

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 18, 2004** **1:30 p.m.**
 Date: 2004/02/18
 [The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

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 Visitors**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mr. Naim Ahmed, consul general of the United States, from Calgary. He's accompanied today by his wife, Linda. There is no doubt that the United States is Alberta's most important trading partner and closest friend. Alberta exports to the United States over \$50 billion in goods annually. This accounts for more than one-quarter of our GDP and includes over 80 per cent of our beef exports. Today, unfortunately, the U.S. border remains temporarily closed to live cattle exports. However, we remain very optimistic that live cattle trade will resume in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, the United States also provides two-thirds of our foreign investment in our province and 60 per cent of our tourists. In return Alberta remains a secure and reliable supplier to the U.S. for many products. This is particularly true in the case of energy with our oil and gas feeding markets from California to Chicago to New York and many places in between.

Alberta's ties with the United States go far beyond dollars and cents. We have shared interests and common values as well as friends and family on both sides of the border. Mr. Speaker, I would ask that all members of the Assembly give our guests the customary and traditional warm welcome.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure that my guests have arrived yet, but I wanted to introduce to you and through you to members of the Legislature some people with whom the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development and I had the opportunity to meet earlier today and whom we deal with on a government-to-government basis with respect to the province of Alberta. These are the chiefs of Treaty 8. We met with Chief Archie Cyprien, Grand Chief; Chief Bernie Meneen; Chief Francis Gladue; Chief Rose Laboucan; Chief Don Testawich; Chief Fred Badger; Elder Francis Meneen; Elder Gabe Meneen; as well, Allan Willier, Lorraine Muskwa, Janice Chalifoux, Donna Roberts, and Richard Auger.

I had understood that they would be coming into the galleries today. Perhaps they will, but I'd like this Assembly to welcome the governments of the Treaty 8 First Nations of this province.

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

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through to the members of the Assembly Dan Astner. Dan is chairman of the board of the Battle River Rural

Electrification Association and has been for about the last 10 years, I believe. He's also on the Alberta council of electricity. As the new head office for the Battle River REA is located near Camrose, it's no surprise that Dan spends a great deal of time in my constituency. Later on the Order Paper I'll be giving a member's statement about the accomplishments of the Battle River REA, and it's a pleasure to have Dan here for that as well. So I'd like to welcome you, Dan, and ask the members of the Assembly to give you a warm welcome as well.

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

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to colleagues of the House it's my pleasure to welcome and introduce a group of students from the University of Alberta in the Speak Out club. They are students whose intent is to forge lines of understanding and communication between the electors and the elected. May I ask our distinguished visitors to please rise when their names are called. Oh, that's fine: all stand up. Jung-Suk Ryu, Calvin Loewen, Woo-sun Shim, E.N. Keteku, Joo Yeon Kim, Jung-Woon Whang, Shad Thevenaz, and Anika Loewen. Thank you and welcome. Please receive the warm greetings of the House.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, would you like to do your introduction now?

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure if my guests have arrived yet, but I would like to introduce them anyway. They will be here a little later today. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 136 of the brightest stars from central Alberta from the school of Fox Run in Sylvan Lake. They're also going to be accompanied by about 24 adults: teachers, parents. I would also like to make special mention of them because the daughter and granddaughter of our own Clerk Assistant and Clerk of Committees, Louise Kamuchik, are going to be amongst them, Danielle Breton and Lynne Breton.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Dr. Ken Nicol Former Leader of the Official Opposition

Mr. Klein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to express the congratulations of the entire government caucus as well as my own personal best wishes to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, who has recently left his post as Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition and who is expected to leave this House entirely before the end of the year.

Over his career in the House the Member for Lethbridge-East has brought great and well-deserved distinction to himself, his constituency, his party, and this Legislature. As leader of his party he has shown a deep respect for the traditions of this Legislature and a deep commitment to his constituents and his province. To my occasional chagrin he has also shown himself to be a thoughtful and effective debater both on the floor of this Assembly and outside the Assembly in front of the media.

Being leader of a political party in a democratic system is a great honour for anyone and I feel humbled by that honour every day and I strongly suspect that the Member for Lethbridge-East has felt that way as well. With that honour comes responsibility as well as tremendous pressure. The hon. member has borne that responsibility

and pressure with grace and skill. In his actions he has always fought hard for his constituents and for his vision for a better Alberta. In his approach he has always focused his attention on issues, not personalities. In his personal conduct he has always shown that the honour of serving Albertans in this Legislature meant more to him than mere words.

Mr. Speaker, for all those reasons I want to extend the very best wishes to the Member for Lethbridge-East and to his family, who have obviously stood behind him throughout his career and brought him great strength. This Legislature has benefited from his presence over the years, and he will be missed when he leaves us. I also wish him luck in his next public endeavour, though not too much luck. Regardless of how he ends up serving Alberta in the future, serve it he will, I am sure, and he will serve it with the same dedication that he has brought to this Legislature every day.

If Mr. Speaker will allow an exception to the rules of the House, let me simply end by saying thank you, Ken, and may the hopes and dreams of you and your family come true in the future.

Thank you. [applause]

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my Liberal caucus colleagues I am pleased to offer tribute to Dr. Ken Nicol, our leader. In a world of politics that becomes more complicated and challenging every day, Ken represents the opposite. Ken's values are deeply rooted in rural Alberta. Ken knows how to govern himself, how to contemplate, and how to create. He has a reputation for thoroughness, concentration, inner discipline, and invention, a talent for thinking things through.

1:40

Financier and philanthropist George Soros said:

At the moment, people are voting their pocketbooks all the time. They are trying to bend legislation to their own financial interests. The common interest gets lost. [I think] there used to be a concept of civic virtue.

Soros doesn't know Ken Nicol. If he did, he would know, like all of us, that civic virtue is not dead. Guarding the public interest and working for the common good has been the hallmark of Ken's work in this House.

Ken came forward to be Liberal leader at a time when we most needed his help. He brought to the leadership strong beliefs. He said that government policy must be based on what is fair for all citizens, that our task is to view all public policy first and foremost from a sound set of principles, and that we have a special obligation to connect citizens with holders of public office in order to develop policies for the common good. Much to some critics' dismay and to his credit he saw no barriers to working in a bipartisan manner with the government in the interests of a better Alberta.

Ken is equally at home in the lecture halls of a university, as his work at the universities of Lethbridge and Iowa attests. His management expertise sees him welcome in the boardrooms of any business, and he is a respected government adviser on the international scene, as his work with the Royal Thai government demanded. Most important this past year has been his role as father, grandfather, and Linda's husband.

Lest this sound more like a eulogy than a tribute, Mr. Speaker, I must tell you and my Legislature colleagues that there are times when Ken won't be missed. Ken won't be missed when we have one of those caucus discussions on finance that just happens to coincide with his old economics 301 lecture notes, an unfortunate coincidence, my caucus colleagues all agree. Ken won't be missed,

according to those who sit next to him in this House, on those days when he used to clean the barn and drive directly to the Assembly without changing boots. Nor will Ken be missed by staff who joined him on his long, long car trips throughout Alberta when Ken preferred to just keep driving instead of stopping for coffee or a comfort break.

Seriously, Mr. Speaker, one of the great joys of being elected to this House is meeting outstanding Albertans of high integrity serving on both sides of the aisle. They come from every corner of this province, and Ken Nicol is one of them. We will miss Ken's qualities as a leader but are pleased to have him around a little longer as our friend and our colleague in this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, unanimous consent will have to be granted in order to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. Would there be any member opposed to granting such a request?

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the House for this opportunity to say a few words of thanks and pay tribute to the Member for Lethbridge-East, who recently resigned as Alberta Liberal leader.

I think I know as well as anyone the sacrifices involved in leading an opposition party in the province of Alberta. Being the leader of an opposition party is very challenging when you're small in numbers and the resources at your disposal are minute in comparison to the resources at the disposal of the government.

The Member for Lethbridge-East has served this Legislature and his constituents with distinction for the past 11 years and since 2001 as Leader of the Official Opposition. I've always been impressed by his dedication to public service. He always conducted himself with the utmost integrity. He is a principled person who has earned the respect of his colleagues on all sides of this House. Glancing at today's headlines, some might say that leaving as Alberta Liberal leader and deciding to run as a federal Liberal candidate is a bit like going from the frying pan into the fire. However, I know that all members of this House know that the Member for Lethbridge-East has never backed down from a challenge. After all, the Member for Lethbridge-East defied the odds before by getting elected as a Liberal in southern Alberta three elections in a row.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Member for Lethbridge-East for all the service that he rendered to Albertans through his presence in this House and by his work outside. Best wishes to you and your family as you embark on the next stage of your political career.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Would the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East like to participate? I'm sure unanimous consent will be provided.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, I just want to say thank you to everybody. It's really an honour for me to have served the province of Alberta with each one of you.

I think each one of us probably sits here in this House and has a vision of how we would perform as government. With the 83 members here, if each one of us were a dictator, to say, in a position, we would all have a different Alberta. But democracy works because all 83 people in this House come together both in their

government role and in their opposition role and work to make Alberta the greatest place in the world. I hope that I can continue to be involved in public service in this province to help the people in this House continue to make Alberta that great place.

In conclusion, thanks to everybody. It's been an honour to work with you. I look forward to staying in contact. If you're ever in southern Alberta or, hopefully, if you're ever in Ottawa, look me up.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Government Travel

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the government said that "all new government spending will be carefully measured." But documents acquired by the Liberal opposition indicate that in the recent past it is the taxpayers of this province who have been taken for an expensive ride by this government. My first question is to the Premier. Was government spending being carefully measured when a whopping \$8,000 was spent on a car service on a four-day trip in New York City in December of 2002?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, to answer the question, that mission involved, I think, about 14 people or maybe 10 or 12, and for the length of the mission we had an Econoline van and a Suburban with a driver from 8 o'clock in the morning to midnight. That is hardly luxury. These were not limousines; that is the going rate. If the hon. member has ever been to New York, that is cheap probably at twice the price for transportation. These people had to get around, both officials and political leaders, and the use of the Suburban and the Econoline van were very effective and very utilitarian vehicles to get these people to their various meetings and other obligations.

Mr. Speaker, ministerial travel is part of the job of any government, and God knows that the federal Liberals know about travel. As the hon. Deputy Premier pointed out in her introduction of the consul general from the United States, we are an exporting province, and we rely on capital investment from outside the province. So having ministers work with business leaders to promote the province is essential to the success and the prosperity of this government and this province and the people of this province.

Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member was paying attention yesterday to the Speech from the Throne, he would have noted that one of the pillars is to take advantage of our potential to add value to the products we produce so we can further export them. Ministerial missions occur in order to promote Alberta businesses, products, and services to international customers; attract investment to the province; encourage new businesses to set up shop in Alberta; meet with international government and business leaders to inform them about Alberta and inform them positively about Alberta; promote cultural ties with friends and neighbours around the globe; and reciprocate visits that are made to Alberta by foreign dignitaries.

Mr. Speaker . . . Well, I'll wait for the next question.

1:50

Mr. MacDonald: In light of that, Mr. Speaker, the next question is: how are Alberta's interests being served by this delegation going to the Cornell Club in Madison Square Garden? What were you doing in those places to enhance Alberta's exports?

Mr. Klein: I don't know anything about the Cornell Club. I've never heard of the Cornell Club in New York City. Perhaps one of the other ministers on that mission can respond. But perhaps I was

at that club, and I was giving a speech to a group of investors, or one of the ministers was giving a speech to a group of investors.

Mr. Speaker, I want to put this thing totally and absolutely in context, and if the Liberals were honest, they would put it in context too. By the Liberals' own estimate the government has spent \$1.1 million on all missions over the last three years. Now, to put that into perspective, listen to this: over three years this entire caucus has spent only one-fifth of the \$5.3 million that the Governor General of Canada spent on one single mission – one single mission – and that mission was concocted and designed by the federal Liberal government, the soulmates of Alberta's Liberals.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that the next comparison is probably going to be to George Radwanski, how can this government consider that they are spending money carefully when the Premier and his staff have forked over over \$1,100 of taxpayers' money to maids in Mexico when you refused even to put the minimum wage up in this country?

Mr. Klein: Well, first of all, \$1,100 is a lot to me, and it's probably a lot to that member, but, Mr. Speaker, the matter of \$1,100 spent on tips to hotel staff in Mexico City in 2002 is also very explainable. In Mexico, if the hon. member has ever been there, service charges are added automatically to the bill. We estimated what our total bill would be for that mission and, as I understand, got a deal on the service charges. I'll have the hon. Minister of Economic Development explain the deal that was achieved. But you have no choice because the tip is added to all the bills, and when you . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Put the minimum wage up.

Mr. Klein: This has nothing to do with the minimum wage. I don't know where this guy gets off; I'm telling you that, Mr. Speaker. You know, he's over there chirping about the minimum wage, and he's talking about \$1,100 for tips for one full week for a full mission, tips that are added automatically to a bill.

I'll have the hon. minister explain.

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, I would really encourage the hon. member to focus more on what's happening in Alberta than Mexico. The trip was a remarkable success.

I want to say here right now to the House that Alberta is remarkably fortunate to have a Premier who understands international markets and our international marketplace and spends so much time on these missions because it's vital to the success of Alberta. I want to say thank you, sir. Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars globe-trotting at Alberta's taxpayers' expense. Now, if we want to focus on Alberta, let's focus on Alberta seniors, students, and health care patients that are being told by this government to do with less. To the Premier: how does this Premier justify jacking up seniors' long-term care fees when this government spends over \$8,000 on car services in New York City? Tell that to seniors.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm sort of curious. Is the hon. member saying that we ought not travel, that we ought not sell Alberta, that we ought not sell Alberta products, that we ought not concentrate on adding value to our products and travelling the market, that we can

find all of the officials, the 22,000 employees, many of whom are in different parts of the globe right now selling Alberta – not politicians; we're stuck here. At any minute of any hour of any day of any week of any month of any year we have numerous officials, probably hundreds of officials, in different parts of the world selling Alberta. Is this hon. member saying: stop all of that right now? If that's what he's saying, let him stand up and say so. Let him stand up and say so.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I want this government to be careful not careless.

How does this Premier justify soaring tuition and crowded classrooms while his government spent over \$5,900 on accommodation, food, and services at the Sheraton hotel in New York City?

Mr. Klein: Fifty-nine hundred is not very expensive in New York City, I'll tell you that for sure, Mr. Speaker. His Liberal cousins have spent that in one night on hotel rooms in Ottawa.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: how does the Premier justify increasing health care premiums and contemplating other user fees on seniors while this government forks over \$1,100 in tips to maids in Mexico?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, I could go on if the hon. member would promise to publish all of the information on the web site. I can tell this Assembly about the value of any mission.

As a result of one mission by the Learning minister to southeast Asia, many Vietnamese students are choosing Alberta institutions as a place to study, both in postsecondary institutions and primary. It is estimated that the potential number of students from Vietnam could bring in \$2.7 million in revenues for our learning institutions. That one mission alone would therefore result in revenue for Alberta more than two times the total estimated cost of all – of all – ministerial missions over the past three years. That one mission.

On a mission to the U.S. in 2001 the Minister of Economic Development and I took part in discussions that led to some Alberta businesses signing lucrative business deals in California.

Energy-related missions have led to face-to-face meetings with the vice-president of the United States to talk about how Alberta can contribute to the new U.S. energy strategy. They've also led to literally thousands of key decision-makers around the world learning a great deal about the energy sector in Alberta and investment opportunities. As a matter of fact, we now see either on stream or contemplated about \$50 billion – \$50 billion – worth of new investment in the oil sands, much of that investment coming from the United States.

A 2001 mission to California primarily to promote the Alberta energy and film industries resulted in successful negotiations for a Disney miniseries that is being shot this spring near Okotoks. Many other Alberta film deals followed on the heels of that mission.

Mr. Speaker, the list goes on and on and on, and I would like a commitment from the hon. member to publish the success of all these missions on their web site.

2:00

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the hundreds of thousands of dollars this government spends on globe-trotting, it's clear that the promise to carefully measure spending rings hollow. In fact, this is a government hiding travel expenses from the scrutiny

of Alberta taxpayers. My questions are to the Premier. Why has the government not publicly released itineraries for 79 out-of-province trips taken since March 2001? Where are the itineraries?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can't speak for the other ministers. I do know that this government is probably one of the most, if not the most, open and transparent governments in the country. If it weren't for this government, the Liberals wouldn't have put our officials to the great expense – and I don't know how much their FOIP requests cost our officials in this government, but if it weren't for this government, they wouldn't have been able to get any of this information.

Relative to the openness and transparency of this government I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance speak to it.

Mrs. Nelson: You know, Mr. Speaker, back in 1992-93 when our Premier took over as Premier, we introduced as Bill 1 the open and transparent Financial Accountability Act in this province. We have led the nation by putting in place not only an act that governs openness and transparency but also through the Auditor General Act even an external audit committee that meets with the Auditor General and reviews the policies and procedures that are in place with this government. If there are difficulties, they have been identified and rectified.

Insofar as openness I can tell you that there isn't any other government that has had as many filings as we do in this House, well, since December of 1992. On a quarterly basis we bring Albertans up to date with all the expenditures. We explain various analyses where we have variances from budget to actual on a quarterly basis. We identify the costs that are coming through our government. We deal with pressure points. We deal with emergencies. We are open and transparent. It was Bill 1 under this Premier.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why has the government not publicly disclosed the costs of 26 out-of-province trips taken since March 20, 2001?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will attempt to get the answer, really. We do as a matter of policy require ministers to issue a news release relative to the itinerary for international missions as well as the estimated costs.

Now, we don't issue news releases for government travel within Canada; that is, out of province but within Canada. In almost all cases when ministers or I travel to other parts of Canada, the trips are to attend meetings with federal and provincial counterparts or various committees: the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, for instance, the francophone matters; yourself, Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary sessions. There are numerous others including some that the members of the opposition attend as well. But for any mission sponsored by my office a full report on the mission and what was accomplished is posted on the web site. The International and Intergovernmental Relations department is responsible for producing that web site, and it's provided in other ways as well, through the media, newsletters, and so on.

So our caucus, if there are any shortcomings . . .

Ms Blakeman: Twenty-six of them.

Mr. Klein: Send us the 26. I hear the chirping over there again: there are 26. Identify the 26. We'll have a look at them, and we'll review the matter of publicly releasing detailed receipts and detailed

accounts of missions if it's absolutely necessary within and without Canada, but normally we don't issue news releases relative to meetings within Canada.

I'm going to Vancouver next week for a meeting of the Council of the Federation, which is the former Premiers' conference. Now, do you object to that? Do you want me to stand up and, you know, explain? I usually do a news conference before I leave for those meetings. I do stand up at the uni-mike while I'm there. You're welcome to take a car and drive out to Vancouver and watch all the Premiers in action if you want to, but I don't see where it would be worth while in any event to stand up and say that I need the Liberals' permission to travel to Vancouver or to feel: oh, my God, this is going to make it 27 now; oh, good Lord, what are we going to do?

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Then in the interests of accountability, Mr. Premier, will you today agree to report all Executive Council expenses to the Public Accounts Committee?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we have been very, very good in my office about reporting all Executive Council, at least as it pertains to my office. We will do it to the best of our ability. Lookit; I have to sit here and face the music relative to public accounts and the questioning that comes from the opposition, so I'll be prepared for any questions they have to ask me, and hopefully I'll be able to provide them with the proper answers.

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

Alberta Blue Cross

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, last Thursday the New Democrat opposition blew the whistle on changes that will pick the pockets of 1 million Albertans with Alberta Blue Cross coverage. A major change being proposed forcing Blue Cross to make payments in lieu of taxes is contrary to the advice of the Blue Cross Review Committee, chaired by the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why is the government going against the advice of its own review committee, which argued that the change in Alberta Blue Cross's tax-exempt status would result in a transfer of costs to Albertans and would not be appropriate?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to note that the committee chaired by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed looked into the matters of the operations of Alberta Blue Cross in a great deal of detail, and I thank her for her work and the dedication that was spent in coming up with the recommendations that are coming forward and are being implemented.

Mr. Speaker, there is some erroneousness about what the hon. member has said with respect to the number of clients that would be affected by these changes, but the long and the short of it is that where Alberta Blue Cross's efforts are in competition with the private sector, we felt that it was most appropriate since the private sector was paying these premium taxes, in order to level the playing field, Alberta Blue Cross should do the same. Now, the impact on a per-client basis is that for individuals now paying roughly \$140 a month, depending on the package of Blue Cross that they decide to take, it would result in a \$3 change to such an individual, a very reasonable amount of money.

2:10

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, why won't the minister admit that the so-

called level playing field is code for high premiums, which is being done for no other reason than to allow the private health insurance industry to take business away from Alberta Blue Cross?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't admit that because it's an asinine suggestion.

Dr. Pannu: My final question to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is the government forcing Albertans with Blue Cross coverage to pay more just so that Tory friends in the private health insurance industry can make more profits by grabbing a bigger share of the market?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, Alberta Blue Cross is a valued service to individuals who are in the province of Alberta, but they, of course, should have the choice as to where they get their services from. It appears that Alberta Blue Cross does provide a very solid service, and that's why Alberta Blue Cross has many, many clients.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's suggestions are simply unsubstantiated. They are untrue, and as I said, it's perfectly reasonable to be looking at levelling the playing field between Alberta Blue Cross's operations and the private sector vis-à-vis other private-sector insurance operators.

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

Protection for Persons in Care

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During my time as an MLA I've learned much about the complexities of elder abuse, whether physical, financial, mental, or emotional. It can occur at any time, whether deliberately or innocently, and by anyone, even in one's own home by a family member. Last month a senior resident at the Jubilee Lodge Nursing Home in Edmonton appears to have died as a result of burns to her legs. I understand that among other investigations Community Development's protection for persons in care branch has completed its investigation. My main question is to the Minister of Community Development. What was the outcome of the investigation by the protection for persons in care branch?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me begin by expressing my personal and collegial sincerest condolences to the family who has suffered the loss of a loved one in this particular instance.

I also want to briefly explain that the Protection for Persons in Care Act, over which I have responsibility, is required to review all cases of alleged abuse or outright abuse that are submitted to us where a particular client may reside in a publicly funded care facility. Of course, I can't comment on the specific details of any single case, such as the one that is being referenced, but I would like to say that after a preliminary investigation of the particular case that has been asked about, we did ask the PPIC branch people to consult with the local police department. They did that, and it was determined to hand that file over to the Edmonton Police Service. They did do that, and then shortly after that the Department of Justice also became involved, and the Minister of Justice may wish to augment where the process went from there.

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Justice, you'll have to guide the chair. Anything sub judice in here at all?

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker, no sub judice at the moment. I won't comment on the police investigation other than to say that yesterday I signed an order calling for a public fatality inquiry into this particular situation. We made that request public today after notifying the family that the inquiry would be called. Of course, members of the Legislature will know that public fatality inquiries do not proceed until other investigations, particularly police investigations, are completed. So when it's actually held, the timing of it will be after that has been completed, but a public fatality inquiry will be held. The purpose, of course, of a public fatality inquiry and the reason why it follows the other inquiries is because it does not find fault. It finds the facts and makes comment if any with respect to how these types of situations can be avoided in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you. My next question is also to the Minister of Community Development. If Albertans have concerns about potential abuse in publicly funded care facilities, how can they get Protection for Persons in Care involved?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, the short answer is that they can call our reporting line, which is toll-free. I believe the number is 1-888-357-9339. They will be assured of some follow-up because it is the mandated requirement of the protection for persons in care unit to in fact follow up on every reporting of abuse or alleged abuse. We will then usually contact an investigator who will look into the details and provide a report back to us for further action.

However, I should tell the member that if someone feels they have a relative or a loved one or an acquaintance who is in some immediate danger, they should immediately contact the local police department to have that issue looked at.

The final point, I think, is that there are several other acts that might come into play which people should also consider reviewing. So anyone who is residing in a publicly funded care facility has protection from a number of other avenues besides the Protection for Persons in Care Act.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Kryczka: Yes. Thank you. Also to the same minister: how can you improve and strengthen protection for persons in care?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, when the Protection for Persons in Care Act came in approximately five years ago, it was already determined that within five years it would be reviewed for the very purpose that the hon. member is raising the question. So a couple of years back I did appoint an MLA-led committee which was chaired by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. As a result of that, a report did come out which I think all members of the House are aware of. We then sent it out for public feedback.

We've received that. We are now analyzing it all. We're looking at and considering changes to do the very thing the member is asking, and that is to look at the mandate of the act, to look at the definitions of abuse, the definitions of intent, to look at the scope and coverage of the act, and perhaps also expand the act to provide greater coverage to more individuals who may need it which the act currently does not cover.

Climate Change Initiatives

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, in January the Minister of Environment

sent a letter threatening industry leaders. He stated that if companies failed to consult with the province on any federal Kyoto initiatives, tax credits and royalty breaks could be lost. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. What was the minister thinking when he sent such an arrogant letter?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Taylor: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I did not send any threatening letter. What the letter stated quite clearly was that we wish to work with Alberta companies. We wish to work with the federal government to reach a solution on climate change initiatives. Quite clearly, the owner of the resource is all Albertans, and all Albertans need to be at discussions with the federal government so that we can work co-operatively with both the industry and the federal government.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, does the minister believe that using strong-arm tactics and placing our industries in the middle of his fight with the feds will encourage investor confidence and innovation in this province?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Premier mentioned just a few minutes ago, we have \$50 billion worth of investment in this province. I think there's extreme confidence in Alberta.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, can this minister tell us what this government's commitment is to helping Alberta businesses meet Kyoto targets?

Dr. Taylor: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. We have an Alberta climate change action plan that, hopefully, the hon. member has read by now. We are putting that climate change action plan into effect. We've done that action plan in consultation with industry, and it's an action plan that works.

I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that we're hopeful that the federal government will pay attention. There is a policy vacuum in the federal government at the present time on climate change, and we feel that by Alberta once again being in the lead on climate change action plans, we can fill that policy vacuum. The new Prime Minister is making the right sounds. He is saying that he wants to consult with the provinces. So we need to take him at his word, and after the next election we need to hold his feet to the fire and make sure that he lives up to his commitment to work with Albertans on climate change.

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

2:20

Downer Cows

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The two North American cases of BSE introduced many nonranchers to a new term: downer cow. Since then, many of my constituents have wondered what a downer cow is and if they pose any danger to the safety of our food supply. My questions are to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Could the minister please explain to my constituents: what is a downer cow?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, very simply put, a downer cow is an animal that cannot stand or walk without assistance, so nonambulatory. The more important thing is the cause of this, and right now that is the source of a lot of discussion around downer cows being presented at abattoirs.

Downer cows can be identified in this way because they are injured on the truck, have a leg injury, break a leg. They could have an injury from calving, somewhat unusual, but it definitely happens that an animal is injured during calving and experiences some inability to walk from an injury to her hind quarters. It can be a metabolic disease. The important thing in our province is how downer cows are handled.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: are downer animals allowed in the human food chain?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I would like to just take a moment to explain how we handle downer animals in this province and how we have handled them for some time. First of all, if downer animals are presented at a provincial abattoir – and I must say that this is not a common experience – they are inspected by a qualified veterinarian prior to slaughter to ensure that they are healthy enough to even move into the slaughter line.

Mr. Speaker, the carcass from a downer cow is held in this province until it has tested clear for BSE before it would be allowed to move into the human food chain. That is a very, very important aspect of how we handle downers and how we see continuing to handle them.

Mr. Johnson: My final question, then, is to the same minister. Do downer cattle pose a health risk to Albertans?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, handled in the way that they are in this province, with the inspections that we have and the fact that they are held, which is in every case, until they are cleared before the carcass is allowed to move on, yes, they are allowed in the human food chain.

Again, I have to go back, Mr. Speaker. A downer animal can be an animal that was being transported to an abattoir that is injured in transport, and the meat from that animal is perfectly safe. So I think we have to put this into perspective. It has in light of the BSE issue become a term that's used in some very negative ways. The term "downer" isn't new in the industry. The understanding of what a downer is is very clear in the industry, and it's important that the public understand what this terminology means.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, on January 22 a government news release stated that the government had decided that Albertans would not accept recommendations from the Graydon report like increasing health care taxes and introducing medical savings accounts. Then less than a week later the Premier arbitrarily decided that, quote, the Graydon report is coming back. My questions are to the Premier. Exactly who is in charge of health reform in Alberta? The Minister of Health and Wellness or the Premier? It seems they're not talking to each other.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't recall saying that the Graydon report wouldn't be tabled at all or considered. Not all recommendations in the Graydon report are acceptable, but that report along with other reports – and when I'm talking about other reports, I'm talking about reports we might get from places like Sweden, France, places that have been touted as having much better health care systems than we do and why. We will consider all of these documents in conjunction with a number of processes that are now underway vis-

à-vis the national health ministers and finance ministers, the Premiers and territorial leaders across the country including the Prime Minister and including our own budgetary problems related to health care.

Notwithstanding what the hon. member says and this hokey-pokey relative to GDP, the fact is that health care costs are rising much faster than are revenues. Indeed, across this nation we're spending about \$72 billion – billion – a year right now. By the year 2020 it's estimated that if health care costs continue to rise the way they have been rising, it'll be \$172 billion. Mr. Speaker, many governments across this nation are already in crisis related to health care where health care spending has now reached 50 per cent of their total provincial budgets. All Premiers and all territorial leaders are saying: we have got to do something about this.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm serving warning right now that the Graydon report along with all of the other information we can obtain from all sectors, including other countries that have been rated much, much higher than Canada, will be brought together as we embark on a program of meaningful reform to achieve sustainability.

Dr. Taft: Well, given the chronic confusion around these reforms, let me repeat: who is in charge of health reform in Alberta? Is it the Premier, or is it the Minister of Health and Wellness?

Mr. Klein: Not that it makes any difference, Mr. Speaker, but it is a joint responsibility. The primary responsibility, of course, rests with the minister. [interjection] What's that? [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. the Premier, ignore it, and please proceed.

Mr. Klein: Thank you. He's loud enough to be recorded in *Hansard*.

The responsibility is a government responsibility. The primary responsibility, of course, is with the minister for the development of policy, but through our system of standing policy committees any policy changes are brought to the SPCs or considered by cabinet or considered by this 83-member caucus, Mr. Speaker. Of course, I'm involved at the Premier's level in addressing health care reform with my provincial counterparts and with the federal government. The minister is involved with his colleagues across the country and the federal minister. He's also involved with other ministers like the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Seniors, Environment to some degree, Community Development to some degree.

So, Mr. Speaker, who's in charge? We're all in charge, except that they are not in charge, thank God.

2:30

Dr. Taft: That incredibly convoluted and confused response explains the problems.

Mr. Speaker, then I ask a simple question to this Premier: does he know when his government signed off on the budgets of the regional health authorities for the current fiscal year? Or have they even been signed off now? Is anybody in charge? Hello?

The Speaker: Okay. Question period is not the place for theatrics time and histrionics time. I'm sure there's some local community theatres in the city of Edmonton who would love the entertainment, but that's not what we're doing here.

I heard at least four questions, and I don't know how anybody can answer four questions at one time, so we're moving on to the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Beef Exports

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE, has caused unthinkable devastation to our cattle industry and to rural Alberta. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has said on more than one occasion that the real solution is to get the borders reopened, and I would agree. All of my questions today are to that minister. What countries are currently importing Canadian beef?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, currently there are 24 countries who have lifted a ban at least partially on importing Canadian beef and cattle. They range from Barbados to the Cayman Islands to Russia to most recently Macao. But more importantly, very early in this issue our two largest trading partners, the United States and Mexico, lifted the ban on boneless beef.

Mr. Speaker, certainly the most important issue is the complete opening of borders, complete resumption of normal trade in beef and beef products, but I must say that the opening of the borders to boneless beef was a huge, huge bonus for our industry because that is the majority of what they ship. I'm pleased to inform the hon. member and indeed all of the Assembly that our exports of beef into Mexico have increased significantly, and in fact the last week in December Mexico imported more than 10 million pounds of fresh or frozen beef and cattle products.

So, Mr. Speaker, we're making progress. Is it fast enough? No. Is it enough? No. But we are making progress, and 24 countries have opened their borders at least partially to our beef.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is very encouraging.

Are there any conditions that our trading partners are demanding of us that we have not yet met before they will reopen their borders to our live cattle?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, this is one of the very frustrating aspects of dealing with this issue because we, frankly, have not had from our trading partners a specific list, if you wish, of things that would be required in order to open the borders entirely. We have put some measures in place as a country. Reflecting, though, on the international panel's report saying that there were some things that we could do that would further strengthen our already excellent system – and I do remind all members that the international panel applauded the systems we do have in place in this country – we put some new mitigation measures in including the removal of SRMs, specified risk materials, from the food chain, removal of them more in their entirety from animals.

We continue to negotiate through our federal negotiators with other countries to try and ascertain what they would require for a complete opening of borders and a complete resumption of normal trade. In fact – and I hope you'll listen; I will put out an itinerary – I will be travelling to Washington early in the week to further those discussions with our largest trading partner in beef to understand how we can work more closely with the U.S. on a North American solution so that our product on a North American basis is accepted in every country in the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker. Given that North America has an integrated cattle industry, is the minister prepared to encourage the federal minister of agriculture to place a ban on the process-

ing of any sick animal to mirror the recently announced U.S. policy on downed animals?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we don't process sick animals. Animals are cleared by inspectors and veterinarians to ensure that they are healthy before they are processed unless they're going to rendering.

On downers the question is: should downers be allowed to be presented at all? The fact is that they are not allowed to be presented at slaughter plants that are federally inspected for export beef. Should they be allowed to be presented at all to provincial abattoirs, which is in our domestic market? That is a discussion that we continue to hold.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that the safeguards that we have in place, where we have inspectors on-site, where we have veterinarians who examine the animals and ensure that they are fit, are sufficient. However, it will be the consumers of that product that will finally determine how we should handle this.

I just have to remind all members that all animals that are termed downers are not sick. They maybe have been injured or in some way incapacitated, but their meat would be very healthy. In Alberta no downer animal would enter the food chain until all tests on that animal were cleared. They are held, and I think it's important that the consuming public knows that.

I should also point out that there are a number of our 52 provincial abattoirs that have made a decision not to accept downer animals, and that is certainly within their prerogative. If a farmer has an animal that has been injured and he wants that animal slaughtered, they will require a veterinarian to examine that animal on the farm, give a letter of clearance for that animal to pass to their abattoir, where it could be slaughtered and would be further inspected.

So we have a good system, Mr. Speaker. It's tough. It's a tough system, but I think it's stood us in good stead.

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

Protection for Persons in Care

(continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 11 a 90-year-old woman died after being scalded during a bath at Edmonton's Jubilee Lodge Nursing Home. Both the woman's family and I repeatedly called for a fatality inquiry. The fatality inquiry review board has now recommended that an inquiry be held, and today the minister has complied. My question is to the Minister of Justice. Is the minister looking into this one person's death as an isolated incident, or will he order an investigation into the questionable deaths of other nursing home patients documented by FAIRE and by the Elder Advocates of Alberta?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the fatality inquiry that's been called, obviously it's been called with respect to this particular incident. In looking into this particular incident, the inquiry should consider the circumstances around how this death occurred, determine what the facts are, the manner of death, and the judge that leads the inquiry may make recommendations on the prevention of similar occurrences in the future. But a fatality inquiry relates specifically to a particular incident, a particular death, and a particular individual.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My next question is to the Minister of

Community Development. Given that the Protection for Persons in Care Act review is complete, would this tragic death have been automatically investigated out of the changes that are now flowing from the review?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, we have not made any changes yet to the legislation that's being referred to. We are simply contemplating and considering all of the feedback that has been received, both during the consultation process, which was province-wide, and also the feedback that has now been actually received in the form of the recommendations that were in the report.

I will be coming forward with some of those recommendations in the not too distant future, and we will be looking at places where we can improve the act, where we can strengthen the act. That will hopefully help stem any of these kinds of occurrences in the future.

We can never guarantee it, Mr. Speaker, but we do what we can through the PPIC Act, which, by the way, is more educative, as the member knows, than it is punitive. There are a couple of punitive sections within the act, but we do what we can by way of following up with every single one of those investigations and reports, which for the timing being at least are mandatory to be done.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My final question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Will this incident prompt the minister into creating and implementing standards of care for all long-term and continuing care which can be applied across all of the health regions in Alberta?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me say first of all that this, as the hon. Minister of Community Development said, was a very tragic set of circumstances, and I join him in expressing personal condolences to this family.

Capital health has conducted a review of this, and I can assure you that Capital health is most interested in ensuring that throughout all of the facilities that it has responsibility for, it takes the appropriate corrective actions to ensure that this doesn't happen to somebody else. As an example, the Jubilee Lodge, on the advice of Capital health, will be improving its water system, and the staff at Capital health are checking the water temperature at all of its long-term care facilities, and Capital health has also sent revised bathing guidelines to all long-term care operators.

Mr. Speaker, I can say that long-term care operators throughout the province are watching this particular set of circumstances very carefully and that throughout the province if any circumstances like this happened, there would be the appropriate investigations, as were done here at Jubilee. A number of reviews took place. The regional health authority did a review, the Jubilee operator itself, and Protection of Persons in Care also reviewed it. The department takes this very seriously. I think that there is some merit in making the suggestion that we make these types of learnings available to all operators of long-term care centres so that we can hopefully do our very, very best and make every reasonable effort to ensure that this doesn't happen again.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll introduce the first of the hon. members. The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Battle River Rural Electrification Association

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the

Battle River Rural Electrification Association. REAs have served the Wetaskiwin-Camrose constituency for over 55 years. They arose out of necessity because rural power customers were being overlooked by the larger power companies of the day.

Today the Battle River REA ensures that rural consumers have a reliable power supply. The Battle River REA is an amalgamation of 19 REAs from around central Alberta. It continues to grow, and this is growth undoubtedly linked to the fine service that it provides to its members.

Not too long ago I helped the Battle River REA open a brand new centralized office in my constituency at Ervick, just west of Camrose. The opening of this building is the culmination of the Battle River REA's tireless work in rural communities in Alberta.

REAs are extremely important for our rural communities. They ensure that the concerns of rural Albertans with regard to electricity are properly heard by both government and industry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Edmonton Oilers

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A sports franchise cannot be successful without the support of its fans and followers. As a sports fan myself I don't believe that I'm out of order in saying that sports enthusiasts are a demanding bunch who expect the best out of their beloved team day in and day out.

As a result, it is not every day that a small franchise sports team gets rated by the fans as the most popular in the league. Earlier this month the Edmonton Oilers received such a prestigious rating by *ESPN Magazine*. The magazine rated the Oilers not only as the fan favourite in the NHL but also the overall number one bang for your buck in all professional sports. The recognitions, Mr. Speaker, are not only reflective of the organization's commitment to its fans and supporters, but they also reinforce the notion that a sports team does not have to be located in the richest city or have the largest player payroll in order to be successful and popular.

I wish to congratulate the Edmonton Oilers on their great achievement and wish them the best to make a spot in the playoffs, and they'll need it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Freedom to Read Week

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Next week, February 22 to 28, is Freedom to Read Week in Canada. This annual event encourages Canadians to think about and reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom guaranteed them under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Check out www.freedomtoread.ca for events in your community.

In Edmonton the freedom to read committee has organized Read is a Four-Letter Word: Teens' Views on Censorship, a reading and debate at 7:30 on Monday, February 23, at the Whitemud Crossing library.

The Writers Guild of Alberta is also encouraging folks to participate in the BookCrossing, an international endeavour to make the whole world a library by having people read a good book, register it at www.bookcrossing.com, and then release it into the wild for someone else to read. Leave it on a park bench or a bus, give it to a friend or a coworker, or leave it at a shelter.

In Calgary the freedom to read committee is celebrating its 10th anniversary by awarding the 2004 freedom of expression award to Greg Gerrard of Pages Bookstore on behalf of his late wife, Cathy

McKay, and with readings by past award winners and raising funds in support of the Writers' Guild of Alberta.

Thank you.

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

South Calgary High School

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the Calgary board of education and the construction firm of Stuart Olsen. They announced last week that they will be opening the new south Calgary high school one full year ahead of schedule.

On behalf of my constituency and all of the high school students in south Calgary I'd like to recognize and thank them for this much-needed, timely completion of a new high school in Calgary.

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

Lac La Biche Forest Capital of Canada 2004

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to stand today to announce to members of this Assembly the designation of Lac La Biche as the forest capital of Canada for 2004. The forest capital of Canada program is spearheaded by the Canadian Forestry Association and highlights the valuable role that forests play in the economic and environmental health of our communities. This is a great honour for Lac La Biche, a community that was created and continues to flourish today due in large part to the success of our forest industry.

It is fitting, then, that the theme of the forest capital of Canada should be Lac La Biche, gateway to the boreal forest. As forest capital Lac La Biche and its neighbours will embark on a 12-month celebration of historic community and forest relationships with a focus on the future through public awareness and education on the wise use of our forests.

I would like to ask members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating the people of Lac La Biche and the surrounding area for this great honour.

EPCOR

Mr. Yankowsky: Mr. Speaker, I rise to give recognition to EPCOR on the occasion of their winning the 2004 national award in governance, sponsored by the Conference Board of Canada and Spencer Stuart. The award recognizes innovation and excellence in board governance. EPCOR was one of only three winners.

It all began in 1891, when the city of Edmonton's first power plant was built in the North Saskatchewan River valley. From this early beginning, the company has grown into one of Alberta's leading power companies.

EPCOR won this prestigious award because of its governance model, which blends the best of the private sector with public-sector accountability. This governance model works because the shareholder, board, and management have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Congratulations and thanks to Don Lowry, CEO, and the EPCOR board and management for your efforts in winning this award.

The Speaker: Hon. Opposition House Leader, my notes suggest that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is the next participant. Is there a substitute? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Henry Harder

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to

recognize the life of Mr. Henry Harder, who, unfortunately, passed away at the age of 78 years last November. Mr. Harder lived with his wife, Molly, in the Strathearn neighbourhood of Edmonton, where they were very active in their community and their church while they were raising their family and ever since their family has grown up and moved away.

Mr. Harder was a passionate golfer and a very proud grandfather. He found enough time from golf and his family to act as returning officer in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar for many elections. It was this job that displayed his sense of fairness. Everyone who dealt with his office was treated with dignity and respect.

Mr. Harder's strolls through our neighbourhood on Sunday mornings will be sadly missed. His walk to Strathearn United Church was an event. He will be missed, but he will not be forgotten.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we move to the next order of business, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:50 Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you two very special constituents of mine: Keith and Maureen Griffiths from Coronation. Yes, they're my parents. These two people helped make me who I am. I can honestly say that I am as proud of them as they say they are of me. I'd ask them to rise, please, and have the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Bill 2 Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will allow limited recreational vehicle access to continue through the Black Creek heritage rangeland on two already existing trails to maintain access to the few existing designated OHV trails in the adjacent Bob Creek wild-land. Recreational OHV activity is prohibited in heritage rangelands. However, in this case we truly have a unique and exceptional circumstance. Therefore, this bill provides an exception for two specific existing trails through Black Creek heritage rangeland as there are no other feasible alternatives that would allow access into the Bob Creek wild-land. It's also important to note that off-highway vehicles are already allowed in wild-land areas in certain circumstances, such as in Bob Creek.

In conclusion to this introduction to this bill I'd like only to add that this bill fulfills our government's commitment to local stakeholders without opening up the possibility of general recreational off-highway vehicle use in any other heritage rangeland or in any other parts of this particular heritage rangeland. The ranchers and landowners who live in that area have been very cautious and careful

stewards themselves and so, too, have their predecessors for many decades.

So we will look forward to the support of all members of the House as this bill goes through the various stages.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a first time]

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

Bill 3
Architects Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Architects Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this act would define the registration and scope of practice of licensed interior designers and clarify registration and renewal for other professionals included in this act.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

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

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Bill 4
Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 4, that being the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill is in response to a public review process, and it addresses concerns raised by stakeholders and concerned groups and individuals from across the province. The bill includes changes to legislation affecting blind persons who rely upon the use of guide dogs. The amendments will clarify the existing Blind Persons' Rights Act and will strengthen those areas that pertain to the rights of blind persons.

Specifically, this bill will provide a more acceptable definition of blindness as determined by the medical profession. It will also establish higher maximum fines for violations of the act, and it will provide protection for certified dog trainers and for dogs in training, and it will allow an identification card for the blind person/guide dog team to be issued. Finally, it will allow the minister responsible for the act to make regulations respecting qualifications for guide dogs.

I know that blind persons across the province are looking forward to this bill and the amendments that it contains, and they are also looking for support from all members in the House. They already have the Premier's support, Mr. Speaker, and they certainly have mine.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Bill 5
Family Support for Children With Disabilities
Amendment Act, 2004

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce to

the Legislature Bill 5, Family Support for Children With Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004.

There are primarily three minor amendments made following consultation with stakeholders on regulations to make this act as we know it, this legislation, the first of its kind in Canada, more user friendly for people especially requiring supports, family members who require supports in caring for children with disabilities. This adds a little clarity.

I move first reading of the bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a first time]

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

Bill 6
Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment I request leave to introduce Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this bill makes minor wording changes to the Income and Employment Supports Act and protects the privacy of third parties who provide information to help government obtain child support agreements and court orders for children and families.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 6 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Bill 7
Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce for first reading Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, the current act expires at the end of this year. We are proposing an amendment to the act which would extend the act to December 31, 2010. This allows the Alberta government to hold Senate elections beyond 2004 should we decide to do so.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a first time]

head: 3:00 **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the appropriate number of copies of the letter I've received from my constituent Abdulahi Mahamad regarding his concerns with false allegations of sexual abuse.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table appropriate copies of a document that I referred to during the question period called Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee report. It was

submitted to the Minister of Health and Wellness in December 2002.
Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there additional tablings?

Hon. members, the chair has several today, first of all being a copy of Members' Services Committee Order 2/03, Constituency Services Amendment Order (No. 12); as well, Members' Services Committee 3/03, being Constituency Services Amendment Order (No. 13). Number 13 may be of interest to hon. members. Essentially, it will look at the base constituency office allocation numbers to be coming into effect on April 1, 2004. In the base there will be an adjustment from \$52,699 to \$56,915 and a mailing clause increase from 96 cents to 98 cents. The additional information will be forthcoming in that one.

Hon. members, pursuant to section 63(1) of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act I am pleased to table with the Assembly the annual report of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. This covers the activities of that office from April 1, 2002, to March 31, 2003.

The third one. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly the 14th annual report of the Legislative Assembly Office for the calendar year ended December 31, 2002. This report presents the audited financial statements of the fiscal year ended March 31, 2002, and the sixth annual report of the Alberta branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which contains a complete inventory of all travel by all members of this Assembly funded under the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the Office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Mar, Minister of Health and Wellness.

Pursuant to the Regional Health Authorities Act the Aspen regional health authority annual report 2002-2003, the Calgary health region 2002-2003 annual report, the Capital health region annual report 2002-2003, the Chinook health region annual report 2002-2003, the Crossroads regional health authority annual report 2002-2003, David Thompson health region annual report 2002-2003, East Central health region annual report 2002-2003, Headwaters health authority 2002-2003 annual report, Health Authority 5 annual report 2002-2003, Keeweenaw Lakes regional health authority No. 15 annual report 2002-2003, the Lakeland regional health authority annual report 2002-2003, Mistahia health region annual report 2002-2003, the Northern Lights regional health services annual report 2002-2003, Northwestern health services region annual report 2002-2003, Palliser health region annual report 2002-2003, Peace health region annual report 2002-2003, the WestView regional health authority annual report 2002-2003.

Pursuant to the Health Professions Act the Alberta College of Optometrists annual report 2002, the College of Chiropractors of Alberta annual report 2001-2002 and 2002-2003.

Pursuant to the Opticians Act the Alberta Opticians Association annual report 2002.

Pursuant to the Health Disciplines Act the Health Disciplines Board annual report January 1, 2000, to December 31, 2000; Health Disciplines Board annual report January 1, 2001, to December 31, 2001; and Health Disciplines Board annual report January 1, 2002, to December 31, 2002.

Pursuant to the Regional Health Authorities Act the Alberta Mental Health Board annual report 2002-2003.

Pursuant to the Health Facilities Review Committee Act the

Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee annual report 2001-2002.

Pursuant to the Mental Health Act the Mental Health Patient Advocate Office annual report 2002.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**

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

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

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

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to be able to rise today to move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne as delivered by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

This fourth session of the 25th Alberta Legislature will be one of the most significant in the history of our province not only because it is the last year before our great province reaches its centennial but because of the bold and promising statement delivered by Her Honour yesterday on the course of this province and the future that awaits Albertans.

Her Honour referred to four key areas, or pillars, that will be crucial to Alberta's continued success. I was very excited by that terminology. You see, I had the honour and pleasure of co-chairing with my very talented and hard-working colleague from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake a committee that was tasked with finding a way to ensure that the Alberta advantage would be enjoyed by all Albertans. We approached our work by looking for ways to extend the Alberta advantage off the highway 2 corridor into rural and remote communities. I'm proud to say that the first major step in our work has been completed with the report entitled rural Alberta, land of opportunity, set to be released shortly. In our report we spoke of four key pillars, pillars that are crucial to the success of any small rural or remote community. Those pillars are health care, education, economic growth, and community infrastructure.

All Albertans know that we enjoy one of the best quality health care systems in the world. Rural Albertans also are most keenly aware of the particular challenges that our health care system faces in trying to deliver those services. The challenge of trying to get the same work done year after year while input costs continually rise but little new money comes in is very reminiscent of farming. Our rural Albertans are creative, imaginative, and hard-working and are prepared to be part of a long-term solution, Mr. Speaker, to the health care issues that our province is facing.

The Health Services Utilization and Outcomes Commission has the current role of monitoring and reporting on the performance of Alberta's health system. The commission created a report card of provincial health care, part of which analyzed the key components of health care delivery by health authority region. What was discovered from that report was that the East Central health authority, the only health authority without a full-scale regional hospital designed to achieve economies of scale on health care service delivery, had far and away the greatest level of customer satisfaction, a commodity often hard to come by in today's world of exceedingly

high expectations. This accomplishment, Mr. Speaker, was possible only because of the close co-operation between the authority and the rural communities it serves. Thanks to their close work they were able to find ways to meet the health and community needs of those rural Albertans.

There is so much yet to do, Mr. Speaker. Communities across this great province are working hard to find ways to deliver quality health care in creative and innovative ways that maximize efficiency and assist in the repatriation of services to rural Alberta. Such solutions could help us maintain quality rural services while relieving stress on urban centres. But the implementation of new and creative ideas will need the support and co-operation of both urban and rural health regions, the public, provincial health unions, the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Rural Physician Action Plan, the provincial and federal governments, and, well, as you can see, the co-operation of nothing short of every organization associated with health care in this province. I know it may sound challenging, but everything worth doing is.

I must say that I was excited to see the continued commitment of this government to delivering quality health care services in cost-efficient and innovative ways through numerous initiatives, not the least of which is the expansion of the commission mandate to that of a quality health council. That commitment will reap great results for all Albertans.

We know rural Albertans are creative, imaginative, and hard-working, and whether it is in delivery of health care or finding new ways to grow their local economies, Mr. Speaker, they will continue to find ways to succeed.

From an economic point of view, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has led the nation, even North America, in fiscal and economic policies that other jurisdictions have been working hard to mimic for years now. Rural Alberta and Albertans have experienced some very trying times in the past few years, mainly the worst drought in historical record, followed by a lone case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy that has devastated our beef industry.

These trying times have led many rural Albertans to feel that they are economically underdeveloped and inadequately diversified to cope with the new world and changing times. They see buildings and facilities closing, youth, young families, and even seniors moving away, sometimes for new jobs, sometimes for better access to education or health care or community services, but always – always – for new opportunities that today appear few and far between in the rural landscape. Rural Albertans need faith, and they need hope, but most of all they need to know that there is a vision for the province, a vision in which they are viewed as growing, prospering Albertans and positively contributing to the collective province.

3:10

I was excited to see some of that vision in the new and renewed commitments I heard yesterday, Mr. Speaker, commitments that are designed to ensure that Alberta's entire economy not only remains strong but builds on its foundation to grow and diversify every corner of our economy. The new value-added strategy will lead the process of moving our provincial economy from one that is predominantly based on harvesting and exporting natural resources such as grain, oilseeds, raw wood products, oil and gas, coal to one that turns those resources into finished goods for export, thereby creating jobs here in Alberta, adding value here in Alberta.

Other initiatives outlined in the Speech from the Throne such as the life sciences initiative and tackling the Canadian Wheat Board issue head-on will do much to compound the advantages that can be achieved with the value-added strategy. Rural Albertans will be pleased by these commitments and with ample reason too. However,

the government must ensure that the new economy, the value-added industries, and new technologies that lead this economy and this province into a prosperous second century are not located only within urban strongholds. Placing or locating value-added industries and technologies in urban centres and merely leaving rural Albertans and the rural economy to harvest natural resources for those processes will do nothing to mitigate the situation in rural Alberta. In order to attract business and industry to rural Alberta, there must be a sound physical infrastructure within and among those communities.

I was glad to hear a commitment to extend the capital plan another year, until 2007. Quality transportation, whether by plane, train, or automobile, is essential to ensuring that artificial barriers aren't created, thus making location in rural areas unfeasible.

We cannot forget either, Mr. Speaker, that infrastructure is also important in areas of telecommunications and the Internet. Improved telecommunication service and SuperNet access to every community within Alberta means that rural Albertans and rural communities will be able to partake in the attraction of ICT industries and business, which will again assist in mitigating the dependence on our resource-based economy.

I was also very pleased to hear about the province's commitment to tourism across the province. Tourism continues to be one of the fastest growing industries around the world. Alberta has one of the richest and most unique histories on the continent, Mr. Speaker, blending strong cowboy traditions with native culture, with buffalo, grain elevators, and steam trains. People around the world are fascinated by those aspects of our culture, and the potential to capitalize on that interest could lead to an industry infinitely more dynamic than the one inspired by the dinosaur craze, but we need to ensure from this moment on that we are prepared to commit to developing and packaging tourism products that cater to these new interests and not just marketing familiar favourites. This is one case where the approach "if you build it, they will come" could never hold more true. I look forward to seeing the tourism strategy fleshed out in the weeks and months to come.

I could speak about economic growth opportunities all day, and I'm sure that some members may feel that I already have, but I simply could not leave this subject without mentioning what is likely one of the most important initiatives that I believe this government will undertake in its entire 20-year strategic plan, Mr. Speaker. I'm referring here to the water strategy. Simply put, all of the economic issues discussed to date are futile without water. This province would be hard-pressed to grow tourism, to grow value-added production, to grow primary production, for that matter, or even to grow its very own population without access to clean, potable water. Regardless of what anyone believes should be done with water, none can deny that water will become a major issue and will remain so forever. This issue needs to be addressed now, while we can act now, rather than later when there is only reaction. So I applaud the government for addressing this issue now.

The government has long had an understanding of the nature of the global economy and is fully aware of the need for open borders and free trade to ensure a strong local economy. Border and free trade issues have not been restricted to beef and BSE, however. They have grown in number in recent years with duties on Canadian wheat, softwood lumber, and a host of other issues. Those issues have direct negative consequences to all Albertans, Mr. Speaker, but specifically to rural Alberta.

Opening an Alberta office in Washington, D.C., is a clear demonstration that this government will not wait for the Canadian government to take the initiative on behalf of this province, and it will no longer allow the mood of the federal government to deter-

mine our province's economic fate. This action is welcome. It shows leadership, and it inspires confidence most among those dependent upon the relationship with our neighbours to the south.

There is a very common saying that I'm sure everyone in this Assembly is familiar with: give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime. Well, Mr. Speaker, that is the nature of education, and that phrase shows its intrinsic value to society. But as I have done so far in this address, I will not speak of the benefit to all Albertans of education but specifically to the importance of education to rural Albertans.

I have always seen this government's deep commitment to education at every level and to every single student, and much of that commitment was reflected within the Learning Commission's report, that was released only recently. There are, however, still small but significant issues that remain unsolved in rural Alberta. These issues are outside the scope of the commission's report, but I am confident that they will be addressed in the months to come.

To be more specific, Mr. Speaker, transportation is a growing issue within rural communities as younger and younger children are finding themselves on longer and longer bus rides, sometimes caused by school closures, sometimes by fewer buses to make up routes, but always caused by shortened resources. The cause is not necessarily provincial funding, but can also be school board management as student numbers decline in many school jurisdictions while dollars spent on administration often remain the same.

In many rural communities class size is not an issue, but rather it is the inflexibility in class accommodation. In a community with one school and one class for each grade, how is the community to handle one class that may be an anomaly and have 40 students at the grade 7 level? A good teacher often cannot be hired for one year to deal with such a situation, and it's impossible to find a teacher with the credentials to follow the class from primary grades right through to high school. How do rural schools address these anomalies in these situations? Those are educational issues that need to be addressed.

It's imperative that communities, school boards, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and the provincial government work to find ways to deliver education in a manner that utilizes public dollars to the maximum available benefit of the community as a whole. However, kindergarten to grade 12 is not the fundamental issue in many small communities. Many communities are curious about how to improve access for adults to education, and how to address on-site training for high school graduates that may want to stay in or close to their community while they work.

These ideas are not just about education but are also about the economic growth of a community. Many communities struggle with how to attract business or industries when further on-the-job training or upgrading of skills cannot be done close to the community; the employees would have to travel. Communities also face difficulties in retraining and attracting youth and young families when higher education opportunities are lacking and far flung. Young people usually move to places where higher learning opportunities are in greater abundance and inevitably just tend to be located in those areas. I cannot suggest any solutions, Mr. Speaker, but I am confident that this government will continue to lead in the pursuit of finding solutions to these and other issues in education with all stakeholders and will work hard to present all Albertans with opportunities for life-long learning.

From a community infrastructure perspective many rural communities, counties, towns, and villages find that they are falling behind. Whether we are discussing community halls, sports facilities such as rinks and ball diamonds, bowling alleys, service clubs, and so on, the community infrastructure across rural Alberta is weakening and in some places deteriorating quickly. What is at stake here, Mr.

Speaker, is the quality of life of rural Albertans. Rural Albertans lose quality of life as they lose affordable and available community infrastructure. They also lose the ability to attract new and young people who are looking for opportunities in small communities. To remedy this problem, we need to offer rural Albertans supports and tools which will not only help them realize their full potential but which will enable them to energize their local economies, their volunteers, and their fundraising capacities.

3:20

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, we need to encourage and promote rural development projects regardless of whether they are funded publicly or privately in order to expand the local infrastructure and capitalize on the entrepreneurial spirit that is so readily available and already in place in rural Alberta.

After the first case of BSE was discovered, Mr. Speaker, I was very heartened that Albertans came together in support of the beef industry, which in turn resulted in a 70 per cent rise in the consumption of beef in our province. I have often said that rural Albertans are strong and proud and that this group has survived droughts, pestilence, flooding, blizzards, tornadoes, hailstorms, and even the odd bout of government intervention. Federal intervention, mind you.

At this time for many rural Albertans the situation seems desperate, and for some it undoubtedly is. There are also a lot more questions than answers, and unfortunately there is no magic bullet that will resolve this emotionally charged and hotly political international issue.

However, there are two things that all Albertans, especially rural Albertans, can be sure of. First, regardless of what happens at any political level in the weeks, months, and even the years to come, nothing in the beef industry, indeed in rural Alberta will ever be the way it was. Secondly, the provincial government and all Albertans will be there for the people of this devastated industry in the days, weeks, and years to come, whether it be through redevelopment, refocusing, repositioning, or transitioning the industry. Two eternal truths remain. Albertans don't just survive; they succeed. And they do so because they look out for each other.

There is not a more pivotal point in our province's centennial than this 99th year. I and all Albertans are proud of this government's continued commitment as outlined in the Speech from the Throne to a rural development strategy that will help ensure that people and businesses in rural Alberta enjoy every opportunity to reach their full potential. It is imperative, especially now, that something be done to share the Alberta advantage with that part of Alberta that so desperately needs our immediate attention and co-operation. If we don't, that segment of the population stops producing what amounts to far more than its share of the economy.

The consequences for the entire province will be devastating. The Alberta advantage created in rural Alberta could be lost to all Albertans. Without healthy, vibrant rural and remote communities it will be impossible to continue to ensure that our resource-based economy continues to grow and thrive. Furthermore, it will be next to impossible to ensure continued diversification and the growth of value-added production within this province without strong, vibrant rural communities. In short, it will be almost infeasible to effectively and successfully implement any of the great new initiatives that the government has announced to take us into the next century without rural Alberta enjoying it.

I would like to take this final moment of my remarks to pay the deepest of respect to Her Honour the Honourable Lieutenant Governor for her eternal grace, her constant dignity, her unwavering faith in the human spirit, and of course her fabulous hugs. Mr.

Speaker, I know that if Her Honour could give rural Alberta a hug right now, she would. I'm confident that all hon. members in this Assembly agree with me when I state that Her Honour is a shining example of the capacity of the human spirit to endure, survive, and prosper through adversity. In hard times may we all, rural and urban Albertans alike, remember Her Honour's strength, grace, and faith and aspire to such levels of composure, dignity, and strength in times of despair. May she also continue to serve us in her current capacity for years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has truly been a pleasure to have the opportunity to move the Speech from the Throne.

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

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm extremely proud and honoured to have been asked to rise on behalf of the people of Calgary-Egmont to second the motion put forward by the hon. and young Member for Wainwright to accept the Speech from the Throne – I'm sure that his parents must be very proud of him today – a speech that was delivered with grace and special charm by the Honourable Lieutenant Governor, Lois Hole. Her Honour represents the best traditions of the office of Lieutenant Governor, and I'm sure that I speak for everyone in this Chamber when I say that Alberta's favourite grandmother has been in our thoughts and prayers during the personal challenges that she endured and overcame with such grace over the past year.

Mr. Speaker, I wish I were in a position of eastern influence so that I could influence the extension of her appointment at least to the end of 2005, our centennial year. Her Honour is loved by all Albertans and, in my view, is a true expression of the values and steadfastness that have made Alberta what it is today. A centennial celebration without Her Honour is just not an option. Show us that you're listening, Mr. Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, in delivering the Speech from the Throne, Her Honour has opened the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature of Alberta. I feel so privileged to be a member of this Legislature and to represent the people of Calgary-Egmont, who have honoured me with the responsibility to speak on their behalf as we prepare to move into our second century.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Calgary-Egmont embody the qualities that make Alberta such a wonderful place to live. In many ways they embody the qualities that we so admire in Her Honour: directness, honesty, entrepreneurship, strength of character, kindness, dedicated service, and a willingness to tackle problems head-on, persevere, and emerge stronger for the future, and – I would agree with the hon. Member for Wainwright – her hugs as well. Those same values and attitudes have brought Alberta from a fledgling member of Confederation in 1905 to become one of the strongest provinces in this great country in less than a century.

Albertans continue to make significant contributions to the freedom and quality of life that we have experienced as Canadians, and I'd like to take this opportunity to offer my best wishes to our troops currently stationed in Afghanistan and throughout the world. Their past and present service to Canada and Alberta contributes to the richness of our lives and has secured the freedom for Albertans to pursue their dreams in peace and security.

Mr. Speaker, I've called Alberta my home for all of my life, as has my father before me and two generations before him, and now two more generations, my children and grandchildren, continue to be blessed with the opportunity to be all that they can be and contribute to the fabric of this great province. I have considered myself privileged to be able to live and raise my children to appreciate the awesome natural beauty that is Alberta and the entrepreneurial

strength of character of Albertans that define who we are as a people. Additionally, my children have enjoyed the benefits that come from the wealth of natural resources and the hard work of previous generations that have made Alberta what we have become today.

The strength of character of Albertans that rise to every challenge has never been so evident as during the current agricultural crisis. Albertans did not hesitate to wholeheartedly support the cattle industry and continue to do so in the face of ongoing difficulties. I'm confident that we will ultimately emerge stronger and resume our international role as the beef of choice for all nations.

Mr. Speaker, while we can look back at success and the current challenges for our people, we must look forward with Her Honour for ways to contribute to the conditions that will enhance the future success of our grandchildren. Almost two years ago I was blessed with my first grandchild, and I was so proud when Her Honour announced the Alberta centennial education savings plan, because my grandson Matthew provided the motivation for the plan, and now thanks to the statesmanship of our Premier we have the opportunity to make it a reality for all future Albertans. Statesmanship, for the benefit of those across the way, focuses on the benefits for the next generation, while partisan politics frequently focuses exclusively on the next election.

I'll look forward to the debate in this House as we examine the benefits of this tremendous investment for the future generations of Albertans.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, in my former life I was involved in the computer and telecommunications industry, so I was especially pleased when Her Honour spoke about unleashing innovation as one of the four pillars that will become the framework for future success for all Albertans. By supporting innovation in Alberta, we can not only move from being exporters of raw material but to being exporters of finished goods and now a new product called knowledge. I feel that the knowledge industry has the potential to become the fifth pillar in Alberta's economy in our second century, the 21st century.

The creativity required for the knowledge industry depends in part on successfully unleashing innovation and successfully deploying ICT initiatives like SuperNet that will become the conduit of knowledge. Another critical initiative to support this vision announced by Her Honour is the creation of an ICT institute to guide research and innovation in this emerging sector. This initiative will in turn help support Alberta's booming economy, that saw the creation of 206,300 jobs over the last five years and 47,900 jobs in 2003 alone. Our unemployment levels continue to be amongst the lowest in the country, and the provincial average hourly wage is higher than the Canadian average.

Mr. Speaker, I've been privileged over the last 10 years to play a small part in the initiatives that have advanced innovation and ICT to the forefront in this government. As politicians we are often quick to take credit for these initiatives when in reality we are accidents of democracy, that happened to place us in the presence of great Albertans who are the ones who, in reality, make it all happen. So I salute all of those clear-thinking Albertans from all disciplines who continue to serve Alberta on all types of authorities, boards, and committees of government and who provide the good counsel from which our decisions flow. Another critical initiative brought forward by these clear-thinking Albertans will see the creation of a life sciences institute to co-ordinate research taking place across the province in areas such as agriculture, environment, forestry, health, bioenergy and water research.

Mr. Speaker, this new knowledge age must be supported from a young age, and that's why I was so pleased when Her Honour spoke

to the government's continued strong support for education at all levels. As most Albertans know, Her Honour has a passion for ensuring that Alberta's children continue to benefit from one of the best education systems in the world, and I share her passion. As the international community evolves around globalization, having an excellent educational experience and, I might add, in more than one language will become even more important to ensure the future success and quality of life for our children.

In October 2003 the members of the Alberta Commission on Learning released their final report. They detailed 95 recommendations that they felt would improve the education system in Alberta. This past December the government responded by adopting 84 of the 95 recommendations. This shows the level of commitment of the government to ensuring that Alberta continues to have one of the best education systems in the world.

The recommendations of the Learning Commission provide opportunities to improve our education system in a variety of ways. I'm pleased to note that the throne speech confirms that the government is taking the report seriously and is taking the necessary steps to implement a great number of the recommendations. This year increased funding for learning will work in combination with a new funding framework that gives school boards increased flexibility to meet the unique needs and circumstances of each Alberta community. Government will not dictate to school boards how to allocate these dollars they receive, leaving it to each board to address priority areas and be more accountable to the parents in each community for their decisions and outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, access to postsecondary institutions is key to producing a productive and caring society. Her Honour described new funding for postsecondary learning that will include an increase in base operating grants for all postsecondary institutions as well as additional dollars for new spaces in high-demand programs. Indeed, that initial investment will come with a commitment to create a total of 2,000 new spaces over the next four years.

Mr. Speaker, on another matter, Her Honour knows of what she speaks because she's played an important role in making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. I was pleased to hear Her Honour describe how this year the government will continue building on programs already in place to ensure that all Albertans enjoy the highest possible quality of life with a particular focus on the most vulnerable members of Alberta communities, a focus that includes all children. In her words, and I quote: there can be no better accomplishment for Albertans than to raise healthy and happy children who are confident in their knowledge and their opportunities about their future and compassionate in their interests with their peers, their community, and the public at large.

While the government steps forward to create that kind of environment for all children, it will be the subject of an upcoming Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying, and I certainly want to congratulate the Minister of Children's Services for putting that together, because I think that's a tremendously important initiative. That round-table will be held in May and will be of course handled with prior consultation province-wide. Communities and government partners find ways to break the cycle of violence, that can have a devastating and lasting effect in dividing families and on the fabric of Alberta communities.

Ultimately, many Albertans are acting in support with communities to strengthen the modelling of values and attitudes in our communities. I was very pleased to see comments dealing with values and attitudes in the Learning Commission report. I think that they're on the right track, and I'm aware that the ASBA is doing some good work in this area and is planning a conference soon to deal with this very important issue.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's most vulnerable citizens will also be protected through a new plan to prevent 21st century sexual crimes that target children such as Internet crimes, Internet luring, child pornography, and child prostitution. We're fortunate here in this province through the actions of our Solicitor General, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, to have legislation to protect children involved in prostitution, but this new plan will bring all crimes that sexually exploit children under one initiative, strengthening the way in which young Albertans are protected from exploitation and abuse.

Mr. Speaker, the Speech from the Throne, delivered by Her Honour, contained much more that time does not permit me to discuss. She re-emphasized the government's commitment to Alberta ideals of making spending decisions that best meet the needs of Albertans while being fiscally responsible. These ideals, coupled with strength of character and the willingness to face difficult challenges, will ensure that all Albertans, including my grandson Matthew, will be proud to live in the best province in Canada.

So may God bless Her Honour and Alberta. Thank you very much.

3:40

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would add my comments and praise of Her Honour for the speech that she delivered yesterday. Her Honour always speaks with grace, good humour, and warmth, and each occasion that you meet her is one that you remember. She's also very unique in terms of Lieutenant Governors of this province in her ability to speak out in terms of what she believes in, and she's been an outspoken advocate for education and schools in the province, as she has been for libraries. Yet she does it in a way that doesn't offend and has, I think, the desired impact on listeners. She again delivered a speech yesterday that we were all privileged to be part of the audience and listen to.

As I listened to the speech, Mr. Speaker, I couldn't help but think back to my constituency. I had been in the office for a number of days and had gone through the log of constituents that we had worked with in the last week or so, and I was struck by how there seem to be two worlds in our province: the world that we heard about yesterday, for the most part but not exclusively, in the throne speech and a world that is lived in by a whole large group of other Albertans.

As I listened to the speech, I wondered what that speech would sound like to the mother who phoned our office and is on a multiple handicap program. Her income is \$675 a month. She was provided at the beginning of the year \$173 for school fees for her teen daughter, and she called because she was in great distress that her daughter was not going to be able to take part in a number of junior high school programs because she didn't have the funds to pay the fees.

I wonder how she would have listened and reacted to the centennial savings plan. What kind of chance is there that she'll be able to even get a hundred dollars to open such a plan for her daughter, much less add to it over the coming years? I wondered how she might react to the K to 12 suggestions in the throne speech saying that there is going to be more money added.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Yet she lives in a world of school fees. We now have fees for courses in schools. We have always had and still continue to have the textbook fees and a whole host of other fees that have now been

resorted to by schools particularly in this city, where they have been desperate for funds. The cuts have really hurt a lot of schools. It seems to me that one of the things that has been lost over the past number of years has been the “public” in public education, and I think it is mothers and children of parents like this that suffer the most.

The second constituent that I thought of was again a lone-parent mother who phoned me in desperation, saying that her utilities were going to be cut off because she was unable to pay the utility bills. And she’s not alone. We have recommended and had to draw upon the CFRN Good Neighbour fund to try to bail out constituents who find themselves in a similar situation more times than I care to recall. I wondered, as she listened to the throne speech, what she would think of the lack of any mention of a deregulation plan and modifications that might be made to it that would help the province return to utility rates that were affordable, but the throne speech was strangely silent.

Another constituent phoned, a young man who was mired in debt, postsecondary school debt and private debt that he had added to that to try to complete his program, and through some unfortunate circumstances healthwise found himself in some difficulty meeting all the obligations. I wondered, as he listened to the plans for increasing funding for postsecondary education, how he felt about nothing being said about tuition and nothing in terms of support for students with respect to loans and the kinds of difficulties that they find themselves in.

A third constituent came in with his son and brought with him their invoices from their automobile insurance company and tried to make the case – at least we’re looking into it for them – that they were facing some unwarranted increases in their rates. They were getting little sympathy from the insurance company and found themselves facing the possibility of not being able to drive their vehicles. Again, if you looked at the throne speech, for that constituent the speech was strangely silent. I guess I wonder why the two pocketbook issues that seem to be front and foremost, utilities and auto insurance, were strangely missing from the Speech from the Throne.

The K to 12 class-size proposals leave me a little concerned because as I read the throne speech carefully, it talks about regulations. I hope that’s not going to be the solution for the Learning Commission recommendation that K to 3 students be in classes of 17 or less and the other recommendations with respect to class size, that there won’t be a set of regulations put in place that lays on the board the responsibility, for instance, for saying that there shan’t be more than 30 students in a high school class and then leaves it up to board to try and figure out how that’s going to work without the additional resources that are going to be needed. I had looked forward to that reference to class sizes to be accompanied with some recommendation in respect to funding increases, but it wasn’t, and I’ll watch very carefully for that link to be made when the spring budget is presented.

As you go through the recommendations, I think, as I said, that for many Albertans and a growing number of Albertans the throne speech presented a different world and not one that they’re very familiar with. Again, I think it’s unfortunate at this time in our history, when we are so blessed with resources, that there isn’t a huge attempt to make sure that all Albertans are benefiting from the richness of those resources. It’s something that’s troubled me, and I think even more troubling, Mr. Speaker, is the dismissal of these people and the growing feeling, it seems to me, that they are somehow responsible for their own plight and that whatever happens to them is just too bad and that the greater community has no responsibility or if not no responsibility, then minimal responsibility

for what happens to them. As I say, that’s a feeling I’ve had for the last number of years, that that’s a growing perception among some Albertans.

3:50

As I look back at the speech itself, the fact that base funding for postsecondary institutions is going to be increased is going to be welcomed, certainly, by those institutions. I think the proof in the pudding will be, of course, in the budget in terms of how much it is. For a long time I wished and hoped and advocated that the government work with those institutions and the federal government to bring in a long-term plan for financing postsecondary schools in this province.

I don’t think we can continue the way we are. If you believe the president of the University of Alberta – and he presents the figures to support it – 20 years ago a student’s dollar in tuition was matched by \$10 from government sources. Today a dollar put in by a student is matched by only \$2.34 from the government. There’s been a tremendous drop-off of financial support for our postsecondary institutions, Mr. Speaker, and I submit that it can’t continue, that we’re going to have institutions in crisis and that the pressure on students for increased tuition and the pressure to try to access outside funding is going to reach a breaking point where these institutions are not going to be able to cover their costs.

If you look at one area alone, utilities, the massive growth in those utilities over the past number of years, the expenses for those institutions are not going down. That’s why my call for a long-term plan for funding for postsecondary institutions in the province. As I said, I think that whether the government recognizes it or not, it’s eventually going to have to happen.

A similar thing may be said about the K to 12 system. I find it a little irksome, Mr. Speaker, that the government in the speech talks about giving boards the authority to spend money as they see fit. It was this government that took that authority away when they started enveloping money. So it is a little irksome to say the least. But just to say, “Now we won’t have an envelope for administration, and now we won’t have an envelope for instruction; now you can spend it any way you want,” isn’t going to solve their financial problems if there’s not enough money. It’s the total money in the envelope that’s going to be very important. I don’t think tinkering with the funding framework or giving boards more freedom with respect to how they spend it addresses the fundamental problem for the K to 12 system, and that is that no one knows what it costs to educate a youngster in the K to 12 system.

Adequacy has not been addressed. I give the government credit for addressing equity in the early 90s, when they addressed the problem of some wealthy boards with a large tax base being able to finance their schools at a much higher rate than school districts who found themselves in jurisdictions where there was a smaller tax base to draw upon. The government’s solution was to take all the money in and then redistribute it across the province on a per-pupil basis, which is a commendable step in terms of equity.

But equity is not enough, Mr. Speaker. Equity has to be coupled with adequacy. It’s no good saying, yes, we have a system that’s equitably funded if everyone is equally poor. I think that at least for the large urban boards in this province, those that educate 75 to 80 per cent of the youngsters, that’s exactly what has happened. They find themselves not being able to access the resources they need to provide programs for the youngsters that they’re expected to serve.

The recommendation from the Learning Commission that would have given them some taxing authority, as distasteful as that was, Mr. Speaker, would have at least given them some flexibility. Whether it would have led to the situation we had in the ’90s before

the changes were made, where that taxing became unacceptable to communities, it's hard to tell, but at least the proposal from the Learning Commission was designed to give them some access to funds.

But again the problem is adequacy, and our neighbours south of the border have had to face the problem of adequacy because they've been forced to by the courts. You have a number of American states where parents have gone to the courts and said, "Look; the state is not providing adequate funds for my youngster," giving that youngster the program that he should have, and the courts have said to those states: then you better revise your funding formulas and your funding frameworks so that adequacy is addressed.

Of course, that raises the whole question of adequacy. What is an adequate education? You'll have states like Wyoming who have said that schools must prepare every youngster to be eligible for a postsecondary program on graduation. That could be vocational. It could be university. It could be an institute. It could be a whole variety of things. But there's the obligation on the school system there of an adequate education. It's one that prepares every youngster for that world when they leave 12th grade.

Other states have approached it quite differently and come up with different measures of what they consider adequate, but it's something that we haven't even looked at in this province. It's been raised. We held a town hall meeting, and I know some government members were there. At least one member of the Learning Commission was at that meeting, yet again we see a throne speech with nothing in terms of adequacy being addressed.

A number of other proposals in the throne speech are going to cause a lot of discussion. I've already mentioned the centennial education savings fund, and as much as I welcome any kind of help for parents and for students in terms of financing their education, I think it may have some unfortunate consequences. One of them is to signal to parents: you're the one that has to pick up the costs for postsecondary education. That's fine for those parents and those students where that's a possibility, but there are a vast number of students in this province where that's not the case. There's a television ad on by one of the insurance companies the other night promoting an educational savings plan and indicating what tuition is going to cost 10, 20 years down the road. Astronomical. I think it's a well-intentioned plan that's going to have some unintended consequences, as I said.

I think the other thing that it seems to do is to pick winners and losers: those people in the province that can afford those kinds of programs for their youngsters and those that can't. A third thing that it does is that it takes away the pressure for the government to really seriously examine postsecondary funding. Again, I think that's a task that the government needs to address in the very near future.

So as much as some may applaud the centennial education savings, I think we'd be naive if we didn't realize that it's going to have varied effects and some policy effects in terms of the future of the province.

4:00

I wanted to touch briefly on the postsecondary degree-granting proposal in the speech, Mr. Speaker, and the move of the government to open up degree granting. It's something that I support, and I think any move that can be taken to open doors to widen the opportunity for students to have access to degrees is worthy of support. I think the major roadblock for this in the past, of course, has been fears of quality. Are the degrees that are going to be offered from some institutions going to be of the quality that one would expect from a university or a college in this province? We have the Campus Alberta quality council which is going to be charged with sanctioning those degrees.

I think it's a move, as long as it's well monitored – I remember

serving on a committee that looked at an institution in the province that wanted to be given degree-granting status and the close scrutiny that they were given in terms of their library collections, the qualifications of their staff, the condition of their laboratories. Those things were looked at extremely carefully, and if that kind of standard remains in place, then I think that this will be a good move in the province.

The fear is that the opposite will happen. We have had experience with that in the province already, not with degree granting but with some of the diploma granting, the private institutions granting diplomas. We've had a couple of those fail and leave students stranded. We've had representations from groups of students from some of those institutions really concerned about the quality of instruction, the kinds of resources that they have to work with, and how much the final paper that they were going to get at the end of the program was really worth. As far as I know, there are still no standards in place, and there is no way that they can be enforced. I had one student tell me that the instructor was two pages ahead of him with respect to instruction in the computer course that he was taking, and that's just not good enough.

I think we can and should at this time raise legitimate concerns about the quality of those degrees. But I think it would be great for our students to be able to access a degree and not have to move to Edmonton or to Calgary but to get it elsewhere in the province and to get a good quality program that was recognized elsewhere. Right now for students in some parts of this province there is no choice, and hopefully this will open the doors to that.

There has been a comment about the school wellness program and the daily physical education. I think the research on daily physical education is pretty well founded. It has an impact on student achievement, to say nothing of their physical well-being. It's been done elsewhere and probably long overdue. The concerns raised, of course, are the preparation and the resources to put that kind of program in place. Are schools going to have the facilities where that daily physical education program may be carried out? Are they going to have the resources for people to run quality programs that youngsters deserve?

I think the last item I'd like to comment on, Mr. Speaker, is the centennial capital plan. The reaction to me by people in terms of the infrastructure plans is confusion. It seems that money is announced then reannounced, that jurisdictions make plans and those plans have to be changed or those plans have to be delayed, and I think that that's unfortunate. It seems to me that it is one area that badly needs attention, badly needs resources, and the kind of confusion and the uncertainty that exists around the plans, I think, has to be dealt with and dealt with directly. I think that, for instance, there should be some limit on how many times you announce funds for a project. It does no one any good when they're repeatedly announced and then they end up being delayed or not completed at all. So I would make a plea for the centennial capital plan to be clear and straightforward and carried out as quickly and as carefully as we would hope those plans would be.

I'll just conclude, Mr. Speaker, returning to what I started out with, and that's this notion of two different worlds. I give credit to the throne speech where there is going to be assistance for families that are facing violent situations. I think the concern for bullying and its impact on children, trying to protect youngsters from the Internet – these are good initiatives, but they are certainly among the minority proposals in the Speech from the Throne.

Like the previous speaker, Mr. Speaker, I too have a grandson. Mine's four years old, and his name, too, happens to be Matthew. I look in this throne speech and just wonder: 14 years down the road is he going to have the opportunity to access a postsecondary

education? Will his high school experience be the kind of experience we would want for all Alberta children? I'm afraid I leave the throne speech with more questions than answers.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 kicks in. Anybody have any questions for the hon. member?

There being none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to have this opportunity to speak to the Speech from the Throne delivered by Her Honour, the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, Lieutenant Governor, at the opening of the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature, Tuesday, February 17.

Mr. Speaker, let me begin my remarks today by commending Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor Lois Hole for her delivery of the Speech from the Throne with her characteristic warmth and humour. For the past four years the Lieutenant Governor has fulfilled the duties of her office with grace, generosity, and, yes, with the hugs for which she is world famous. Over the past year she has shown remarkable courage in facing enormous personal difficulties and health problems. Through it all her characteristic good cheer and work ethic have been an inspiration not only to members on all sides of this House but, indeed, to all Albertans. Thank you, Your Honour. One thing the Premier and I do agree on is for her to remain as Lieutenant Governor through Alberta's centennial year and for as long beyond as she sees fit.

Had the Lieutenant Governor written the throne speech, I suspect it would have read differently, Mr. Speaker. But the throne speech is only read by the Lieutenant Governor; it is written by the government and sets out its agenda for the next year.

Mr. Speaker, I smell an election. It's almost as sure as the first sign of spring that as this Conservative government enters the fourth year of its electoral mandate, the purse strings get loosened, and Albertans are asked to forget what they were put through the previous three years. Albertans are told to forget about the fiasco of electricity deregulation that had drained \$6 million out of their pockets. They're told to forget about the highest auto insurance premiums in western Canada. They're told to forget about student tuition that has tripled in the last dozen years. Albertans get three years of Mr. Hyde, and, presto, the year before an election they get Dr. Jekyll. We need stable, predictable, multiyear funding, but what we get is the government's Jekyll-and-Hyde approach: turn on the taps before an election and turn them off afterwards.

4:10

Much was made in yesterday's throne speech about an education savings plan under which the government proposed to provide a \$500 contribution to children born in 2005 and beyond. The question must be asked, though: is introducing this kind of voucher-style system the most effective way to fund postsecondary education? I think not. Only about 40 per cent of Alberta parents are able to afford to set up a savings plan for their children's postsecondary education. How will this plan assist the 60 per cent of Albertans who lack the financial means to participate?

Mr. Speaker, we need a tuition freeze, not a half-baked savings scheme that will only begin, presumably, to benefit students starting in the year 2023 – eighteen years of wait for even those ones who are fortunate to start receiving this money. Is this what the Conservative government means by a 20-year plan: pay high tuition now and hope for the best 20 years down the road? It's today's students that have seen their tuition fees triple in the past dozen years. For little more than the cost of this education savings plan the government, if it

chose to do so, could immediately freeze tuition fees for every student in university, public college, or technical institute today. Unless we tackle today's sky-high tuition fees, which continue to rise at two or three times the rate of inflation, we are saddling the current generation of students with a lifetime of debt.

In commenting on the government's education savings scheme, Shirley Barg, president of the Council of Alberta University Students, described the RESP strategy as bad policy and went on to say, and I briefly quote: a flat, across-the-board giveaway like this program is about the election, not about postsecondary education. This is indicative of the chronic government underfunding of universities. Albertans won't be fooled. End of quote.

Brett Bergie, executive director of the Alberta College and Technical Institute Students' Executive Council, points out that the program will not benefit anyone born prior to 2005, which is grossly unfair to young people facing sky-high tuition fees now and in future years.

Mr. Speaker, this Jekyll-and-Hyde approach is also evident when it comes to support for K to 12 education. This past September this government laid off 1,000 teachers, causing class sizes to skyrocket. Yet in yesterday's throne speech the government undergoes an election-year conversion by promising to hire more teachers and make class sizes more manageable. In the throne speech the government has the audacity to say, and I quote, the Learning Commission's recommendation to reduce class size is already being implemented, unquote.

Well, tell that to the students of Edmonton public, which lost 450 teachers last September. As a result, 25 per cent of K to grade 3 students are in classes of more than 25; 70 per cent of K to 3 children are in classes of more than 20 students. Class sizes are up significantly in every grade. Try telling these students and their parents that the Learning Commission's recommendations to reduce class sizes are already being implemented. These students and their parents will see such a statement for what it is: pre-election rhetoric from a government that has failed to deliver on its claim that K to 12 education is a top priority.

What about seniors, Mr. Speaker? There was no mention of seniors in the Premier's TV infomercial two weeks ago, and once again seniors barely rated a mention in yesterday's throne speech. There's a vague mention in the throne speech about the government setting up a new process to ensure that long-term care facilities are accountable for the accommodation services they provide. Well, the frail and elderly in Alberta's long-term care centres, who recently faced a hike of anywhere from 38 to 50 per cent in their accommodation rates, must be sleeping easier knowing this. Does the throne speech commit to rolling back some or all of the 50 per cent rate hike? No, it does not.

What about eliminating seniors' health care premiums as a first step to phasing out this regressive and unfair health care tax for all Albertans? Now, that would be a concrete initiative to help the province's seniors. But is scrapping seniors' health care premiums mentioned in the throne speech? No, it's not, Mr. Speaker. That is because the government's priority is not the province's seniors. It is continued corporate tax cuts and royalty giveaways.

The situation facing our rural communities does receive several mentions in the throne speech, Mr. Speaker. A vague mention is made of a comprehensive research program focusing on BSE. While lacking in details, this sounds like a worthwhile initiative which may do some good in the long run but does very little to address the looming farm crisis in the short term.

After recovering late last year, the prices for both finished cattle and feeder cattle are once again in free fall. In some cases cattle are fetching only half of what they were last year. The seriousness of the

situation facing our families and our rural communities cannot be overstated, Mr. Speaker, yet not everyone is suffering. Prices in our supermarkets have barely budged. Profits at Tyson Foods and Cargill, which process 90 per cent of Alberta's cattle, are up, despite the hardship being experienced by our farmers and ranchers.

What else isn't in the throne speech? The throne speech makes no mention of the fact that Alberta has the highest auto insurance rates of any western Canadian province. The throne speech makes no mention of the fact that this province has the highest power bills in Canada because of the Tory government's bungled deregulation scheme. No mention is made of a plan to increase Alberta minimum wage, which is the lowest of any Canadian province and, at \$5.90 per hour, has not been adjusted for almost five years.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that there's not much in the throne speech that offers a better deal to middle-class and working Albertans except for vague promises to ramp up spending in areas where the government is vulnerable on the eve of an election. Perhaps all the government's rhetoric about a 20-year plan is an excuse not to deal with the problems of the present. The problems of the present are piling up: mad cow and a looming rural crisis; the highest electricity bills in Canada; the highest auto insurance rates in western Canada; a refusal to scrap health care premiums, which would be good medicine for everyone; royalty giveaways instead of meaningful action to reduce class sizes; the nickelling, diming, loonie-ing, and toonie-ing of our seniors; subsidies for the horse racing industry instead of a break for students on postsecondary education fees.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, while the rest of us have to worry about rising power bills, auto insurance premiums, class sizes, tuition fees, and long-term care centre fee hikes, the government's priority in the throne speech is to go on a 20-year blue-skying exercise in the hope that the government's poor track record in dealing with current challenges will be overlooked. Well, this doesn't wash with Albertans, and it doesn't wash with the New Democrats.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29; any questions for the hon. member?

There being none, the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to be able to respond to Her Honour's Speech from the Throne. Like many Albertans, I have admired the strength and compassion with which the Lieutenant Governor has undertaken her duties over the past year, and it was a joy to once again listen to her deliver the throne speech.

Mr. Speaker, I am an Albertan by choice. Back in 1980 when my husband was transferred to Alberta, we hesitated to accept the job placement. After all, Alberta? It was too far from home. But we had heard how beautiful the Rockies were, and we laughed with a friend who had visited Olds and spent a few evenings at the old Penholder. Maybe Alberta was an okay place to live. Well, we were young and full of adventure, so why not?

4:20

When we arrived, it became all too clear to us that this was home. It had called to us, and we had come home. This was indeed the land of opportunity and majestic mountains and fly-fishing streams unequalled. It was the land of rednecks, where you were not judged by what your family was but by who you were. This was the land of promises: work hard, work smart, and you can make all your dreams come true. Thank you, Alberta, for making my dreams come true.

I can speak for my husband, who is also very thankful for having his dreams come true. So our province moves into its second century. We need to have a plan that will keep this province strong so that the opportunity to work hard, work smart, and make your dreams come true is there for our children and all our grandchildren to come.

In my view, the foundation of any strong province or country has been the individuals and the families who reside there. It is interesting that the teachings of Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, are as relevant today as they were more than 2,000 years ago. Aristotle's philosophical view of a strong nation was this: you start building a strong nation with strong and healthy family units; when that foundation is secure, it creates healthy communities, and those communities come together to create healthy nations or, in our case, a healthy province. Aristotle had one major concern, and that was that should any of the family or the community be corrupted, the entire nation suffers.

So as MLAs, if you want to keep our province strong and free from corruption, then we must keep our families strong. We face the challenge of protecting and enhancing not just our province but the lives of those who reside within our communities. It is our duty to listen to our citizens, to hear their aspirations, and to work to maintain the supports that will help them to achieve their full potential.

For Conservatives this doesn't mean that we become the centre of families. It can't ever mean that. What it means is that the government takes its rightful role as the stewards of a clean, healthy, and safe environment and as facilitators of programs that help those families who need help. It means that we undertake our duty to maintain a strong education system, solid environmental standards that guarantee clean air and clean drinking water, and finally programs designed to aid those who are at a disadvantage, including children in abusive homes, persons with developmental disabilities, seniors who face health and income problems, the homeless, and single parents working hard to raise their families. Just as in every other constituency in Alberta we face all of these challenges in my home constituency of Red Deer-North.

As I think about where Alberta has come during the past 100 years, I often find myself doing so by reflecting on Red Deer's growth in its 100-plus years. Red Deer started out as a small village on the Alberta prairie. It, like many villages in pioneer days, was focused on agricultural pursuits. Red Deer was inhabited by determined men and women who worked tirelessly to build the sort of community that could sustain them through good times and bad. I imagine that when they were told they were going to Alberta, they thought, just like me: Alberta? It was too far from home. But they came anyway because they sensed the opportunity and the promise that was here in this land. I think those pioneers would be proud of their city and proud of our province were they able to see it today. We have kept the promises they made to future generations.

Red Deer has grown from being simply an agricultural hub to being a centre for oil field and gas services, food processing, manufacturing, and retail. We've got a college that is the pride of central Alberta. We've got great workers and hard-working volunteers. We've got strong community values, and like other communities in the Calgary-Edmonton corridor Red Deer has continued to grow, showing itself as a true economic engine and a vital part of the great western tiger. We have much to be proud of.

Yet with that growth has come several problems, and it is these problems that cause me great concern. My focus lately has been on the issue of community safety. Like others who live in Red Deer, I find that our city is in a sort of in-between phase. We all want and appreciate the small city feel, the closeness of our neighbours, the feeling of safety, the promise of lifestyle and community that gives

its young every opportunity to succeed and become the future pillars of Red Deer and of Alberta, but with our huge growth we also find the emergence of gang activity, drugs, family abuse, and violent crime. These elements are eroding the solid foundation of our families and therefore our communities.

I feel comfortable speaking for every upstanding citizen of our city and our province and saying: I want them out. We've had too many families ripped apart by the violence and terrorism of drugs. We've had too many families ripped apart by the terrorism of domestic violence. We've had too many families ripped apart by addictions.

So with our growth and prosperity come the enemies that would destroy us. When these enemies weaken our families, they weaken our province and our country. Aristotle was right. Should any of the family or the community be corrupted, the whole nation suffers, and therefore it becomes our duty to ensure that all Albertans are safe and protected.

Her Honour outlined in the throne speech that in May the province will conduct a round-table on family violence and bullying. These efforts will help communities and government partners find ways to break the devastating cycle of family violence. We will fight crime and drugs through changes to government funding for policing. There will be a new funding formula for policing that will increase the dollars to deliver this very critical service. Special police units have already been assigned to defeat the gangs that seek to control drugs and prostitution in this province, and we look to AADAC to help fight addictions.

I share with Her Honour a commitment to a better and brighter education system. I share with Her Honour and with many of my caucus colleagues the desire for our government to make as strong a commitment as possible to the education of preschool- and elementary school-age citizens, so much so that I believe our government should take on the aim of ensuring that every child in Alberta can read by the time he or she is eight years old. In fact, we should adopt a policy that guarantees that every child who is able is reading by the end of grade 3. Reading is the basic building block of a good education. One of the four pillars of the 20-year plan is leading in learning. Let's lead in learning by guaranteeing that all children will read by grade 3.

A good educational system is the foundation of a strong nation. During my trip to Bangladesh in October, when I attended the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference, I saw a poor nation with great potential. The Bangladeshi people were very friendly and welcoming. They had fought for their independence in the early '70s, and they are going to build a strong nation one day. The majority of people in Bangladesh live in poverty with inadequate food, very little health care, inadequate housing, and a questionable educational system. As I observed the people in the countryside around me, I asked myself how the problems in Bangladesh could be solved and what would be the quickest and most effective way to bring these beautiful people to our higher standard of living. I came to the realization that the only way the quality of life in Bangladesh could be improved for everyone was through education. Education is the foundation of a strong and prosperous nation. For Canada to be a strong and prosperous nation, there must be strong and prosperous provinces and territories.

In November 2003 I was given the honour of being appointed co-chair to the government MLA Committee on Strengthening Alberta's Role in Confederation. It has been a great pleasure to travel to the communities and towns in Alberta to hear what the people have to say. While we hear about an Alberta police force, an Alberta pension plan, and collecting our own taxes, we also hear about the gun registry fiasco, the Canadian Wheat Board monopoly, and infrastructure needs like roads and regional water and sewage

systems. We have also felt the pain of hard-working, desperate farmers whose livelihoods are affected by mad cow disease. I have felt the pain of good and loyal citizens being labelled criminals because their guns are not registered.

The first of the four pillars described in the throne speech is unleashing innovation. We need research and innovation to help us prove to the world that our beef and our food supply in Alberta is safe. We need innovation to help us strengthen the role of this province in Confederation. When we make this province stronger, we make all provinces stronger. I am receiving e-mails from all over Canada saying: go for it Alberta; we are right behind you.

The four pillars of the 20-year plan that Her Honour spoke of are the four pillars of promise. We need to have research and development point us in the right directions. We will lead in learning. We will compete in a global marketplace because this world is getting smaller and smaller and we are a big part of the world's breadbasket. We will go beyond wheat and raw materials to develop centres of manufacturing and export. The fourth pillar will follow from the first three: to make Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit.

There is no doubt in my mind that Alberta is the best place to live and work, and we welcome all visitors. Alberta is the land of the pancake breakfast and the beef barbecue served up with friendly faces and cowboy hats, and if this province is calling you home, as it called to my family, then we offer you goodwill and opportunity. Welcome. But when you come to make it your home, then give it all you have, because you will be expected to return that welcome and to protect the heritage and rights of all Albertans and Canadians.

4:30

I agree with Her Honour when she states that the many new projects and initiatives to be launched in the coming year are much more than the result of careful fiscal planning. They are also a testament to the remarkable energy, dedication, and forward-looking spirit of Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans understand that of those to whom much is given, much is expected. We will fulfill those expectations as we take on the challenges of the future and make Alberta's approaching second century even more successful than the province's first hundred years.

Aristotle was right when he taught that a strong nation rests on a foundation of strong families. This is the promise of Alberta, a province that offers an economy with jobs and safe communities so that your family may grow up strong and free, strong and free to dream and to succeed, a strong province that offers a good education to make your dreams possible and a health care system to keep your body strong and free.

On my way home late at night when the northern lights dance in the winter sky, I pause to watch the beauty and the majesty. I breathe in the crisp air as it fills my lungs with life and energy, and I'm compelled to say a humble prayer of thanks: thanks for the many gifts that I have been given, and thanks for giving me the opportunity to help make this province strong so that I may be able to pass those gifts on to others.

My final thanks is to the people of this great province. Thank you, Alberta, for all that you have done for my family and me.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 kicks in. Any questions for the hon. member?

There being none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne is always an interesting one, and I listened with great respect and fondness to my hon. colleagues opposite put their feelings, their passions on the record.

It's always nice to hear what people really believe in and want to promote.

I'm picking up a theme as I listen to a number of them today, as though the Lieutenant Governor has written the speech, and we know that it's a quaint tradition that we regard it that way, but in truth it's meant to be – and it is – the government's plan, setting forward its blueprint as read into the record by the Lieutenant Governor. I've listened to a number of very kind remarks about the Lieutenant Governor and her place in the hearts of Albertans, and I think they're all absolutely true and they're all heartfelt, and I would add my voice to that. She has been a wonderful representative for all of us, representing the Queen to the people of Alberta, but I'm sure that also goes the other way, representing Albertans back to the Queen. We all appreciate the heart and soul that she has brought to this position and made it a very human position, and we admire her strength in pursuing that.

We are looking at the Speech from the Throne, and it is the government's blueprint: vague, no new ideas, and once again telling Albertans to lower their expectations, which I always find really interesting coming from this government. It's not about good news and let's look forward; it's about how you need to expect less and how things are going to be a little tougher. Always interesting.

The one thing that I did see as a theme this year – and perhaps the Minister of Environment has been reading some books or having some influence with his colleagues. I can certainly see the three Rs of recycling coming into play here, so we have reuse, reduce, and recycle. Certainly, we have reuse when I look at what's being proposed around the Alberta workfare. That's a reuse of a program that we had in place here in Alberta a good 15 years ago: the Alberta Works program to “help clients assess their strengths and needs,” where they go in and you sort of do a little test and they tell you, you know, that you should go off and be a doctor and you should be a ditchdigger and that kind of thing. So here we have it again, Alberta government recycling, in this case reusing an old program.

We have the reduce factor involved here as well as we tell university students that they need to reduce their economic viability with continued high tuition costs and associated costs of trying to get postsecondary education in this province. We have some recycling of some platitudes and ideas when we talk about what's in this particular throne speech for seniors and the usual, well, yes, we respect the dignity and uphold the independence of seniors.

Overall, this speech sounded very much like last year's and the year's before that. I actually had one fellow who hadn't been to listen to a throne speech in a couple of years pull me aside and say: you know, this could have been the same speech. The only thing that was different was that Martha and Henry were no longer involved in it, but other than that, he really couldn't see much difference and wondered if it was possible that it could be the same speech. I hope not, but it's possible, I suppose.

Part of what I'm noticing from this government is that since paying off the net debt in 1999, it's lost its unifier, its glue, its focus, its absolute adherence to a vision that it had, and it's all over the place now. Some members of caucus say: spend money. Some other members of caucus say: don't spend money. Some people say: go forward. Some people say: go back. So it's all over the place, and I think that the throne speech reflects that. That unifying focus has gone, and there's a lot of dissipation of energy.

When I look more specifically at what's being laid out here, I think I am most profoundly disappointed by the flagship bill or the flagship idea, the centennial education savings plan. Talk about reuse, recycle, reduce. Once again we have the government picking winners and losers. Everybody born this date forward gets to be a winner; anybody else, you're on your own. We'd had so many

assurances that that was not going to happen any more, but that's exactly what's happening. Honestly, if you really wanted to be helping the young people and families in Alberta today, then put that money into the universities and the postsecondary educational institutions and reduce the tuition fee across the board for all of those students. That would have an immediate effect on not only those students but their families and any children they're going to have. That would be far fairer than anything that's being contemplated here.

What do I mean by fair? Well, the government says that it plans to offer this \$500 initial amount of money to anyone, any family or parent, that can open a registered education savings plan for their children. Well, if you start to look into this, which I have done, you in fact have to invest some money to get one of these going. You have to buy a minimum number of units, and I suppose, depending on the banking institution or your own tax status, that probably has some effect on what the bottom line is. But you don't get into these things for \$10 or \$25. You're looking at a much more substantial investment. The figure, I've been told, is a hundred dollars, and I'm having that confirmed from someone across the way who would know: a hundred dollars to start it.

So what the government has really said is that for those families out there who can afford to put a hundred dollars into a registered education savings plan, then we will give you \$500. Okay. Then my question here is: what about those families who with a new baby born in 2005 do not have a hundred dollars to put aside into this registered education savings plan? Do they not get the \$500 then? Do they not get to participate in this? Sounds like it. So once again winners and losers. People who are wealthy enough to be able to put aside that hundred dollars get to enjoy the government's largesse. Not wealthy enough? “Sorry. Bye. You're not part of the Alberta advantage.” Back to the winners and losers theme.

4:40

I find this a gimmick bill, and this is the biggest disappointment for me in what's being talked about in the government's blueprint. I would like to see the government follow through on lofty ideals about helping students. Well, good; then reduce that tuition. That will help students right now and for a long time to come. But picking those winners and losers and especially setting up families to fail with new babies in 2005 – I'm really disappointed.

Here's another way. You really want to help students? You really want to help young families? Well, the Learning Commission came out with 95 recommendations. The government has already said that they're going to institute 84 of them, but no money has been invested in actually implementing those 84 Learning Commission recommendations, so let's see the money. Invest that money now. Let's get them happening. Let's make it happen. Thus far we've got, “Yeah, yeah, we sure do agree,” but no money that's going to actually implement them.

One of the other things that struck me as I went through this was that I have a concern around BSE, which is of enormous consequence to everyone in Alberta. I represent an inner-city riding. Yes, we recognize as well what kind of impact this has already had in Alberta and could have in Alberta. My concern when I read what is in the Speech from the Throne is that I see an attempt to control the message, to spin the message out rather than concrete plans about how it is going to achieve what's being asked from us from those international markets to restore our credibility, to restore our position in the world.

You know, the talk about the single case of BSE and then later there's the second – well, it doesn't say: second case. It just talks about the “single case in the United States connected to Alberta.” I

heard someone on CBC who was really laying out some of the things that are possible and that are being asked for by other countries that could be purchasing our beef, things like the exact labelling of where it comes from and the idea of marketing beef, in the way that wine is marketed, from certain regions of Alberta to help restore that credibility. Testing is a huge issue. I don't see that in here. What are we doing about testing? I don't see where that is. So I don't know what the government is trying to tell us with this. All I can see is the massaging of a message, but I don't see the concrete plans to move us out of this.

There's a discussion about skilled workers and the need to strengthen and enhance apprenticeship programs. At the same time it's talking about attracting highly skilled immigrants to the Alberta workforce. Well, let's face it: in most countries that you would go to that already have a highly skilled workforce, they're not going to move from where they are to come to Alberta. So you're actually looking into markets and into countries where they are facing much more stress financially or far fewer opportunities. So really what we're talking about here is cheaper labour rather than more skilled labour, and I am interested to see how the government looks forward to working with and strengthening the workers and particularly the unionized workers in the province as compared to bringing in cheaper labour from somewhere else and how those labourers are going to be treated.

Policing. You know, I'm not going to complain when I see an about-face by the government when it's an about-face that comes to a position that I have been championing. I know that in the draft police report that we actually saw, it specifically said that they would not be looking at funding municipalities, and now in this throne speech they seem to be saying that the government will be funding or considering a different funding formula for police forces. I'm happy to see that. Once again show me the money. What does this actually mean? We're not getting a very clear indication of what would happen. Implement "a new funding formula for policing which will significantly increase the dollars to deliver this important service." That's all it says. So again it's a very vague plan. Let's see the actual money and what that means here.

We've got a number of municipalities and municipal organizations that have indicated, you know, that they have been squeezed by the province on the issue of police funding. The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics has indicated that the province is way behind in funding policing. Saskatchewan pays twice as much per capita on policing, and Newfoundland spends four times as much per person on policing as does Alberta. The same Centre for Justice Statistics has indicated that the province's municipalities pay the highest percentage of the provincial policing costs at 82 per cent, and some communities like Lac La Biche, High Prairie, High Level, Edson, St. Paul, Cardston, Valleyview, and others are paying nearly 50 per cent of their municipal revenue for policing. So we look forward to seeing the money there and what that actually means.

There's also a discussion about continuing a centennial infrastructure program here, and that I am having problems with. What I'm really seeing here is that the regular maintenance of infrastructure and upgrading of infrastructure that's needed in this province, that should be planned for and budgeted for all the way along, that this province has failed so miserably in in the last 10 years has created an infrastructure deficit. They're now going to plow money in there under the guise of the centennial project. What they should be doing all the way along, what they should be doing as prudent managers and stewards of the assets that all Albertans own, they're now going to gussy it up, call it the centennial capital project, and do the work they should have been doing anyway. We're not getting anything, you know, extraordinarily new here, and I don't see any money, and

the end of this fiscal year and the period of time that this throne speech anticipates – there's no money forthcoming for communities to implement centennial plans.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to join those who have spoken in a positive manner in light of what was said in yesterday's Speech from the Throne. I find it most oppressive listening to those who speak from the school of negativity. I have found that the speech yesterday which was read by Her Honour, who is a constituent of mine in the community of St. Albert, was, indeed, one that was full of optimism, and as the speech read, it spoke to the Alberta spirit of generosity, the spirit of strength and compassion, and certainly to the optimism that is in the hearts of so many Albertans, particularly those, I might add, in my community.

I'd like to speak about and pay tribute to, of course, Her Honour for a moment because I do find her to be a woman of true dignity and the embodiment of the common touch. She has presented to us a spirit of Albertans that is very, very honourable, and unlike the Member for Edmonton-Centre I do feel that the tradition is not a quaint one. I believe it is an honourable tradition for Her Honour to read the Speech from the Throne, which is, indeed, not only the blueprint but the vision that we as a government have for the people of this province in the years to come. That vision is embodied in the registered education savings plan for children as it was detailed yesterday in the Speech from the Throne. I believe it is the cornerstone of all that we are envisioning for building the strength of this province as we move into our second century.

I couldn't help but note as well that it is the Speech from the Throne for the 99th year of this province, and 99 has a special meaning, if you will, and is a very lucky number, I think, for those of us who live in the area of the capital city and, indeed, right across the province because of the hockey player who skated with that wonderful number and brought great fame and encouragement and delight to the people of Alberta.

4:50

But I want to return specifically, of course, to the sentiments that have been expressed and to the vision that has been articulated in the Speech from the Throne. The four pillars of the plan to take us and lead us and initiate us into the second century of this province are "unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit."

I want to speak, first of all, about the unleashing innovation. In the speech Her Honour spoke of the incredible emphasis and that we will be directing our resources to research as it will be done in this province, research both pure and applied. It will give us opportunity to create new economic opportunities or circumstances out of our traditional strengths. In particular, I find great delight in the creation of the life sciences institute which will co-ordinate research as it relates to much of what life presents us with for our challenges, from water and a water strategy to agriculture, indeed, to health issues and everything else that encompasses the quality of life that we hope to strengthen for our province.

The second pillar mentioned was leading in learning. Of course, for the people of the constituency of St. Albert that I'm honoured to represent here in this Assembly it means that we can continue our journey of facilitating for everyone the ability to reach their full potential, whether that means my friend Sarah whose abilities are

challenged and encouraged every day in Vital Grandin school or whether it means any one of the 284 Rutherford scholarship recipients from St. Albert over this past year. The important thing is that we will lead everyone and provide the circumstances, the encouragement, and those opportunities for everyone to reach their full potential. This is a value that my community has expressed often.

I should speak a little bit about the preschool programs, the early intervention and the Head Start programs that currently exist in my community. There are many volunteers and qualified teachers who work with young children to enable them and to create a climate of readiness to learn so that those individuals who might have been somewhat shortchanged by either circumstances or ability will be able to be ready with everyone else to reap the benefits of a really remarkable education system.

But the topic in yesterday's Speech from the Throne that did excite me greatly was the postsecondary level opportunities as mentioned. As far as postsecondary facilities go in my community, we do have the NAIT/Fairview College St. Albert campus facility. Also, not only for the students who attend that facility in the community but for the thousands who attend or learn cyberly from postsecondary institutions around the world, the statements and the commitment in yesterday's Speech from the Throne speak to our value that we highly, highly regard of investing in the future, investing in our own lives, and, indeed, investing in the knowledge base that we believe resides and will grow in our community.

Also, I'm particularly encouraged by the ability for more qualifying postsecondary institutions to offer degree-granting programs, and I, too, believe that this is an opportunity where students around the province will be able to perhaps stay closer to home while they raise their families, work at their jobs, and receive a degree at the same time. The Campus Alberta quality council will indeed make sure that those degrees are valuable and recognized around the world. You can't have one without the other, so it is opportunity and quality control.

Competing in a global marketplace is the third pillar. I want to say that what I have been hearing from Albertans as I've had the opportunity to travel around the province is a desire to assist in this whole movement called value added. It was best expressed to me the other evening and to a group of us who were doing some hearings in Wainwright, Alberta, by a farmer who spoke about the crop of oats. In fact, I know a number of landowners in my community who do own some of the finest quality oat crops grown around this province. This farmer from around Wainwright mentioned that what he really wanted to do – and he stated the obvious – was not only continue to grow his quality oats in Alberta, but he didn't see why we had to ship them to Ontario where the cereal was manufactured and packaged and returned by shipment to Alberta so that I can buy my Cheerios from the shelf of the Garden Market near home.

This is what I would call value added. This is what I am hoping: that unleashing innovation and competing in the global marketplace will enable us to enhance our products, to innovate where needed, to increase our ability to add value to our natural resources and in some cases our nonrenewable resources so that we have here in this province the opportunity to compete and to compete at a very high level in the global marketplace.

Finally, I wanted to speak about making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. In St. Albert our economic development a couple of years ago had a slogan saying: St. Albert, the best place to live, work, and shop. It is a play on the same words, but indeed it is the same activity. We want to have a quality of life – and the Speech from the Throne yesterday enhanced that desire – that is, indeed, valuable, life giving, and enhancing for our residents, our constituents, and our citizens of Alberta.

Health care, of course, has been mentioned in the Speech from the Throne and new ways of delivering health care that are really quite exciting, but they are more customer/patient-friendly. They will be more one-stop shopping, a better, more comprehensive, and inclusive way for individuals to approach the health care system at the primary care level for the services that they need, not only that but to get the right services that they need.

Yes, I will speak of car insurance. It was not specifically mentioned in the Speech from the Throne, but that's because the plan is underway for a new delivery of how car insurance will be delivered in this province. I look forward to it, having been the sponsor of a private member's bill a couple of years ago that looked to gender equity insurance premiums. It was defeated, but I'm very happy to say that that issue is being addressed in the new plans, which I look forward to seeing implemented come this spring.

For my community the centennial infrastructure program, or the centennial capital program as it was called in yesterday's Speech from the Throne, speaks to an opportunity that the folks in my community will indeed, I know, respond to. We have been dealing over the years with the concept of a recreation facility. We do have some very fine ones in my community, but in no way do they meet the needs, the demands, and the desires of those in my community who want an active lifestyle, an opportunity for their children and themselves to lead that active lifestyle, whether in organized sporting events or in healthy self-directed activity programs. So I look forward to that because we do look forward as a community to a centennial celebration in which we can not just recognize it by, if you will, monuments or facilities, but we can recognize the spirit, the pioneering spirit, the building spirit, the generous spirit, and the optimistic spirit of the people of Alberta.

5:00

I find that the Speech from the Throne articulated in so many ways in such a broad spectrum our vision for the future. It looked for opportunities for our children. I look forward to the next generation and the succeeding generations to capitalize on the opportunities that we are presenting to them, to their parents, to their families, and to their friends to join in making sure that they have the wherewithal, the opportunity, the training, and the resources to assist them in their postsecondary education.

I have confidence in the people of Alberta, in particular in the people of my community, to share in the responsibility and the exciting optimism as it was presented in yesterday's Speech from the Throne. I am very, very happy to say that I believe Albertans, who have always been positive thinkers, who have been conquerors of obstacles that got in their way, who have been able to use their abilities to the best of their powers, are looking forward to a new century in which we will build on all that is good and strong from the past.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions for the hon. member?

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, I just want to caution members. It's been – well, it's day one, technically – a little over three and a half hours since we've been in session. I know that a lot of people want to catch up with what has transpired over the last few weeks and few months. If you have anything to converse with your colleagues, please step outside,

and you can do that. I hope that you will give due respect to every speaker that's speaking on this very important subject.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Debate Continued

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate those words of caution and advice to all of us. I'm sure they will be closely heeded.

I appreciated listening to the Lieutenant Governor deliver this speech yesterday. It was great to see her in fine form and excellent health and speaking so clearly and so forcefully to Albertans. It's always a pleasure to be in her presence in this Assembly, and I think we all feel that way.

I will struggle here to lead with the positive. There are some things in here, actually, that I think are good ideas. I will mention those and elaborate a little bit on those before making some other comments.

I do believe that the idea under Leading in Learning that a new school wellness program will be developed recognizing that a strong mind is nurtured by a healthy body is a good idea. It does emphasize a mandatory program of daily physical activity for all students. Terrific. Well placed. I value that. My wife and I have two boys in the school system, and they're both really active. I think all kids and, indeed, all adults should be.

I'd like to see this program go a little bit further, emphasizing not just physical activity but proper diet. I would be one who would support restricting vending machines, for example, in schools, especially in elementary schools where soda pop and candies are turning up, and they're turning up even more so in junior high and high school. I'd be happy to support any activity by this government to restrict or eliminate that development as part of this program for nurturing healthy bodies. In the long term these are significant health issues that we'll be paying for over and over and over.

I also found some other things in the policy here under the pillar of making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. The general idea of expanding government funding to municipalities for policing services, I think, is certainly something I endorse. I'm not seeing very many details here. We've read some leaks in the newspaper about this, how this might be handled, so I'm reluctant to give it a wholesale, unqualified endorsement because I don't know the details. But in general this level of government, the province, has to show stronger support to municipalities, and this is one way to do it.

I also endorse the idea of a mobile diabetes screening program for aboriginals living off reserves as well as emphasizing programs dealing with HIV and tobacco use and community-based care for aboriginal citizens. That's all to the good.

I also endorse the idea – I'm on page 9 now – of “increased government support for community-based care options for seniors, persons with disabilities, and mental health clients looking for alternatives to acute care in a hospital setting.” Again, there's not a lot of detail here. We don't know how much increase, and we don't know how that will be delivered, and I would encourage the government to deliver these services through nonprofit groups as much as possible. I especially think that mental health clients need strong community-based alternatives to keep them out of the very costly acute care treatment system.

So those are all points to the good and that I endorse in principle, and hopefully when I see the details, I'll be able to endorse them in details. Beyond that, I have a number of comments and concerns, and I think some of these will reflect the attitude of ordinary Albertans. The four pillars truly sound vague and general. I was actually talking to a former cabinet minister of this government this morning who said very much the same thing and, in fact, that these

could have been drawn from government documents of the 1980s. He mentioned a white paper in the 1980s that sounded a lot like this.

Unleashing innovation. It's a slogan, and frankly I don't think it's even a very clever slogan because it makes one ask: well, who's leashing it? Who's keeping innovation on a leash that it needs to be unleashed? I certainly hope this government hasn't been leashing innovation although I am concerned that it has. I think that Alberta has one of the lowest research and development expenditures as a percentage of its economy in the country. So we need to be moving aggressively on that. We should have been doing that long ago.

Leading in learning. A clever slogan, I suppose. Competing in a global marketplace. We've been talking about this year after year after year. Making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Again, kind of a vague slogan. I guess the Public Affairs Bureau with its 260 staff or however many got their hands on this. In fact, I know they did because they produce this kind of thing, but it doesn't ring with anything specific.

I know that what I'm getting called about at my constituency office are very specific concerns. The kind of Speech from the Throne that would excite Albertans, would get a real endorsement from me, would be a Speech from the Throne that addresses those specifics. If the pillars were things like bringing in public auto insurance, unplugging electricity deregulation, reducing classroom sizes – those are specifics, those are something you can grab onto. Whether you agree with them or not, at least you know what you're dealing with as opposed to something like leading in learning or unleashing innovation.

So I'm finding it frustrating to deal with this kind of a vague document. If it was a Liberal government, I know what we would be saying. We would be bringing in specific pillars or specific points aimed at resolving the issues that Albertans are facing today, like their high electricity bills and their high auto insurance rates. So I find that generally a huge disappointment in this speech.

If I wanted to get more specific I would like to see something addressing, for example, electricity costs. Why is there nothing in here when that turns up as an absolutely top concern of ordinary Albertans, of Alberta businesses, of Alberta postsecondary education institutions? I mean, we talk here on page 5 about new funding for postsecondary learning including “an increase in base operating grants for all postsecondary institutions.” Well, aside from the fact that it doesn't say how much – it could be 2 per cent or something – unfortunately, it doesn't address the largest single underlying cause of why this has to go up, which is soaring utility costs to our postsecondary learning institutions, especially electricity costs. So it's unfortunate that that's not here.

5:10

I also am concerned – and I see the Deputy Premier is here, and she will undoubtedly respond here – about false hope about opening the American border to our live cattle exports. I know that the Deputy Premier made comments earlier today about how she's hoping those open soon, and I see a reference here to this sort of thing. I am concerned and I know many, many people in the beef industry in this province are concerned that we're into a long, long problem here. In fact, it's almost certainly many, many months and quite possibly a few years before the American border is fully open again. So we might want to have a BSE strategy that recognizes that we're into a long-term crisis here. At least let's be prepared for that possibility.

Our goal here – I'm quoting from the plan, page 7, under Making Alberta the Best Place to Live, Work, and Visit. It says, “Our goal is simple: to ensure that Albertans, especially children, feel safe and protected.” A laudable goal, of course. Everybody would feel that

way. Again, if there was a specific in here – I'd love to see something like a hot lunch program, some commitment that no child goes to school hungry or no child is taught at school on an empty stomach. That doesn't mean that we have to feed every child in Alberta who's going to school, but we do know that there are an unacceptable number of Alberta children who are hungry at school and that the school is often their only shelter from a harsh world and their only opportunity to get a hot meal. Why can't we make that sort of commitment to our children?

I'm also concerned in this throne speech about several places where there are new institutes or new councils or new offices that in fact instead of taking what we've got already and making it stronger, we're window-dressing by putting up another office. I'm thinking here specifically of one example on page 8, the creation of an office for disability issues, and it says here in the Speech from the Throne that this "will work with the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and government ministries." Well, why are we adding yet another player to an already complex mix? Why aren't we strengthening what's there now? Why aren't we giving the muscle, say, to the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities instead of adding another player to the mix?

Earlier today there was heated debate in question period over health care reforms, and one of the things that's clear is that there are too many players in the mix. It seemed like every person in the government benches was involved in one way or another in health care reform and all kinds of people beyond that.

I am concerned about the same kind of loss of focus drifting over this government generally, whether it's health care, persons with disabilities, innovation. We have the Minister of Economic Development; we have the Minister of Innovation and Science; we have Sustainable Resource Development. We've got a government that's losing focus, and it shows in this Speech from the Throne.

Again, another example: a new rural development strategy. Well, how many rural development strategies has this government brought forward, and where are we? Where we are is with a rural economy

that is in crisis, with rural towns that are emptying out, with rural towns that are seeing their provincial buildings vacated, government employees reduced, schools downsized, health facilities downsized. Rural development strategy: I'll bet that if we did a search in the library under that term, we would find that there have been dozens, quite possibly, of rural development strategies. So, again, a sense that I reflect for many people, including former members of this government, that this is a pretty tired document.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to wrap up by saying that perhaps underlying that fatigue is what's become known as the democratic deficit in this province. The kinds of things that would reinvigorate this entire Assembly have to do with reforming the way it works and quite possibly addressing how all of us here are elected and how the representation of the population is reflected in this Assembly. In the last election almost 50 per cent of Albertans who were eligible to vote did not vote, and certainly a majority of those who voted supported the governing party. Nobody debates that. But when you do the math, what it means is that about 30 per cent of eligible voters voted for this government. I think that's a reflection on how a sense of fatigue and a sense almost of irrelevance has settled on this government and on this Assembly.

So, Mr. Speaker, if this had something substantial in it that addressed any of those issues I've mentioned, whether they're relating to the democratic deficit or to policy issues around electricity or insurance or education, we could get really excited. As it is, there are bits and pieces in here that are good, but overall I think most Albertans would say that it's a real disappointment.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I'd move that we adjourn until 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:19 p.m.]