

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, February 19, 2004** **1:30 p.m.**
 Date: 2004/02/19
 [The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant that we the members of our province's Legislature may fulfill our office with honesty and integrity. May our first concern be for the good of all of the people. Let us be guided by our deliberations this day. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed with great pleasure that I rise today to introduce to you and through you some very special members of our community who are working with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. I would ask them to rise as their names are called, and then perhaps we can salute them all at the end of my introduction. Mr. Bryan O'Donnell, chair of the board for CNIB; Mr. Bill McKeown, the executive director of CNIB; Ellie Shuster, director of communications for CNIB; Diane Bergeron, who is here with her daughter Summer Satre, and I think Diane has brought her other special friend, Polar. Is Polar with you? Where is Polar? There he is, Polar the dog. Diane worked with the city of Edmonton as a co-ordinator on the advisory board on Services to Persons with Disabilities, and she's a board member of CNIB. They are accompanied by a member of my staff, Mr. Andrew Turzansky, who has worked extensively on the revisions to the Blind Persons' Rights Act, which is before us for debate today, and they are here to witness that.

I might just add quickly, Mr. Speaker, that this was the group that also put together the first ever Vision awards, which occurred yesterday at the lovely Winspear Centre with the Edmonton Symphony and Ian Tyson and George Blondheim and all those superstars, and presented our Premier with the first ever Vision award.

Thank you for that, and welcome to the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of the Legislature three members of Alberta's law enforcement community. These three men are members of Cops for Cancer. Cops for Cancer started in Alberta in 1994 when Edmonton Police Service then Sergeant Gary Goulet became friends with a young boy suffering from cancer. Over the past 10 years Cops for Cancer has raised more than \$15 million for the Canadian Cancer Society.

Yesterday I had the honour of participating in one of their fundraising events by riding with them as part of their cross-country Canada and back stationary bike ride set up at West Edmonton Mall. I would like to thank everyone who sponsored my ride. Donations are still coming in today, and I sincerely thank all of my colleagues and Legislature staff who were so thoughtful in contributing to this worthy cause.

I am very pleased to ask Edmonton Police Service Inspector John Ratcliff and EPS Staff Sergeant Kerry Nisbet and Staff Sergeant Gary Goulet to please stand and accept the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the House this afternoon two people whose company is responsible for some of the best ads on television. Ferg Devins and Jeff Gaulin of Molson Canada are with us today. In addition to being vice-president of corporate affairs, Ferg is also one of the very best impersonators that I've had the opportunity to be entertained by. I'd ask both Ferg and Jeff to rise and receive the acknowledgment of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 18 young students in grade 6 from Clive school. With them today is teacher Mr. Robert MacKinnon, who's just the best and one of my all-time favourites; parent helpers Mr. Keith Knight, Mr. Jake Tolsma, Mrs. Monica Catellier, Mrs. Debbie Wagner, Mr. Dave Rainforth, Mrs. Colleen Rainforth, Mr. Scott Clark; bus driver Mrs. Deanne Rowley. Today is one of the students' 12th birthday. Happy birthday, Carmen. Would you please stand, and would the Assembly please award them the warm welcome of the House.

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

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a constituent of mine, a young man we're very proud of, Dave Arcand. Dave has recently graduated with honours from the business administration program at NAIT and is looking forward to a career in finance. Dave is also getting married in September. Many of the members in this Assembly know Dave's mother, Deb Arcand, who is the legislative assistant to the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane. Dave has risen. Would you please give him a warm welcome from this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four guests: the first is Joe Fardell, who is the president of Tourism Calgary; George Morrison, the president of Leap Sports Incorporated and also the Alberta Classic golf tournament; Mike Stevens, the vice-president of the PGA tour, who was here yesterday to launch the Alberta Classic, being held at Redwood Meadows this year in August; and also the president of the Edmonton Golf Association, Pat Carrigan, who is touring them around here in the city today. I'd ask them all to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: I think that at this point it's probably appropriate for a point of trivia, seeing as we have golfers from across the country. Very few people know that the first golf course built in Canada was actually built right on the site of this building.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I always appreciate your wisdom. Almost always.

As I'm sure many MLAs have noticed, there have been people in the gallery, parents and other people connected to education, watching our debates closely and following progress on education

issues. Today I'd like to introduce one of those people in the public gallery, Susan O'Neil. Susan is a parent with kids in the Edmonton public system. She is editor of *Commission Watch* and with Education Watch and as such will be watching us very carefully as we debate in the Legislature today. Please give her a warm welcome.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two student leaders who are here to observe today's proceedings. They are Melanee Thomas, executive director of the Council of Alberta University Students, and Brett Bergie, provincial director of the Alberta College and Technical Institute Students' Executive Council. They are seated in the public gallery. I'll ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two postsecondary students. Melissa Stephen is a first-year social work student who is working in my constituency office at Edmonton-Highlands for the practicum portion of the social work program she is enrolled in at Grant MacEwan College. She is doing a very good job of handling the large volume of casework that comes to my office, and I'm very happy that she could join us today. Erin Lindon is a second-year student at Grant MacEwan in the correctional services program. She hopes to continue with her education following this program with a criminal justice degree, and her ultimate goal is to work with the RCMP. I'm very pleased that they could join us today, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Government Expense Claims

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier tried to justify his government's travel expenses by saying that it was necessary to promote and sell Alberta abroad. Well, I'm sure Albertans would like to know what this government is doing with their money in the province. My first question is to the Premier. What was the government selling when the Premier and the executive director of his southern Alberta office spent \$750 of tax money for a meal at Caesar's restaurant in Calgary?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know and the hon. member has not said when, and I don't know who might have been at that meeting, but obviously there was more than one, more than two, more than three, perhaps more than four, perhaps five, perhaps six, perhaps seven, perhaps eight people at that particular meeting.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, I can't tell you how frustrated I am with the Liberals, who have FOIPed, as they have the right to do, and have put literally dozens and dozens of public service employees to work at great expense. They have spent countless hours investigating these matters. Countless hours. I would guess that once the tab has been tallied – and I plan to table it in this Legislature – it far exceeds the expenses incurred by my office over the past three years, and I will table that.

I'm frustrated and I'm disappointed that the Liberals would not be honest enough. You alluded to honesty and integrity in your prayer today, Mr. Speaker, and it's something that is desperately lacking within the Liberal Party: honesty and integrity. I read the headline in the *Edmonton Sun* today that a glass of orange juice cost \$27. That is not true, Mr. Speaker. It is not true, and they didn't go out of their way to say that that was not true.

As a matter of fact, what cost \$27 Canadian was three jugs of orange juice. Three jugs of orange juice. At \$12 that was roughly \$27 Canadian, and that works out to approximately \$2.70 a glass. That wasn't in the *Edmonton Sun*, and the Liberals did not go out of their way to explain the situation. They did not go out of their way. That to me speaks to the lack of honesty and the lack of integrity within that party.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday they tabled information relative to the amount spent on transportation in New York. I will have to give credit to some of the media outlets who phoned New York and said that at that price, my delegation and myself got a bargain, an absolute bargain. Again, this speaks to their lack of integrity and honesty, not standing up and telling the public what the cost of doing business in New York actually is.

They raised the matter of \$1,100 spent on tips to hotel staff in Mexico City and others. Mr. Speaker, they lacked honesty and integrity when they failed to explain that this is not a discretionary expenditure. It is part of the way Mexican hotels and others bill customers. That fee covered the service costs of six people for four days and also included costs for meeting room use. They did not say that. They didn't go out of their way to explain that. That to me says that they are not honest and that they lack integrity.

The Speaker: The hon. member has been recognized.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking of being frustrated and disappointed by a government, it's the citizens of this province who are on AISH and SFI. They have not had a raise.

Now, how does this Premier justify spending almost the same amount on a meal at Caesar's restaurant in Calgary as some Albertans on AISH receive from this government to live on for an entire month?

Mr. Klein: Again I speak to honesty and integrity, and this man, this person, lacks both tremendously, because he is implying that I spent personally \$750 on a meal for me. That, Mr. Speaker, is dishonest, and he knows it.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm tempted to ask if there's tuna fish on the menu at Caesar's.

My next question, Mr. Speaker, is: why are no details provided by the Premier's office on the dinners and hotel expenses charged to taxpayers by members of Executive Council? Why not?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, Executive Council is granted certain privileges by virtue of the oaths we take as ministers, oaths, by the way, that are not required of the opposition, not that they would keep them anyway.

Mr. Speaker, in many cases there are sensitive meetings that take place between members of Executive Council and individuals. That is the reason that some business meetings, whether they're over dinner or otherwise, are kept secret and the names of the clients or guests are not disclosed.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, at a time when a thousand teachers are laid off in Alberta, when tuition fees soar, and when seniors are left in

jeopardy, this Tory government found plenty of money for travel and communications. In 1998 annual reports show that this government spent an amazing \$89 million for travel and communications. By last year that huge amount had soared an unbelievable 47 per cent to \$131 million. To the Premier: why has this government's travel and communications spending soared 47 per cent since 1998 to a mind-boggling \$131 million a year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll attempt to get that information for the hon. member. I understand that he has a request for a written answer to that particular question on the Order Paper, and I'm sure that he'll be provided with that information. In addition, I've agreed to appear at Public Accounts at a time that will be suitable to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who I understand is chair of the Public Accounts Committee. We'll try to arrange a time. Be glad to answer those questions, and I'm sure there are detailed explanations for all of the expenditures.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to point out to the hon. member that for the disabled alone I think we spend in excess of 1.7 billion – billion – dollars. Even this person can understand \$1.7 billion for disabled services in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Can the Premier tell us if he himself is ultimately responsible for expense claims filed by staff in his office?

Mr. Klein: Am I responsible? I really don't know. I haven't given it any thought. But if he wants to know what I had for lunch today, I had a bowl of mushroom soup and an egg salad sandwich.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, in the interest of openness can the Premier explain why his chief of staff spent over \$1,500 of taxpayer money on hotel rooms in Edmonton when he lives in metro Edmonton?

Mr. Klein: I really don't know, but I'll ask him about that. I really don't know. If the hon. member will provide me with the documentation, I'll look into it. Perhaps – and I say perhaps – he had to secure those hotel rooms for out-of-town visitors, Mr. Speaker, visitors who had been invited to do business at our expense, various consultants. We have numerous people, literally hundreds of people, coming to Edmonton each and every day who do business, who require my office to give them help in securing transportation and securing accommodation, and we do that as a matter of courtesy.

Mr. Speaker, I guess these people don't understand, thank God, what government is all about and how government runs. If they look to their Liberal cousins in Ottawa, as an example, I would remind the Liberal Party that the total expenses they're talking about don't equal over three years the amount spent on one trip by the Governor General – one trip, \$5.3 million – and that was sanctioned by their Liberal cousins in Ottawa, and they think it's okay.

1:50

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier claimed that his government was open and transparent. However, when one looks at the record of this government, that claim rings hollow. My questions are to the Premier. Why has the Premier and his executive staff not appeared before the Public Accounts Committee in over eight years despite having been issued invitations to appear? Eight years.

Mr. Klein: Very interesting. I said that I would. It's not normal for Premiers to appear before public accounts committees. As a matter of fact, I was the first Premier to appear before the Public Accounts Committee in almost 30 years, Mr. Speaker. No other Premier in this country, as I understand it – as I understand it – appears before Public Accounts. Now, I have agreed to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why is the Premier and his Executive Council provided special privileges to withhold information under the freedom of information act?

Mr. Smith: They signed off on the act.

Mr. Klein: On the FOIP Act.

Mr. Smith: Yes. They signed off on that.

Mr. Klein: Well, I'm advised by the hon. Minister of Energy that they signed off on the FOIP Act, which provides certain exemptions for members of Executive Council due to the sometimes sensitive nature of the discussions we have with our citizens.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Then to the Premier again: will the Premier bring in amendments to the freedom of information act to drop the special exemptions for Executive Council around travel details?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are as open and transparent as we possibly can be. We don't sneak around. We don't hire operatives like the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to find out what we're doing in London. If he wants to know or if the Liberals want to know, then get on a plane and go. Find out; don't sneak around.

Mr. Speaker, the Energy minister will be representing me in New York. He has issued this news release, and to me it's quite satisfactory because he'll be representing me in New York City. "The estimated cost of the trip for Minister Smith and his executive assistant is \$9,500." Estimated cost. It could be \$10,000; it could be \$9,000. We don't know. The full itinerary is listed, what he's going to be doing. I'm sure that he doesn't know everyone who's going to be there, because I've attended these conferences before and usually there are 150 to 200, sometimes 250 people. But he will travel to New York; he will attend the East Coast Canadian Energy Conference. There will be presentations by companies with operations in Alberta. Minister Smith will be the keynote speaker at that meeting. There will be media availability. Now, if you think this is all wrong, you stand up and say so. You stand up and say so, that it's wrong.

On Thursday he will attend the FirstEnergy research trust overview. He will do an interview with *Petroleum Intelligence Weekly*. He will attend a presentation by Henry Groppe, who's a well-known analyst in the oil and gas business. He will attend the FirstEnergy research update on oil sands evolution. He will do another media availability. He will attend presentations by companies with operations in Alberta on Friday. Then he will depart the conference for Edmonton or Calgary.

What is wrong with that? If the opposition feels that there is something wrong with this mission, stand up and say so. Be honest. Show integrity. Stand up and say that they don't agree with these missions to sell Alberta. Stand up and say it.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I do want to supplement that. As a matter of fact, on the topic of yesterday and today, the trips to New York,

the last time the Premier and I were in New York, while the Kyoto-loving Liberals were sucking lattes down in the United Nations, we were downtown defending Alberta's interest and the destruction of the Alberta economy through the Kyoto protocol that those guys caused. So, boy, we'll continue to do that.

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

Cattle Prices

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to the most recent weekly survey done by the agriculture ministry, Alberta cattle prices are in free fall. In fact, cow-calf producers are only getting about half as much for their feeder calves as they were one year ago. With the news that the border for live cattle could remain slammed shut until next year, it's become pretty clear that this government's strategy of barbecues and pleading with their pals in the Bush administration just doesn't cut it. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Why is the government turning its back on rural Alberta by refusing to even consider getting a floor price for cattle in this province?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I have had a lot of questions in this House over a period of many years, and I have never heard one that was as off base as this one. I would invite this hon. member to go out to rural Alberta, to get out of the city and go sit in an auction market, to go stand before 1,200 people and discuss this industry, to spend nine and a half months meeting almost daily with them, and ask them how they feel about this government's support to agriculture. I'll tell you that it'll be not this member that has stood up for agriculture. I think two questions in the last session. I have listened for two days to the opposition benches questioning trips on trade missions for this province of ours while these important issues sit out there.

Mr. Speaker, we have provided support programs that have carried this industry, that were designed by this industry in its totality. Every member of every organization in agriculture, in beef production, including processors and retailers and truckers, has been at a round-table designing those programs. If he doesn't believe it's worked, tell the industry that because they designed them. We supported them to the tune of \$400 million, which is more than any province in Canada has provided and double what the federal government has provided to date.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that only cattle producers are being devastated while the profit margins of supermarkets and packing plants are on the rise, why is this government letting the cow-calf producers bear the brunt of this crisis? Why don't they share the pain at least?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, if we had time, I would give the hon. member a little lesson in market, but we don't have that kind of time in the House. It again displays his lack of knowledge of the industry. Through the programs that were provided last year that supported the chain of beef production, which is how it works, cow-calf producers received as good or better prices in the fall for their calves. No question; the evidence is there, and I can provide tapes from a sale one year ago to last fall. That is fact, and it's a simple matter. Pick it up on the web site. They're all there. Yes, you will find some feeder cattle today at half price, but generally, Mr. Speaker, 800-pound steers, if they're good cattle, are up to 65

cents. That is not satisfactory. It is not half. It's probably 25 cents off, 15 cents off what it should be.

2:00

Mr. Speaker, we do have in place, if we can convince the rest of the provinces to sign, a disaster assistance program called the Canada agriculture income stabilization program. If he could write to some of his NDP governments on either side of us, that would help, and then that support would be available to the producers of this province. We've signed.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, why is it that while cattle ranchers and feedlot owners are losing their land, losing their herds, all this minister can do is flip burgers and go on bended knee to Washington? [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier has been recognized.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I must confess that I probably only flipped one or two burgers, and it was at a school in Edmonton where the teacher of that school had the foresight and wisdom to take his grade 4 class – and I wish he'd have invited the hon. member to attend – to do a study on BSE. He felt it was important that the students understood this issue thoroughly, to recognize this, and a special young lady in that school stylized the I Love Alberta Beef slogan by writing “still” – I Still Love Alberta Beef – on it. We did attend that school. I was proud to do that with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and recognize that grade 4 students take an interest in the struggles that our beef industry are going through right now. So I did; I flipped a burger there. That's the extent of it.

What I have done and what the hon. member has not done is sit down with this industry on almost a daily basis to try to work our way through what is a very complex and difficult situation that is no fault of theirs, and we continue to do that. I do not have to, I think, defend my work with this industry to that hon. member. The industry will determine that.

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

Mr. Norris: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important, if the hon. members want to ask questions, that they at least get their questions and facts right. There are, indeed, trips to promote beef. They're in conjunction with the CBEF and BIC. The hon. Member for Wainwright has gone on one; the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert is going on one. But this particular minister of agriculture has led the nation in defending this industry, and I can tell you as minister of industry that they're very proud of what she has done. For him to comment that she's out flipping burgers is not only incorrect; it's wrong. I want to say in front of the House that the industry is incredibly proud of what this particular ministry has done.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Aldersyde Interchange

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last weekend there was yet another fatal collision at the intersection of highways 2, 7, and 547 near Aldersyde in my constituency. Today my question is to the Minister of Transportation. My constituents want to know how many collisions have to occur at this dangerous intersection before the Department of Transportation takes the initiative and builds an interchange.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the Aldersyde interchange is a priority for the department. Presently, to date all of the preliminary functional planning has been complete. The land acquisition is in progress. In fact, a fair amount of the parcels of land required to accommodate the interchange have been purchased, and we will be now issuing an RFP for the very detailed engineering plan to be put in effect at that particular location.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental question, then, is again to the Minister of Transportation. Recognizing the minister's comments that it takes time to build road infrastructure like that interchange, when can Albertans and my constituents expect to see construction at the intersection of highways 2, 7, and 547? When?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the interchange in question is not in the 2003-2006 capital plan. However, with Budget 2004, which will be announced soon, and with every budget we always update our capital plan, always go back to it, revise it, add another year to that three-year plan, and given this location, the traffic counts, and all the work that's been done to date, I'm looking forward to the capital plan being tabled in this House in the very near future.

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

Lieutenant Governor's Residence

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been discovered that next week the government is going to be tearing down the official residence of the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta and selling off one-third of the land. This residence has been significant in terms of architectural style as well as for the heads of state and other officials, including Princess Diana and Grant MacEwan, who have lived or been entertained there. The government has provided no concrete plan to rebuild this public asset. My questions are to the Premier. Is allowing an asset to deteriorate to the point where it will cost \$400,000 to repair it the government's version of good stewardship?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, unlike the hon. member I've been in the home, and it was a nice home.

Ms Blakeman: How do you know?

Mr. Klein: If she has been in the home, then stand up and say so. Maybe she will do it when she, you know, gets up to question. If you've been in the house, I will apologize.

Ms Blakeman: Answer the question.

Mr. Klein: I'm going to answer the question. You haven't been in the house; have you?

I have been in the house, Mr. Speaker, and it was maintained as best as it possibly could be. We spent, I understand, about \$25,000 a year on the bungalow, which is a considerable amount of money, but as that old song says, *This Old House*, you know, there are things that go wrong with a house: the heating systems, the wiring systems, the kinds of things that you can't see.

It was the opinion of the Department of Infrastructure that rather than spend \$400,000 to renovate the home and completely overhaul it, it would be better to sell one of the lots at a very good price –

because it is prime real estate – and develop the other two lots, and it seems to me that you can build a very, very nice home on two lots in Glenora, a very nice home indeed. I'm sure once the architects have the plans prepared, the hon. minister would be prepared to table those plans, and I can assure you that whatever is built there will be most appropriate for a head of state, the Lieutenant Governor, and anyone who might want to visit her or him in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why did the government not consult with Albertans and particularly with the neighbours in Glenora before deciding to demolish this historic building?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, relative to the process I'll have the hon. minister respond.

2:10

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I did tour the house on two occasions, and of course the hon. member has admitted that she did not. We also toured the house with Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. If you've been in the house, you would quickly see that it's built in three sections. Even the dining room is not really conducive to having royalty live in it. So we, in fact, assessed the condition of the home in many areas, and the Premier has talked about the various things that were a problem. We discussed it with Her Honour, and she also agreed that the house needed to be replaced and not to try to just simply repair it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. To the Minister of Infrastructure then: as the people's steward for this Lieutenant Governor's residence, under what authority did the minister decide to destroy the building?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, she said that we're responsible for it, so I would assume that that gives us the authority to manage the property the way that we see fit to spend money wisely, because they are Albertans' dollars.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Education Policy

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta students continue to be top achievers nationally and at the international level, and I know that everyone in this Assembly is proud of how well our students are doing. However, we must continue to maintain that momentum, and that doesn't happen easily. There must be a continuous plan for improvement. What I hear from teachers is that they want to be able to do their very best in teaching for all their students. What I hear from parents is that they want their children to learn to their potential. Teachers and parents believe that their children must be able to learn and succeed in a relatively pleasant environment. To the Minister of Learning: in the Learning department's planning what assistance will there be to ensure that every child, wherever they reside in the province, will learn to their potential?

The Speaker: Okay. Within the confines of the question period, please.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What the hon. member has just asked me is basically the essence of the Department of Learning. Our wish and our mandate is to ensure that every child succeeds so that every child can live to its full potential within the education system. I will say quite simply in one very short, succinct answer that that is exactly what we do in the Department of Learning.

Mr. Maskell: My second question is also to the same minister. Of the total Learning budget what percentage stays in the department and what kinds – and I say kinds – of support from the money retained is used to support schools and teachers and, as a result, students?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, in the K to 12 system we presently spend about \$3.8 billion per year. Of that \$3.8 billion roughly \$72 million is kept within the department for such things as curriculum, such things as assessments, such things as school board and teacher supports. Again a succinct answer to the hon. member is that every dollar of that \$72 million is aimed to support teachers and students.

Mr. Maskell: My final question to the same minister. The Learning Commission recognized that working with ESL students and early intervention with high-needs students must happen as early as possible. What is the Learning department doing to ensure that these students' needs are met?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, we do a lot when it comes to ESL, but in direct reference to the hon. member's question there were some interesting concepts raised in the Learning Commission about full-day kindergarten, about junior kindergarten, and we are currently looking at how we can best utilize those recommendations to ensure that the kids at an even younger age can do even better. ESL is incredibly important. We will be increasing our grants to ESL. Obviously, people in Alberta have to learn English if they are to succeed in the Alberta environment and the Alberta economy. Those two elements that the hon. member has mentioned are incredibly important to us, and it's something that the thousand people in my department work at continually to ensure that the best possible supports for ESL, the best possible supports for the teachers, the best possible supports for the students are out there and are looked at each and every day.

Municipal Financing

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, aside from implementing a few short-term financing measures, the minister's council on three Rs has failed to deliver long-term, stable financial solutions for municipalities. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: when is this council going to implement reliable, predictable, long-term funding for municipalities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that this minister's council is the only council of its kind in Canada, and I'm very proud of that initiative. Second of all, I want to say that the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary, our two biggest cities, but also every one of our 360 municipalities, are represented through the president of the AUMA as well as the president of the AAMD and C.

What I'm really particularly proud of is – one of the initiatives was ME First. It's a hundred million dollars that goes to municipalities

interest-free in terms of promoting energy efficiency in the province. Second of all, we've been working very closely with the initiative of the issue of the police report that is coming out. It's going to be reflected in the budget when it's released in March. We've worked very closely with the Solicitor General because policing issues have been ones that have been identified by municipal leaders across this great province.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: will this government show its commitment to a new deal for municipalities by matching the funding provided by the federal government?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is yes, but I would like to elaborate even further. The Prime Minister has appointed a representative, the former Premier of British Columbia, who was also a former city mayor, Mike Harcourt. The first province he's visited is the province of Alberta. We met with him last week here in the Legislature office in Edmonton. I'm really pleased to see that both the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary participated. One of the things he said, and I quote: we want to follow the example that Alberta has shown to other cities across all of Canada.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that the federal government has already formed a committee to work on a new deal for municipalities, will this ministry work with the feds to ensure that our municipalities are getting the best possible deal?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, let me elaborate, and I'll also ask the Minister of Transportation, responsible for the only deal of any province in Canada where the province of Alberta gives our cities, in fact, 5 cents a litre of the 9 cents that's collected by the provincial government. In actual fact, of the 9 cents that the province of Alberta collects, we contribute back to roads across Alberta something like 16 cents, so I'm very proud of the fact. This is the first initiative that we'd like to see the federal government follow in terms of helping a new deal for Alberta cities and also rural cities, because we have a subsequent meeting with the presidents of both the rural and urban associations.

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

Gasoline Taxes

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that our Alberta government collects 9 cents per litre of gasoline and returns 5 cents to the municipalities of Calgary and Edmonton and also given that the federal government currently collects 10 cents per litre of gasoline, that translates to lots of dollars from Alberta, but none of this money is allocated and returned directly to our municipalities. They're now talking about increasing the gasoline tax in the name of the Kyoto agreement commitment. So reflecting the concerns from my constituents, my question today is to the minister of municipalities. What has the minister been doing to help Alberta cities convince the federal government to do the same as our Alberta government for our fast-growing Alberta municipalities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, of the 10 cents that Albertans pay to the federal government, the Minister of Transporta-

tion has informed us that the amount of money sent to the federal government over the last 10 years was \$7 billion. What we said is: we do not need to create a bureaucracy. We have a system in place that works very, very well. So rather than creating another bureaucracy – and I want to say that I applaud the federal government and the Prime Minister for saying that they want to help municipalities. That’s positive, but why create another bureaucracy? Mr. Harcourt said that he would like to see a deal quickly and to follow the Alberta way of doing it. It’s my hope that that will benefit all motorists in Alberta and that that money can go directly. I know that mayors across this province want to put that money back into roads, and certainly I know that the Minister of Transportation would agree with that statement.

2:20

Mr. Cao: Well, my last supplemental question is, in fact, to the Minister of Transportation. What is the minister doing now to facilitate or expedite the federal transfer of gasoline sales tax to the pressing needs of the cities of Calgary and Edmonton?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We’re also privileged in the province of Alberta to have the president of the AAMD and C as a member of the committee that was put together by the Prime Minister to review some method, some process of providing all municipalities with some of the revenue that goes to Ottawa in the form of a gas tax, so we have a good strong voice at the table. He is there as a citizen of rural Canada, not in his official capacity, but he is bringing forward, of course, the Alberta position.

Next week we will be in Ottawa with our first meeting of the provincial ministers of transportation and actually meeting the federal minister for the first time. This will be a topic of discussion. There are certainly musings from Ottawa. The committee has been put together, but we want to see the money, and we also are very adamant, Mr. Speaker, that we feel that all dollars from the federal government in terms of gas tax have to flow through to the province, and then we will sit down with our municipalities and decide how then that money will go to every municipality in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

School Construction

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Schools in Devon are badly overcrowded. A new separate school was approved in 1999, and in 2000 a budget was established. The board planned to open the school in September of this year. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. With a budget within approximately 5 per cent of the planned cost, why has the government not proceeded with this badly needed project?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, it would have been very helpful if the member would have told me what school it is that he’s talking about; I’m not sure. Certainly, within the city of Edmonton, in both the public and the separate boards, their utilization is still well below the 85 if you take it over the whole jurisdiction. There are some sectors that are somewhat higher, particularly in the separate board, and we, of course, have facilitated. As a matter of fact, since I was appointed Minister of Infrastructure, I have been present at the opening and/or the modernization of four separate schools and one public within the city of Edmonton, so over the last couple, three years.

I think that if we look at what has happened province-wide, in fact since the year 2000 we’ve spent some \$1.1 billion on schools within the province, some 774 projects. So it’s not as though this government hasn’t been spending money on new schools and modernization within the province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. I’m sorry, Mr. Speaker; I think the minister misunderstood. The school has been approved, and a budget of \$4 million was established in 2000. So my question is: how can boards be expected to plan for student accommodation when four years after they have the approval for a building, they’re still not allowed to go to tender?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again the member has not told me what school it is or what area. As I just indicated, just in schools alone we have some 774 projects, so if he comes to me and asks about one specific school, how am I supposed to know all 774 projects? I’m sorry, but I just don’t have that information right at my fingertips, especially when he does not even have the courtesy to tell me what the name of the school is.

Dr. Massey: Well, I’m sure there are a number of schools being built in Devon. It’s Evergreen Catholic separate regional.

My third question, then, is again to the minister. What does getting approval for a school mean if the school is never built?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there’s a whole process that we go through, and the process starts off with the boards giving us their capital plan. They have to prioritize the plan. Then we take all of those from all of the jurisdictions within the province and prioritize them on a provincial basis. A school may get an approval but not with funding. Very often what happens after that process is that the next year or subsequent years the boards may very well have changed their capital plan and have raised another school to a priority. He’s suggesting that it was in the year 2000. We’ll try to research and find out exactly what has happened and give an answer, but it’s very, very interesting that he raises that here because I have met, as a matter of fact two weeks ago, with the separate board here in the city of Edmonton and they’ve never mentioned it, so I’m at a bit of a loss as to exactly what the problem is.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Health Care Funding and Revenue Generation

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, after gouging Albertans on electricity, after forcing drivers to pay the highest car insurance in western Canada, after jacking up health premiums and 70 other user fees and taxes, apparently this government wants more. Apparently, it wants more out of the pockets of Albertans, for the Premier now says that the Graydon report, which called for user fees for health care, is still under active consideration. Apparently, this government now thinks that parents rushing children to the emergency room should have to worry about receiving a bill, as if any parent wants to think about that when their child is running a 104-degree temperature. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. On January 22 the minister ruled out accepting the Graydon report recommendations. Why?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I want to say that we have a good health

care system. We have a good health care system in Canada, but the reality is – and Albertans and Canadians need to know this – that health care expenditures have risen between 8 and 10 per cent each year over the last 10 years and government revenues over the same period of time have only gone up 2 to 4 per cent a year. So that's the reason why a province like Nova Scotia now spends more than 50 per cent of its entire budget on one budget item, health care. They spend more on health care than everything else that they do put together.

Mr. Speaker, in this province we have the good fortune of resources that have assisted us, but the reality remains the same here. In 1993 roughly 24 per cent of our budget was spent on health care. That compares interestingly with 1971 when it was only about 10 per cent, and this year we'll spend about 36 per cent of our budget on health care, and in its current track we'll spend over 50 per cent within the medium-term future.

So, Mr. Speaker, we need to look at different ways of financing our health care system. We look for every efficiency that we can. We try our very best to pay for those things that make a difference to the health outcomes for individuals. We try our best not to waste our money. We try our very best to gear down our administrative costs, but we have to look at other jurisdictions around the world and ask: what is it that they're doing in their jurisdictions?

2:30

Now, let me say this, Mr. Speaker. In Canada we believe in values of sharing and caring as it relates to some of our social services, and one of our great social services in this country is medicare. We don't want to do anything to impair medicare, but unless we start looking at other ways of dealing with the ongoing costs and expenditures of our health care system, what will ultimately end up happening is that a duality in our health care system will accrue.

That means that there will be physicians who start to opt out of the Canada health system, and they will set up an entirely private system of health care. We will have at that point a two-tiered health care system, Mr. Speaker, something that we are very much committed to trying to avoid in the sense that our own provincial legislation adopts the principles of the Canada Health Act. But duality is inevitable, and it will be forced upon us by circumstances instead of by choice.

So, Mr. Speaker, we need to be open minded and looking at jurisdictions around the world, places that also have long traditions of social democracy and slightly left-of-centre perspectives when it comes to things like health care. We need to look at places like New Zealand. We need to look at Australia, we need to look at the U.K., we need to look at Sweden, and we need to look at France, all of which have elements of private and public delivery of health care service and all of which have elements where patients need to make a contribution to ensure that the health care system that they treasure is, in fact, sustainable.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 22 the minister gave reasons for not implementing the Graydon report, and they are as follows. He said that people in Alberta have not been clamouring for health care user fees, and therefore he wouldn't implement the Graydon report. What has changed from January 22 to today?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the whole issue of the Graydon report is not so much interesting from the point of view that it suggests that there is a single solution to this remorselessness of arithmetic of health care costs going up at 8 per cent and revenues going up by 4 per cent. The most important part of the Graydon report, in my opinion, is that it helps define the issue.

There are many Albertans who will talk about the issue in health care being one of access. But that's not the core issue, Mr. Speaker. The core issue is sustainability, and unless we come to grips with the fact, until Albertans and Canadians come to realize that something has got to give when you've got 8 per cent growth in expenditures and 4 per cent growth in revenues, we don't have a hope of ever dealing with the issues that precipitate from that, such as problems with access.

This, Mr. Speaker, is the reason why Mr. Romanow wonders out loud right now why a year after the Romanow report nobody has implemented his report. The reason is because Mr. Romanow, who I have a great deal of respect for, presented, frankly, a false picture of the choices that Canadians have. He suggested that your choice is between an American system that has 50 million uninsured Americans and tens of millions more underinsured or the Canadian system.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that if one looks at the World Health Organization's review of health care systems throughout the world, Canada is ranked somewhere around number 27. France is marked as number 1. I think that means that there are many choices along this continuum between the Canadian system and the American system that we should be responsible in looking at in order to determine: are there things that are being done in other jurisdictions in the world that can help make our health care system sustainable?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the minister's flip-flop on this issue and given that the government is now actively considering the recommendations of the Graydon report, why won't the minister release the report and let Albertans have a say in the process?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we are going through that process right now. The hon. member doesn't know, having had no experience, how the process works for the release of reports. It goes through a process of going to our Agenda and Priorities Committee, it goes to our standing policy committees, it goes to our caucus, and it goes to our cabinet, all of which have the opportunity to vet it at each and every point before a report is released. That would be our intention, in fact, that if after going through that process, it's deemed that this report should be released, it will be.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona interjected at least six times in that last response. Is that really the way your students dealt with you in the classroom?

Thirty seconds from now we'll call on the first of the hon. members to participate in Members' Statements.

Well, hon. members, I can remember when I turned 40, so happy birthday to the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Alberta Winter Games

Mr. Friedel: I wish it was me.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the entire Peace country livened up to the sounds of excitement as several thousand young athletes, coaches, supervisors converged on the region for the 2004 Alberta Winter Games. For the first time in its history the games were hosted by multiple communities; in fact, 19 communities came together to sponsor and host the event. In spite of the logistical

challenges of splitting the event venues among the communities, it worked out remarkably well, and all the reports that I heard were extremely positive.

On top of it all, the games coincided with the St. Isidore Winter Carnival, which is a major annual cultural event in the region. The two events gave our visitors an even broader perspective of the Peace country notwithstanding the added challenges to the volunteer pool.

It's hard for me to put into words the pride that I felt for the organizers when thousands of spectators converged, along with the athletes, for the spectacular opening event. Our Premier along with a number of my colleagues and the mayors, Reeves, and chiefs were there to show how proud we are of our province and our communities. I salute those who participated in the games and congratulate the winners of the various events.

The Peace country is renowned for its hospitality, but this one has to stand out as the mother of all co-operative events. It has opened the doors for other smaller communities to work together and host games of this stature in the future.

To all the organizers, the volunteers, the coaches and parents, and especially the athletes, we couldn't be prouder of you than we are right now. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Society for Treatment of Autism

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to bring to the attention of this House a growing problem for children and families in Alberta but also a message of hope. Autism is becoming one of the greatest threats to Canadian children today. It's now agreed that autism affects at least one in 300 children across Canada. Autism impairs communication and learning. Often children with autism don't understand the world around them, and there is nothing more crushing for a family than to receive the diagnosis of autism and to hear the words "there is no cure."

But there is hope. Early intensive treatment is remarkably effective in improving the lives of children with autism. This treatment can take children away from the path of institutionalization and reintegrate them with families and into schools. It is a miracle, but it needs our help.

In Calgary the Society for Treatment of Autism needs desperately to expand. A North American leader in autism treatment, the society needs the support of all Albertans to end waiting lists and provide treatment. Their dream of construction of a facility where all children with autism can receive treatment quickly and effectively is a dream shared by families across Alberta who have children with autism. Built on land they already own, opening in Alberta's centennial year of 2005, the new facility will create a critical mass of staff and expertise. It will allow the society to ensure that now and in the future children with autism never have to wait for much-needed treatment.

The society is working hard to raise private funds, but autism is a quiet affliction, one that does not generate headlines. For the families of children with autism there is no greater hope than for society to realize that they deserve help and that help makes a difference, and I call on this House today and on Albertans to lend a hand. We can't cure autism, but we can make a huge difference in the lives of hundreds of Albertans. Let's recognize the need, respond to that need, and give hope.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:40

Government Travel Expenses

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the people of Alberta expect this government

to be responsible stewards of the public purse. However, this government provides very few details on its entertainment and travel expenses, and we believe Albertans deserve to know where their hard-earned tax dollars are going.

First, let's talk about the trips. Between the last election and January 2004 the government has released information on 122 out-of-province trips taken by ministers and MLAs. While the total reported cost of all trips was over a million dollars, the government did not publicly provide costs for 26 of those trips, so the actual total is probably considerably higher. The government also failed to provide itineraries for 79 of the trips. That means that taxpayers do not know specifically what business was conducted during these trips.

Now let's look at what those trips cost. When the Premier, the Minister of Economic Development, and the Minister of Energy went to New York in December 2002, taxpayers paid \$8,320 for four days of car services, enough for over 250 trips from LaGuardia Airport to downtown Manhattan. During the same trip a senior staff member for Executive Council spent almost \$6,000 in just four days on accommodation, food, and the mini-bar at the Sheraton Hotel. During the Team Canada mission to the U.K. and Ukraine in May 2002 the managing director of Alberta's trade office in London charged \$15,720 to taxpayers, including \$4,922 for accommodation, \$4,511 for car service, and \$1,451 on one lunch at the London Marriott Hotel, a lunch worth two weeks of an average Albertan's earnings.

Mr. Speaker, it's time this government came clean with Albertans and opened their books. This issue is not just about what the government spent but what they have not told us or refuse to tell us about what they spent.

Thank you.

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

Government Travel Expenses

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today many Albertans are questioning why the Premier and his entourage dumped taxpayers with an \$8,320 bill for car service in New York City. Albertans want to know why they should have to foot such an outrageous bill.

The following are the government's top eight reasons why Albertans should pay \$8,320 for them to ride around in luxury, according to their own document that we have obtained by a freedom of information and privacy request. Reason number one: it was holiday season in New York. Reason number two: at least five cabs to each event would have been required. Reason number three: travel times are longer in New York. Reason number four: they needed security when they were leaving the New York Yacht Club. Reason number five: briefing. Reason number six: the lines for taxis are too long. Reason number seven: meetings and dinners are too late at night. The number eight reason why the government is charging Albertans \$8,320 for car service: they didn't want to go onto the street to capture taxis in New York City.

I would like to conclude, Mr. Speaker, by saying that a minimum-wage earner in Alberta would have to work 1,410 hours to make what the Premier and his entourage spent in four days on car services alone.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I'd like to present a petition signed by a number of individuals. It looks like they're mostly living in

Edmonton and St. Albert. They're asking the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to honour senior Albertans by "adopting the guidelines for rent increases pursuant to Section 14 of the Residential Tenancies Act" and "limit increases to no more than ten percent in any twelve month period" for long-term care.

Thank you.

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, today I'll present a petition signed by approximately 150 people throughout Alberta who petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta "to support the establishment of Bighorn Country as a legislated protected area."

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do also stand and retain their places.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

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

**Bill 8
Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004**

Ms Graham: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon I request leave to introduce Bill 8, being the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill, Mr. Speaker, will have the effect of modernizing the duty of care to be exercised by directors and officers of Alberta Blue Cross and the duties of the board as a whole, and it will also go a fair distance to create fair competition between Alberta Blue Cross and other private insurance companies in the area of private insurance. Under the amendments the Alberta Blue Cross Benefits Corporation will start paying a 2 per cent premium tax and a payment in lieu of federal and provincial tax on its private insurance programs. To be clear, these latter changes only affect private insurance programs offered by Blue Cross. They do not affect government-sponsored insurance programs.

[Motion carried; Bill 8 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be moved under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

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

**Bill 9
Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use
Amendment Act, 2004**

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I also request leave to introduce

Bill 9, being the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004.

The original act, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act, was brought into force April 1, 2003, making it illegal for anyone under 18 to use or possess tobacco in a public place. Bill 9 will provide amendments that will clarify how the original act should be enforced to reduce tobacco use among youth and includes valid exemptions for tobacco use and possession by youth, such as allowing young sales clerks to sell tobacco in the workplace, permitting aboriginal youth the ceremonial use of tobacco, and allowing young people to be used in tobacco enforcement. There will also be amendments to provide a broader definition of public places where the act can be enforced, such as in school buildings, streets, shopping malls, and parks.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 9 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 9, Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004, be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

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

**2:50
Bill 11
Alberta Personal Income Tax
Amendment Act, 2004**

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 11 will introduce amendments that will make technical and clarification changes to ensure that provincial legislation remains consistent with federal legislation, with current administration, and with other parts of the act.

Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004, be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

**Bill 201
Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access)
Amendment Act, 2004**

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill will enable the creation of a new barrier-free design and access council as part of the Safety Codes Council, and it will also provide a greater opportunity for input regarding safety codes for persons with disabilities.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a first time]

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

**Bill 202
Environmental Protection and Enhancement
(Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004**

Mr. Masyk: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise and request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004.

The purpose of Bill 202 is to reduce emissions of VOCs, or volatile organic compounds, during fuel storage and distribution by requiring all service stations, gasoline fuel cargo trucks, terminals to install stage 1 vapour recovery by the year of our Lord 2014.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 202 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got one document to table today. It's appropriate copies of the news release issued by the Minister of Health and Wellness dated January 22, 2004, in which the minister rejects the findings of the MLA Task Force on Health Care Funding and Revenue Generation because "most Albertans would not accept [the] recommendations."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one document as well to table, and it is the appropriate number of copies of the Weekly Livestock Market Review dated February 13, 2004. The review shows the distressing plummet of cattle prices in Alberta, with sales of livestock such as feeder heifers bringing in as little as 50 per cent of what they did a year ago.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the Government House Leader to please share the projected government business for the week of February 23 to 26.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to respond. On Monday, February 23, in the afternoon we will have private members' business, Written Questions, and Motions for Returns, followed by Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders including Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 202, Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. In the evening under Motions Other than Government Motions we will deal with motions 501 and 502, thereafter under Government Bills and Orders addresses in reply to the Speech from the Throne and then second reading, perhaps Committee of the Whole as well depending on progress, on Bill 1, Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act; Bill 2, Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act; and Bill 4, Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004; and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders

we will continue with addresses in reply to the Speech from the Throne, followed by second reading of Bill 5, the Family Support for Children With Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004, then Committee of the Whole for bills 5 and 11 and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Tuesday evening under Government Bills and Orders we will begin with second reading of Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004, followed by Committee of the Whole for bills 5, 11, and 6 and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders supplementary supply messages may be presented. Government motions may also be presented referring to Committee of Supply and the number of days required for Committee of Supply, followed by second reading of Bill 7, Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 8, Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 9, Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004. Then Committee of the Whole will deal with bills 7, 8, and 9 and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Wednesday evening under Government Bills and Orders, Committee of Supply, supplementary supply, day 1 of 1 is expected to occur, followed by second reading and possibly also Committee of the Whole for bills 7, 8, and 9 and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, February 26, in the afternoon we will deal with Government Bills and Orders, Introduction of Bills, Supplementary Supply Appropriation Act, second reading of bills 12 and 13, and third readings and otherwise as per the Order Paper. I should comment that we anticipate that bills 12 and 13, that I just alluded to for Thursday, will be introduced on February 24, two days earlier.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, you have received in the last several days the biographies of all the new pages, and I think they're quite energetic and quite enthusiastic, and they definitely will enforce the rule of no foreign objects in the Assembly until Orders of the Day is called.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 4
Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a privilege to rise today to officially move this particular bill, Bill 4, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, at second reading.

I say that because it has been a long time coming, and I'm delighted that today we are joined by the guests I introduced earlier to you.

Mr. Speaker, in May of 2000 responsibility for the Blind Persons' Rights Act and its regulation, the guide dogs' qualification regulation, was transferred from Alberta Health and Wellness to my Ministry of Community Development. We are continuing on a journey of change with this Bill 4 that puts into place very important and much-needed changes to the Blind Persons' Rights Act. It closes the gap in our legislation and provides better protection for individual Albertans who are blind and require the use of a guide dog or a white cane.

One of these individuals is present here today with her dog. That is Diane Bergeron. Diane, as I indicated to the House earlier, is a special co-ordinator of the Advisory Board on Services for Persons

with Disabilities and the City of Edmonton Youth Council. She also serves as a volunteer member of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, or CNIB, board. She has two children, and I'm so pleased that Summer, one of her children, was here today to be with her. She has a special two-year-old guide dog named Polar.

3:00

About two and a half years ago Diane and her children, accompanied by her guide dog of the day, were out buying groceries, Mr. Speaker. She called a taxi to take them home. Somewhere about 20 minutes later a cab pulled up in front of the doors, and as soon as the driver saw the dog beside Diane, the cab pulled away and left them standing there. Diane called the cab company, told the dispatcher what had happened. She was advised that the drivers could not be forced to pick them up even though there were three cabs from that company already sitting in that same parking lot. Obviously, she was upset that this would happen while she had her children with her particularly. I think her daughter still remembers seeing her crying in the store.

Diane is not alone in this particular situation, because we know that other Albertans are also telling us how they have been denied services in restaurants, denied access to shopping in local grocery stores, perhaps denied apartment accommodations and so on because of a no dog policy in those premises. Proposed amendments to the bill before us, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, are a step forward in creating an environment for Albertans that promotes a better understanding, promotes positive attitudes, attitudes that can contribute to the well-being of those who are blind.

I want to comment also on the stakeholder consultation that led up to the creation of these amendments. Changes and recommendations for change came from our stakeholders, the persons who will be served most by this particular set of amendments, and they also came from members of the general public. Many, many Albertans were consulted including a very public and open review process that strove to strike a balance in clarifying and strengthening the act as it pertains to the rights of blind persons.

The public review process that commenced in October of 2001 was in fact chaired by former Alberta Ombudsman Harley Johnson to address not only guide dogs but also assistive dogs that are trained for other purposes. These are dogs that are used by other disability groups such as persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or suffer from seizures.

The final report from that chair was submitted in late 2001. Public feedback on the report through a standardized questionnaire was then initiated. It has always been my practice, Mr. Speaker, as you know, to release these reports to the public for another look, if you will, at what the actual recommendations look like.

We had many active discussions in that respect with Albertans who fed into the process and, quite obviously, with the persons with the CNIB. Included in that feedback from Albertans was the fact that guide dogs and other assistive dogs are very different in terms of need, in terms of requirement, certification, and scope and that these matters should be addressed separately. The feedback also identified that legislation concerning blind persons' rights should concentrate on the rights of those who are determined to be blind as well as the need to develop a better definition of blindness, a more medical and legal definition, if you like.

So we began looking at how we can bring into effect those important and necessary changes. Bill 4 is in response to what we heard, and it addresses the concerns raised by stakeholders, including changes to legislation affecting those individuals who rely upon the use of guide dogs. Individuals who rely upon assistive dogs for other purposes will continue to be protected as they already are by

the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act.

Now, the amendments before us today clarify the existing Blind Persons' Rights Act, and they strengthen those areas that pertain to the rights of blind individuals. Quite specifically, Mr. Speaker, these amendments will do at least the following things. They will provide a more acceptable definition of blindness as determined by the medical profession. They will provide protection for certified dog trainers and for the dogs being trained. They will allow an identification card for the blind person guide dog team to be issued. They will provide ministerial authority for developing further regulations respecting qualifications for guide dogs. As well, they will establish higher maximum fines for violations of the act such as discrimination against a blind person accompanied by a guide dog or an individual purporting to be blind who is trying to garner benefits under the act.

For example, these fines will increase as follows. Discrimination against a blind person accompanied by a guide dog will increase threefold, from \$1,000 to \$3,000. An individual purporting to be blind to garner benefits under the act will see fines increased from \$100 to \$300, and with respect to abuse of white canes, individuals other than a blind person carrying a white cane in public places will see a penalty increasing from \$25 to \$250, a tenfold increase. These are very serious changes to a very serious issue within a very serious act.

Once the amending legislation is in place, we will also have mechanisms that will allow us to add other training facilities to the list of accredited facilities. You know, Mr. Speaker, as I was meeting with individuals from the blind community, I noted that there are about a dozen or so of these facilities across North America. There's only one in Canada, and it happens to be in Ottawa. I said to them, as I've said to others in the consultation process: why can't we have one of those facilities right here in Alberta? It would be another wonderful Alberta first, in this particular case specifically for the blind community. So we began looking at the possibility of doing that, and lo and behold I think we can and we will accomplish that. It will be a tremendously positive step forward in providing services to our blind community.

As I begin to wrap up, Mr. Speaker, I'll just add a few points. The amending legislation also will provide the minister of the day with the authority to make regulations respecting the qualifications for guide dogs, and this authority will expedite the process for making regulatory amendments such as adding additional training facilities to the accredited list, be they here in Alberta or elsewhere.

I recall one of my colleagues having said on several occasions that change is a journey, not a destination. Through the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, we will continue to create an Alberta that builds on what we already have and ensures that all Albertans enjoy the highest possible quality of life with a particular focus on the most vulnerable members of our communities. By doing this, I'm confident that we will be creating a place with a very level playing field for Diane, for her family, and for all Albertans, a place that encourages a more effective delivery of programs for those who are disabled and that promotes positive attitudes while raising awareness of these important issues.

In this respect, I want to sincerely thank the CNIB and their representatives who are here with us today – Mr. O'Donnell, Mr. McKeown, Ms Shuster, and, of course, Diane – and also my own staff members who have been working so diligently on this. Andrew Turzansky, whom I introduced to you earlier, has been extremely helpful, and he's become a closer friend probably to the community and to the department for his leadership in this respect.

For their help, for their stewardship, and for the care and concern that the CNIB have shown and continue to show daily for blind,

deaf-blind, and for all vision impaired individuals, they were certainly warmly received at an inaugural event in our community last evening. I think we had just under 1,000 people who came out to show support and respect for the CNIB and the many individuals that they serve. It was a particularly special night not only for the CNIB but also for our government because yesterday was the day that we actually had this bill introduced at first reading, and I was so privileged to do that.

3:10

At the same time, it was also the inauguration of what I hope will become a long-standing tradition, a fundraiser, as it were, with a sharp focus on not only raising funds but also raising awareness for issues pertaining to the blind community. In that respect, they provided the first ever Vision award to our Premier. I know that the Premier's work in this area goes back to at least 1980, if that is correct – I think it is – when he was mayor of Calgary, and we saw that in some of the film footage, Mr. Speaker, that was shown yesterday.

We also were shown what some of the issues are that blind individuals face on a daily basis, and we saw how much hope was given to people who have suddenly become blind or to the young children who are born blind. It was a tremendous message, and I'm so glad that so many of our colleagues from the Legislature were able to be there with us.

We've met many times with the CNIB. I think we will continue to meet many more times as we move this bill along and as we address these very important needs that reflect the needs of the blind persons' community and their guide dogs and the facilities that are needed to help ensure that that infrastructure remains solid and continues to be the best that our province can provide.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your support for this important Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am very pleased to be able to rise today and add my comments to the record in second reading for Bill 4, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004. This has been a long time coming. I can remember that it was some time ago, I think actually at the end of my first term, that this issue first came up legislatively with a bill introduced by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, if I remember correctly. I think we adjourned from the sitting before it got a full debate.

We've had a review, as the minister mentioned, launched in October, public reaction to the initial report, then a final report submitted to the minister by the end of December of 2001, and some additional questionnaires, the minister says. I wasn't aware of that particular consultation or go-round but certainly take his word for it.

I'm just going to go through the issues about why there's been a need for an update of this particular act. Essentially, what we've had is two acts that offered protection for people with a visual disability, and those are the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act and then the Blind Persons' Rights Act. This was to make sure that people were not facing any kind of prohibition or discrimination around accommodation and facilities, tenancies, housing, employment, access to government programs and services. All of those are protections meant to be offered to various individuals.

The Blind Persons' Rights Act quite specifically was setting out to make sure that no one was impersonating a blind person, so there was mention of not using the white cane and quite a bit of detail around a white cane. I even noticed that the original wording talked about the white cane being painted over a certain percentage of its

surface, which certainly does date it as now I think many of them, in fact, have a plastic covering or are made of some material that doesn't require painting.

A number of other things were in that bill. There was a definition of blindness, referring to someone registered as blind at the CNIB or who is receiving a pension as a result of blindness or an eye specialist has certified them to be according to a particular chart. It also went further to define "guide dog." That act has been problematic for some time for a number of reasons. The duplication in itself in that the blind persons are protected by both pieces of legislation can create some confusion, I think.

The enforcement of it. I think there have been problems with the police and the prosecutors being reluctant to act on complaints made under the Blind Persons' Rights Act because there are comparable sections available under the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act. That shouldn't have been a reason for no action to be taken at all, but enforcement seemed to be a problem.

The timeliness of resolving complaints. Some cases were resolved very quickly, but others took a lot longer, and it seemed that the ones that came forward under the Blind Persons' Rights Act hardly ever got resolved at all, which became problematic.

I in particular heard about the issues raised under accreditation and training. We need to know that the guide dogs have been trained and there's a standardized training, and that also offers reassurance to people who are working with the dogs. What we had was that the owner of a training school had to apply to the government to be included on the list of qualified institutions, but then there was no follow-up to make sure that that school or that individual trainer met any kind of ongoing standards or upgrading or anything else. There was no monitoring or evaluation to make sure that everybody stayed current and that acceptable standards were upheld.

Those regulations have not been updated since 1986, and the list of training institutions was not maintained, so there was a great deal of consternation over that. In fact, I can think of one individual with a dog that I'm sure was not trained at an accredited training institution, and yet they are out there with that dog. You know, that causes worry for the public, for the individual, and for everyone else that's trying to uphold the use of service dogs like blind dogs.

I wasn't aware of this until I started doing the research, but there was also a provision in the act that said that the CNIB would issue identification cards for the individual and for their dog, and in fact the CNIB has never done that and didn't really want to do it, and thus you see in the amending act that the ministry will take that over.

Aside from the currency of the accreditation and training the second-largest complaint or number of complaints that I heard about the Blind Persons' Rights Act was that it was not taking into consideration all of the other kinds of assistance animals that had come into fairly common usage. Essentially, there are service dogs, signal dogs, and assistance dogs. Right now we only have legislation that protects people that are using guide dogs for the blind.

There are hearing ear dogs. There are seizure dogs. There are special highly trained protection dogs for people who have been stalked or are under imminent threat of attack, and the dog is always with them and will protect them. That's a difficult one for many business owners and people to deal with. Nonetheless, it's a dog for a very specific reason to assist people. We've assistance dogs like the ones you see that work with children with autism, for example, or with people with mobility problems. They help, you know, turn on lights and appliances and pick things up that people that are in wheelchairs may drop. So that's an assistance dog, and there's nothing in the legislation that allows people to have those dogs and to have the same protection as is offered to the guide dogs. So there is no question that there was a need for an update in this bill.

3:20

Okay. So we had the need. We went through all of the consultations, and what came out of the focus groups and the resultant feedback loops was that there is still a problem with restaurants. We heard a story from the minister about taxicabs, a number of providers of services not understanding and not recognizing the guide dogs, and that lack of public awareness is still the biggest barrier.

I've already talked about the issue about the other kinds of assistance and service and signal animals, and although the minister said that they would be protected under the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act, in fact they're not protected in the same way that guide dogs are. There was a great desire to have those animals brought in under the act, and there certainly was a lot of discussion in the focus groups of that.

There is a real need for very clear training guidelines and upholding monitoring and evaluation of the trainers and the training institutions. There's a need to balance the rights of the dog handler or the person who is using the dog and their ability to control the animal in public. We need people to feel confident when they're in public with a dog that's being used as an assistance animal that that animal is clearly under the control of the person that's working with them.

The CNIB, whose main office is, in fact, in my constituency, developed a very strong position, and they put it forward to me at one point that they wanted to see this act, the Blind Persons' Rights Act, remain pretty much as it was, to not include additional kinds of service animals and, further, that they felt – and they did a good job of lobbying for it – that there should be some expansion and strengthening of the act to, you know, provide some additional assistance to students around Braille materials and classroom education in Braille. They had a very effective lobbying strategy to get that point of view across, and that was sort of balanced on the other side with those people that wanted to see the legislation expanded. So that's kind of the background and history of this.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I'm willing to support the act as brought forward by the Minister of Community Development, but I am disappointed that we are not looking at Bill 5 being, you know, the assistance animal act. Clearly, there's a need for that. There was a great deal of time and effort put in by people to say: we need this. If the choice by the government was not to include those animals under the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, to leave that as it is pretty much, then I think we should have seen the second piece of legislation come forward at the same time because we've waited.

I mean, 1980 I think is the originating act for the Blind Persons' Rights Act. We're now in 2004, so it took us 24 years to get a good amending act in front of us. I'm assuming that this is going to pass now. I don't want to have to wait 24 years to get an assistive or service animal act in front of the Legislature, and I think that if the minister were really committed to that, he should have brought it forward as a companion piece.

So that's my concern with what's happened in this process. I have no problem with the act as it's in front of us, but the process was not completed. There's a need for some sort of legislated protection against discrimination for people that use other kinds of service animals. We needed the same kinds of rules around monitoring and evaluation and registration of training facilities and of trainers for those other kinds of service and assistance animals, and we just don't have it. So we've got half the equation here.

Now, as I said, I'm more than happy to support the first half of the

equation, but I really wanted to see the second half of the equation. All of the groundwork has been done, so I'm disappointed that the government didn't take the time when they had it to come forward with the rest of what we need here.

From all of that work – from the 24 years, from the consultation process that started in October of 2001, and here we are in February of 2004 so over two years – what we have are some fairly minor changes to the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, essentially an update in the definition so that it's not quite so loosey-goosey and is looking for a medical definition. We've got fines for someone using a white cane who isn't visually impaired, fines and prohibitions for impersonating a blind person. It's including the protections and extending the protections and privileges to the trainers who are out on the street training or taking dogs that are being trained into cabs and places like that.

It includes, again, that standard clause, that the government always does and that I loathe and detest, about everything further is done by regulation behind closed doors with the minister with one exception, and that's the updating of the list of approved trainers. Finally, the minister is going to take over – well, I guess start, because there doesn't seem to have ever been anyone that actually issued the ID cards. So the minister would be responsible for issuing the ID cards. So all of that 24 years plus the consultation has resulted in five changes. As I say, I don't need to belabour the point. It's all there.

Oh, the one thing was that we've over the years, of course, heard from a number of individuals who felt very strongly about this. Just one that I'll highlight is Harry Lunscher, who's from Lethbridge. He was one of the ones that has written repeatedly to members of the Official Opposition caucus talking about his disappointment that this proposed act would only deal with sight assistance dogs and not with all service dogs, his point being that service dogs are used in support of lifestyles that go well beyond sight assistance. He and his wife use one. He's prone to falls and his wife is hearing impaired, so their dog T.J. helps them enjoy life to the fullest, and he doesn't get the same protection for T.J. that someone with a guide dog does.

He's been in touch with the Premier. He's been in touch with, I'm sure, many of my colleagues here in the House trying to lobby to have all service dogs included. Others went further and wanted it to be service animals because there are certain animals that are much more sensitive to be of assistance, like seizure animals. Certain ones are better at detecting the seizures coming. I've got a number of letters here from him. That's just one. He was writing at that point in June of 2001 in support of Bill 219, which was then the one brought forward by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan in which he was hoping it would pass because that one was bringing forward an act that brought hearing ear dogs or assistance dogs for the deaf into the Blind Persons' Rights Act, and that was sort of the first go at this.

I just wanted to point out, you know, how important it is to a whole other section of people that we do address and offer protection to those that are using other kinds of service and assistance and signal animals, and I hope that before we leave this spring session we will see the government bring forward the companion act to this one. In the meantime I am happy to state my support in second reading in principle for Bill 4.

Thank you very much.

3:30

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities I'm pleased to

speaking in support of this bill. Bill 4 does a number of things. First of all, it clarifies guide dog certification and monitoring rules. It protects those who train these exceptional dogs. It strengthens the definition of blindness and helps prevent discrimination against those who use a guide dog.

I'm supportive of this bill also because it's one more step towards a barrier-free Alberta. It supports the spirit and the intent of the Alberta disability strategy that was developed by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. In it there's a call for full citizenship for persons with disabilities, and full citizenship means enabling persons with disabilities to be independent, to make choices, and to access opportunities to fully contribute to our society. The Premier's council believes that the lives of persons with disabilities can be improved if we break down those barriers, those barriers that prevent disabled individuals from contributing fully and participating. Bill 4 supports this belief in tangible ways, the way in which blind people and their guide dogs are perceived and treated.

Through my role as chair of the Premier's council I have the privilege to meet and know many people throughout the province with physical and mental disabilities. Almost to a person their frustrations in life are not connected to their disability but rather the limitations on their lifestyle that's imposed on them often by the opinions of others. These limitations are usually a result of preconceptions, assumptions, or just plain old lack of understanding and education.

I've been privileged in my time working with the council and being associated with the council members to learn a great deal about their issues. One example that stands out in my mind is the time I exited a building with one of our council members who was blind and accompanied by a Seeing Eye dog. We were coming up to a row of taxis waiting for customers and Shirley was a little bit ahead of me with her guide dog, Willie, and as she was walking along the first taxi driver sort of was there, and he indicated that he was waiting for somebody or he was in use. I don't remember exactly. I wasn't sure that he was actually waiting for a customer and had already committed to somebody.

Anyway, I ended up walking ahead and it appeared, I think, to the second driver in the second car that I was by myself. "Taxi, sir?" he says. I said, "Yeah. Great." So I gave him my little briefcase, or whatever it was, and he threw it in the trunk, and then I said, "Shirley, throw this in too." He nearly fell over because here was this other person accompanied by a dog, and I'm sure – I suspect, anyway – that Shirley would have been denied service if she had been alone and had been asking for cab service.

In another set of circumstances when Shirley and I took a cab to someplace else, the cab driver was not pleased in that circumstance either. Yet this dog, Willie, that Shirley has is one of the most obedient animals that I think anybody could ever see. It's an amazing dog. Shirley tells me that the many trips she's been on – for example, she goes across Canada to Newfoundland – Willie curls up under the seat on the plane. Shirley reports good service from the airlines. Willie will curl up under the seat and stay there for five or six hours without moving and then re-emerges from underneath, and people around are really surprised, you know, because Shirley would board first, that this dog was on the plane.

These are obedient dogs; they are well trained. These people face many challenges taking these dogs with them. Being in meetings with Shirley and seeing how she's always compelled to, you know, take Willie out during lunchtime so Willie can have a little break and get out there – she's got issues of dealing with dog droppings and disposing of those. Another big issue is pets. Whereas Willie is a well-behaved dog, if another dog comes along under poor control by its owner, runs up, starts barking and chasing Willie around, it's very

difficult. Here we have a lady, unable to see anything and trying to control her dog, not knowing what's going on, and the other person not controlling their pet. A difficult situation.

It was interesting for me last night at the CNIB Vision awards, and many of you were there. There were many dogs around. There was a bunch of noise at one time when people were doing something with different instruments just as a kind of entertainment time and lots of racket. I'm sure that there was not a single dog bark heard in that whole facility from all those Seeing Eye dogs that were there. They are under control, they are trained, and they are a credit to the people who are engaged in that industry to take care of them.

Something else that we've observed lately that is quite a change as well is the increase in the number of dogs in training that we see around. I don't know what agencies are doing that here in Alberta, but I do see quite a few of those dogs. Quite a few of those dogs have little signs on them saying: I'm in training. Some other dogs that are qualified, certified Seeing Eye dogs have: I'm a working dog; do not pet.

When I first became acquainted with Shirley and her Seeing Eye dog, Willie, you know, you tend to reach down and pat it, and if you like dogs, you scratch it behind the ears and so on. Everybody does that. It's a typical reaction. Those dogs are working animals, and they aren't pets. They aren't to be treated that way. It's encouraging to see those little signs that they do have on there. It's an education for the rest of us. We need to be educated in so many ways about the needs of people with disabilities that we just don't understand. So that's been an interesting observation over the past few years, to see how that's been happening with those dogs.

I'm appreciative, too, of this bill for the increase in the penalties that are mentioned. They're significant penalties, and they cut both ways. I'm aware of a situation in another jurisdiction. I have been in meetings in this circumstance. There was a person using a dog who didn't really seem to need this. It was an assistive dog. Just recently a fellow told me about how this wasn't really a trained dog; it wasn't necessary. The person wasn't utilizing it, as I kind of suspected. He was commenting on how that inappropriate use destroyed both his credibility as an individual and also jeopardized the work of people like the CNIB who are promoting the use of legitimate guide dogs, well-trained and useful to people with vision difficulties.

Mr. Speaker, a barrier-free Alberta is certainly possible if we have the will and the commitment to make it happen, and Bill 4 helps us get one step closer to that goal. I'd encourage all members to support me in supporting this Bill 4, and at this time I'd just like to adjourn debate on Bill 4.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head:

Consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

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

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

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

[Adjourned debate February 18: Mr. McClelland]

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

3:40

Ms Haley: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne. The vision outlined within it comes at a truly momentous time as we approach our second century as a province. I would like to thank the Lieutenant Governor for so graciously beginning our session, and I am glad, as are all Albertans, that she is in good health in both body and spirit.

The Speech from the Throne covered many areas of great importance to Albertans. However, the area of greatest interest to me is the strategic plan. I appreciate that there are four distinct pillars to this plan; however, what I am most excited about in this speech is the part of the strategic plan that allows us to look forward on an economic basis. The plan is designed to set out a 20-year vision for Alberta, and that gives us a starting point to plan how we can continue to diversify our economy as we move further into the 21st century.

As a child growing up in the oil patch, I always knew how important the oil and gas industry was to our province's economic well-being. Moreover, I believe it will be of major importance for years to come. What I hope we can accomplish with the plan is to capitalize on the opportunities that allow us to further develop both our nonrenewable and our renewable resources as well as to pursue innovation- and knowledge-based sectors at a time that our economy is so strong. While our manufacturing sector is doing better and more jobs are being created in that area of our workforce, the real truth is that for too long now we have been shipping out our oil and gas, our live cattle, our grain and oilseed by the bushel, and our forest products with little or no value added to them, and value added is what I want to talk about today.

Almost a hundred years ago in Alberta no one could have imagined the massive changes that have occurred from cars and planes to electricity and running water, to plasma screen TVs, to towers that reach to the sky, let alone computers and the Internet. I mean, even 30 years ago people were lucky if they had a set of encyclopedias in their homes let alone the amazing information that we have access to today just by turning on a computer and surfing the web.

This second century that we are approaching will hold more changes than any of us can even begin to imagine. It is possible that a hundred years from now people could be living on other planets. Perhaps mundane issues like trying to build roads will no longer be quite so important. The sky is truly the limit, and Albertans with their go-to-it attitude will be major players in anything that is going to happen. But one thing is for sure: this is the time right now that we have to further develop our own unique industries in Alberta. We cannot sit back and say that things are just fine the way they are now. We do not have the luxury of taking anything for granted, particularly the surpluses that we have been so fortunate to achieve when oil and gas prices are high. This is precisely the time that we have to take advantage of our economic well-being to further diversify our economic base.

I would like to talk about the kinds of things that I think we can do even in the short term and where I think there are some issues that truly we need to deal with. We all know about and many of us have seen the petrochemical plants at Joffre and the magnitude of the multibillion dollar investments this industry created when they were able to strip certain gas components like ethane or butane, propane, and condensate from our own resources. It has allowed the private sector to make huge investments in our province, create great jobs, and further diversify our economy. The best part, Mr. Speaker, is that once these products were stripped out, we were still able to sell natural gas to heat homes in other parts of Canada or the United States.

However, several years ago the federal government's National

Energy Board decided against allowing Alberta corporations to strip out by-products when they approved the construction of the Alliance pipeline. This allows the petrochemical industry in Chicago to strip those same products out of our gas, allowing American industry to grow and flourish while our local producers struggle to secure an adequate supply for their production needs. It is clear to me that part of the strategic plan is to have the federal government be more willing to help all provinces in Canada achieve all that they can and not hamper progress or be at cross-purposes with the various regions of this country. In fact, it is time to adopt a policy all over this country of recognizing and encouraging strength and diversity. Whether it is the situation like the National Energy Board created or like the feds are creating now by trying to leave Alberta out of the negotiations with our industries on the Kyoto protocol, these types of situations have to be resolved.

Another sector that could benefit from a better-defined value-added policy is the secondary manufacturers of forest products. At just one plant in Crossfield Palliser Lumber has created over 125 jobs and many value-added products that are sold not just here in Alberta but as far away as Texas. You have to admit, Mr. Speaker, that it beats just shipping logs out of our province.

We have a very young secondary manufacturing industry in Alberta, and we need to nurture it so that it can develop into a viable contributor to our economy. It makes so much sense that you have to wonder why these same companies are struggling to exist. Well, it turns out, Mr. Speaker, that in a province where 60 per cent of the land mass is covered with forest, these companies struggle to acquire the very fibre they need to run their businesses. Perhaps the first step in helping them to make this value-added sector viable is to indicate to the big forest product companies that it might be a good idea to leave some fibre inside the province so that the secondary manufacturers could utilize it. Possibly a way to encourage them would be to tie their contribution of fibre to their forest management agreements. You have to wonder, if there was just a little more processing going on here and less raw wood leaving our province, whether or not the softwood lumber issue would be a little less damaging than it is today.

Another obvious area that will benefit from a better value-added strategy is agriculture. In this area, I want to give credit where credit is due. Much has been done, but much more needs to be done. Many Albertans can understand the whole concept of value added much more easily when we look at some simple products. A loaf of bread in some specialty shops can sell for more than a whole bushel of wheat. A bottle of Canadian Club rye whisky sells for more than about 10 bushels of rye. And, of course, there is beer, everyone's favourite barley product, and for some strange reason it has a much higher value than a bushel of barley. Now, that, Mr. Speaker, is what value-added is all about.

Many consumers appreciate the ready-to-consume products that require little effort to prepare after a long day at work. The more of that that can be done in our own province, where the raw materials are, the more jobs can be created and the higher the value of those products being sold.

The government of Alberta has assisted value-added agriculture by funding organizations like AVAC. It is a research arm designed to assist in product research, development, and production possibilities. There are other groups and organizations throughout the province, but many of them face the same obstacles.

Once again, we have to look at the federal government together with the Canadian Wheat Board, as they seem to be at cross-purposes to our value-added strategy. The anomaly of the shipping and elevation charges on board-controlled wheat and grain means that you would be hard-pressed to find a pasta manufacturer inside

Alberta. In fact, in the very province where some of the world's best durum wheat is grown, it is not economically viable to make pasta. That is just one more of the ludicrous situations we find ourselves in because of the Wheat Board's antiquated and counterproductive rules. The good news for canola producers is that the Wheat Board doesn't control it, and that is why we have a successful canola-crushing industry in our province.

It is not rocket science; it is just common sense but an important area that must be dealt with so that our province can benefit from the spinoff value of our own products. Many of our producers have discovered the importance of growing niche crops like mustard seed, canary seed, lentils, peas, flax, or oats. All of these crops allow us to look at further adding value to our products. Being able to ship Alberta beef in boxes or to make pet food and suede coats creates jobs here at home rather than outside our province.

I can only hope and pray that our beef industry can survive this crazy situation that we find ourselves in because of one case of mad cow disease. Perhaps the challenge we will face when it does finally end will be to consider whether we really want to continue being reliant on shipping live cattle out of our province. Or do we want to further add value to that product as we redevelop our markets in what will no doubt be a very different cattle business than it is today?

As someone that farmed and ranched in Alberta, I have to say that one day our producers are going to have to look carefully at the wisdom of growing crops and raising cattle for an export market. We are all learning the hard way that commodity market trends are down, that it is getting more and more difficult all the time to even get close to breaking even on import costs let alone make enough money to keep a farm viable.

We must use all of our ingenuity to find ways to add value to our agriculture products if we want farming to even continue in Alberta. I know that many people in this industry are looking at the situation, and I am confident in them and in their ability to find the silver lining in this incredibly dark cloud. The people who stay in this industry are some of Alberta's finest residents, and I wish them all the very best as they go through these difficult days filled with even more difficult decisions.

Another element of the value-added strategy that I want to talk about is knowledge-based industries. The big question is: what can we do to encourage such companies to come here? It appears that the strategy most commonly utilized by other provinces and the United States was to come up with incentive programs for these industries. Alberta is not competitive in this sector. The result is that most of the research and development funding in Alberta comes from government sources. Further, Alberta, with the third-largest economy in Canada, has only 1.5 per cent of the venture capital. These are things that need to change drastically if we are to become not just competitive but a leader in this field.

When I look at value-added, I see that government has to assess very carefully where it is important to level the playing field and make Alberta a strong competitor, one that is capable of attracting corporate research and development and venture capital as well as technology commercialization. For too long now research that is finally at the point where one can commercialize it has been leaving our province. This needs to change so that as taxpayers we can see the world's best research culminate in innovative products and technologies developed and marketed right here at home.

Our ingenuity fund is helping to make it possible for Alberta to have some of the finest researchers anywhere in the world locate right here. However, our inability to capitalize on what they develop is leaving the glass half full. As we get deeper into things like nanotechnology, I hope that we will have found a way to keep the

spinoff industries here, that that, in fact, Mr. Speaker, may well be the next oil and gas business for our province.

3:50

Film is an example of an industry that receives tax credits both federally and provincially in all parts of Canada, the United States, as well as Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. In order to have any film production done in Alberta at all, we had to come up with a program to assist this industry. The Alberta film development program has helped, and in fact many Alberta producers and crew members have moved back from other provinces to help re-establish our industry. Unfortunately, our program, the way it sits now, does not attract big productions over \$10 million, nor do we have the ability to work with offshore and guest production on a direct basis. We do, however, work with our own Alberta-based producers, who are able to enter into co-production work and still access our program.

This past year in Alberta close to \$100 million in production has been done, but that is a far cry from the \$400 million or \$500 million that should be done here if we were to achieve even 10 per cent of what is being done in Canada. Also, with a cap in place on our fund at \$10 million in this past fiscal year, we find ourselves hemorrhaging production into other provinces, and there is not enough money in our fund to do all of the business that should be done here, so they go where the tax credits are.

As well, this winter we have lost Great North Productions out of Alberta, and the reason was simple: they could not assure their owners, Alliance Atlantis, that when they were ready to move into production, they would in fact be able to access our fund. This company was doing over \$30 million worth of production in Alberta, and it is a real loss for Edmonton.

So once again I find myself looking forward to the budget because I hope that Treasury Board will recognize the importance of this industry to Alberta, to our communities, and particularly to our tourism sector. If you wonder at all about the logic of that, I leave you with this thought on film. The country of New Zealand has seen a \$3.8 billion economic benefit thanks to a \$200 million tax credit given to the producers of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Mr. Speaker, I'm absolutely delighted that my government has set out a 20-year strategic plan, and I know that as we move further down this road, there will be things that will need to be looked at including using our fiscal policy to ensure that we're competitive with other jurisdictions. We're a very young province—we're only 99 years old—competing with cultures that are thousands of years old. Even just in Canada alone we have had to do in less than a hundred years that which our eastern cousins have had over 300 years to accomplish. I do not see it as a disadvantage, but what I do see is that we have to take the time to look at the whole picture. We would not have the economic benefit of the tar sands and billions of dollars in investment they have created had we not had a government willing to find ways to assist that industry in the beginning.

As we take steps into the second century of our province's history, we must be bold. We must find ways to convince the federal government to work with us and not against us so that we may find ways to achieve our full potential. It is time to unleash innovation that focuses on becoming a world leader in research, development, and commercialization of new ideas. This applies to both our existing strengths in energy, agriculture, forestry as well as new businesses that create wealth by commercializing new technologies, creating new products, and adding value at home and for export abroad.

We must find the strength of will to look at our fiscal policies for ways to help our economy move past the hewers of wood and

drawers of water attitudes that have plagued us for decades and instead allow us to fully capture our own economic diversity. I am excited about our future, Mr. Speaker. I think the 21st century truly belongs to us.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It was indeed a pleasure to hear Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor deliver the throne speech. As always Her Honour brought renewed warmth and grace to this Chamber. I would also like to add my voice to those of my colleagues in expressing my hope that Her Honour will remain in office for at least the duration of next year's centennial celebrations. She does tremendous credit to her office, and I very much appreciate her contribution to the entire province.

The content of the speech of course, Mr. Speaker, as we know, is determined by the government, and Tuesday's throne speech certainly lacked the vision that I had hoped to see for this province. It lacked commitment, and it lacked any sense that this government has a plan for Alberta beyond the next election. Indeed, this government's insistence on setting policy according to the election cycle clearly demonstrates that their priority is on their own political survival rather than the long-term quality of Albertans' lives.

Mr. Speaker, the 20-year plan that has been spoken of by the Premier among others is in my view the height of arrogance. To suggest that this government with its record can make a plan for 20 years into the future is a joke. As one commentator put it: "Who are they trying to kid? They can't even stick to a plan for one year."

Mr. Speaker, I could list file after file that this government has bungled. I could bemoan the damaged relations between this government and Alberta's teachers. I could scold the government for abandoning seniors and condemning postsecondary students to massive debt loads. I could speak at some length about why I believe that this is perhaps the worst government in this country. But last year the government caucus felt it necessary to reduce the time that members are allowed to speak on matters such as this, limiting thereby the amount of debate time in this Assembly. Of course, such restrictions are to be expected from a government that has used closure to choke off debate more than any other jurisdiction in Canada and which boasts the fewest sitting days of any Assembly in Canada other than Prince Edward Island.

Alberta is suffering under a democratic deficit that is becoming wider and wider. A recent study by the Parkland Institute entitled *Trouble in Paradise?* found that 60 per cent of Albertans believe that our democracy is unhealthy and that 79 per cent feel that big business has too much influence on government policy. This growing skepticism about democracy in Alberta is symptomatic of a core problem: we've had a single party in power for far too long.

This longevity has led in the worst cases to outright arrogance – and we've seen that just in the last couple of days, hon. members – and to a closed-door approach to policy-making. No wonder, then, that there's a growing disconnect between the priorities of Albertans and the priorities of this government. There is, of course, the old saw that practice makes perfect, but in this case the exception seems to prove the rule. In fact, for this government the longer they have to play at politics, the more their mistakes and the accumulated effects of years of mismanagement begin to catch up.

For example, Mr. Speaker, as I travel through Alberta, I hear from both rural and urban Albertans that something doesn't quite sit right about how the government has handled and is handling the whole question of BSE. We found one cow, and the answer of the government was: well, it's just one cow. Well, then they found a

second cow, and that, I think, underlined the ineffectiveness of the government's response to that point. On one hand, the government claims that consumers can feel secure in the safety of their food supply, yet on the other hand they have done nothing to ramp up testing to meet even the standards in Europe.

Again the government claims to be fighting for our farmers, but it was this government that closed labs in Fairview, Airdrie, and Lethbridge, forcing farmers to use private labs at their own expense, and established full cost recovery programs for livestock inspection and branding services. It was this government that in 2001 amended the Agricultural Operation Practices Act to eliminate local communities' ability to interfere with the siting of massive intensive livestock operations. It is this government that has allowed rural infrastructure to crumble and decay, only offering some relief now that the election is nearly upon us.

Rural Albertans can be forgiven for feeling a little confused about this government's attitude towards our agricultural heritage. Judging by the lack of leadership that has been shown on this issue and the contradictory statements coming from the Premier, on the one hand, and the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development on the other, it seems that the government itself is confused about the future of rural Alberta.

Even worse, the longer this government is allowed to hold power the more devastating will be the cumulative effects of nearsighted privatization and lack of investment in our infrastructure.

4:00

Let me be clear, Mr. Speaker. This is a government that revels in nearsightedness and contradiction. Only a government that has overstayed its welcome could produce environment policies that indicate that the best way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is to increase their production and in the water for life strategy indicate that the best way to conserve water is to allow more of it to be used. Perhaps someone should explain to the government that George Orwell's ominous predictions about doublespeak were meant as a warning, not as a business plan for Conservative cabinet members.

But if anything positive can be said about this government, it's this: they are clearly a united team. When the Learning minister forced the layoff of 1,000 teachers in Alberta while claiming school boards were receiving adequate funding, the team stood behind him. When a year later the Learning Commission noted that not only should those teachers not have been laid off but that funding should be provided for an additional 1,500 teaching positions, the team stood together and pretended that the minister had never claimed that funding was already inadequate.

As a team this government allowed insurance premiums to skyrocket way past the levels in other western provinces. Then as a team this government locked in rates that were 57 per cent higher than those a year before with no clear plan to bring those rates down.

Let's not forget, Mr. Speaker, about the highly specialized section of the government team, the so-called Edmonton caucus. The commitment and unity shown by the Edmonton caucus as they watched the Electoral Boundaries Commission eliminate an Edmonton riding, as they watched the Calgary school board receive funding that Edmonton school boards did not, and when they allowed discrimination in auto insurance rates for the misfortune of having registered your vehicle in Edmonton, it was breathtaking to be seen.

Now, when confronted by these messes of their own making, the government, led by the Premier, has a very simple strategy. It's called blame it on the feds. They have elevated the science of distraction and misdirection into an art form. We have a government that cries and complains about the \$1 billion spent by the federal

government on the gun registry, and justly so, I might add, Mr. Speaker. However, they conveniently ignore the \$6 billion that has been drained from Alberta's economy by a bungled electricity deregulation agenda.

This government likes to gnash its teeth and to wail about the delay in the \$2 billion promised to the provinces for health care funding while behind closed doors plans to privatize our medicare system are carefully put into place. The Premier and the Minister of Health and Wellness hope that if they focus enough attention on the federal government, then no one will notice as services are reduced, user fees are increased, and profit is slowly allowed to eat up more and more of our health care dollars.

Tuesday's throne speech did bless us with one bit of distraction not undertaken at the expense of the federal government: the government's promise to throw money at people who don't even exist yet. The Alberta centennial education savings plan is clearly an attempt to throw money at babies fortunate enough to be born during an election year. The plan does nothing to address the massive debt loads faced by today's postsecondary students. It does nothing to make higher education accessible to the thousands of Albertans who would like to continue their learning but simply cannot afford to do so. Rather than simply freezing tuition fees now, a move that could be paid for by ending the unnecessary subsidy to the horse racing industry, this government is planning to make education so expensive that families will have to spend 20 years in preparing for one child to attend university. Mr. Speaker, I said at the beginning of my comments that this is arguably the worst government in Canada.

To conclude I would like to tell this Assembly that I'm proud that New Democrats are not only a part of a growing tide of people who are ready to challenge this government and work hard to replace it but that we are leading the battle charge, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to do so into and through the next provincial election.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. I have a question for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, please. Now, would the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands in his speech elaborate on what was missing in the Speech from the Throne in regard to auto insurance? What would the hon. member like to see this government do to reduce auto insurance premiums?

Mr. Mason: Thank you, hon. member, for that question. I would like them to do what the Liberal caucus has done, and that is to adopt the New Democrat plan for public auto insurance. I might say that it shows great wisdom on the part of the Alberta Liberal caucus because across western Canada Alberta is the only province that doesn't have public auto insurance, and as a result we pay the highest rates.

Even under the government plan, such as it is, we will continue to pay higher rates for automobile insurance than under a public plan, and there are a number of important reasons for that. One is the efficiencies of combining the organization with the licensing, the licence plates, and the registration. There are great economies to be found there. Of course, any profits that are made are plowed right back into lower rates, and that's something that is impossible to achieve under the Conservative approach of letting private auto insurance companies charge to provide the service.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Minister of Learning, a question?

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just a very quick question, and that is quite simply: would the hon. member consider a 15 to 28 per cent return after taxes, after inflation a good deal?

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

Mr. Mason: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. The hon. minister has not given me enough information to answer the question.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Seeing that the hon. member would not bite on that one, I'll just say quite simply that the TD financial group this week came out with a report that said that college students received an after-tax, after-inflation return on their dollar spent of 15 to 28 per cent and university degrees were 12 to 20 per cent after taxes, after inflation, which on this side of the floor is an excellent return on the dollar.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I might just point out that that's the problem with having a Learning minister that thinks like a banker.

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

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour for me to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne. The speech that was presented by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor served to do more than just open the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature. It was also a bold statement on the course of this province and the future of Alberta. I would like to say that after 34 and a half months of being an MLA in this Assembly, it is a great day to stand here and know that the government of Alberta is saying that education is the number one priority in this province. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Her Honour for her grace, humility, and dedication. She has served our province and our sovereign with the utmost distinction.

I find it very fitting that the speech Her Honour delivered on Tuesday was entitled *Heading toward Alberta's Second Century: A Proud History, A Promising Future*. Next year our province will celebrate its hundredth birthday. As well, we look back at the past century. We as Albertans have many things to be proud of. Thanks to the hard work and perseverance of numerous generations of Albertans we have been able to transform our vast prairie grasslands into successful large farming operations, expand our small pioneer settlements and villages into thriving urban communities, and transform a small subsistence-based economy into the best performing economy in the world.

I want to look back for a minute to 10 years ago. We were sitting in a province that was in deficit and debt, and with the leadership that was taken at that time, we are able to enjoy the throne speech that we heard yesterday from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. If it wasn't for the leadership of our Premier and some of the members that are sitting on the front bench today and many of the other members that have left this Assembly, we would not be able to afford to move the portfolios of learning, advanced education, and health care. It is that vision from 10, 11 years ago that has allowed us this throne speech that we enjoy today.

4:10

Related to the throne speech – it is directly to do with learning – I'd also like to acknowledge and thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for the work that he has done on the Learning Commission.

Over the last decade we have been able to further increase our productivity levels creating an atmosphere both business-friendly and environmentally responsible. By increasing employment rates, reducing income tax, and ensuring that Albertans retain more of their hard-earned money, our province has become one of the best places for people to live and work. As we look towards the next century, the health and welfare of Albertans will undoubtedly continue to be the top priority of our government. However, while we currently have an effective and well-funded health care system in place, it has become apparent Canada-wide that this system is not sustainable unless we are prepared to initiate appropriate reforms and improvements.

I applaud Albertans for having the courage to seize the initiative in addressing these problems through new and innovative solutions. I am fully convinced that through continued health care reform we'll not only enhance the sustainability of the system, but we will also guarantee that every Albertan continues to enjoy access to affordable and quality care.

During her address on Tuesday, Mr. Speaker, Her Honour referred to the 20-year plan this government has developed to ensure that the next centennial is as successful and prosperous for Albertans as was the last one. The main components of this plan are made up of four key pillars that over the next 20 years will strengthen and expand as they will be crucial to the continued success of our urban and rural communities. The four pillars I am referring to include unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to work, live, and visit.

Of those four pillars, the one that has been of particular interest to me and my constituents in Edmonton-Glenora is, of course, learning and the future improvement and enhancement of our primary, secondary, and postsecondary education. I look forward to the jobs that the hon. ministers will be involved in moving forward: the Minister of Learning, the Minister of Infrastructure, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment, and the minister of aboriginal affairs.

Our present and future realities, Mr. Speaker, demand that we maintain a world-class education system in order for our economy and society to grow and prosper. We need to train and attract a skilled and educated labour force that will be able to meet the needs and demands of the future. By investing in Alberta's learning system and placing it as one of the four key pillars of our development strategy, we're not only ensuring that future generations of Albertans are provided with the tools and knowledge they require to realize the goals and aspirations, but we are making certain that Alberta in 2025 will be a well-educated workforce with a strong and vibrant economy.

In support of this vision I was heartened to hear that the government will be marking our centennial year by investing in Alberta's children in the form of the Alberta centennial education savings plan. I feel that the announced \$500 contribution per child will not only help to encourage children to pursue higher learning but also create an incentive for parents to start planning and saving for their child's education as early as possible. Furthermore, by encouraging parents to start planning early, the centennial savings plan will help future students meet some of the costs associated with pursuing postsecondary education.

Another topic that I would quickly like to touch on, Mr. Speaker,

relates to the issue of class sizes. Over the past year I've had the opportunity to speak to many of my constituents who approached me with genuine concerns regarding the sizes of children's classrooms at their local schools. This issue was raised in the Alberta Learning Commission report, and I am indeed thrilled that this government has taken steps to increase funding to those schools that exceed the average class size guidelines as recommended by the commission.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to see that the government has chosen to deal with this issue by working with individual school boards as opposed to dictating to them what specific steps they need to take. I understand that school boards are reluctant to have the province mandate class sizes to them as this would not only infringe upon their autonomy and self-sufficiency but also severely limit their flexibility to respond to local needs.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, I am extremely encouraged by the fact that our schools and our learning institutions are continuously staffed by extremely committed teachers and instructors who provide our young ones with the superior curriculum and also promote parent involvement. All these factors combined give Alberta one of the best education systems in the world.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude by reiterating that we as Albertans have accomplished much in a relatively short period of time. We have developed a booming economy, established first-rate social services, and we have created a learning system that will steer our province towards a bright and prosperous future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was a privilege today to stand before you and respond to the Speech from the Throne.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity also to reply to the Speech from the Throne, and I also would like to lift up the MLA for Edmonton-Meadowlark as an outstanding young man.

Mr. Speaker, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor, Lois Hole, delivered her speech the other day with dignity and grace that embodies the office she holds. The content of her speech outlined a path for the government of this province that I'm proud to walk down. The speech sketched in our plan that would not only address the current concerns of Albertans but also prepare Alberta's continuing success long into the future. This plan includes all of the cornerstones upon which our province's current prosperity is built. We see elements that will ensure that our children will be privy to a fantastic education system both in grade school and beyond. Other elements discussed will ensure that Alberta will remain strong in the international trade community while nurturing research and innovation at home.

Mr. Speaker, I had the liberty to visit our Research Council on a couple of different occasions, and each and every time I'm absolutely surprised at the distances they reach and what they're doing with biogas and biomass and other concerns of our environment.

On the international scene, Mr. Speaker, Alberta is not only known for its natural resources that reside underground but the wealth and beauty that lies above-ground as well. Alberta is home to an astonishing diversity of terrain from the Rockies to the west and the hoodoos down south. We're privileged to enjoy this natural splendour. However, this natural beauty will not remain if both government and society do not act decisively to implement conservation measures that will protect our environment. It is the duty and privilege of every Albertan to do their part to ensure that their environment will be protected.

The government has recognized the need to take the initiative in

environmental issues and to this end are developing a provincial water council. The council will work to ensure that Alberta's water supply remains fresh, clear, and readily available for generations to come, and from what I know of our minister in this department, it will be achieved.

This commitment to our environment will not stop at protecting Alberta waterways. In her speech the hon. Lieutenant Governor mentioned that some of our energies would be devoted to developing new technology that would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to investigating alternative sources further. We have to go farther to go further.

It is a stark reality that a good portion of our environmental contamination is a result of automobiles. Manufacturers have made great strides developing automobiles that are more fuel efficient, burn more cleanly, but there are still negative environmental impacts when dealing with vehicles fuelled by petroleum products.

These impacts result not only from burning fossil fuels but also from the transfer of the same fuels. In response to this alternative source of pollution I, myself, Mr. Speaker, with great wisdom am sponsoring a bill, Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004, that would help reduce the amount of pollution that results from transfer of both fuels from storage tanks into tankers and from these same trucks to service stations. My colleagues and myself, we don't only talk the talk, but we walk the walk, and that can be measured by supporting this bill and passing it. The installation of stage 1 vapour recovery systems into every storage facility, tanker truck, and service station storage tank would benefit our environment. This technology reduces the amount of gasoline vapours that are lost during fuel transfer.

4:20

Mr. Speaker, there are a variety of contaminants that are released into the environment during the transfer of fuel. Those include the formation of ground level ozones. While I'm talking about ground level ozones, I'd like to mention one of the ministries, Children's Services. As it's going into the ground level, these young future children of ours – mine, yours, everybody in this room, and all Albertans: why do they have to breathe that? They don't. By having healthy individuals, not only does it take in the Ministry of Learning to stretch their GPA to a higher level, it also takes in the Ministry of Environment, the ministry of health. The reason these costs are rising is because people are not healthier. I'd like to compliment the Minister of Learning for introducing physical education into the school, and coupled with that would be the air you breathe and dispensing these ground level ozones.

Mr. Speaker, benzene is another well-known carcinogen. The ground level ozone has a negative impact on health as well, and we know that it's linked to leukemia and various other diseases. That's not acceptable to this government, and there again, we can measure that by voting for this bill and passing it. By reducing the amount of emissions, we will not only be caring for the health of our environment, but by implementing such technology, we will be acting to prevent an environmental and personal health threat before the problem becomes insurmountable. I can honestly say that with my colleagues, as we talk in public or we talk in private, that is the number one foundation that we have built this government upon, and the encouragement of my colleagues is why I've taken the liberty to step forward.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take this opportunity to reply again and to give my utmost thanks to everybody for doing their part to form a good government and to look at the underlying factors causing our population and our citizenry to live healthier. At the same time, the

policy of our government is to make sure that when we bring something forward, it covers all ministries one way or another. For example, Bill 202. It's not what's said in the written word by Her Majesty's English, but it's what's not said as we look for the finite details and we bring forward our laws and our acts and our amending acts to make everything better.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for this opportunity.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, did you want to rise to speak on this? Hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne delivered yesterday by our Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole. With much grace and poise the Lieutenant Governor outlined the Alberta government's plan for the future to Albertans of all walks of life.

Before I address the important issues covered in the Speech from the Throne, I would like to express appreciation on behalf of my constituents for the dedication the Lieutenant Governor has shown in her position. She has captured the hearts of all Albertans through her passionate words and personal touches. This past year has not been an easy one for her, but her determination has been inspiring to all of us. It does not surprise me that Albertans have embraced this lady as their own and are very proud of her commitment to this province, its people, and the Queen.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to address the Assembly today on behalf of my constituents of Calgary-Fort. While there is much diversity among the people I represent in terms of age, ethnic ancestry, religion, and economic background, these Albertans have common traits and common goals. They are all proud to be living in the finest province in the world. They recognize the importance of family values, of helping their fellow man and making a difference in their communities. These are Albertans who want to contribute to the province's future and are ready for any challenge that may come their way. I am extremely proud to have the opportunity to represent such a proud, honest, and hard-working group of Albertans.

They are also very happy to hear about the Alberta government's vision for the future. As we reach the centennial year, it is important to look back and recognize the important people, initiatives, and events which have led us to this point in time. Our past deserves to be celebrated, and Albertans will have that opportunity over the next couple of years. We should be proud that we have led the country in debt reduction and are on the verge of becoming a debt-free province. We should be proud that our education system is among the best in the world and that other jurisdictions flock to Alberta to learn about our approach. We should be proud of the fact that we pay less tax than anywhere in the country.

From the beauty of our mountains and landscape to the cleanliness of our cities to the approach of our people, we can all be proud to say, "I'm from Alberta." We can even sing the Alberta song later next year. But as pointed out in the Speech from the Throne, it is also important to look towards Alberta's short- and long-term future. We need to set our goals and chase them with vigour, we need to continue to set standards as a province and exceed them, and we need to chart a course for the future by carefully outlining what is important to us as Albertans and instigating a plan that will allow us to reach our destination.

Albertans were very, very happy to hear about the province's 20-year plan for the future. Our four pillars – unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global market, and making

Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit – will provide support for this great province.

Today I would like to speak to some of the topics outlined in the Speech from the Throne and address the importance of each approach. I think we can all agree that we are extremely fortunate to live in a province that has such an abundance of natural resources. Oil and gas revenues have provided us with opportunities that other provinces could only dream of having. The advantage of having these resources gives us the opportunity to diversify our economy and make other sectors, like tourism, manufacturing, and the various service-oriented businesses in Alberta, stronger and more prosperous.

Unleashing innovation means researching our approaches and implementing action plans to benefit our energy industry, our communication and life sciences sectors, and areas like agriculture, environment, forestry, and water research. We have an opportunity to strengthen many different sectors across the province, and through this approach families will benefit through new jobs and business opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, with my global perspective I believe that we need to internationalize Alberta. Yes, just like any other free, successful, and lasting enterprises or jurisdictions, to grow we need to go beyond our borders. To me, we need to think global and act local, and we need to join the international exchange and trade.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about our future as a province, we must talk about our youth. I am very encouraged by the direction that the Alberta government is taking in regard to education and the importance of giving our children every opportunity to succeed. This government has been a proponent of lifelong learning for years, but with some learning opportunities come future costs for families like university tuition and apprenticeship training.

In the spirit of Alberta's hundredth birthday the government's commitment to learning, the Alberta centennial education savings plan, has been announced. The initiative will help young families plan for their children's future. Beginning in 2005, every child born in Alberta will receive a \$500 contribution to a registered education savings plan. Not only will this head start help to alleviate the anxiety a new parent may face when he or she ponders their child's educational future, but the program will maintain choice for the future students.

4:30

In addition to this important program, the Alberta government, as outlined in the throne speech, will maintain its commitment to Alberta's public schools and postsecondary system. By allocating substantial new funding to these areas, the goal of creating 2,000 new spots in Alberta universities and colleges is an admirable one. These funds will help shape our future, our children, into respectable, dynamic, well-rounded leaders of tomorrow.

As outlined in the throne speech, it is important that Alberta finds its place in the global market. Decisions made in other jurisdictions can have a profound effect on the health of Alberta's economy and people. We have seen the effect of the closure of the United States' border to Alberta cattle, tariffs slapped on Alberta exports like softwood lumber.

Alberta has worked and will continue to work hard to protect the province's interest when it comes to issues that affect its citizens. Alberta can be proud of the fact that their Premier wasted little time in travelling to the United States after a single case of BSE was discovered in the province and proud of the fact that consumers helped out the farmers by continuing to support the beef industry. It was an example of this government's commitment to maintaining an important seat at the international table.

It is very important to have healthy ties to our most important trading partner, the U.S.A. As outlined in the throne speech, setting up an Alberta office in Washington is an important step for fostering a good relationship with our neighbour to the south. Alberta cannot rely on entities like the federal government to convey important Alberta messages to a country like the United States. This is a responsibility the province must put on itself in order to create a healthy trading environment with countries all over the globe.

It is absolutely imperative for Alberta's economy to be strong internationally as the revenues generated help to pay for domestic service demands. Therefore, it is up to the Alberta government to continue its focus on economic development internationally. I believe we have the tools as a province to make this happen. As my riding certainly reflects, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has a diverse cultural heritage. It is an advantage in an international economy as it allows us to connect with other countries in a meaningful way and to capitalize on trading opportunities.

Now that I have addressed the first three pillars of the Alberta government's 20-year plan for the province, I would like to state the final pillar. Making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit provides the most insight into what Alberta's future should and can look like. Our communities should be strong and protected. Our children deserve to be healthy and safe. Disabled Albertans should not be discriminated against. Seniors should be able to live independently and with dignity. Albertans should have employment, and an aboriginal Albertan should be able to access programs dealing with all sorts of social issues and community-based care.

Mr. Speaker, this is an extensive vision for the future indeed, and in most cases it would be easy to deem this list too idealistic. But the fact that Alberta's government is able to quite readily provide a list of programs, plans if you will, that squarely addresses each of these issues bodes well for our future. The Round-table on Family Violence and Bullying, the Alberta disabilities strategy, the Alberta Works program, the health quality council of Alberta, and the centennial capital plan are just some of the initiatives that will help keep Alberta a healthy place for all Albertans.

Alberta's government must continue to develop its caring social policies and programs that are based on a hand up and not handouts and to do what it can to provide a decent standard of living for Alberta's poor families. It is important to implement initiatives that allow the working poor hope and a sense of security. Measures like the Alberta Works program, which will help low-income Albertans find meaningful jobs and provide income support, health, and child support benefits, is an important step towards solving this problem. Providing financial assistance to people fleeing family violence to help themselves re-establish a new household and make a fresh start is another important initiative.

We need to pay more attention to the working poor, Mr. Speaker. This is a condition where some of Alberta's hard-working families need help. Affordable and low-cost housing needs more focus and implementation. We must continue to monitor the progress we have made in these areas and implement measures to help our children, our working poor, and our low-income seniors.

I would like to take time, Mr. Speaker, to elaborate on an issue that I believe especially important. Alberta's seniors are very important to this province, and this government must continue to improve its senior-oriented programs. I was very pleased to hear in the Speech from the Throne that a plan will be created to help the province's health system, workplaces, and other institutions prepare for Alberta's aging population. This is an issue that will only become more important as years pass by.

While we are on the subject of seniors, I would like to take this

opportunity to talk about a motion I will be putting forward this year. Motion 540 urges the government to

implement a consistent income qualification threshold for all seniors' benefits and subsidy programs that would be indexed to the annual inflation rate or the market basket measure and include a graduated scale of benefits and subsidy programs for seniors with incomes above the qualifying threshold.

I believe this approach would help low-income seniors receive the help they need to live independently and with dignity and would address funding needs for Albertans living in areas with a higher cost of living.

Also under the pillar of making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit is a renewed commitment for Alberta's infrastructure. Extending the plan by an additional year will allow more projects to be completed. The growth of our province has put strains on our infrastructure, and we must be committed to maintaining it. My constituents have seen the pressure that has been put on Calgary's services, like transportation, schools, health services, affordable housing. This area must continue to be a priority of this government.

The throne speech has touched on the importance of all new government spending being carefully measured to ensure that programs and services don't jeopardize the financial security that Albertans have worked so hard to create for themselves. The events in Ottawa over the past two weeks dictate a need for government to be responsible for taxpayers' money.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions?

The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. After that very good discourse on the Speech from the Throne I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading
(continued)

Bill 2
Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to rise today and speak in favour of Bill 2. I am pleased at this time to officially move at second reading the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act.

Mr. Speaker, I want to begin my comments by providing a little bit of background, perhaps some context to the importance of this bill as it relates to this history of this province and in particular Alberta's reputed rangelands. During the years immediately following 1905, when Alberta was just becoming a province, so to speak, agriculture was really the driving force behind the growth of our economy and our population, and I'm happy that it is still such an important driver. Grain and mixed farming tended to dominate in the central part of the province and also up in Peace River, where we just were last week, and grain farming and ranching tended to dominate the south. Looking back, however, the prairies of southern Alberta have seen major changes in a very short period of time.

4:40

That change is very well illustrated by a pioneer rancher named

Frederick Ings in his 1936 autobiography, *Before the Fences*, and I'd like to quote a brief passage.

On the trail, as far down as the cattle might have drifted, we passed through an absolutely unsettled land; no towns, no farms, no fences, just one big grass-covered range, such grass as we never see now. The buffalo had been gone for years, and what cattle there were wandered at will from Sheep River (just south of Calgary) almost to the border.

He further reflected:

Gradually, the range had been closed out. The great leases were cut up into farms and smaller ranches. The cattle were restricted in their wanderings by the home fence. Wheat took the place of cattle on the plains.

Ings was, of course, commenting on the passing of the open-range ranching era that was all but gone by the 1900s.

Now, today, despite droughts and concerns for BSE, agriculture remains a significant part of Alberta's economy, and ranchers still raise large herds in the foothills and in the south of our province. Today less than one-third of the natural prairie landscape remains, but some very large tracts of the continent's finest prairies anywhere are still found right here in southern Alberta. These natural prairie landscapes continue to support viable populations of many of the plants and animals native to southern Alberta. The ecological integrity of these remaining prairie landscapes is due in no small way to the excellent and outstanding stewardship of Alberta's ranching community.

There's great value to the heritage rangelands and to the protected areas that we are so privileged to enjoy in this province, and the ranching community and the environmental community share a common interest in preserving the environmental diversity of our prairie landscape. This common interest has evolved into the establishment of the heritage rangelands class of protected area in the Alberta parks and protected areas system within my ministry. Through our provincially protected areas we can ensure that our natural heritage remains vibrant and strong and protected not only for today but also for the second century and onward.

I was very pleased, Mr. Speaker, to note during some of the research that I was doing that the provincial government of Alberta many years ago decided to pass the Provincial Parks and Protected Areas Act. I believe that was back on March 21 of 1930. Now, a lot has obviously happened in the 74 or so years since that time including the enormous amount of work that went into and honouring our government's commitment in 1992 to the Alberta component of the World Wildlife Fund's endangered spaces program. So we have the Whaleback protected areas: Black Creek heritage rangeland and Bob Creek wild-land. These were designated under the special places program in May 1999. In fact, I believe it was our own Premier who made that announcement and indicated that these two new designations under the special places program were being established to create a nationally significant protected area in the Whaleback: Black Creek and Bob Creek.

Heritage rangelands, as we all know, contribute very significantly to the conservation of Alberta's natural grasslands while recognizing traditional land-use activities such as grazing. This classification will also allow limited opportunities for some outdoor recreation that is compatible with that preservation of natural values and grazing management.

So with the proclamation of Bill 24 last June, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, and Natural Areas Amendment Act, 2000, the heritage rangeland designation formally became enshrined in legislation. Not only are the lands within heritage rangelands legislatively protected, but the cattle-ranching lifestyle, which is such a significant element of Alberta's history, is also legislatively protected.

At the same time, last June the Black Creek heritage rangeland in the Whaleback region of our province became Alberta's first heritage rangeland. The Alberta government has been working very hard with the municipal district of Ranchland, local ranchers, and other stakeholders to finalize requirements for the long-term management and protection of these unique areas, and we will be bringing that forward very soon. This goes back to at least 1999, Mr. Speaker, when local stakeholders, residents, and ranchers brought forward some concerns about this designation of the Whaleback because they felt that the designation of these protected areas would possibly significantly interfere with their livelihoods and with their way of life as well.

So out of all of this a number of commitments needed to be made to secure local support and comfort for the protected land designation process to proceed. One of these commitments was to maintain access into the recreational vehicle trails that exist in the Bob Creek wild-land, which the local community has been using for many, many years for their hunting and recreational and grazing purposes.

It is within this broader context, Mr. Speaker, that I outline the reasons that precipitated the bringing in of Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act, because it is another step in fulfilling our government's commitment to local stakeholders. This particular act will allow limited – and I want to stress that word “limited” – recreational vehicle access to continue through the Black Creek heritage rangeland on two already existing trails that have been there for many, many years in order to maintain access to the few existing designated off-highway vehicle trails in the Bob Creek wild-land, which is the adjacent park to the Black Creek heritage rangeland.

I need to indicate for the comfort of everyone that these two trails, where we will be allowing off-highway vehicles to travel, are 3.5 kilometres in total, taken together, and they are approximately 15 feet wide, so they're very small trails. They're already existing trails, and we're going to allow off-highway vehicle usage on those trails only through the heritage rangeland to get to the Bob Creek wild-land.

Alternative access was also explored, Mr. Speaker, around the entire rangeland, but the topography, the drainage patterns, the configuration of the rangeland, and so on virtually eliminated any other possible access points. So as you can see, there are no feasible alternatives for access into this area to the wild-land other than as provided for in this act. In fact, this act provides a specific exception without opening up the possibility of general recreational vehicle use in any of the heritage rangelands or in any other parts of this particular heritage rangeland.

So to be clear, we are not – and I want to stress that – opening up the entire heritage rangeland to OHV use. We are going to allow two existing trails that are very narrow and very short to carry the OHVs through the heritage rangeland into the Bob Creek wild-land. That is one reason why our legislation needs to come forward: because the people who were involved recognized how important it is to set aside areas for protection but at the same time to allow common sense to prevail. That's what's happening here so that that access can occur while protection can still also take place. So our legislation does not allow general recreational vehicle use in heritage rangelands, and I hope that has been made abundantly clear.

What Bill 2 does do is it provides a specific exception without opening up that possibility for general recreation that I mentioned, and more specifically it will also allow our parks staff access to manage recreational vehicle use on these trails through regulations. In fact, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act also applies to these trails and governs any other matters respecting the trails.

4:50

Now, I want to just briefly reference the issue of other heritage rangelands. Mr. Speaker, there are six remaining heritage rangeland natural areas that will be re-established as heritage rangelands over a period of the next several years and as site-specific requirements at each location are addressed. They will include Beaverhill Lake heritage rangeland natural area near Tofield, which is just east of Edmonton; Killarney-Reflex Lakes near the Saskatchewan border by Chauvin; Onefour, which is close to the Montana border, halfway between Coutts and the Saskatchewan border; Ribstone Creek just southeast of Wainwright; Tolman Badlands just northwest of Drumheller; and, of course, Twin River, which is not far west of Milk River. As always, we will continue to work with the local stakeholders of these other heritage rangelands to finalize requirements for the long-term management and protection of these unique areas.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I want to simply add that our parks and protected areas, which number over 500 in this province, are a tremendous and great source of pride for me, for my staff, and for all Albertans. They help us to deepen our understanding of that precious relationship between human beings and our natural environmental setting.

We all have a role to play in the stewardship of our land and for the continued prosperity of our province, which is dependent on striking a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. That successful balance, however, can only be reached with all partners working together: the private sector, the public sector, all three levels of government. All of us together have to make a long-term commitment to protecting our natural heritage and to understanding its value and importance to each and every one of us as well as understanding what the local needs are, in this particular case to the farming and ranching communities in the Whaleback area.

My final thanks goes to all the people who inputted through the public consultation that occurred down in the southern part of the province and in particular to the Minister of Government Services, who happens to be the MLA for Livingstone-Macleod, who took it upon himself to organize a meeting last year which I, our Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and our Minister of Sustainable Resource Development attended. The four of us went to a meeting with the ranching representatives. We had a pleasant couple of hours with them, aired all the issues, explained what our positions were, listened to what their positions were, and came out with the best possible solution under these particular circumstances.

So I would appreciate the support of members of this House for taking this bill forward and for the very unique circumstances that precipitate its need. This is a highly unique situation, Mr. Speaker, and I hope I've explained to everyone's satisfaction the need for it and the importance of having it go through.

My final comment is simply to say again that we are not opening up the entire heritage rangeland to recreational OHV use. That would not be the case. We are simply allowing OHVs, recreational vehicles, to travel through the heritage rangeland on two small existing trails so they can get to the Bob Creek wild-land, where that particular recreational activity can in fact occur.

So, with that, I'll take my spot and look forward to other speakers joining in this debate on Bill 2. Thank you.

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

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As MLA for that very special place known as the Whaleback, which contains the

Black Creek heritage rangeland and the Bob Creek wild-land, I am pleased this afternoon to take a few moments here, before we adjourn, to speak to Bill 2.

As the Minister of Community Development has so wonderfully outlined, it's the whole issue of access that is the need for this bill. This particular bill is very unique to a very unique place, the Whaleback, and as the minister pointed out, it doesn't apply to every heritage rangeland. It only applies to Bob Creek wild-land and Black Creek heritage rangeland.

Just a brief history. The minister did a very good job in explaining what's happened over the past seven or eight years. During the period from 1995 to 2001 Alberta did commit itself to the special places program, which was a made-in-Alberta solution to meeting our commitment to the World Wildlife Fund's endangered spaces program. During this period Alberta established 81 new and 13 expanded protected areas, and when we consider the national parks in Alberta as our own protected areas, over 12 per cent of Alberta land is now protected. About 8 per cent of that is through the national parks and the balance, 4 per cent, provincially.

I have to say that I was very proud to be the chair of the Special Places Provincial Co-ordinating Committee from 1997 to 2001. Under the special places program it was recognized that Alberta has many unique landscapes that contribute to our identity and that capture our western heritage, and that includes our prairie grassland. We needed to ensure that they are protected and appropriately managed, which gave rise to the whole concept of something new called heritage rangeland, where such landscapes can be protected while allowing their traditions to continue.

An Hon. Member: We can still drill?

Mr. Coutts: You can still drill.

In recognition of this, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act defined the parameters for establishing and protecting heritage rangelands, including the general prohibition on off-highway vehicles used in such areas as a means of assisting with their ongoing protection. Now, there are many dispositions that are permitted for such uses as grazing and trapping and the like.

This prohibition, however, has not yet come into effect and has had a unique situation affecting the Black Creek heritage rangeland, Alberta's first formally designated heritage rangeland. The Black Creek heritage rangeland is adjacent to the Bob Creek wild-land, and OHV use can be permitted on a limited basis on designated trails in wild-lands or wild-land provincial parks. However, access to the Bob Creek wild-land has traditionally been through the lands now designated as the Black Creek heritage rangeland, and no other feasible access is possible given the vegetation and the drainage patterns of the area. Ensuring ongoing access is a commitment that this government made when establishing those protected areas, and that was made to the local committee as well as the traditional users of the area.

We recognized that this unique situation had to be addressed before we proclaimed a general prohibition on OHV use in heritage rangelands. Without addressing this situation, we would have barred Albertans and producers from accessing an area where OHV use is permitted and failed to fulfill our commitment to the local residents. In addressing this unique situation, we are not opening up the Black Creek heritage rangeland for random recreational vehicle access. The minister made that very clear, and I would just like to confirm that. Instead, this bill will only apply to the two existing trails in the heritage rangeland, as the minister said, that have a total length of 3.5 kilometres.

5:00

Limiting recreational vehicle access to these two existing trails will ensure that heritage rangeland continues to be protected and that Albertans will continue, also, to have access to the Bob Creek wild-land, as they have traditionally done for years. Local ranchers and stakeholders are very supportive of this approach, which is responsive to this very unique situation.

Mr. Speaker, it's important that we continue to protect Alberta's special places and to consider the unique circumstances for which they provide. We've got ecological benefits which are done by maintaining essential ecological processes and by preserving diversity of species and the genetic variations that are within them. We have economic benefits by creating a climate of greater certainty for industry by establishing where they can and cannot operate and by balancing a healthy and sustainable environment with a vibrant and sustainable economy.

We have educational benefits by promoting a deeper understanding of the relationship between humanity and the ecosphere and by serving as outdoor classrooms for colleges, schools, universities, and organizations. We have recreational and health benefits by promoting recreation for the enjoyment of nature, physical fitness, and escape from the pressures of urban living and by providing opportunities for a distinctive range of outdoor recreation including hunting, fishing, equestrian, hiking, camping, boating, and other activities as well as the scientific benefits by providing natural research laboratories in which to gather and access information on how ecosystems function and how they respond to change.

It also gives us an opportunity for spiritual and cultural benefits by strengthening cultural identities and heritage values, by inspiring artists, poets, musicians, writers, and sculptors, and by ensuring the survival of species that symbolize our province such as bighorn sheep, the great horned owl, elk, and bull trout.

Mr. Speaker, this initiative will complete a very, very long process that was put in place under the special places program. Individuals from the community gave a lot of their time to making sure that it came to a successful conclusion, and I'm sure that there were times when I met with them that they had some doubts about the process, but all those doubts were taken away when the Deputy Premier, the minister of agriculture; the Minister of Community Development; the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development; and myself went down and met with them. They were satisfied with the consultation that we had with them that Saturday morning, and they agreed with this bill that was unique to their area.

This puts closure on it. It puts in place a management system that everyone can live with. So, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to speak in support of Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act, for it's fulfilling our commitment to the stakeholders that was made at the time that these protected areas, both Bob Creek wild-land and the Black Creek heritage rangeland, were established, and this will make sure that they are viable and managed well for years to come.

I encourage all my colleagues to support this legislation, and I want to thank the Minister of Community Development for his indulgence in this initiative, bringing it forward to this very successful conclusion. Without him listening to our concerns and without him sitting down and listening to me about the concerns of the stakeholders, this wouldn't have happened. So, Mr. Minister, I want to express my congratulations and thank you on behalf of my constituents.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have some questions for the speaker now.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 with regard to five minutes applies to the third speaker and the speakers thereafter. I recognized you to speak. Did you want to speak, or did you just want to ask a question?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I'm sorry. I thought I was eligible to do that. I will then move that we adjourn debate on this bill.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very, very exciting opening to the spring session. I think we're all fully charged and ready to go for several more weeks and months. Given the hour of the day, I would now move that the House stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Monday.

[Motion carried; at 5:07 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]