

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 8, 2004**

**8:00 p.m.**

Date: 2004/03/08

[The Speaker in the chair]

**The Speaker:** Please be seated.

Hon. members, prior to commencing tonight, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

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

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House another group of parents and volunteers who are very interested in the education system in our province and are part of the Education Watch initiative. Tonight the guests from my constituency of Edmonton-Mill Creek are parents with children at Julia Kiniski school and at Ottewell school. I'm going to ask each of them to rise as I introduce them, and then perhaps we can greet them all together: Megan Land, Andrea Ell, Colleen Albus, Linda Bosch, Terry Brosda, Lori Reid, Andrew Reid. They are joined by Preet Sara, co-ordinator of the action for education initiative. They are all standing. Please greet them. Thank you very much for coming.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

### Health Care Premiums

502. Mr. Mason moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate seniors' health care premiums immediately and phase out premiums for all Albertans within three years.

[Debate adjourned March 1: Dr. Pannu speaking]

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

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I understand I have about five minutes left of my time, so I will try to make the best use of those five minutes. I wish to make a few brief arguments as to why Motion 502, which urges the government to abolish seniors' health care premiums immediately and phase them out for all Albertans within three years, is deserving of the support of all members in this Assembly.

Health care premiums are one of the most flawed taxes levied by this government. They are regressive, create red tape for individuals and businesses, and are a make-work project for collection agencies. Worst of all, health care premiums are, plain and simple, unfair to middle-income earners. A two-adult family making \$35,000 per year pays exactly the same, \$1,056, in health care premiums as a family making \$350,000 per year. Everyone who now pays health care premiums would benefit from scrapping this tax, but middle-income families, including middle-income seniors, would experience the most relief.

The Premier had the gall to call the regressive health tax nominal. The Premier said last week, and I briefly quote: I don't know. Is it hurting you? A thousand bucks for what? For your whole family? That's not too bad, considering. I would say that it's nominal. Unquote. Perhaps for the Premier, who has a pay package in excess of \$130,000 this year, \$1,056 in health care premium tax would be

nominal, but what about a family making \$35,000 per year? This modest-income family would see their total tax load cut by one-third should health care premiums be fully eliminated. Why are my colleagues on the government side not in favour of tax cuts for the middle-income families? That's what I ask. That's a significant tax relief to hard-pressed families. It is definitely not nominal, Mr. Speaker.

So far the corporate tax rate for larger companies was reduced from 15.5 per cent to 12.5 per cent permanently, reducing provincial revenues by \$400 million per year. The eventual goal is to go all the way to an 8 per cent rate, thereby forgoing yet another \$600 million in corporate tax revenues. Cancelling the corporate tax cuts while retaining the small business tax reductions can more than make up for the revenue loss that will result from scrapping the health care premiums. The question must be asked: what should have the greater priority? Further corporate tax reductions or phasing out of health care premiums? I challenge the government to put such a choice before Albertans and let them decide what should have higher priority.

It is time for the government to change course and cancel the reductions in corporate taxes and, instead, phase out health care premiums along the lines of Motion 502. Businesses large and small, along with other employers, would also directly save the hundreds of millions of dollars that they directly contribute to paying health care premiums on behalf of their employees. This would offset in large measure any increases in corporate taxes that would result from cancelling them.

Collecting and remitting premiums on behalf of the government is an administrative nightmare for employers, an added cost of doing business in Alberta. The phased elimination of premiums would save additional millions in business costs that are wasted in designing systems to collect and remit this troublesome health care premium tax.

Albertans are already paying out-of-control power bills, unnecessary school user fees, and sky-high insurance rates. We deserve a break for hard-working, regular, middle-income earning Albertans. This plan to eliminate premiums as set out in this motion is a good start toward a better deal for middle-class families, seniors, and working Albertans.

The tax cuts to corporations benefit the few, but the money that is returned to corporations doesn't necessarily stay in Alberta. Tax cuts that we are proposing by way of Motion 502 will be a break for Albertans who will spend that money in Alberta buying homes, putting money in for supporting their families and kids in postsecondary education.

So I urge all members of the Assembly to support Motion 502, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

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

**Mr. Horner:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to very briefly get some comments on record. I am, actually, on record as supporting the removal of health care premiums. However, this motion is very simple, and it's not very surprising that it is simple. If we're going to look at removal of Alberta health care premiums, we also need to look at how we're going to replace them, and the system that we're going to replace them with needs to have accountability from both the provider and the client sides. So to have a motion which simply says that we'll do away with it and not retain accountability in the system on either the provider or the client side is not, I think, a good direction for this government to go.

I think we need to look very, very carefully at how we're going to

fund the system in the future, and we need to make some changes. On that basis, Mr. Speaker, I will not be able to vote in favour of this motion. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Vandermeer:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this evening to speak to Motion 502, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. I would like to begin by saying that I think this is a good and noble motion which attempts to alleviate some of the hardships that Albertans face while paying for health care premiums.

Mr. Speaker, I campaigned on this issue, and I handed out door-to-door information that said that I would sponsor a bill to eliminate health care premiums for all Albertans, and in 2001 I presented such a bill to this Legislature. This motion provides us with an important opportunity, and that is to debate this issue openly here. At least we can hear both sides of the argument, and we can hopefully understand how this issue is affecting each of our own constituents.

I think that the elimination of premiums is something that this government should very seriously consider. I think there are benefits from eliminating premiums that go far beyond the emotional arguments; that is, the unfair tax that people pay when they make over a certain amount of money and that if their income level is \$50,000 or if it's \$500,000, they pay the same in a tax.

Another point is the economic benefits that this would have for the province of Alberta. First of all, we must look at what we bring into our general revenue fund in the form of premiums. Premiums account for \$913 million of our health care funding. This is quite substantial. However, even though we bring in \$913 million, we must ask ourselves: how much does this government pay out as the employer? For instance, the government has a lot of civil servants employed, which means that as the employer the government pays a portion of their premium amount. So if we eliminate premiums, we would be cutting some of our costs back as well, which could be used to offset a bit of the amount that we would forgo by eliminating premiums outright.

We can delve further into this in that we give out money that goes to pay for a portion of premium costs for teachers, police officers, judges, prosecutors, even MLAs – and the list goes on and on – approximately \$15 million a month. That's \$180 million a year. Couple that with \$20 million to administrate the premiums for collection of the money, add in collection agency fees for unpaid premiums, approximately \$50 million in costs to the Alberta government – and the list goes on and on. I've already accounted for \$250 million, and that's just at a glance.

### 8:10

What is important to remember is that we give these employees the money and then we collect it back, which I find a bit counterproductive and inefficient. For instance, there is an average of \$3 million a month collected from school boards in health care premiums. We give the school boards the money, and then we just take some of it right back. I think there is a better way of doing this.

What I think we should look at first is how this will benefit the employer, who pays a portion or sometimes all of the premium costs anyhow. I see this tax break the same way I see the federal government not charging municipalities GST. We give money to school boards, municipalities, et cetera, and then they pay us premiums back on behalf of their employees. In this era of tax breaks for corporations and businesses eliminating premiums would in essence give some businesses a saving because they would no longer be funding a portion of the premium costs. I think that eliminating

premiums would be a benefit on a larger scale, not just alleviating hardships for low-income Albertans.

**The Speaker:** I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, but under Standing Order 8(4), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion to close debate, I'd now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands to close debate on Motion 502.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to conclude debate.

Mr. Speaker, this government, due to abundant oil and gas revenues, is flush with money. The most recent quarterly report says that the government is on track to record a surplus of \$3 billion. The government budget plan will reduce provincial revenues by \$161 million through a one-point cut in the corporate tax rate effective April 1, 2004, part of a multiyear plan to cut corporate taxes in half, permanently reducing provincial revenues by \$1 billion. If it chose to do so, the Tory government could eliminate health care premiums with a pen stroke without in any way jeopardizing the province's bottom line.

Until six weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, it looked like the elimination of health care premiums might be actively being considered as part of the government's agenda. During his year-end interview this year the Premier openly talked about reducing health care premiums. The Seniors minister has repeatedly promised seniors' groups that he is pushing for the elimination of health care premiums.

What seems to have changed in the past six weeks is not the affordability of scrapping health care premiums but, rather, the political agenda of the government. It seems to have taken a considerable turn to the right. The Conservative government seems bent on creating a crisis in public confidence about the sustainability of health care funding as part of an agenda to soften up Albertans to accept user-pay and, ultimately, two-tier health care. Reducing or eliminating health care premiums seems to run counter to this new agenda of stoking public fear about the affordability of health care.

So Alberta seniors, who just a few months ago had reason to believe that the government might eliminate their health care premiums, are suddenly sacrificed to a new, cynical government strategy. Alberta seniors have had to pay more for dental work, eye care, and copayments on prescription drugs. They have seen changes in long-term care centres go up by more than 50 per cent. Cutting seniors' health care premiums will cost a modest \$90 million per year. Cutting premiums represents immediate relief for seniors on fixed incomes coping with rising living costs and cuts to services.

Phasing out this regressive tax for everyone will put \$1,056 into the pocket of each Alberta family. While an extra \$1,056 may seem to be a nominal amount to the Premier, it's a lot of money for the average middle-class family. Middle-class families and working Albertans need a break. The Tory government has made them pay more for power, more for car insurance, more for tuition, more for long-term seniors' care, and more for a host of other public services. For less than the cost of the Tory corporate tax cut, which does nothing for middle-class families, we can scrap this unfair, dishonest, and regressive tax. It's time to end the tax breaks to corporations while middle-class families are being squeezed.

The plan set out in Motion 502 is good for families, and it's good for the economy. Albertans will spend the \$900 million in yearly savings in their communities, which will boost economic activity right here in Alberta. It's time for government members to vote for what they themselves have advocated. I urge all members on all sides of the House to vote for Motion 502.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 502 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:17 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

|         |       |            |
|---------|-------|------------|
| Carlson | Masyk | Taft       |
| Mason   | Pannu | Vandermeer |

Against the motion:

|           |            |            |
|-----------|------------|------------|
| Abbott    | Horner     | Pham       |
| Broda     | Lord       | Rathgeber  |
| Calahasen | Lougheed   | Renner     |
| Cenaiko   | Lukaszuk   | Snelgrove  |
| Doerksen  | Lund       | Stelmach   |
| Evans     | Magnus     | Stevens    |
| Forsyth   | McClelland | Strang     |
| Friedel   | McFarland  | Tarchuk    |
| Graham    | Melchin    | Taylor     |
| Griffiths | O'Neill    | VanderBurg |
| Herard    | Ouellette  | Zwozdesky  |

|         |         |              |
|---------|---------|--------------|
| Totals: | For – 6 | Against – 33 |
|---------|---------|--------------|

[Motion Other than Government Motion 502 lost]

**Special Constables**

503. Rev. Abbott moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation which would make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and require special constables to take enhanced weapons training thereby creating the appropriate conditions under which the province could consider allowing the option of arming special constables with better defensive weapons such as Tasers.

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

**Rev. Abbott:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to open debate this evening on Motion 503, which asks the Assembly to consider making certain changes to the Police Act and the regulations surrounding the Police Act.

Mr. Speaker, for the purposes of debate it may be useful to separate this motion into its three distinct parts. The first asks that we make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, the second asks that we require our special constables to take more enhanced weapons training, and the third asks only that we consider the possibility of allowing special constables to carry other defensive weapons such as Tasers.

Before I go into each of those sections, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to provide some background as to why I've raised this motion. Everyone in this Assembly understands the increasing role that special constables are playing. In rural areas such as Drayton Valley-Calmar special constables are often the only police presence that some small towns ever see. As municipalities continue to take up a greater role in policing, especially as this role relates to enforcing municipal bylaws and some provincial traffic safety laws inside of municipalities, special constables are increasingly on the front lines of law enforcement.

When special constables are carrying out these duties, they do so with the protection of a can of pepper spray and a billy club, but that's basically about it.

8:30

During normal office hours at RCMP detachments special constables can call RCMP detachments to get a reading on a licence plate to find out if the vehicle that they've pulled over is stolen or if it raises any red flags, but after the RCMP office is closed for the evening, special constables have no backup aside from what everyone else has, a phone call to 911. Given the changing nature of policing in Alberta, I hardly think that this level of backup is appropriate. In my constituency there are several unpopulated areas where you wouldn't want to be left alone while enforcing traffic laws in the evenings.

So consider the situation of a special constable who pulls a guy over for speeding and then has to walk up to the car without having any clue about who is in it or without having any clue about whether or not the person is potentially dangerous or is potentially armed. These special constables often work alone, and when they do, they can be left in a lurch. It's not appropriate for any level of policing, Mr. Speaker, and this reality has sparked a wake-up call amongst many special constables. It's caused them to think: you know, I enforce the law, and there's a certain amount of danger in enforcing the law, and I should be able to adequately protect myself.

While special constables do understand that they are not full-fledged police officers or RCMP officers, many of them cannot understand why that should mean that it is acceptable that they have a lesser means of protecting themselves in dangerous situations. Creating the environment in which there would be an opportunity for special constables to greater protect themselves is therefore the thrust of Motion 503. But we do have to ask ourselves: what are the appropriate conditions under which this could happen?

This leads me to the first part of the motion, the Law Enforcement Review Board. As it stands, special constables are not accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The Solicitor General's department has set out appropriate guidelines for employers of special constables to follow if a complaint is made, but those guidelines are not law. This is, in my mind, an area of our legislation that is due for a change. As special constables are doing more and more, it's entirely appropriate that they be subject to greater levels of accountability.

Once that level of accountability is in place, then it's necessary to make sure that we increase the weapons training of our special constables. We need to ensure that the weapons that our special constables are using are ones that they are capable of using and, more importantly, capable of not using. Special constables would need to be trained to ensure that they were able to diffuse dangerous situations through tried-and-true methods of verbal and psychological force and persuasion. Once these two requirements are satisfied, we will then find ourselves in a better position to provide special constables with better weapons with which to defend themselves.

As for the third part of this motion, Mr. Speaker, let's be perfectly precise. There's nothing in this motion that says special constables must carry Tasers if this motion is passed. My own personal belief, though, is that we do need to start looking at weapons such as the new high-tech Tasers that are available, especially given the difficult and increasingly dangerous situations that special constables are now finding themselves in.

One can agree to this motion without agreeing to allow special constables to carry Tasers. One can agree that special constables ought to be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and one can agree to the suggestion that special constables ought to take

more enhanced training than they do now. If you agree to these two things, then by the actual wording of the motion you should agree with the entire motion. Perhaps you might not want to see special constables carrying Tasers, but note that this part of the motion is only an after-the-fact consideration. It's really not the meat and bones of the motion.

My own personal belief is that we need to start looking forward, and in that look forward, especially given the increased role that special constables are playing these days, we ought to consider arming certain special constables with better weaponry. I chose the Taser as the next step for special constables because it is a less lethal weapon that is not actually a firearm. Its purpose is to subdue, not to maim, to injure, or to kill.

I'd also submit that Tasers are far more humane than a billy club. Mr. Speaker, billy clubs are designed for the purpose of clubbing somebody over the head as a means of forcing their submission. Tasers are kind of the modern-day billy club, and I believe that they should replace this ancient and barbaric weapon.

Pepper spray is designed to burn someone's eyes and cause the skin around the eyes to swell so that that person cannot keep his or her eyes open. Now, a Taser, on the other hand, sends a shock into the person, causing that person to black out immediately. There's no beating. There's no burning and swelling. There's simply one quick shock which causes the person to become temporarily immobile. Officers, or in this case special constables, then have the ability to neutralize any threat that may have been posed by the person.

Another advantage of a Taser versus a billy club or pepper spray is that a Taser gives the officer far greater reaction time and distance in the event of a threat. With a Taser an officer can secure a distance of roughly 15 feet between himself and a potential threat. With that much room to work with, the officer is that much farther out of harm's way in the event that a threat is imminent.

Mr. Speaker, nobody denies that the best way to reduce a threat is to nonviolently ease the tension of a situation and talk a possible threatening person into submitting to the will of an officer. Special constables understand this as much as any other person involved in law enforcement. Nobody relishes the opportunity to pull a weapon on a citizen, and if they do relish that opportunity, well, they ought not be involved in any aspect of law enforcement. Nor should a person who enjoys threatening others with a weapon be allowed to carry pepper spray or a billy club. If we are willing to trust people with a billy club and with pepper spray, then we should at least be able to ask why we wouldn't allow these very same people to carry a Taser.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, nobody can look forward to being asked to enforce the law without having the proper backup protection. It is my contention that a billy club and pepper spray do not provide that proper backup protection.

So, again, before I close, I'd like to recap. In order to agree with this motion, all one has to do is agree to the following: that special constables ought to be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and, secondly, that greater weapons training is something that we should consider providing for all of our special constables across Alberta. If you agree with these steps, then you ought to agree with Motion 503. I guarantee you that special constables would definitely appreciate not only the support that you give them but also the next step towards greater protection that you would give them as well.

I know also, Mr. Speaker, from some of the meetings that I've held with my municipalities that this is something that they are more than willing to fund on behalf of their special constables just to ensure that they feel safer when they're out there on the streets enforcing the laws.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Ms Carlson:** Mr. Speaker, it sounds to me like what the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar wants is his own Taser.

**Rev. Abbott:** Right on.

**Ms Carlson:** That's what I thought. He'd be the last person I'd trust with that kind of a weapon, I have to tell you. [interjections]

**The Speaker:** Let's not start violating Standing Orders about accruing to certain members what their beliefs are or are not. Only the hon. member knows what he or she believes. Please.

**Ms Carlson:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to speak to this motion. I don't agree with what the member has put forward.

Certainly, we have a great deal of respect for the work that special constables perform in our communities every day. They provide a very necessary and important assisting function to existing police forces, and they do do some of the work for which the higher level training that police officers have isn't necessary, things like enforcing municipal bylaws and running photoradar and dealing with public education.

But they truly are really an assist function, Mr. Speaker, and I think it's a very slippery slope if we start to look at giving them more power and more ability. What we enter into then is a real deskilling process that we've seen occur in other areas like the trades and like the nursing profession.

We've seen over the years how a lot of the work has been taken away from registered nurses so that lower paying staff can be hired to perform those functions. Well, that's exactly what's happening here. What I see is that the municipalities, who are very crunched for funding to provide their policing and the other necessary services, are looking at reducing their police costs and are looking at being able to incorporate special constables in a more active function in the police work. Well, that's a very dangerous place for us to go.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

If the special constables receive more training than what they are getting now, as the member who introduced this motion would suggest, then they should be police officers. Police officer training is not years in nature; it's months in nature. With a little extra training then those special constables could be police officers. But that's not what this member is looking for. He is looking for a cheap answer to policing solutions, and this is not it.

8:40

To give them Tasers is a false sense of security in most cases. A Taser is a close-contact weapon. It does not protect special constables in situations that they may find themselves in if they've got this confidence of having a weapon with them. In my opinion and in my experience with policing, special constables, I don't believe, should be out in the cars by themselves. They are an assist function, and it's a dangerous precedent to start sending them out to do policing on their own. So I certainly don't believe that that's what we should be taking a look at when we take a look at how to solve the policing crisis in this province. What we need to do is adequately fund police services in this province.

The member talked about the special constables being accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. Well, that's definitely a duplication of services, particularly from this member who is always so concerned about the cost of things. I wish he would have costed out this particular proposal and put it forward because it really does

not make any sense at all to establish a whole different review process for special constables, which is what would be required here. They have a process in place now that seems to be working and an appeal process put in place, so that would be the way that we should continue to proceed with this, not duplicating any services.

So to give them enhanced weapons training when you don't give them the rest of the training that goes along with police officer training really puts them out on the street in an unsafe fashion for themselves and for the people that they might come into contact with.

Mr. Speaker, for all of those reasons I really do not believe that we can support this motion.

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

**Mr. Magnus:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and join the debate for Motion 503, sponsored by the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor. When I look at Motion 503, I see in some respects an idea whose time has come as accountability is something that will be important as special constables play a greater role in policing in the future. The issue of police force numbers in Alberta is one that has been raised a number of times in this House and one that many of Alberta's communities are concerned with.

Presently in accordance with the Police Act of Alberta, special constables are peace officers appointed by the Solicitor General. Each individual special constable has an appointment form signed by the Department of the Solicitor General. This form, drawn up by the special constable's employer, indicates which provincial statutes they are authorized to enforce and the geographical area that they are authorized to provide enforcement within. Should the special constable's employer require that he or she have the ability to conduct traffic enforcement on primary highways, the appointment form would need to be granted by the Solicitor General.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has close to 3,000 special constables who enforce provincial statutes. Of those, about 4 per cent are employed by municipalities and municipal districts to enforce highway traffic safety. The province of Alberta employs the majority of Alberta's special constables as conservation officers, transportation inspectors, or provincial constables, and their appointments reflect their individual duties. These individuals, although not classified as police officers, still play a valuable role within a number of Alberta communities. From rural municipalities to large urban centres, their presence helps to ensure the safety and the security of Alberta municipalities.

Motion 503, as has been mentioned previously, would increase the accountability of Alberta's special constables by making them accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and this is a part of the motion that I do agree with. Mr. Speaker, as of today special constables are accountable only to their employer. This means that should a complaint be submitted concerning a special constable, there's a possibility for a conflict of interest to exist. The complaint is left in the hands of the employer, and it is therefore his or her individual decision which decides the outcome of the complaint as well as the punishment should the employer find wrongdoing by the special constable.

What Motion 503 proposes is that special constables be made accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. This would result in an independent, quasi-judicial body which was established under the Police Act, hearing appeals from citizens who filed the complaint regarding the actions of a special constable.

Increasing the accountability of special constables could improve public trust in these individuals. As of now they are only accountable to their employer. That can be perceived as a conflict of

interest, and thus the possibility of distrust in those individuals could exist. However, Mr. Speaker, by assuring Albertans that special constables are held accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, as police officers are, we would be relieving the current perception of conflict of interest, resulting in increased trust levels, and with trust comes respect.

Any peace officer that attempts to mediate a situation or confront an unruly citizen will tell you that if you do not have that individual's trust and respect, then the chance of a peaceful resolution declines sharply. Should the constable have the trust and respect of the individual they are in contact with, it is less likely that the situation could escalate into one that requires the use of self-defence.

However, Motion 503 also asks that special constables take advanced weapons training and that we begin to set the proper stage in which special constables, especially those enforcing municipal bylaws and traffic safety laws, could be granted Tasers. Mr. Speaker, I am not entirely comfortable with this suggestion, and put simply, my concern with this part of the motion is that it does not give this House the appropriate amount of time to truly consider the weapons aspect it suggests. After all, the motion suggests that we introduce legislation, and accordingly I think that we need more time to consider the idea.

That being said, the future of policing may demand that we look at these sorts of suggestions in greater detail. So while I am not entirely sure of granting Tasers to special constables, at the same time I don't want to say no to this motion. In speaking with some colleagues, I know that I share this indecision with many of them.

Accordingly, I'd like to introduce an amendment to the motion which allows us greater opportunities to consider the motion without being bound to introduce the legislation that the current motion suggests we do. I've brought the appropriate number of copies. I believe the House officers have them, and I'd ask that they be distributed now.

Let me know when you'd like me to proceed, Mr. Speaker, sir.

**The Acting Speaker:** If you're going to be reading the amendment for the record, you may proceed. Otherwise, wait for a few seconds.

You may proceed.

**Mr. Magnus:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As all members can now see, the motion makes the following changes. Motion 503 is amended first by striking out "make special constables accountable" and substituting "provide the option of making special constables accountable"; second, by striking out "enhanced weapons training" and substituting "enhanced training"; and third, by striking out "thereby creating the appropriate conditions under which the Province could consider allowing the option of arming special constables with better defensive weapons such as Tasers."

The amended motion would then read:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation which would provide the option of making special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and require special constables to take enhanced training.

I think that most members will agree that this motion retains the main intent of Motion 503, preparing our special constables for their future role in Alberta. At the same time, members will see that this motion softens the language around weaponry, which I believe is important at this time.

As many members in this House are aware, smaller municipalities often face the problem of meagre police presence, and it's in these situations that special constables play greater roles. However, the province cannot send these individuals into these types of roles without adequately preparing them for the task at hand. Currently

they have billy clubs and pepper spray at their disposal. They're provided under the special constables regulations. What Motion 503 currently asks is that we expand that regulation to include Tasers.

Mr. Speaker, one argument against Tasers is that they have been known to cause death when used. It's a strong argument, and one that needs to be discussed in greater detail than this one hour of debate will afford. We cannot equip special constables with Tasers if we are not satisfied that they will be able to use them judiciously and properly given that they do have the ability to kill. Furthermore, we can't allow Albertans to carry with them the perception that the government will introduce legislation allowing special constables to carry Tasers without doing more homework and without consulting with Albertans to see if they're comfortable with this change in legislation and policy.

8:50

So, Mr. Speaker, I'd ask all members to see the good in this motion but join me in helping to change the parts that need more study. The amended wording of this motion calls for increased training and safety for special constables and increased accountability. They're both important aspects to consider when discussing roles and responsibilities to ensure that our communities are safe and secure. Special constables need to be accountable to more than their employer, especially with these increased roles.

Mr. Speaker, by ensuring that they are given the proper training, the ability to properly defend themselves, and are held accountable for their actions to an independent body, they are better prepared to help fill the void that is present within smaller municipalities across this province. They're also prepared to take on more of a role within larger municipalities and, in doing so, will help to ensure that Alberta remains a safe and secure place to raise a family.

I'd encourage all members to support Motion 503 as amended to support the security of Albertans. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to speak to the amendment to Motion 503. I believe that if this amendment were to be passed, Motion 503 might be something that I could consider supporting.

Clearly, the whole impetus behind the original motion was to arm special constables with Tasers, and the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor was in my view being disingenuous when he suggested that all you had to do to support the motion was agree to having special constables be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. That was clearly not where he was going with the motion, and voting for the motion would have done a lot more than just saying that special constables ought to be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board.

I think the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill has provided a thoughtful amendment that disarms the drive towards Tasers and disarms the motion. I think that it certainly brings the motion into something that's a little more sensible.

I appreciated the comments of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie with respect to the importance of having properly trained officers using weapons and not creating sort of a bargain basement version of police officers that have potentially lethal armament but not the appropriate level of training and skill to use it appropriately. I think that this amendment will short-circuit the drive for Tasers and pull the plug on what was potentially a dangerous idea, Mr. Speaker, which could potentially have had revolting consequences.

So I would be pleased to support the amendment to Motion 503,

and if it passes, Mr. Speaker, I'll be prepared to support the main motion as well.

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

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to the amendments to Motion 503 from the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor. The amendments concern two issues concerning special constables. The first deals with whether or not special constables in this province should be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The second deals with requiring special constables to take enhanced training to eventually allow special constables to carry defensive weapons. I would like to speak to the accountability of special constables.

The Law Enforcement Review Board is an independent body established under the Police Act. The principal activity of the board is to hear appeals from citizens who have filed a complaint against a police officer and who are not satisfied with the way the complaint was handled. Police officers who have been the subject of discipline arising out of a complaint must also appeal to the board. The board also conducts hearings from special constables regarding the cancellation of their appointment or from private investigators and security guards who have had their licences refused.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 503 suggests that the government may enact legislation that would allow complaints against special constables and appeals by special constables to be heard by the Law Enforcement Review Board. Here are some of the reasons why I support the accountability to the Law Enforcement Review Board.

Currently complaints against special constables are handled by the employer, mostly municipal and provincial governments. If the complainant is not satisfied with the way the issue has been handled, there is no other avenue to pursue this issue. The public needs a formal, independent, and transparent appeal process to handle these situations. Some employers and police services have already come to us and requested this change. The bottom line is that special constables are an important part of the law enforcement community and should accept the same level of accountability as others in the law enforcement community.

The second issue that the amendment to Motion 503 raises is to require special constables to take enhanced training that would allow them to be armed with defensive weapons. Mr. Speaker, first of all, I believe it is important for this House to understand what we mean by special constables. There are about 3,000 special constables in this province. They range from court clerical staff, inspections and regulatory officers, taxi inspectors, provincial protection officers who handle court security, a number of municipal bylaw enforcement officers, and many, many others.

While I said earlier that special constables are part of the law enforcement community, they are not police officers. They are responsible for bylaw and provincial statutes enforcement. They are not a second tier of policing in Alberta.

While I appreciate the amendments to the motion to make it more general in terms of the training and equipment that special constables have, special constables must work within the very clear borders that are defined. I believe it is essential to establish clearly defined boundaries on the limitation of their duties consistent with their training, their standards, and their authority. I support proper and standardized training for special constables that is appropriate to the duties set out in their appointments.

Mr. Speaker, a policy manual is being prepared by my department as we speak to assist employers in determining the role of a special constable. Some – and I will repeat “some” – special constables have the authority to carry pepper spray, a prohibited weapon. Many

others carry batons. Given the mandate, I believe these weapons are sufficient to provide a special constable the ability to tactically reposition and seek assistance from the police in this province, who are properly trained and who are equipped.

So, Mr. Speaker, I do appreciate the intent of this motion to improve the training and functioning of special constables in our province, and I appreciate all the work that the special constables in this province do to keep our community safe.

In closing, I'm open to the notion of making special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and I agree that enhanced training is a necessary thing. We will continue to work on this with the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor, the Special Constables Association and their employers, and the law enforcement community.

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

**Mr. Cernaiko:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to join debate on the amendment to Motion 503, sponsored by the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor. The concept proposed by the sponsor is of particular importance to me because of my work on the Police Act review completed last year. I'd like to talk about some of the changes to policing in Alberta considered by this committee and how these changes relate to the amendments proposed to Motion 503.

Two major themes arising from the MLA Policing Review Committee centred on levels of service and the cost of policing. Mr. Speaker, the amended motion has two important parts that could improve service and reduce funding pressure in some areas. Taken separately, these parts may be cause for concern for some Albertans. Taken together, both aspects of Motion 503 are consistent with the future of policing in Alberta.

Motion 503 addresses the need for common policing standards established and monitored by the province. This was also one of the key findings of the policing review committee. The first step is to pass legislation to make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The board is a quasi-judicial, independent body legitimized by the Police Act. Having special constables answer to this board will help keep these officers accountable.

The next step is to provide special constables with enhanced training. This is an important consideration because the role of the special constable could dramatically change in the future.

**The Acting Speaker:** I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

head: 9:00      **Government Bills and Orders**  
**Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

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

**Bill 12**  
**Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004**

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

**Mr. McFarland:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. During the second

reading there were a number of questions and comments brought up, and I undertook to have answers provided to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, which I have done in written form. For the record I would just like to indicate that with respect to a number of the questions that came up, we do have a couple of brief answers.

The transition from paper to electronics and whether or not information would be backed up and if there would be any savings was question number one. How the amendments would actually improve the efficiency in administering the investment opportunities as well as whether or not there had been a cost-benefit analysis done was the second question, Mr. Chairman. The final one was to point out that this whole issue of changes to the legislation was merely a technical one to basically bring the reporting system into the new age along with the electronic reporting.

Bill 12, as I indicated in second reading, simply streamlines the legislation and clarifies much of the wording and definitions, along with many technical amendments. The investments and how they're managed has not changed. The manner in which payments are made is not changed. We are, as I had indicated, Mr. Chairman, in this electronic environment, and this is a commonly held industry practice where the investment world is utilizing these same procedures on an ongoing basis.

The cost-benefit portion of the question from Edmonton-Riverview simply put is this. With the changes that are being proposed in the amendments, it's really hard to come up with finite numbers of savings on a cost-benefit analysis basis; rather, it's keeping up with the industry practice that's becoming very commonplace.

The amendments will also authorize Treasury Board to establish alternate controls and limitations respecting the making of certain classes of disbursements, including electronic payments, and it will also allow Treasury Board to ensure government's controls remain up to date with emergent trends that happen in the industry.

The electronic transactions will be documented in a backup in the computer system, and a paper backup will also be kept, where it's appropriate. The electronic processes provide for a speedier payment and faster settling of the transactions, which has become a standard industry practice.

So with those few comments, Mr. Chairman, I hope that's satisfactory to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and I look forward to any further comments. At the appropriate time I'd like to call the question.

**The Deputy Chair:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

**Dr. Taft:** Yes. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I think the comments from the Member for Little Bow are very useful. He's been prompt and co-operative in answering all of our questions, and this is a bill that seems essentially to be an administrative bill, as he says, making some adjustments to ensure that procedures within the government are in line with industry. So we have no particular further comments on this bill.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 12 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.

**The Deputy Chair:** Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. An interesting debate for an interesting bill. That having been said, I would now move that the committee rise and report Bill 12, the Financial Administration Amendment Act.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

**Mr. Lougheed:** Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 12.

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

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.

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

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

**Bill 15  
Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate March 3: Mrs. Nelson]

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

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unlike the previous bill we just dealt with, this one is considerably more substantive. It has the effect of raising the spending cap on nonrenewable resource revenues from 3 and a half billion dollars up to \$4 billion per year, so clearly a bill that has an impact of some \$500 million annually and well worth some significant debate here. As well as that change, which I think is the principal one and the most concerning one, the most worrisome one, there are some other adjustments in wording. But primarily this bill exists and is being brought to us because, frankly, the government wants to be able to spend more money from nonrenewable resource revenues, and I think we need to debate how that's being done and why it's being done.

I guess there is one particularly troubling aspect to this bill, and that concerns the government's inability to put in place a fiscal plan and to stick to it. I recall – I'm sure it was less than a year ago – sitting in this Assembly and debating Bill 2, which was an interesting bill, a reasonable bill. It was in line with some of the ideas of the Liberal opposition. It established the cap on how much nonrenewable resource revenue could be spent, and it helped set the stage for some other spending controls for the provincial government. It set that cap at 3 and a half billion dollars, and then when nonrenewable resource revenues went beyond that, anything above the 3 and a half billion dollars was either allocated to a particular government fund, the sustainability fund, or used to pay off debt or whatever. What we're seeing here now is that 3 and a half billion dollars being raised to \$4 billion so that the provincial government can take that extra \$500 million and use it for whatever pet projects it has.

The timing of this is troublesome for two reasons. First of all, the initial plan didn't even last a year, and I guess we have to really question and I hope the public really questions the government's commitment to any particular plan and its ability to plan in the long term when this bill changes last year's plan less than a year into its implementation. What sort of long-term plan is that? We need in

this province to take a much, much longer view of how we handle our nonrenewable resource revenues, and this bill just violates that completely.

The other concern about the timing of this bill is the coincidence that we're in the lead-up to an election.

9:10

**Mr. Mason:** Surprise, surprise.

**Dr. Taft:** Yes. The Member for Edmonton-Highlands is saying, "Surprise, surprise," and I'm sure we're all surprised that in a lead-up to an election the government is arranging things to set aside an extra half a billion dollars for election goodies.

Now, it's interesting to try to imagine what those goodies will be. We'll find out in two weeks when the budget comes, but I'm told, I think by the Premier himself, that the new hospitals for south Calgary will not be in the budget. So we'll see what the election goodies are.

But that really undermines the credibility of the justifications for this bill. It does make it look very much, to us and I think to the general public, like the government is simply playing politics with the long-term financial security and stability of this province, and, yes, I'm afraid that they would do that.

Now, there are some other ways that this could be handled, and I put this forward to the government in case they want to perhaps take this bill back and amend it or bring forward amendments or otherwise consider these options. We have long argued that budgeting in the province should use a five-year moving average for its predictions of nonrenewable resource revenues, and that would help us smooth out some of the peaks and valleys that we see in budgets that are consistently coming in billions of dollars off target. It's a remarkable failure of accurate budgeting, and as a result we're always billions of dollars off in our fiscal plans. That would have been something I'd like to have seen in this kind of legislation.

We're keen supporters of the fiscal stability fund, but it looks like it's grown into yet another slush fund. In fact, this government, as a reporter was saying the other day, has more money than it has pockets to put it into. So the fiscal stability fund, which probably doesn't need to be worth much more than \$1.2 billion, I believe now, from the third-quarter fiscal update, is over \$4 billion. That money can be drawn down and may well be drawn down in the lead-up to an election, which would be a shame, but it could happen.

How about bringing in an infrastructure enhancement fund? We have very significant infrastructure problems in this province, and we need some way to predictably finance those, whether they're roads or hospitals or schools or public buildings. We need to build those at standards that are going to serve us well into the future. That would have been something good to see in here, and of course some proper, actual, hard three-year business plans with a real commitment to meeting those targets would have been good as well.

None of that is in this bill. Instead, we simply see an adjustment of the cap on resource revenues. So there's not much to commend this bill. It feels like the result of broken-down controls on public spending. It feels like it's coming from a government that's got lazy with public money, and that's disappointing.

I would've loved to have seen a value-for-money audit, for example, on the health care system. Why is it that we're spending as much on health care as most other provinces in this country, but we're getting about 20 per cent fewer hospital grants? Well, why is that happening? That would have been something to address in a value-for-money audit, but instead of doing that, instead of taking some of the challenging and interesting issues of good management, we simply see the government reaching into our nonrenewable



resource revenues to spread more money around in the lead-up to the election.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm disappointed in this bill. I think it reflects, as I say, a laziness with public money that's descended on this government, and unless there are very significant amendments to it, I expect we'll be voting against it. Thank you.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Mr. Speaker, I was listening quite intently to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and I just have to make a comment here. You know, the intent of this bill is to increase the government's ability to fund some important programs, some of which exist and some of which might need to come into existence, and at the same time to address some of the pressures that we know have been referenced with respect to education, for example, by the Learning Commission.

That money has to come from somewhere, hon. members, and what this bill would do is enable another half a billion dollars to come into the system to address some of those kinds of pressures, not to mention what some of the other ministries are facing; for example, Transportation: roadways and bridges and so on across the province. [interjection] Well, of course Environment. I mean, that would be paramount in many people's books, I'm sure.

Similarly, with health care and this business of having a value-for-money audit, as laudable as the speaker's cause is in that regard, I'm sure some of that money will also make its way to some of the pressure points that exist, I'm sure you're fully aware, in the health care system. The primary concern, I'm sure, is going to be toward the government of Alberta's first priority, which is the education circle, and this simply allows that to happen.

So I'm not clear, Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member is complaining about the fact that we're putting more money into the system, which they and others have been asking for, or if it's just a question of them complaining about the timing of it all. Either way, I think it's a good move for us to make, because the time has come to address some of those pressure points. Infrastructure, Community Development, Justice: there are many departments in government that will put this money to very good use.

So I will be supporting the bill. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Mason:** Mr. Speaker, to the hon. Minister of Community Development. While I appreciated his defence of funding of these kinds of programs, I noticed that he was remarkably silent on the need to address these financial pressures, say, two years ago or even one year ago. What is different now with respect to those requirements?

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Well, I'm not sure which meetings the hon. member might have been at where I was supposedly silent. I'm sure my colleagues here would disagree with that.

But I think there are some fundamental differences, to put all the kidding aside, and one of the most fundamental differences is the Learning Commission report, which in itself has been evaluated at a cost of almost half a billion dollars or perhaps even more than that. There is information provided in that particular commission report that simply wasn't available a year ago or two years ago in the form in which it now exists. I think there were certainly all kinds of comments being made from many different directions that sort of seeded the way for the Learning Commission and helped it through-out its debate and its presentations.

Secondly, there are things which I know the hon. member is very

familiar with that happened that are unpredictable, Mr. Speaker, such as the BSE crisis, such as forest fires, such as drought, which our farming communities and elsewhere are facing. So things happen and they need to be addressed, and this will provide that kind of necessary cushion, I hope, to address all of those points I've referenced and many, many more which I haven't got time to get into; for example, the provincial parks in my area. We know that we need to upgrade the water and sewage treatments in many of our provincial parks, and these monies will help to address that, and that's just one example. That condition, to the extent that we know it today, perhaps didn't exist two years ago, as referenced by the hon. member.

**The Acting Speaker:** Any further questions? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if the hon. Minister of Community Development can assure the House that election timing has absolutely nothing to do with this.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Well, you know, if the Learning Commission had come out a year earlier, perhaps that comment wouldn't even be valid, but I haven't got any idea when an election would be coming. I'm aware of a federal election possibly coming this year. I'm aware of a municipal election that is coming in the fall, but I don't know when we might be having a provincial election, which I think is what you are commenting on. The mandate that was given to this government on or about March 12, 2001, gave it a five-year window. That would take us through to 2006, approximately March, by which time an election would be called. That, by my calculation, would be approximately five years from now, and I have the hon. Minister of Environment's concurrence with that.

9:20

**Dr. Taylor:** Two years from now.

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Two years from now. Sorry. Thank you.

**Mr. Lund:** Mr. Speaker, I listened very intently to the hon. Member for . . .

**The Acting Speaker:** Hon. minister, are you rising to ask a question or to speak to the bill?

**Mr. Lund:** To speak to the bill.

**The Acting Speaker:** Okay. Well, is there anybody else who wanted to ask a question?

There being none, I'll recognize the hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

**Mr. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened intently to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and quite frankly I was quite shocked, because obviously he's not aware of what exactly has happened over the last year. So I thought perhaps it would be useful to just walk him quickly through it because he made some comments that obviously he's not aware of.

The idea of the sustainability fund came out of the Financial Review Commission, and all of the nonrenewable resource revenue goes into that fund. We started out and said that we would see for one year; we would have a review at \$3.5 billion that would come out and go into the operating side of the budget.

Because of events that have happened – and the hon. Minister of

Community Development clearly indicated that one of them was the Learning Commission and the costs that are associated with the recommendations of that commission plus the ever-increasing costs of health care – the fact is that we're finding that the other revenue that would be available for operating is not sufficient. So we have to have a vehicle where we can take more than the \$3.5 billion out of the sustainability fund and move it into the operating. That's what this is all about: increasing it from \$500 million so that we can cover the operating.

You know, I find it really interesting that the folks over there voted to remove the health care premiums. That's about \$900 million. That money is going into operating. I'd like to know how they figured they were going to backfill that money if you took it out without passing this bill that would at least see another \$500 million going in.

Now, he made a comment that we should have a fund that would deal with capital. Well, we've done that. We do have a capital fund. As a matter of fact, if the member had been watching what happened in the second-quarter report and the third-quarter report, there was money above the \$2.5 billion in the sustainability fund that went into paying down debt and went into the capital fund. So the capital fund has been growing through that very vehicle.

So those are the things that have been happening. Quite frankly, I'm very disappointed that they would even suggest that this had anything to do with an upcoming election because clearly when we set it up at \$3.5 billion, we indicated that we would see how that would work, and if it wasn't sufficient, then we could revisit the situation. That's exactly what we have done, Mr. Speaker.

**The Acting Speaker:** Standing Order 29? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you. Under Standing Order 29, Mr. Speaker. I think we're frequently on the record as having said that we would prefer to look after the loss of revenue from eliminating health care premiums by installing a progressive tax system.

I would like to ask the minister a question. My concern is that we are in this province living off the capital of this land, the natural capital of the land, meaning the nonrenewable resource revenues, and if we increase the amount we take from that capital by half a billion dollars a year, it seems to me to be long-term folly. I'm wondering if the minister sees us as also living off the capital of the land, a nonrenewable capital, or if he has some other interpretation of it.

**Mr. Lund:** Mr. Speaker, of course, it's been a concern of all of us that with a nonrenewable resource you only get the revenue from that resource once, so you have to plan for the day that it's not there. That is part of the reason that we are adopting a 20-year plan that will see a number of other initiatives flow out so that, in fact, future generations have other sources of income that are stable and that will backfill the reduction in the royalties.

However, we also have a huge resource in the tar sands up in the Fort McMurray area. That will yield a fairly substantial royalty over a longer period of time, but it won't be sufficient. It won't be likely as much as we're receiving today, but we are planning in the event that the royalties decrease.

Now, the beauty of the sustainability fund, Mr. Speaker, is that if the royalties fall down below the \$4 billion, then you can take out of the sustainability fund so that there is that \$4 billion available annually for operating. It's a cushion in the sustainability fund, but it also allows us to transfer money into the capital fund and to pay down debt, depending on the number of dollars that are coming in.

**The Acting Speaker:** Any further questions?

Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 15, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, which, as has been said, increases the amount of money which will flow from our nonrenewable resource revenues from 3 and a half billion dollars a year to \$4 billion a year.

Now, you know, the hon. members opposite are suddenly champions of education and health care. This is a little bit like seeing the light on the road to Damascus, I think, Mr. Speaker, and we will see. It's important that these things be funded – I want to make that perfectly clear – and funded at an adequate level, and they have not been. They have not been adequately funded by this government.

It's fine to talk about the Learning Commission report, but I would point out to hon. members opposite that parents, teachers, school boards, and the opposition have been criticizing the level of funding for education for a number of years. The government and particularly the current Minister of Learning have consistently responded that we have the highest level of per capita funding of any province and that everything is fine – this predates the Learning Commission – and he stuck to that message and ignored the real situation, which is that Alberta has a fairly low level of funding if you calculate it on a per student basis, because Alberta has a young population and many children that need to be schooled.

We heard repeatedly from the Minister of Learning on that question, and finally, as a result of the chaos that took place in our learning system with a teachers' strike and a disputed arbitration process and so on, there was an agreement which was obtained by the Alberta Teachers' Association to create the Learning Commission. Lo and behold, Mr. Speaker, the Learning Commission confirmed what parents and teachers, school boards, and the opposition had been saying for one or two years before. So now it becomes a road map to re-election for the government, and we are going to see more increases in spending, particularly in capital funding for health care in this budget, unless I miss my guess.

So now we have this bill. The problem with the bill is not that there's more money which would be made available for health care and education. That is important, and that needs to happen and should have happened two or three years ago. The question is where the money comes from.

9:30

When the New Democrat opposition launched its campaign about two years ago on electricity deregulation, we did a little bit of research in terms of the natural gas issue as well. One of the things that we found – and this was two years ago – was that according to – I'm trying to remember, Mr. Speaker, the exact body – statistics provided by the Energy and Utilities Board, I believe, Alberta had at that time nine years' proven reserves of natural gas left. Now, I know that we all talk about oil and gas revenues as being a major revenue, but primarily the main source of the revenue comes from natural gas rather than oil. The reserves that have been mandated by the government have consistently been reduced.

Mr. Speaker, since the advent of the Alliance Pipeline and the change in government policy which no longer requires those volatile chemicals that are useful for a chemical industry as a raw material to be extracted and kept in Alberta, we now export our natural gas much faster than we are finding new reserves. The result is that we are rapidly running out of natural gas and, therefore, rapidly running out of the main resource that feeds this government's funding of many things including this.

So what we have in that situation is a government that, on the one hand, is increasing the amount of spending from nonrenewable sources and reducing its income from the general taxation system. We've seen that partially offset by the dramatic increase in gambling that's taken place in this province, and the government revenues from gambling have now gone up to about a billion dollars. We are really running on empty as far as natural gas revenues and royalties in this province. Speaking in a bit of a longer term sense, we're running out.

To increase this now and at the same time to follow through on a program of massive tax cuts for corporations is irresponsible, in my view, Mr. Speaker. The government was committed by Dr. West when he was the Minister of Finance to cutting taxes for corporations by a billion dollars, essentially cutting them in half. The government has been in a stage basis implementing that, and this year is no exception: there's another reduction in the corporate tax rate. So here we have a renewable source of money for the government – that is, the normal tax base – which is becoming narrower and narrower and is shrinking at the same time as the government is increasing its dependence on revenue sources that are about to run out.

Mr. Speaker, it's not right. It's bad planning. It's not even planning at all. It's planning for the next election. It's not planning for future generations of this province, that's for sure. I know the suggestion has been made that we're going to get along. We're going to replace this loss of resource royalty revenue from the natural gas and conventional oil with the tar sands, but I believe and I've seen articles as well in the business press that indicate that the government is underestimating the difficulty of doing that. Certainly, so far they've had to give royalty rates for oil sands extraction that are considerably less than that for energy revenues from conventional sources.

So the direction that the government is going is not sustainable, to use their favourite catch phrase. It is not sustainable. They need to either do something about their natural gas policy, or they need to do something about their corporate taxation policy because they are basically standing on two horses, and they're going in different directions, and the result is predictable and inevitable, Mr. Speaker.

**Dr. Taylor:** That hurts.

**Mr. Mason:** I know it's a bit of a stretch, even for you, hon. member.

I want to make the point here, Mr. Speaker, that the New Democrat opposition is the only party in this Legislature that stood up against this billion dollar corporate tax cut, and without that we would be unable to eliminate health care premiums. We've talked very specifically about what kind of tax cut we favour, and we favour cutting the premiums, which is a flat tax.

Mr. Speaker, just to conclude, I want to indicate that I will not be supporting this bill. I think that the financial direction of this

government is irresponsible, unsupportable, and unsustainable, and we should reject this bill. Thank you.

**The Acting Speaker:** Standing Order 29?

**Mr. Lougheed:** Mr. Speaker, as the representative for the area which consumes a great deal of the natural gas liquids and turns them into higher value commodities, I'd like to inquire of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands what policy the government implemented that allowed the liquids to be shipped out of province. There was no policy.

**Mr. Mason:** Mr. Speaker, to the best of my knowledge under the Lougheed government – and I'm not referring to anyone here but the other guy – there was a policy that these volatiles had to be stripped so that only the pure ethane would be exported for heating purposes only, and that was the basis on which a lot of the industry in Alberta existed. That policy, to the best of my knowledge, has been rescinded some time ago, some years ago, and we just pump out the raw gas.

**Mr. Lund:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't leave that go on the record because it's absolutely false. We need to have on the record what is accurate. The member alluded to the Alliance gas pipeline, and I would love to know how shipping out an additional 30 per cent of the capacity of that line depletes our resource to the extent that the member talked about.

When it comes to the stripping of the liquids, the fact is that this government appealed the decision of the National Energy Board, which is a Liberal-run – you know, you're the left wing of that party. The National Energy Board ruled that we could not force them to strip the liquids out. That was not a policy of this government, and we actually intervened and tried to stop it.

**Mr. Mason:** I thank the hon. member for his correction, and I will withdraw it and go back and ask a few questions, but I take him at his word. I just want to indicate that it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between this government and the federal Liberals.

**The Acting Speaker:** Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 15 read a second time]

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

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In view of the hour I would move that we now adjourn until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 9:40 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

