

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 22, 2004**

**8:00 p.m.**

Date: 2004/03/22

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

**The Acting Speaker:** Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

### Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

504. Mr. Hutton moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to (a) continue to develop and implement strategies to reduce and ultimately eliminate alcohol consumption prior to and during pregnancy, (b) develop and implement initiatives to support Albertans affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, FASD, and (c) continue to work with all levels of government, partners and stakeholders, and members of the public to create an environment that would address the systemic problem of women consuming alcohol while pregnant.

[Debate adjourned March 15: Mrs. Ady speaking]

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

**Mrs. Ady:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to resume debate on Motion 504, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. As I was saying, prior to coming into office, I had never understood that fetal alcohol syndrome existed. It wasn't a condition that had come by me in life. I'd never really thought that I knew anybody that had the condition and wasn't particularly well educated about it. Yet surprisingly to me I did know somebody with the condition.

I had a friend who had adopted a young daughter. They hadn't been able to have children of their own and were so excited when they got this little baby girl. By about grade 1 they started to notice some major deficiencies. We weren't sure what they were. Nobody was really aware. They just worked harder. They tried to help her with her learning disabilities more, and they tried to help correct her behaviour more. It seemed like the harder they tried, the worse things seemed to go, and there was no understanding for why things weren't going well.

As this child got older and older and moved into adolescence, of course we as other parents started to notice that she had other behaviors that we weren't all that impressed with, and because things were not going well with this daughter, I know that sometimes her mother felt discouraged because she felt like she was being judged as a parent. It wasn't until she was 18 years old that she was diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome. So all those years she and her mother lived under this kind of almost cloud or criticism as they didn't understand the condition they were living with, and it was quite a long ways along in her life before they did discover what that was. It made a big difference to her mother to have an explanation and a reason for why things didn't go well.

So when I looked at the hon. member's motion, I said that this is something that I'd really like to speak to because there are some important messages in here. One, we need to prevent it. We need to find a way to help women understand that they should not drink alcohol during pregnancy. Two, we need more strategies and designs to support those that actually have the condition. And its final objective is to request that we continue to work together as governments, as partners, and as stakeholders.

At this point I would like to compliment the hon. Children's

Services minister for the work that she and her department have been doing around fetal alcohol syndrome. I know from attending a conference with her a year or so ago that Alberta is looked to as one of the leaders in this area, and a lot of that is because of the work that she's done and the awareness that she's brought around the issue.

Mr. Speaker, fetal alcohol syndrome is most commonly referred to as FASD, and it's preventable. That's the thing that we need to remember. Many of the problems that surround this disorder revolve around the misconceptions as to the medical impact of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Medical disability is specific, and it relates directly to the amount of alcohol consumed, but it's uncertain. We know that the severity of this disorder can be great.

When I was first exposed to the condition, I remember hearing the statistic that a fetal alcohol syndrome child can cost the system up to a million dollars by the time they turn 18. Then after age 18, of course, if they enter the criminal justice system, it's very difficult to track what that in fact costs us as a government.

People with fetal alcohol syndrome have distinctive physical appearances and generally have lower IQs. Individuals with fetal alcohol effect, or FAE, may look normal and have relatively normal intelligence. I was really struck by this as the chair of the social care review committee when I was interviewing a boy in a foster care facility one day. He was telling me about his ambitions and what he wanted to do someday. He said that he'd like to go to university and then he'd like to go to med school, and he was telling me all about his plans. I thought: here's a boy that has an idea of what he wants to do, and I was impressed with him. So later I said to his foster care mother: you know, here's a boy who has a plan. He seems to have some direction and some focus. I said: he wants to go to med school someday. She said: you know, that's really great, and once he gets used to using a toilet properly, I'm sure he's going to be able to go to med school.

Mr. Speaker, I was completely fooled by this boy. He had such high verbal skills and for all intents and purposes made me think, because he spoke with such confidence about his future, that he really did understand the parameters of his future, which he did not. I think that's the part of the condition that is so deceiving, that sometimes they do have high verbal skills, so they seem or look relatively normal when they are working with great disabilities.

Some of those disabilities can be impulsive actions, lying, violence, and aggression. FAE can result in limited cognitive responses such as the inability to predict consequences or the incapacity to learn from experience. Imagine if you couldn't learn from your experiences all the lessons you would be relearning over and over in life. Individuals may also have a lack of conscience and be prone to addiction. Many individuals with FAE or FASD never get diagnosed like my friend's daughter. Research indicates that there's a high presence of homeless people and roughly 50 per cent of juvenile and adult offenders that suffer from undiagnosed FASD.

Mr. Speaker, the possible outcomes stemming from this disorder are extremely alarming. Research indicates that 95 per cent of individuals who suffer the effects of FAE and who are between the ages of 12 and 51 will have some sort of mental health problems. Moreover, 68 per cent will experience trouble with the law, and 55 per cent will be admitted into a drug or alcohol treatment centre.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the most crucial point to be made this evening is that this disorder is preventable. Prevention strategies along with treatment programs for alcoholic women are the most important parts of alleviating the incidence of FASD. These steps are prudent to battling the effects of alcohol during pregnancy.

I'm remembering a beautiful young girl that I met at an FAS conference. She spoke to the conference about her future. She was just this stunning young woman. She got up there, and I remember

she said: yes, I have this condition. She said: I know I'll never marry, and I'll never have children, and I'll never have a credit card. She talked about all the things that she would never be able to do. She seemed to have enough of an understanding that she was working under capacity and that she would not have those futures. I remember looking at her and thinking how tragic it was that her future was so limited by someone who probably didn't understand or wasn't aware or perhaps was aware and not able to prevent addiction, but if someone could have helped her mother, her whole future could have been different.

Therefore, I ask all members to join with me in supporting Motion 504 and encouraging the development of new strategies to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and I thank the member for bringing it forward. Thank you.

**The Acting Speaker:** Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

**The Acting Speaker:** The Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature Kathleen Marta. Kathleen is a parent of two children attending Lendrum elementary school. Kathleen is here as part of the Education Watch initiative. She's concerned about the quality of education her children are receiving and the funding for public education in this province. She's in the members' gallery, and with your permission, Mr. Speaker, I'd have her rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly some guests who are present in the members' gallery this evening. They have come to observe our Legislative Assembly in action. They are also concerned about the quality of public education that is offered in the schools that their children are attending, and they're also concerned about the funding, the entire funding structure for public education in this province. The people in attendance this evening are Debbie MacLeod, and she is the parent of a child attending Rutherford elementary school. Heather Pick is also here with her oldest son, Fraser Pick. Heather has children attending each of Strathcona high, Vimy Ridge, Strathearn elementary, and Garneau elementary. I would now ask them to please rise and receive the warm and traditional and gracious welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. McClelland:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to members of the Assembly it's my pleasure to make two introductions tonight. The first is to introduce Pat Sawatzky, who is known to many of us because she's been an advocate for education for some time and is here tonight as a part of the Education Watch. She has two children attending MacKenzie school. We'd ask Pat to rise and accept the welcome of the Assembly.

**8:10**

My second introduction tonight is on behalf of the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, the MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud. If I may, I'd like to introduce Shauna Gervais. She is a constituent of Edmonton-Whitemud, the parent of two children, one of whom, the elder, is attending the Catholic School of Hope for home-schooling. She's here this evening because of her concern about support and funding for special-needs students within Alberta schools. She is part of the Education Watch initiative. She's seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that she please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

### **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder**

*(continued)*

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. member for Red Deer-North.

**Mrs. Jablonski:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It does not give me pleasure to rise today and join in the debate on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. However, it would give me great pleasure to stand one day and celebrate the total eradication of this devastating disorder, and that is what Motion 504 hopes to achieve.

I'd like to say thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Glenora for bringing this motion forward. I know that finding a strategy to reduce and ultimately eliminate alcohol consumption during pregnancy is a goal that this hon. member hopes one day to achieve, as do most hon. members in the House. Although we all know that this goal will take considerable time and effort and the will of Albertans to achieve, it is a worthy goal and one that is very necessary for the safety and stability of our future.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a very complicated and devastating disease that affects not only those who are afflicted, but it affects all of society. Society pays for this disorder in more than one way: special-needs funding in early childhood, special-needs funding throughout school, special-needs funding through Justice, and special-needs funding for lifelong supports. Funding for individuals with FASD reaches into the millions.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition. A child with FASD becomes an adult with FASD. There is no cure for this disability. The damage is irreversible. The brain damage to an unborn baby that is caused when a mother drinks is permanent. There is no way to fix that brain damage. FASD is a life sentence. Some people estimate that 50 per cent of the people that are in our correctional facilities have FASD, so you can see that having FAS is a severe problem for crime in our society. We have FAS youth justice committees that try to give supports to our youth that are afflicted.

I have seen the horror in the eyes of a young mother who has suddenly become aware that she has damaged her beautiful child forever, because you see, Mr. Speaker, children don't necessarily have the visual effects of FASD although they have the brain damage. Therefore, they're expected to act normally, and when they don't make the right choices and when they get into trouble, it's called defiance. It isn't really recognized as a disability unless they have been diagnosed with this disability. I have seen the sadness and the tears in the eyes of a 16 year old who suddenly realizes that her problems are because she has fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, because she knows that her mother is an alcoholic.

So what is this government doing to combat fetal alcohol syndrome? Well, I think we need to look at the remarkable job done by our illustrious Minister of Children's Services, as the Member for

Calgary-Shaw has mentioned, to see how effective our strategies are. I think our education programs are getting the message across to young Albertans, and I know that there are a lot of Albertans who know that if they are pregnant, drinking alcohol is unacceptable. But I think what we should realize is that the concern is there. A lot of people realize the harm that they can do to their child if they are not careful, which makes me feel that the work being done on FAS is slowly starting to show results.

In a healing circle that I experienced with a group at an FAS conference in Saskatoon, I met a mother and her daughter who had a very strong bond. The daughter suffered many years of believing that she was stupid and defiant because she couldn't remember things and she made bad choices. When the mother and daughter finally understood what was wrong with the daughter, the daughter turned to her mother and asked: why did you drink when you were pregnant with me? The mother, in obvious emotional pain, looked at her daughter and said: because I didn't know; I didn't know.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage every member of this Legislature to support Motion 504 so that we can eradicate FASD, so that we can support those who will always be burdened by FASD, and so that no mother will ever have to look her child in the eye again and say, "Because I didn't know."

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate this evening on Motion 504, drinking during pregnancy, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. This motion deals with the problem of drinking while pregnant, and the motion certainly urges the government to do three very appropriate things.

But one of the things that I have not heard to date this evening, Mr. Speaker, is: how are we going to control advertising of liquor, particularly to young people, particularly to young females? There seems to be an increase, if one visits the University of Alberta, in liquor advertising. Every event seems to be tailor-made to a beer or wine or spirit company. The same applies at Grant MacEwan. The same applies at NAIT whenever one visits there. Certainly, there seems to be an impression left that young people can't have a good time unless there is liquor involved.

We all know that there are marketing programs that are targeted to young people. I'm not going to get into the tobacco companies, but certainly there are with liquor marketing campaigns and liquor sales, and this is something that I would urge the government through AADAC to perhaps have a look at. How are these marketing programs targeting young people, and how are they changing their drinking habits or their drinking patterns?

I had the opportunity not too long ago to visit Braemar school in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar, and there are some very, very good things being done by the Children's Services ministry in regard to pregnancy and young mothers, particularly those who have a need to continue their education. But in this matter, that is certainly one of the things I would like to see addressed.

I would also like to see a dedicated amount of money from the total sale of liquor used to combat this problem. I know there are those that say that there is adequate money for AADAC, but I for one was listening with a great deal of interest to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre had to say in this Assembly last week, I believe, during question period in regard to the amounts of money that are being set aside for those who have problems controlling their liquor consumption.

Those, Mr. Speaker, are two of the issues that I would like to see added to the scope of this motion. Certainly, this motion is worthy

of support. I would urge all hon. members of this Assembly to accept it.

I also at this time would like to thank the Assembly for their time.

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

**Mr. Horner:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to speak to the Assembly today in support of Motion 504, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, and I congratulate him for bringing this debate to the floor of this House.

Mr. Speaker, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is one of the leading known causes of mental illness in North America today. Despite the widely publicized warnings that drinking during pregnancy harms the unborn child, alcohol use by pregnant women continues at alarming rates. Some general figures suggest that the cost for one FASD child is estimated anywhere between 1 and a half million and 2 million dollars over their lifetime.

Mr. Speaker, the total population of FASD in Alberta is unknown. However, due to demographics approximate statistics suggest that in Alberta 3 to 6 out of 1,000 are born with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder while 1 to 3 are born with fetal alcohol syndrome, and that is recognized as significantly high. With that said, it is a birth defect that can be prevented.

**8:20**

I address this Assembly today to reiterate the importance of increasing public awareness through educational resources and a public advertising campaign targeted at prevention amongst high-risk populations here in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, with an increase in public awareness geared toward the systemic problems associated with women consuming alcohol while pregnant, the ability of the government to minimize alcohol-related birth injury and neurodevelopmental disabilities would be increased greatly. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder cases are spawned from a vicious cycle of substance addiction and pride that must be halted for the sake of generations of Albertans to come.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, the solutions to this extremely preventable defect will not happen overnight. I urge the government and all members here to support Motion 504 and further examine other jurisdictions' strategies coupled with the current steps taken by the government in the prevention and treatment of those afflicted with FASD.

Mr. Speaker, a Health Canada study has suggested a three-step prevention process in stages for methods of curbing the progression of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in Canada. The three steps in sequence are primary prevention, secondary prevention, and tertiary prevention.

Firstly, primary prevention is a broad-based approach that seeks to address socioeconomic factors related to FASD and the effect it has on the health of a population. Primary prevention activities typically focus on behaviour change, systems, and/or the environment. Statistics in Canada and the United States suggest that prevalence of FASD is greater in lower socioeconomic families and communities. Therefore, two relatively effective methods of prevention of FASD, through a Health Canada study, looked at reducing the availability of alcohol through community-supported prohibition or price increases. Prohibition broadly supported by the community or price increases can reduce heavy alcohol use by pregnant women at least in the short term.

The second, moderately effective means of prevention saw the implementation of school/community substance abuse preventative programs coupled with a multicomponent media FASD awareness

campaign involving warning labels and posters that resulted in a moderate success rate. However, I believe we should really concentrate in this area. Secondly, the aim of secondary prevention activities targets women of child-bearing age who abuse substances and includes outreach, screening, referral, and brief intervention. The intent is to promote the health of the mother and prevent or minimize harm to the fetus.

Mr. Speaker, secondary prevention activities can only occur when a pregnancy is recognized, which is often four to six weeks or more into a pregnancy. However, studies have shown that absence or reduction in the consumption of alcohol as late as the third trimester may increase the viability of the fetus. This may be achieved through the use of brief and early intervention programs for pregnant women, which has yielded reasonable efficiency. For example, some evidence supports the effectiveness of drug education programs in reducing substance use among pregnant adolescents attending prenatal clinics.

There is also some evidence among experts that advanced training can be effective in helping physicians and other professionals who work with women who suffer from substance abuse. Educating all of those persons involved in a pregnancy at all levels of care would potentially produce a decrease in FASD in Alberta.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, tertiary prevention activities included in the Health Canada study targets those for whom FASD is already a concern. The aim of tertiary prevention is to minimize the damage to the fetus, reduce the likelihood of further affected pregnancies, and increase the capacity of the mother to care for her FASD children effectively. Tertiary prevention involves intensive multicomponent activities including strategies such as substance abuse treatment, birth control, and parenting programs.

Experts have identified that when dealing with tertiary prevention, the potential key for success is the ability to provide women with a comprehensive, co-ordinated, and consistent range of prenatal and substance treatment services. Case management has proven effective when providing for the various health and social needs of pregnant women who use substances. Furthermore, there is no evidence to support the use of punitive measures such as mandated treatment as being effective in improving maternal and fetal health. In fact, such measures discourage at-risk pregnant women from seeking assistance.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the efforts of Health Canada and the continued efforts of this government and its partners in reducing FASD. However, in light of the previously mentioned statistics, in order to eliminate this preventable birth defect, the government should consider focusing its resources on primary prevention, as stated in the Health Canada study, and build upon the already positive initiatives this government and its partners have embarked upon in the last five years.

I believe that Motion 504 will further enhance this government's already steadfast approach to eliminating FASD through the education of our children and addressing the overall health of at-risk pregnant women in Alberta communities. The potential of this preventative education will serve all socioeconomic regions of Alberta for generations to come.

Coupled with the seriousness and complexity involved with the prevention of FASD in Alberta, I would also like to bring to the government's attention the financial and societal risks that have resulted from persons afflicted with FASD. Mr. Speaker, evidence suggests a correlation amongst individuals affected with FASD and the portion of those incarcerated in the Canadian prison system that may be afflicted with FASD. With an inmate population, male and female, of both federal and provincial prisons estimated at 148,979, studies have concluded that those incarcerated in Canadian prisons

afflicted with FASD may range from a conservative estimate of .33 inmates per thousand to as high as 9.1 inmates per thousand.

Statistics of those suffering with FASD in our prisons have not really yet been solidified. However, Dr. Christine Loock, a noted expert in FASD research, estimates that at least 1 out of 4 inmates incarcerated in federal correctional institutions are not in prison because of a conscious crime but because of their fetal alcohol affliction. Alcohol injury to the brain impairs individuals with FASD and their decision-making abilities. Therefore, those individuals afflicted with FASD have difficulty in deciphering the difference between right and wrong. It is important to identify those individuals at high risk of FASD and associate the correlation of FASD victims and the likelihood for criminal behaviour. As a result, the potential of individuals in the Canadian prison system afflicted with FASD could be larger than anyone expects.

In light of these potential findings, I would ask the government to consider expanding its funding to support the Prairie Northern initiative, which was designed in 1999 to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I also urge the government to further enhance the strategies of the initiative along with Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories and to investigate more closely preventative practices and methods in deterring alcohol consumption among pregnant women. I believe that the support and co-ordination of the numerous partners and stakeholders working alongside the Alberta government would enhance and further develop the message of the seriousness of the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy.

For those individuals who are already living with FASD, it is recommended that we continue to advocate for a model of service delivery that involves accurate diagnosis, long-term intervention, adequate funding, realistic expectations, and a lifespan approach for those Albertans who are injured. However, Mr. Speaker, wherever possible I would urge the government to further assist in the prevention of FASD in Alberta communities so as to limit the amount of those affected by FASD, therefore reducing the financial and, more importantly, the emotional costs associated with caring for individuals with FASD. That would benefit our society. Supporting initiatives such as DARE, Clean Scene, and other Alberta's Promise members should be a high priority for all of us.

Mr. Speaker, FASD is a significant issue for Albertans and often has devastating consequences for the affected individuals and their families. Abstinence from drugs and alcohol during pregnancy is the key to prevention. Therefore, I would strongly encourage the government to increase our funding for research and development in promoting public awareness campaigns within all Alberta communities. This would undoubtedly identify the horrific consequences of consuming alcohol and/or drugs during pregnancy.

I believe that coupled with an increase in the education of Alberta's youth through things like DARE and Clean Scene, two good examples, enlightening them to the disabling consequences of substance abuse during pregnancy will be the potential solution to combating FASD. As I have previously said, FASD is a birth defect that the government and our society can prevent if Albertans are willing to work together for the common good of all.

I urge all members to vote in favour of Motion 504. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Danyluk:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise in the Assembly this evening and add my comments to the discussion and debate surrounding Motion 504, the encouragement of new strategies to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD.

8:30

Mr. Speaker, as we have already heard this evening, this motion works to support the steps already taken by the government but, further, addresses the issue by encouraging new strategies to deal with the effects of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The motion takes a balanced approach. It recognizes the important work the province has accomplished to deal with this problem but also acknowledges that we need to take these initiatives further. I feel that we have a challenge before us to increase awareness and develop new strategies in an effort to combat this problem, which has a visible presence in our society. This is especially evident in our corrections system.

Mr. Speaker, I was on a corrections committee led by the Member for Red Deer-North that visited our correctional institutes in Alberta, and this was a continuing concern of personnel and administration. It became very evident to us the challenges that these personnel had in our corrections system.

We need to create a greater understanding surrounding the consequences of drinking while pregnant. Since 1973 the medical profession has known that alcohol consumption during pregnancy impedes fetal brain development, affecting intelligence, learning skills, and behaviour. Studies have not been able to determine the frequency and the amount of alcohol consumption that results in children with FASD. The general consensus of the experts, however, is that there is a risk and that the risk increases with the amount of alcohol consumed.

The levels of alcohol and the direct effects on the fetus are unclear; however, what is clear is that no consumption of alcohol during a pregnancy has been established as safe for the fetus. Because researchers have not been able to determine a safe level of drinking during pregnancy, Health Canada recommends that women who are pregnant or wish to be pregnant – and I stress “wish to be pregnant” – should abstain from drinking alcohol completely.

One of the leading problems surrounding fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is the lack of understanding. This deficiency of knowledge is evident throughout the general population, and there tends to be an inconsistent message amongst professionals. FASD is believed to be one of the leading causes of preventable birth defects and developmental delay among Canadian births. Mr. Speaker, I must stress that it is one of the leading causes, but it is also preventable, a problem the public tends to understand very little about. Addressing FASD is a priority for this province. Preventing the disorder is one of Alberta's major health strategies.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight some of the important steps the province has taken to deal with fetal alcohol syndrome and its related disorders. The Department of Children's Services has supported many programs and has designed services to prevent FASD and assist children who are affected by the disorder. These include demonstration and educational programs along with research and partnership initiatives. I stress that our education systems are new, and there need to be innovative ways to try to bring the message to all individuals.

The department budgets \$4.75 million for FASD initiatives. Of that money, \$2.4 million gets administered through child and family services authorities and, therefore, goes directly to addressing regional considerations. The local region is allocated control in planning and delivery of services to accommodate the local needs and determine how best to assist individual communities.

Children's Services supports partnerships and cross-ministry initiatives that reflect a multijurisdictional approach to addressing FASD because this is a disorder that affects all Canadian provinces. The Alberta government recognizes the importance of working with other jurisdictions to develop strategies and build on each other's

knowledge and expertise to address this disorder. Alberta is a member of the Canada/northwest FASD and the prairie/northern Pacific FAS partnership. As you can see, Mr. Speaker, the province takes this issue very seriously.

However, our work is not done. We need to continue providing information to the public about this disorder. We must reach more Albertans and alert them to the dangers of consuming alcohol while pregnant. We also need to create new strategies in the battle against fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the Member for Edmonton-Glenora for all his hard work on this important initiative. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder can have a devastating impact on the fetus and the health of a child. It is imperative that we raise awareness about the dangerous consequences of alcohol in pregnancy.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

**The Acting Speaker:** I believe the 38 minutes allocated have run out. Is that correct? As per Standing Order 8(4) the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has five minutes to close debate.

**Mr. Hutton:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to just reinforce the comments made by all of my colleagues. I particularly would like to thank the hon. Minister of Children's Services for the work that she is doing right now in regard to this very preventable condition, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, as well as the Minister of Learning, who actually spearheaded this government's policy with regard to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I would like to thank him as well.

I'd also like to make the comment that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned a campaign geared towards discouraging youth and women, in particular. The hon. Minister of Gaming addressed that in his remarks. That certainly is the intent of my motion, and I think it was reinforced by the hon. Minister of Gaming.

With that, I'd like to just thank all my colleagues that have supported this motion, and I encourage all members to support it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 504 carried]

**The Acting Speaker:** The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

8:40

#### Health Care Premiums

505. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft:  
Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate health care premiums.

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The debate over the elimination of health care premiums has gone on for some time in the province and continues. A bit of the background. Our caucus has long called for the elimination of health care premiums. We called for it during the 2001 election. Our plan called for the elimination of premiums first of all for seniors with a full phase-out of premiums in five years.

Even members of the governing party were musing prior to the 2001 elections about the elimination of health care premiums. It was at a Conservative convention in October of 2000 that a resolution was passed calling for the end of health care premiums. Members that are in this House were on record at that time as supporting such an elimination. The upshot of that was that instead of the premiums

being eradicated, they were actually increased by 30 per cent in the spring of 2002. So quite a reversal from what the convention had asked of the government.

I think it's important to note that the increase in premiums was across the board, including all seniors. That is a direct contradiction to a promise that was made in 1996 by the cabinet that premiums would not be increased for seniors in the near future. As recently as the fall of 2003 there have been musings by some government members about eliminating premiums either for seniors or for low-income Albertans.

That's some of the background to Motion 505, Mr. Speaker. I think it's important to note that Alberta is one of only two Canadian provinces that charge health care insurance premiums. It really is a regressive tax that puts the burden on everyone but particularly on middle-income earners and the working poor. Recently that burden became even greater. Based on recommendations from the Premier's Advisory Council on Health, the government boosted health care premiums by 30 per cent in 2002. This represents a huge tax increase, \$120 a year for individuals and \$240 a year for families.

The application of that premium charge is uneven, Mr. Speaker. A family with children earning \$35,000 per year spends approximately 3 cents of each and every dollar on health care premiums while a wealthy family earning \$100,000 a year or more spends 1 cent per dollar.

Most Albertans don't mind paying for public health care, but health premiums are not the way to do it. It's time, Mr. Speaker, to eliminate health care premiums. Of course, it's one thing to advocate eliminating those premiums, but it's another to figure out how it's going to be paid for. Health care premiums generate a lot of tax dollars. In the 2003-2004 fiscal year the Alberta government expected to collect \$871 million from those premiums. I think that there is the capacity within the system to compensate, however. In the past eight years the government has recorded on average a surplus of \$2.27 billion per year, almost three times the revenue generated by the health care premiums.

By introducing the flat tax in 2000, the government decided to forgo approximately \$1.5 billion from taxes, putting most of those dollars back into the pockets of Alberta's wealthiest citizens. Mr. Speaker, it would seem that if we can't afford to eliminate health care premiums, how could we afford that kind of a tax break? Eight provinces seem to be able to get along without resorting to premiums.

I think that the change would even be easier to absorb if we didn't know the kind of spending that the government has done, spending that would have allowed in part for those premiums to be eradicated. The topic has been raised a number of times in the last budget in terms of the addition of six new ministries to the government, the money that was spent on committees for health care reform, the money that was put into replacing video lottery terminals. So from one perspective it seems to be but a matter of will and priorities, Mr. Speaker, for the government.

#### **Point of Order**

##### **Decorum**

**Ms Blakeman:** Mr. Speaker, decorum under 13(1). There's a radio playing or a cellphone or computer of some kind.

**The Acting Speaker:** I thought I also heard a little bit, but I'm not sure where it's coming from.

Hon. members, that is not allowed in the Assembly as you know. If you're using your Internet, please, you should have your volume turned off.

**An Hon. Member:** It's over there somewhere.

**The Acting Speaker:** Well, I'm just cautioning all members. We have an understanding that that should not be the case.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has the floor. Thank you.

#### **Debate Continued**

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In closing, I think we have to remember that the money from health care does not go directly to fund health care. It goes into the general revenue just like income tax, corporate taxes, fuel taxes, and school property taxes. Eliminating the premium tax would be like eliminating any other tax, except I think in this case it would benefit those who deserve it most, Alberta's middle and low-income earners. I think it's abundantly clear that health care insurance premiums are unfair, and it's time that this motion was supported and those premiums were done away with.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Lund:** Mr. Speaker, I just want to put on the record a few comments relative to this motion. I was provoked a lot by what the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition said when he talked about the flat tax and the fact, he said, that the rich were the ones that benefited most from that. Well, the fact is that some 130,000 Albertans were taken off the provincial tax roll by that move. Those were the folks down at the bottom end, and they had a hundred per cent reduction. While it's true that some people all along the way had a reduction, there were those at the bottom that had a hundred.

But I think we have to also look, when we're talking about the elimination of this particular fee, at the fact that it does generate about \$900 million in revenue. While it's true that that does go into general revenue, as do all other forms of taxation, if you look at the cost of doctors in the health care system, it doesn't even cover that cost. We are spending about \$7.3 billion on health, and so \$900 million is – while it's a lot of money, it's necessary to help pay for that huge expenditure.

Now, I am the first to advocate that we need to raise the level at which people start paying and have the graduated scale go farther up. It certainly is a burden for fixed-income people and those that are just above that current level because there are those at the bottom that currently don't pay anything.

But there are other ways that we can help people, I think, even broader and help poorer income people more, and that is to follow the bill that was presented by the hon. Member for Wainwright. He was talking about the removal of the funding of education from property. That is a very complicated system, Mr. Speaker, and I'm sure that the reason the Liberals are honing in on the health care premiums is because that's a 15-second bite. It sounds great. But try to explain the removal of funding of education from property.

I believe that if we start by removing that tax – and it generates some \$1.4 billion, and of course with the great management that this government has presented over the last number of years by paying down and paying off the debt and eliminating the servicing of deficit, we are going to have the opportunity to do a number of things in the upcoming years. Certainly, I would hope that one of them will be a reduction in taxation.

#### **8:50**

But when you look at what's happening with the funding of education on property, even though we have frozen the mill rate, the

fact is that the amount of money that people are paying out of their pockets annually increases. That's because of the way the assessment system works. I believe that if we started with the elimination of the assessment on land – the reason I say that, Mr. Speaker, is because, well, right here in the city, if you go down along the river valley into the older area where there are smaller homes and usually seniors and/or lower income people living there, the fact is that the land that those houses are situated on is going up in value every year. That means that the amount of taxes that they're paying for education is going up every year even though the mill rate is frozen.

That's getting to be a real burden, particularly on seniors and low-income people. So by eliminating that as the first step towards reducing taxation, we would do far more to help people on a low income and a fixed-income than we will by eliminating these health care premiums.

I would urge that we vote against this particular motion but look at two things: look at the gradual elimination of the funding of education from property, and raise the level at which people start having to pay health care premiums. That way we're going to help the very people that really need help.

There's another thing that I must mention about health care premiums. For many, many professional people and out in industry the employer pays for half and, in some cases, the total health care premium. So even if you eliminate them, you don't help those individuals. But if you remove the funding of education from land to start with, everybody gets help.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 505, the elimination of health care premiums, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview. Certainly, I have to support the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview whenever he wants to cut taxes, and this simply is a tax. It has grown larger and larger as time has progressed.

There were promises made in the past by this government to eliminate this tax. In fact, before the last election, on October 29th in the year 2000, Alberta's grassroots provincial Conservatives endorsed plans to scrap health care premiums, or the health care tax, but four years later it hasn't been done. We were leading up to the election in the winter of 2001, and that was the talk. I'm disappointed to say that it hasn't been done.

We have seen in fact from that time health care premiums go up from \$700 million to over \$900 million last year. If we're looking for a real tax break for everyone, this is it, and this is why we should support the motion as presented by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Now, in 2000, before the winter election of 2001, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford also said that getting rid of health care premiums was a bigger priority for him than cutting income taxes. The hon. member went on to say – and I'm pleased to learn that he agrees with us – that this is a tax. It's a tax, and it's got to go.

How could we pay for this tax reduction? Well, there are many ways we could pay for this, Mr. Speaker. We could look at among other things changing our rules on VLT purchases. We recently have spent over \$100 million on replacement of VLTs. In the fiscal year 2002-03 we spent \$33 million on horse racing. We could forget about that. Let's eliminate health care premiums and forget about the horse racing industry for the time being.

There was \$5 million on committees implementing health reform. Some of these committees have yet to report to this Assembly. In 2001 after the election we created six new cabinet spots, and that cost a handy \$50 million in salaries, wages, and employee benefits. We've seen the communications and travel budget go up, Mr. Speaker.

**Dr. Massey:** Wait until Steve West gets at that cabinet.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes. The former Minister of Energy is apt to reduce that cabinet. I don't think we could call him a cabinet maker. We might be able to call him in the future a cabinet breaker because I think he will probably reduce it in size.

Now we have this travel and communications budget that has skyrocketed totally out of control. The government may be sensitive whenever people on this side of the House bring up what all this costs, including pitchers of orange juice in London, England, and travel costs in Mexico. We've got vans, limousine services in New York city.

But I was pleased to see on the news tonight the Premier doing some good work in Washington trying to get the borders open for cattle exports. He had a wee glass of orange juice in his hand as he went into this room. It was a glass smaller than this, Mr. Speaker, and it was only half full, so I'm glad to see a fiscal conservative working.

There is money available if we do not have a large amount of money raised from premiums and fees and licences for health care.

**Rev. Abbott:** Relevance.

**Mr. MacDonald:** The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar is talking about relevance. Well, this is one of the broken promises by this government leading up to the election. This government has continually promised that the only way taxes in Alberta, Mr. Speaker, are going is down. But it's been broken. I'm sorry; this has not been delivered. In 2002, just one year after the election, the government increased health care premiums, a regressive tax, by a whopping 30 per cent. That's not the only way taxes are going is down. That certainly is not.

Now, we can go down memory lane a little further to 1996. The Conservative cabinet promised that premiums would not be increased for seniors in the future. Another broken promise. In 2002 health care premiums for some seniors increased by 30 per cent.

Now, I suppose I cannot talk about the regional health authority boards and the election of those boards and then the firing of some of them because the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar may not think that that's relevant, so I won't go any further with that.

Mr. Speaker, there are many reasons to reduce taxes. There are many taxes that could be reduced, but the first one should be the health care insurance premium. Now, we are only one of two provinces that collect this tax. The other one is British Columbia, and it amazes me that in all the years that the New Democrats were in power in British Columbia, they never eliminated that tax. They never even discussed it that I'm aware of. But we have with this motion the ideal opportunity to reduce taxes in this province, and I can't think of a better way to start than to get rid of this regressive tax.

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

head: 9:00     **Government Bills and Orders**  
**Second Reading**

**Bill 24**  
**Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004**

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

**Mr. Stevens:** Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Finance it's my pleasure to move second reading of Bill 24, Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004.

As you know, the current fiscal year ends this March 31, and the budget with respect to the year 2003-2004 comes to an end. The budget for the upcoming year will be introduced this upcoming Wednesday, and the process associated with the debate of that will take us into the second week of May. As such, this bill will allow the government to continue to operate while this Legislative Assembly debates that budget into the new year.

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and discuss Bill 24, particularly in light of the budget that is going to be brought down for all Albertans on Wednesday.

Now, there are many items of interest in this bill. One only has to look at the office of the Chief Electoral Officer, for instance. We are looking at providing that officer with an operating expense of \$3.4 million.

**Ms Blakeman:** That's interesting.

**Mr. MacDonald:** It's quite interesting. One would only have to conclude that the government is preparing for an early election. If not, why are we so anxious to fund that office so quickly?

**Ms Blakeman:** How much was it last year?

**Mr. MacDonald:** I have no idea what it was last year, but it's certainly something that I'm going to research.

We're looking at Learning, for instance. Here we're looking at close to a billion dollars, just a whisker under a billion dollars. One only has to look at the newspaper or turn on a television set and you look at the financial dilemma some young students are facing in this province. Postsecondary education is getting unaffordable for some; 10 per cent of those, I'm told, that are attending the University of Alberta had in one way or another to apply for some form of emergency funding.

This is the government's idea, this Bill 24, of emergency funding, and I think we would be better suited to starting the budget debate much, much sooner, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the session should start the 15th of January, maybe the third week of January, and then it wouldn't be necessary to have these large sums passed as interim funding.

When we look at education and we look at the billion dollars in here and I go back to previous budgets and previous budget announcements, there was the same government, different Learning minister or education minister, and the former education minister used to get very frustrated with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods whenever he would ask questions about adequate funding for public education in this province, and the former education minister would say: \$300 million. He would repeat this figure over and over and over again.

That was money that was allocated over a period of time, and people were left with the impression that this was a large sum of

money that was going to be immediately put into the public education system and we would see a reduction in class sizes; we would see infrastructure repairs; we would see a lot of things for public education. But when the public figured out that this was money that was to be brought in over a period of time, then it was much different.

I'm wondering if history is going to repeat itself in a day or two and we're going to be on initial reaction thinking: oh, my, there is a government that is finally coming to its senses. Not only are we going to see the billion dollars in interim supply, but we're also going to see additional funding for public education. It's not going to be an orchestrated public relations exercise, but it's going to be a commitment – finally a commitment – to hire more teachers, reduce class sizes, and fix up a lot of the infrastructure problems in our schools.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we look at this \$1 billion amount in Learning, and we think of what's going on in the city of Calgary. In the city of Calgary alone the infrastructure deficit for schools is in excess of \$400 million. That's a lot of money. When you add up that infrastructure deficit for schools and hospitals and roads throughout the province, it is in excess of \$7 billion. It's a lot of money.

Whenever we keep putting off much-needed repairs or naturally occurring repairs because of the age of the building or the road, the final repair bill is going to be much higher. So sometimes when we talk about deficits, when we talk about public debt held, we forget the entire picture. A government that doesn't, for instance, look at the repair costs in Calgary for the schools is probably a government that in the future is going to have to pay more money to repair those schools and in some cases even build new schools. I don't know how those communities around Douglasdale are doing, how the parents feel. Maybe they're getting new schools already. But there's a need for infrastructure across the province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, whenever we look at this bill department by department, I don't think there's anyone that's been left out. When you consider that we're looking at over 5 and a half billion dollars to operate for two months and we have six pages to explain it or not to explain it . . . What is the plan for the use of this money? Well, it's for operating expenses.

This is a big operation, and usually Conservative governments pride themselves on fiscal responsibility, but in my time in this Legislative Assembly this government has gone from roughly a \$14 billion budget to – I suppose on Wednesday we're going to find out that it's a handy \$21 billion, maybe \$22 billion. That's a significant increase, yet we still have the same problems. We have a public education system that's underfunded. We have a public health care system where we seem more interested in manufacturing wine lists for people recovering from surgeries than we are in reducing waiting lists. I don't think we've got our priorities right here. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure is shaking his head, but I don't think we do.

**9:10**

Now we are requesting to proceed with Bill 24, Mr. Speaker, this interim supply bill, without first tabling the budget. Thus, in my view, the lack of details within the bill is where and how all this money will be spent. Ministers may be reluctant to provide any details on spending in Committee of Supply because of concern of giving away budget secrets. That's fair enough, but it was just in here last week that I heard that with Municipal Affairs we could be pleasantly surprised – I believe that was how it was put – and I also heard that from another minister as well. So I don't know exactly what to believe, but I guess I'll just have to wait and see.

When we talk about this government and its history, the Alberta

government has a long history, in my view, of poor budget management. Albertans have been on a fiscal roller coaster for years, facing spending increases and budget cuts all within a matter of months. An excellent example of this is the fiscal year 2000-2001 when this government had to make a 1 per cent cut to all departments as a result of a global economic slowdown. Nevertheless, by the end of the year the government had started to spend again. There was this panic, there was this supposed reduction, but it didn't last too long. You could open your weekend paper and you could see where the government was spending money again.

Now, the lack of budget management was further illustrated just a few weeks ago when this government brought forward their second request for supplementary supply in the current fiscal year, Mr. Speaker. The amount of unbudgeted spending brought in over the course of fiscal year 2003-2004 totals \$1.35 billion. The government has said that this is because of economic and environmental disasters that they could not foresee.

To be fair, no one could have predicted BSE or the forest fires our province suffered this year. However, unbudgeted spending of more than \$1 billion is not a new habit of this government, nor was it simply brought on by last year's disasters. Last year this government racked up over a billion dollars in unbudgeted spending. The year before it was \$1.4 billion. So it's obvious that this government is unable to stick to the budget plans that it develops. Hopefully, with the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East's stability fund we're not going to see any more of the panic that was displayed back in 2000-2001.

This is a government, Mr. Speaker, that's very fond of saying that it's in charge of a \$20 billion corporation or \$21 billion corporation; however, their brand of fiscal irresponsibility would never fly in the business world. If the CFO of a \$20 billion corporation could not have a budget aired and implemented in time for April 1, he would not be the chief financial officer for very long. I think there would be a shareholder revolt. It would be interesting to go to that meeting. However, if this individual were in government, perhaps they would be in charge of the Ministry of Finance.

Something needs to be improved here, I believe, Mr. Speaker. This government cannot maintain stable funding, this government cannot manage program cuts, and this government does not listen to Albertans when setting priorities. So why should we rely on Bill 24 that this government is presenting in regard to interim supply? Certainly, one looks at the continuity of the civil service, and there are certain government programs that have to be delivered and in some cases administered. But if we're really concerned and we really want to improve, I think we should take the advice of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, and let's get the budget process going a little earlier. If that means that we have to start the session in January, then that is fine.

Now, in regard to this bill, Mr. Speaker, with the \$184 million that's going to Children's Services, how much of this money will go to implementing the five recommendations the Auditor General made in his last annual report?

We're looking further here at \$215 million in Community Development. How much of this money will be contracted out to private operators who run provincially owned parks? That is a real bone of contention, if I may use that term, with campers and outdoors people in this province. They're sick and tired of this government charging them \$5 for a little armload of wood whenever they go camping. It's wet wood; it's dirty wood. I don't know where they find this wood. Whenever we talk about privatization, Albertans bring this up, and they're not happy.

Now, Economic Development. What have we got for Economic Development? Fourteen million dollars. How much of this money

will be spent towards opening Alberta's new trade office in Washington, D.C.? How much of this money will be spent on out-of-province trips? [interjections] How much of this money will be spent trying to promote the agricultural economy after BSE?

**The Acting Speaker:** Hon. members, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the floor. If you wish to participate in the debate, you may rise after he's finished.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, with Economic Development I don't want to be giving the hon. minister encouragement when others would caution me not to, but certainly Alberta's exports to the People's Republic of China indicate by industry that with livestock from January of 2002 to December of 2003 we saw a significant reduction, to zero, of the number of cattle that were shipped there.

At some point if there were to be a trade mission to open up these markets to Alberta products, whether they be boxed beef or live cattle for breeding purposes, I would have no objection to that. I just see this as something that really needs to be done. It's a large market, and I'm surprised that we have no participation in that market. If the minister were to go there sometime and try to sell cattle on the hoof or boxes of beef, you wouldn't hear a complaint from this member, providing he tabled his expenses when he returned.

Now, Energy. The Energy department is spending \$50 million here. How much of this money will go towards this government's \$3 million propaganda campaign to promote electricity deregulation and other communications campaigns? I'm astonished that we're trying to convince rural Albertans that are participating in REAs and gas co-ops that this isn't in their interests. REAs, of course, operate on a not-for-profit basis; so do gas co-ops. They're both managed democratically by the people they provide the utility to, and they're sort of an Alberta tradition that works. It astonishes me why we would have a communications plan to convince Albertans that this is not in their interests.

Again, Mr. Speaker, would the Minister of Energy be doubling the communications budget this year, as he did last year? How much of this \$50 million will be spent on the minister's travels? Certainly, this minister travels a lot. He travels more than Pepe. You know, he gets around. There's no doubt about that. Again, how much of this money will go towards ensuring that Albertans are paying the lowest prices for electricity and natural gas instead of the highest prices, as they are paying now?

9:20

Now, the Environment department is also going to get \$30 million. How much of this money will be spent on a water conservation strategy? How much of this money will be spent on initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and on other Kyoto requirements? How much of this money will fund green technologies?

Executive Council, further down here, is getting \$6 million. Why is the Executive Council requesting almost double the interim supply that it has requested in the last two years? Where are the extra dollars going? How much of this money will be spent on spin doctors, and how much of this money will be spent on out-of-province travelling, on the Premier's and his staff's dining bills and hotel rooms?

Finance is getting \$18 million, and then nonbudgetary disbursements are going to bring this up to over \$36 million, Mr. Speaker. How much of this money will be spent on improving the Finance minister's budgeting skills? Last year the government spent

\$230,000 on advertising for Budget 2003. How much will the government spend this year trying to convince Albertans that Budget 2004 is good news?

Thank you.

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

**Ms Blakeman:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, this debate for me is always about two things: timing and information. We always get the same line from the government members about, well, just given circumstances, sometimes circumstances beyond their control – once there was a reference to circumstances that the federal government had under their control. All kinds of reasons and sometimes no reasons as to why the government is late bringing its budget in and therefore needs to get an interim supply in order to keep running and pay everyone's salary and the rent and keep everything going.

Frankly, that argument just does not hold up. The government is in complete control of the agenda here. They can bring the session in whenever they wish and certainly well in advance of the time needed to debate the complete budget and the accompanying supply bill and get it all passed before the fiscal year-end so that we didn't have to do an interim supply. But this has now become common operational timing for this government, so they keep coming up with these frankly rather feeble excuses as to why they're late and why it can't be done on time and why, therefore, they need this interim supply, all the while pretending that somehow this isn't their fault.

Well, it's feeble and I expected better out of the government, but that's the one they keep using. I think the best one was that they had to wait for the federal government to table a budget and they couldn't do it until after the federal budget had come down. Well, if you look back over the last eight or nine years, I think the federal government has actually tabled a budget anywhere close to this time twice, maybe. So that was a particularly feeble year for excuses, that they had to wait for the federal government budget to come down before they could do theirs. It really is hardly connected, and most times you don't get a federal government budget tabled anywhere near it.

The second part of it is around information and just having one or two lines that appear in the supply document saying: well, you know, it's covering supplies and salaries. And there's a sort of little catch-all line. Here we go.

Operating expense includes salaries, supplies, grants, amortization of capital assets and debt servicing costs. Equipment/inventory purchases consist of consumable inventories and movable capital assets.

Then it sort of gives you a breakdown on how they do that. Then nonbudgetary disbursements and lottery fund payments. That's it. That's the description that you get for – what are they asking for? – over a billion dollars.

So there's a rather glaring lack of information. You know, it's as though asking for information is somehow a bad thing in this Assembly, because whenever the members of the opposition ask for information – you know, how am I supposed to make up my mind whether to support this interim supply? I'd like to know what the money is going to be spent on. They're asking, I think, for three months' worth of operational budget. That's going to cover April, May, June. Well, in some departments that's a very significant period of activity. Maybe most of its activity or significant activity takes place in that time.

For example, the budgets that the schools use are late this year, I understand, but basically they have to make up their mind about what kind of requisition they're going to have or how much money

they're going to have to operate the following year, and that all has to be done before June. So for money coming from the provincial government to the school boards, that's a very important period of time, because by June all the budgeting cycles are done and everything is set for the following year. So that period of activity is very important.

I had raised a number of questions during the Committee of Supply debates on this request for interim supply connected with points that had been raised by the Auditor General. I did in fact have one minister who did her best to answer my question on the spot, and that was the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. I didn't hear from any of the other ministers when I raised issues and concerns from the Auditor General. I didn't get any kind of answer back as to whether they were addressing those concerns and, therefore, whether I could rest a little easier when I was to trust them with voting through three months' worth of supply for their particular department.

So ever questing for information, I'm going to try again, Mr. Speaker, with a number of areas. Now, I have some in each department, and then I've collected a whole file folder of little bits and pieces that I've tossed in there to question various departments on. I don't want to go over territory already discussed by my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar. I believe he went as far as the Gaming budget?

**Mr. MacDonald:** I didn't get to Gaming.

**Ms Blakeman:** Oh, he was just going to start on Gaming. Okay.

So I have some questions, then, starting with Gaming. That department is requesting \$364.1 million. I'm wondering whether any of this money will be spent on rehabilitation programs for gambling addicts. In particular, I have raised a number of times in the past whether the department will tie together the amount of money raised through specific kinds of gambling or alcohol-related revenue to treatment of problem gambling or problem drinking. So two questions there: whether any of that money will be spent on rehabilitation programs and whether there would be a ratio or a direct link between the amount of money raised through, for example, VLT revenues and the amount of money spent on treating problem gambling.

I'm wondering how much money this year will be spent subsidizing the horse racing industry. I'm sure the minister will leap to his feet and go: we don't subsidize the horse racing industry. Of course, he knows that what I'm referring to there is the special deal through the RECs, racing entertainment centres, where there was a particular deal that was requested by Horse Racing Alberta and, in fact, granted by the government whereby they would be able to keep a larger percentage from the slots and VLTs. Maybe it was just slot machines.

Usually the deal was about 15 per cent back to the operator of the facility, 15 per cent to the charity, et cetera, et cetera, and in this case it came out to a much larger percentage that went directly to the operator, and that's how they were helping to pay off their machines, I think. Specifically, how much money is flowing through there to the horse racing industry? I think that last year it was \$65 million or \$81 million that flowed through. So three questions in that department.

Under Government Services, which is requesting \$59.3 million, will any of this money be used to offset the cost that energy consumers are being forced to pay for the Utilities Consumer Advocate office?

9:30

The second question: how much of this money will be spent

protecting Albertans from door-to-door energy marketers? Is there another campaign being expected there? Again, there is an expectation that Albertans will move to a contract basis where they will be signing a contract for purchase of electricity and gas. What other kinds of consumer protection, consumer enlightenment programs does the government have in mind around this new system so that we don't get ripped off?

How much of the money will be spent on updating the Fair Trading Act in order to protect Alberta's energy consumers from Direct Energy? That's an interesting one, but we keep hearing that poor Direct Energy keeps getting sued. They're up in the United Kingdom, and they're also before the courts in several places in the States, every time, I think, because they have unsavoury practices in pressuring people to sign these energy contracts. I know that the government has worked hard to entice Direct Energy. We even changed some legislation to make it more appealing to them to come into Alberta.

So is there any balance on this enticement that's going to be around protection for consumers in Alberta from any of the unscrupulous practices that Direct Energy has exhibited in the United States and in the United Kingdom? [interjection] Well, I didn't have to bad-mouth them actually – I'm getting heckled by one of the Calgary members here – because they did that to themselves by having such unscrupulous practices that they ended up before the courts. Of course, those court documents are in the public purview, and anyone can go and look it up. So I don't have to bad-mouth them; they managed to do that to themselves.

Under the Health and Wellness department \$2 billion is being requested. Now, the government recently announced a \$5 million boost to education and health, and I'm wondering how that breaks down. How much of that \$5 million is coming into Health and Wellness, and will any of this money particularly be directed to help the emergency room situation in Calgary and Edmonton? My colleague from Edmonton-Riverview has raised a number of times the code burgundy situation in the Calgary emergency rooms in their hospitals there.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Does that mean there's no red wine in the hospital surgical suites?

**Ms Blakeman:** No. The code burgundy is not about whether there's red wine available in the surgical suites. It's about having to create an additional code reflecting an emergency situation that is even more severe than a code red. That's what a code burgundy is, but I can understand how the member might have been led to believe it would be about something else.

Specifically, then, when we're looking at the emergency room situation in Calgary and Edmonton, how much of that money would be directed toward the code burgundy occurrences, and how is it expected that this money will decrease waiting lists? I know the government is planning on publicizing waiting lists, but what's being done to decrease the waiting lists?

Looking at Human Resources and Employment, \$286.9 million is being requested. How much of this money is earmarked for the nurses' salary settlements and for the AUPE salary settlements? Surely that is going to pertain to the first three months here that is under examination.

Under Infrastructure we have \$400.7 million that's being requested. How much of this is the Department of Infrastructure's budgeting for natural gas rebates for next year? The government has accrued a \$7 billion infrastructure gap from the outstanding requests for infrastructure support from school boards, health authorities, and postsecondary institutions. How much of this money will go toward paying down this \$7 billion infrastructure gap?

That's always an interesting debate. We have the government quite proud of itself, although frankly I think that the credit goes to Albertans, for having paid down debt. I think they're now down to owing \$3.5 billion, but at the same time we've created a \$7 billion infrastructure debt. So I don't know how much smart managing can really be credited there when we're down to \$3.5 billion on the one side and we've increased a deficit on the other side to \$7 billion. I think there's a problem there.

How much of that \$400.7 million will go toward building new schools or upgrading existing schools in Alberta? How much of this money will go toward building a hospital in southeast Calgary? We've had a little hint of an announcement there, but how much exactly? One presumes that some of the money will be advance-planning money that would probably be spent in the first three months. Therefore, this budget is under scrutiny, so what's the answer to that?

Ah, Innovation and Science. How much of this money will be going into the SuperNet project? How many more things will be added onto that running total that we have under SuperNet, which by the time it's all finished and done may in fact have been overtaken and will become obsolete technology.

**Mr. Herard:** Aw, come on. Why don't you learn about that?

**Ms Blakeman:** I have actually spent quite a bit of time learning about it. This member is very interested in getting into the debate, so I'm looking forward to what he's actually going to say.

I'm wondering how much of this money, if any of it, is going to go toward making sure that the other 4,400 and some hospitals, schools, and municipal buildings will get actually hooked right up to the SuperNet.

International and Intergovernmental Relations: \$2.3 million is requested. How will this money contribute to the reopening of the U.S. border to Alberta beef, and how much of this money will fund activities related to the softwood lumber dispute?

**The Acting Speaker:** Standing Order 29. Any questions?

Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of Finance to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a second time]

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

**Bill 19**  
**Public Trustee Act**

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

**Mr. Stevens:** Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General it is my pleasure to move third reading of Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act.

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

**Ms Blakeman:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Bill 19 is a complete revamp and updating of the Public Trustee Act. All of the bills are progressing very quickly through the Assembly in this spring sitting, mostly because we are not able to hear from the many government members here who are not adding to the debate, which is a pity, actually, because then their members don't know where they stand on particular bills.

I spoke fairly thoroughly during second reading of Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act, to the various updates that were being done. I spoke about the different catchment, whether it was a legal update, an administrative update, or whether it was around changes to the funds and how the funds would be administered. There is an additional section that is meshing with the new changes that are being brought forward under the Minors' Property Act, which is appearing in this session as Bill 20.

9:40

I did the usual stakeholder loop that I would do with bills like this. In fact, a number of the requests for the updating and modernization of the bill have come from the legal community and those that deal fairly frequently with the Public Trustee Act. I have actually heard no reservations or concerns expressed, at least that have reached my ears. The only request that I did have was concerns around power of attorney, so there is still some confusion in the minds of the public as to what the Public Trustee does and what powers they have. The

one concern that I heard really wasn't pertaining to Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act; it was to a different act entirely.

So I'm happy enough with what I've seen in the updates and modernizations that are appearing in the act. As I say, from stakeholder groups I've heard no concerns expressed, so at this point I'm happy to support the passage of Bill 19 in third reading. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 19 read a third time]

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

**Mr. Stevens:** Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move that the Assembly stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 9:41 p.m. the Assembly adjourned until Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]