

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 24, 2004

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly two visitors seated in your gallery. The Hon. Scott Smith, MLA for Brandon West, is the Minister of Industry, Economic Development, and Mines for the province of Manitoba and is also charged with the administration of the Manitoba Liquor Control Act and the Manitoba Lotteries Corporation Act. Minister Smith is in Edmonton to attend the eighth annual Canadian Gaming Summit and Exhibition being held from March 22 to March 24. Alberta is proud to have had the opportunity to showcase our dynamic and well-regulated gaming environment to the hundreds of conference participants who are attending from all parts of Canada and from around the world. Attending with Minister Smith is his special assistant Greg Merner. I'd ask our visitors to now rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of students and their parents from Connections for Learning, which is a home-schooling group. Mr. Curtis Currie is the teacher with parents Mrs. Jannie Jamieson, Mrs. Carmen Martin, Mr. Brian Shaw, Mrs. Lorie Saito, Mrs. Susan O'Reilly, Mrs. Alma Carter, Mrs. Diana Nelson. I'd ask them and the students to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 97 very energetic and bright students from the Gibbons school. They are accompanied by their teachers, Mr. Don McIntyre, Mrs. Rhonda Hruschak, Mrs. Kristine Wilkinson, Ms Sheligne Connolly, and Mrs. Nikki Maurer; also, aides Mrs. Jamie Hamilton, Mrs. Charlotte McLean, Mrs. Lorie Chrétien, and Mrs. Kathy Larson. Accompanying them also are parents Mrs. Tricia Hurst, Mrs. Debra Becker, Mrs. Susanne Hedstrom, Ms Gail Badke, and Miss Teresa Tychy. They're seated in both the members' and public galleries. I'd ask them to please rise and receive this warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to

introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly five exceptional people from the Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency. Geraldine Bidulock is the constituency treasurer. She is accompanied by her uncle Bob Prozni. Along with being family members, they have a very unique connection. Later today I'll be making a recognition on organ donation, and Geraldine and Bob are examples of a direct result of a successful transplant effort. Geraldine is among those brave and selfless people who have donated an organ for transplant, and her uncle Bob is, I know, the most grateful recipient of her gift. With them today are Jerry Bidulock, Robbie Prozni, and Reverend Adelina Pecchia. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon, and I would ask them to all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly somebody who probably doesn't need an introduction, and that is the reeve of Brazeau county, the county in which I live. He's also the vice-president of the AAMD and C. I'm going to ask Mr. Bart Guyon to stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

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

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly an individual that keeps my days very busy in Calgary-Buffalo. As well, her interpersonal skills are second to none in dealing with constituents. I'd like to ask Kathy Holdaway to stand – she's in the members' gallery – and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Snelgrove: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's an obvious sign that the condos in the area need spring cleaning as I can see that we're joined in the gallery today by the wife of the Calgary-Buffalo MLA. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly Mrs. Sherry Cenaiko. Would she rise and accept the warm welcome.

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

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to introduce to you and to all assembled a good friend and a long-time volunteer and a member of the executive of Calgary-Egmont, Mr. Bill Williams. Bill's involvement goes all the way back to when Dr. David Carter was sitting in your chair, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask Bill to stand and receive the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a very special guest seated in the members' gallery. As the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul has introduced the family members and an organ donor, this individual that I'd like to introduce, Mrs. Georgina Prozni, is the mother of the donor. The Prozni family, as you know, has been synonymous with the community of Willingdon and has been in that area for well over a century. I'd ask Georgina to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four staff members that operate the land-use operations of public lands. They manage over 170,000 active files.

Dr. Taylor: How much?

Mr. Cardinal: A hundred and seventy thousand active files. The members are Glenn Selland, John Begg, Margarete Hee, and Gerry Haekel. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the balance of the Assembly two wonderful people, Jennifer Diakiw and her grandson Matt. Matt is at the Legislature for the first time today. Jennifer had the thrill and privilege of working here years previous, and as a note of interest Matthew's grandfather was the architect of the Jubilee auditoria, built in 1955. I'd ask them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two Edmonton public school board trustees. They're sitting in the public gallery and will be joining us later on again in the House for the budget speech. They are Trustee Lynn Odynski, representing ward C, and Trustee Jean Woodrow, representing ward E. Both these trustees have been instrumental in the development of the Council of School Councils, a joint initiative between their respective wards whose aim it is to strengthen the relationships between school council members, trustees, and their representative MLAs. They will be joined by, I know, other council members and trustees later on during the budget speech. I would now request them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you for recognizing me, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce a few spouses and friends of some of our members who are here with us. They're a little shy to do it themselves. I'd like to recognize Mrs. Jan Marz, wife of our member from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, as well as Angeline Goudreau, wife of the MLA for Dunvegan. I think it's kind of special that his brother Paul is here as well to see him in action. Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Oral Question Period

Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, despite two more needless deaths in the Calgary health region this government continues to deny Albertans what is needed most: a fully independent public inquiry. Instead, the government hangs its hat on the Health Quality Council and the region announces that an out-of-province medical officer will help

with its internal review. These are nothing more than band-aid solutions for what has become a gaping wound. To the Premier: given that nobody currently looking into this incident has the mandate to conduct a fully open and public investigation, will the Premier tell us why his government is so reluctant to order a fully independent public inquiry?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is not true. Quite simply that is not true. There are a number of investigations that can be taken and will be taken in many cases relative to this very, very unfortunate incident. Like the hon. member I'm saddened and disturbed by the news of these deaths, but there are a number of investigations underway that will bring answers to the families and to all Albertans, and they are unbiased, open, and transparent investigations.

First of all, the medical examiner's office investigation is underway and will likely refer the two cases to the Fatality Review Board. This board is entirely independent, is a judicial if not a quasi-judicial board that operates in an open and transparent way. If the Fatality Review Board recommends to the Justice minister that fatality inquiries be held into one or both cases, I suspect that the Justice minister would accept that recommendation and do what is appropriate. Fatality inquiries, if one is to be held or two are to be held, are open processes chaired by an independent judge.

Mr. Speaker, there are many courses to conduct a full, a complete, an open, an honest, and a transparent investigation and adjudication of these two unfortunate incidents.

Dr. Taft: To the Minister of Health and Wellness: how can the minister claim that the Health Quality Council's investigation is independent when its members include a former government MLA, a current government MLA, and a senior officer with the Calgary health region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I want to again outline for the hon. member what the purpose of the review by the Health Quality Council is, and that is to look at this from the perspective of a system-wide basis. Now, there are other adjudications that may be in respect of the assessment or the finding of accountability of individuals within the system.

Again, I want the hon. member to understand and I want all Albertans to understand that there will be accountability for individuals involved in this, but just as important if not more important is to try and prevent this from happening in the future. That's the reason why the Health Quality Council is involved: to look at the best practices across Canada for the handling of materials that contain potassium. We think, Mr. Speaker, that this is a very, very important part because we want to learn from these particular circumstances and employ then the best practices for ensuring that it does not happen again.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there have been two near deaths and the lessons weren't learned, two deaths and the lessons weren't learned, and a number of other inquiries and investigations, will the Premier commit to calling a public inquiry under the Public Inquiries Act into the situation at the Calgary health region?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I've already answered that question. There are many processes available, many of which are being used. They are open processes, and they are transparent processes, and they are judicial processes. If you have at least three or four streams of

investigation and adjudication, why would you add, at great expense, another stream? Just to satisfy the opposition? Just to satisfy . . . [interjections] No. The public will be satisfied. The public will be able to hear, will be able to participate if they have evidence to present to any of these tribunals.

In addition to the investigations that have been mentioned – and I notice that the leader, not the leader but the . . .

An Hon. Member: Wannabe.

Mr. Klein: . . . wannabe leader. The real leader is here today.

The Speaker: I think we'll move on.

Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The SuperNet's costs continue to rise for the taxpayers of Alberta. The minister tells us now that the \$193 million has everyone hooked up to the door. My question is to the Premier. Why hasn't this government told Albertans that the \$193 million will get the SuperNet to the doorsteps, but the libraries and municipal buildings will still have to pay more to get connected?

Mr. Klein: I am not sure what the hon. member means by "more to get connected." More than what? More is very subjective. More than what? More of less or less of more or more of more?

Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, as has been explained in the Assembly before, the Alberta SuperNet builds the highway over which traffic can move. That highway, as the member quite rightly points out, connects the schools, the libraries, the hospitals, and government buildings. Just like you have at home, the telephone company brings your telephone service to the door. You still have to pay money to access that network, and that's not uncommon. That has not been anything unusual. Through many budget discussions in this House on the Alberta SuperNet that's always been the case. It's been perfectly clear.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, back to the Premier: why does the \$3,000 per year SuperNet connection not include basic Internet service?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will have the hon. minister answer relative to the specifics related to hooking up to the SuperNet.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I'm not being clear on this point. Let's talk about the earlier discussion we had in the Assembly about municipalities and the \$4,000 grant that was announced by the Minister of Municipal Affairs just a few days ago that lets the municipalities join the highway, which is something that they find beneficial. So digging the conduit or providing the wireless connection to the municipalities is the \$4,000. The monthly charge to have access or access to the data like you would pay for your telephone line or your high-speed Internet service at your home is the monthly charge that is the responsibility in this case of the municipalities.

1:50

Ms Blakeman: And you still don't have Internet.

My final question back to the Premier: did the government understand that they were getting Alberta taxpayers into a project that costs them to build the highway, that costs them to hook up the entrance to the highway, and that costs them to get connected, to have a car to drive on the highway. You got us into all of that. Did you know that? I don't think so.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. minister outlined it adequately. We built the highway. If someone wants to connect to the highway, that's entirely up to them, but there is a cost for a connection to the highway.

Ms Blakeman: More.

Mr. Klein: I don't know what she talks about "more." More than what? There's never been a highway before. I'm confused as to: more than what? More than before they had the highway that they couldn't connect to? You know, go figure.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Minister of Economic Development would also love to supplement if you would permit them.

I, frankly, am at a loss for words at what to say. This provides us a lot more than just the Internet, Mr. Speaker. This is part of the confusion. The benefits of having a classroom in Rainbow Lake connected to the University of Alberta connected to La Crête connected to Drayton Valley are all possible now with the Alberta SuperNet. You can do video conferencing that is much more than simple access to the Internet. This brings us into the 21st century in a major way.

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

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta businesses are hitting the highway and leaving the province because of electricity deregulation. Power bills for a glass fibre plant in Leduc have more than doubled to \$1.5 million a year, and the plant has lost up to \$400,000 in production due to constant power outages. With electricity deregulation costing the plant \$2 million more each year, the owner is now looking to move out of the province to a place where power is affordable and reliable. My first question is to the Premier. What feeble excuses does the Premier now have for this \$8 billion electricity boondoggle when we see so many businesses complaining about the cost of power and the reliability of supply?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm not receiving a lot of cards and letters on the reliability of supply. I'm receiving none on the reliability of supply because if we have one thing in this province, we do have the energy. We have the power.

Relative to these people that the hon. member alludes to in the context that hordes and hordes of people are leaving the province, well, hordes and hordes of people are coming to the province. All one needs to do is turn one's ear to the highways leading to the north, particularly the oil sands up north, where there's about \$50 billion worth of new construction underway, and trucks are moving, and the railways are talking about building rail services up there. The highways are as busy as they possibly can be.

I haven't heard about anyone leaving the province. When you look at everything overall, including power rates and the stabilization of power rates, the secure supply of power, the low taxes, the

Alberta advantage generally, Mr. Speaker, there are far more people coming to this province, notwithstanding this feeble Liberal opposition, than will ever, ever leave this province.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that no one will ever build an electric train to Fort McMurray because they know it will be too expensive for sure, again to the Premier: how many Alberta businesses and industries will be forced to flee from this province and relocate to other provinces like Manitoba or British Columbia, where electricity is much cheaper, before this government comes to their senses and unplugs electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have never in my life heard such nonsense. We are doing just fine, thank you. You know, because the Liberals like the old way of doing things and because they're so tuned in to socialistic systems, they can't accept something that is new, is innovative, is effective, and it works.

Relative to the situation today with respect to businesses either coming or going, I'll have the hon. Minister of Economic Development supplement.

Mr. Norris: I'm getting the signal to be short, Mr. Speaker. With such an abundance of good news it'll be tough. I have to say, being of Irish descent, that my mother always told me to consider the source. I'd say to the hon. member: you have to start telling the truth.

Here's the reality. Bankruptcies in Alberta were down by 28 per cent compared to the rest of the nation. The business migration was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 300 new businesses into the province of Alberta, clearly not what the hon. member says. In the first 11 months of the year 2003 the number of business bankruptcies in Alberta was at – and listen for it – an all-time low. Coincidentally, big surprise, the number of new business start-ups in Alberta was at – listen for it – an all-time high. Clearly, the member is absolutely incorrect.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: since our electricity bills are at an all-time high in this province, why is this government continuing with such a destructive economic policy, which is the fostering of electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, this is so typical of the Liberals. They sit there, and they listen with their duffs. I'm sure they do because they don't listen with their ears. The hon. minister just went through the list of why people are coming here in droves. Far, far more businesses are coming here to take advantage of the Alberta advantage than are leaving, for sure.

This hon. member should be proud to live in Alberta, where we have, thank God, an entrepreneurial spirit, a spirit of free enterprise, and where we have the courage to do things differently and do things in an efficient and an effective manner. That's why this province is prosperous today.

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

Tax Policy for Armed Forces Personnel

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is home to one of the largest contingents of military personnel in Canada, based at a number of locations including the Edmonton Garrison, the Cold Lake air base, and CFB Suffield. Often these men and women in uniform are asked to leave their families and serve in dangerous

missions in world trouble spots. My question is to the Premier. Does the government plan to follow the lead of the federal government and exempt our men and women in uniform from paying provincial income tax on their military salaries during the months that they are serving overseas, and if not, why not?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's an interesting question and certainly one that I hadn't contemplated. I will take that under advisement and consult with the provincial Finance minister.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Is the Premier at liberty to give us an estimate as to how long this might take?

2:00

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll discuss it with the hon. minister as soon as I possibly can. Hopefully, an answer will be provided either this week or next week.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Should the government decide to exempt military personnel from paying provincial income tax while serving overseas, will this apply to the beginning of the 2004 taxation year so that it can match what is being done by the federal government?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the question is hypothetical because I don't have the answer to his first question. Once that question is answered, perhaps I'll be able to answer his third question.

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

Opening of U.S. Border to Live Cattle

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents as well as the rest of our Alberta residents are still very concerned about when the U.S. border will open to Alberta beef. They were glad to hear the recent announcement that Canada would be accepting beef from U.S. states that are low-risk for bluetongue and anaplasmosis. They were even happier to hear about the Premier's and the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's trip to Washington to present Alberta's case directly to the USDA. My first question is to the Premier. How successful was Alberta's trip to Washington?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess the success of the trip will be when the border opens. If – and I underline the word "if" – everything goes according to plan and we aren't hit with an unexpected case of BSE either in the United States or Canada, then the border will likely open at the end of June. That will be for young cattle, cattle under 30 months, live cattle. That would be a welcomed first step.

The meetings, I believe, went very well indeed. This time around it was necessary to be aggressive, because little did we ever imagine that a second case of BSE would surface in the United States or in Canada.

An Hon. Member: You should have known.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member sitting over there said, "You should have known." Would this hon. member ever know and

tell me when the next case is going to occur? Can he tell me this now, today? If he can't tell me, then keep his trap shut.

Mr. Speaker, in Washington we heard nothing that would change our belief that the U.S., too, wants our borders to open soon. We heard that from the cattle industry. We heard it from the political side, and we heard it from the administration side. We presented our comment submission on the proposed U.S. role directly to the undersecretary of the United States Department of Agriculture. I have found and I'm sure the hon. minister found as well that face-to-face meetings are infinitely more valuable than speaking to someone over the phone or simply writing a letter.

Mr. Speaker, this trip was more than just presenting our comment submission. This trip was about positioning ourselves as a province and as a country, to explain and receive concurrence that our industries are fully integrated and that after things get back to normal, we need to work together as countries and as beef-producing areas to convince the international community of the quality and the safety of Canadian and American beef.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What was contained in Alberta's comment submission?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, first may I say that the Premier did an absolutely outstanding job of meeting with the cross-section of people in the U.S. that were important to hear our submission. Our submission talked about the highly integrated nature of the North American cattle and beef industry, certainly a relationship that benefits not only producers but processors and consumers on both sides of the border. That was recognized by all that we met with.

It was important to discuss again the measures that we have put in place and to hear from the U.S. people that we met with that they recognize that we have put in place very extensive measures to reduce the risk of BSE including our expanded surveillance, which they are also doing, including the removal of specified risk materials, which they are also doing, and, of course, talking about the ban that has been in place since 1997 on ruminant-to-ruminant feeding.

Mr. Speaker, it was important for us to reiterate to the U.S. that we support the USDA in using science as the basis for making the decision. We've been saying that since the beginning, and it was important that we reiterate that Canada is a minimal risk area and that the borders should open.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is for the same minister. How was the CFIA announcement on bluetongue and anaplasmosis received?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, this has been an issue that has been a point of contention, I would say, between the U.S. industry and the Canadian industry for some years. We were in the process of introducing a pilot project in 2003 that would have seen the first cattle move into the province in what is considered a vector season. Unfortunately, with the case of BSE that pilot project was halted.

I can tell you that in discussions with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and with politicians in the U.S., the opening of our country to beef from 39 states in all seasons of the year was very well received. Certainly, it goes a long way to proving once again how integrated the Canadian and U.S. beef industry is.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Access to Information Application Fees

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday in the Legislative Assembly the hon. Minister of Government Services stated in question period not once but twice that Alberta has the lowest fee for access to information across Canada. My first question is to the Minister of Government Services. Given that application fees for access to information in Canada range from a low of \$5 in New Brunswick to a high of \$25 in Nova Scotia and at the federal level again to a low of \$5 and our application fee in this province is \$25, how can the minister say that we have the lowest fees across Canada for access to information?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, my comment yesterday was exactly correct. The initial fee is \$25. Subsequent requests that go up to \$150 are assessed by the department, and that assessment can go down to \$25, so that just proves that my statement yesterday was true. Twenty five dollars after assessment is the fee, and that is the lowest in Canada.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, I'm astonished that he doesn't understand his own legislation, Mr. Speaker.

Again to the minister: will he reduce the initial application fee in this province from \$25 to what the federal government has, which is \$5? Why don't you reduce those fees, which are really taxes?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, that would not be a very good move because the average cost to handle each FOIP request is over \$45 in this province.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that access to information legislation is a means by which people get that information from sometimes reluctant government hands, why is this government taxing information that should be readily provided in the public interest not only to the Official Opposition but also to other Albertans?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, I'm quite surprised at the hon. member's third question, because this particular legislation has been reviewed twice and this hon. member sat on both of those committees. It would have been very appropriate if during that process this particular individual who sat on those committees had brought that forward at that time. The actual report, that was brought and placed in this House, where it was debated, actually provided the basis for amendments to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. That's the process, and that's the way he should approach this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

2:10 Organized Crime and Gang Activity

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have recently met with distraught constituents who are concerned about organized crime, gangs, and drugs in our communities. Some constituents see suspicious activity and are afraid to let their children walk down certain neighbourhood streets by themselves. Some have heard that there is a dealer and pimp who has said to those who owe him drug money: bring me a 14 year old and I will cancel your debt. My questions are for the Solicitor General. What is the government

doing to address the issues of organized crime and gangs in our communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to say that anyone with information about criminal activities in this province should be giving that information to the police.

As for the question of gangs and organized crime we know that gangs are a breeding ground for organized crime, and we know that organized crime is a problem crossing all boundaries, all communities, and a part of society. It's no longer a big-city problem.

This government is not standing idly by. First, we provide the Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta with \$2.4 million in annual funding. Secondly, we established the integrated response to organized crime unit, which is known as IROC, which is directed by senior RCMP members, members from Calgary and Edmonton. This is really a first in Canada, and I'm very, very proud of what they're doing. They're up and running. Police are targeting key players and crime bosses through the co-ordinated efforts of CISA and IROC in addition to the actions already taken by all the law enforcement agencies in the province.

Mrs. Jablonski: Again to the Solicitor General: can you tell me whether or not organized crime and gang activity is growing in this province?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, crime in general is going down in Alberta. It is down in Canada and in most other western industrialized countries. Crime stats, however, do show increases in organized crime activities partly due to our booming economy. So to answer her question, yes, gang and organized crime activity seems to be increasing. We understand how Albertans want to have safer communities, and law enforcement is a high priority. Without being specific, we're going to be dealing with the budget in a couple of hours, and we're going to have good news for the policing community in this province.

Mrs. Jablonski: Finally, to the same minister: what should people look for and what should they do if they suspect that there's a crystal meth lab or grow operation in their neighbourhood?

Mrs. Forsyth: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I encourage the member and any other person to be very, very careful if they suspect a home in their area is being used to make meth. If you suspect something, contact the police. Obviously, do not make contact with the residents of the home or go around investigating the home. It's important to call the police.

There are signs that people can look for if they're suspicious that there's a meth lab next to them, and that is an unusual or strong odour similar to fingernail polish or cat urine. Look at the garbage that's being disposed of; are there large quantities of cold medicine, antifreeze, drain cleaners, lantern fuel, coffee filters, batteries, duct tape, and large glass containers? Are the windows blacked out? Is there unusual traffic at night? All of these are signs that a meth operation could be next door. Again, contact your police.

Private/Public Partnerships for Hospital Construction

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, last week members of the government were unfamiliar with a report that was tabled in this Assembly on November 26, 2003, which was titled *Why P3s Don't Work, and What Will*. My question today is to the minister of health. Given

that this report clearly states that "the P3 model for public hospitals is likely to lead to . . . a deterioration of the quality and extent of universal service," how can this minister condone using P3s for hospitals?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. Please remember that we're not into a debate here.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there is a certain philosophical element to this, I would suggest. The reality is that when an individual goes into a facility seeking health care services, the operative questions that will be on the mind of such an individual are: does this place have the people and the equipment and the skills to diagnose me and treat me so I get better? Nobody is going to ask: "I wonder what the rate of return on this building is. I wonder if this is owned by the regional health authority. I wonder if this is a P3 project." That is far removed from what the concerns are of individuals who are ill and need access to the health care system.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is important that we look at the recent report prepared by the Conference Board of Canada that examined OECD countries in the world. It assessed that Canada has the third highest cost system in the world but only gets middle-of-the-pack results, around 13th in the world, in terms of outcomes. We do have a good health care system. I don't want Albertans to think otherwise. But the reality is that there are other places that are getting better outcomes. Our responsibility as a government is to examine these systems from around the world, and if we're prepared to import physicians from other parts of the world, we should also be prepared to import the gold-medal standards of best practices, including innovative ways of looking at how our health care system is provided through P3s.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the report states that "it is reasonable to expect P3 hospitals to be at least 10% more costly than their public sector equivalents," why does the Premier believe that P3 hospitals won't cost Alberta taxpayers more?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again the hon. member does not understand or refuses to understand the whole concept and the process relative to P3s.

First of all, this government is not saying by any stretch of the imagination that P3s are the end-all and the be-all. We are saying that this is another tool that might be used to get needed infrastructure on stream, whether that infrastructure involves municipal buildings, schools, hospitals, roadways, or whatever else. If a P3 works and if it can be demonstrated through a very detailed adjudication process that the project will be a good project and it will save taxpayers' dollars, then we will consider it and likely go ahead with it. If it can be shown that the project is of no particular benefit to the taxpayer or to the government or to the people of this province, then it won't go ahead. We'll find another way of doing it.

So, Mr. Speaker, there is nothing wrong whatsoever in reviewing and looking at P3 proposals and putting them to work if they work. If they don't work, they won't happen.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier: when will this government actually hear the concerns of Albertans, of prominent economists, of relevant organizations and other governments and reject the P3 model for essential public services such as health care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, P3 projects for essential public services and other public services will be rejected if they don't work. I have seen examples of P3 projects that work in the health care system.

[interjection] Well, I have seen a proposal that works. In my mind it works. Maybe in his mind it doesn't work, but in the minds of the people involved with the project – and I'm talking about one in the U.K. – it works.

Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs respond.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I should have ruled these questions out at the beginning. They just lead to debate. The purpose of question period is to deal with policy, so I apologize for the last five minutes or six minutes.

We're now moving on to the hon. Member for Wainwright, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

2:20

Rural Education

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Learning Commission's is an excellent report that ensures that the urban education system works, but while the report deals with the urban issue of class size, it does not address the rural issue of double and triple grading. In fact, nowhere in the report are unique rural education issues around transportation, program inequity, lack of specialized services, and the effects of declining enrolment addressed at all. My question is to the Minister of Learning. What plans does the minister have to address these unique problems faced by rural boards in delivering quality education in rural Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member has raised some very good points. The Learning Commission received a lot of accolades across the province and, indeed, right across the country for the work that it's done. One of the disappointments, though, that has been voiced to me is exactly what the hon. member has brought up, which is the rural school issue. There are not a lot of things in the Learning Commission about rural schools.

I will add, though, Mr. Speaker, that included in the funding formula which was actually suggested and recommended by the Learning Commission are a lot of specific things that deal with the exact issues that the hon. member asked. Small schools by necessity will now become a type of grant that will be given to those areas where they have small schools. The small schools are such that, realistically, because of their location you cannot close them down. You cannot close a school because there won't be another school for, you know, 30 or 40 miles. So that's certainly one of the areas.

Another thing and a very important thing, Mr. Speaker, that we will be doing, in subtle reference to another question that was asked today: the SuperNet will play a very important role. Indeed, the SuperNet has been funded in my department for the last two years and actually will continue to be funded for the next 20 or 30 years within my department. As a matter of fact, in the funding formula it has been recommended that these funds be enveloped.

So, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has an excellent question. Rural schools are something we continue to work on and continue to work for because those challenges faced by rural schools are considerably different than challenges faced in urban areas.

Rural Economy

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, this government has deliberately destabilized growth in rural Alberta during the Klein regime.

The Speaker: Please, please. It's against the rules to mention people's names.

Ms Carlson: I withdraw that, Mr. Speaker.

By centralizing control and removing local offices, rural communities have lost infrastructure, jobs, and new dollars into their communities. To the Premier: why did your government do this?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we didn't. You know, I don't know how often – perhaps the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East gets out into the country from time to time. I imagine he does because he understands it. I don't think that many of these other members get out into the country, but I do, and the majority of the government MLAs either live in the country or get out into the country. I'm talking about the rural areas of Alberta, real Alberta, from High Level to Warner, from Banff to Medicine Hat, from Oyen to Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Speaker, we travel around, and when I travel around to communities in this province, I see a tremendous spirit: a spirit of confidence, a spirit of commitment, a can-do spirit. I see communities that are vibrant. I see people going to their work, their jobs, working in the fields, volunteering in their communities. I see the vibrancies and all the activities going on in the curling rinks and the hockey rinks and the community halls and the church basements. This province is very much alive and, indeed, is very much alive in the rural areas.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, my second question goes to the Minister of Economic Development. Given that this question comes from a constituent in central Alberta, can he tell us how removing local offices has helped economic development in rural Alberta?

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, I guess that, much like the Minister of Gaming the other day, I'm very flattered that you asked a question. I thought that you forgot about me.

I'll answer the question in a number of different ways, Mr. Speaker. There was some rationalization done in the ministry of agriculture, which I think she's referring to – and the minister might want to comment – but to offset those, that were very rational economic decisions, our department along with the minister of agriculture and the members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright have coauthored a strategy for rural development called the economic blueprint for rural development. It talks about the things you're speaking to, about how to have a healthy rural Alberta, because this government does identify how important that is.

Other initiatives, Mr. Speaker, that the member should know about that are specific to rural Alberta are the SuperNet, which we had a lively discussion on earlier; our regional economic alliances, which identify grouping together regional economies and cities and towns into economic alliances to help promote them and stop the us versus them mentality; and, of course, our tourism initiative, that's been incredibly successful, to recognize that rather than coming into Calgary and Edmonton and moving on to British Columbia, we would like people to go east and maybe see the Lac La Biche Mission or maybe see the Ukrainian Cultural Centre or go see the Dinosaur Trail or any number of other opportunities that are all in rural Alberta. We've spent an awful lot of time developing those projects, so the member should just come to Public Accounts next week and find out.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: are we going to see some dollars dedicated in the form of the hotel tax to tourism initiatives that can be run by the associations themselves rather than the government?

Mr. Norris: Well, clearly, if I answer that question, Mr. Speaker,

I'll be killed. I just want to say yes, but as you're well aware, the budget comes out tomorrow . . .

Some Hon. Members: Today.

Mr. Norris: Oh, today. Clearly, I'm still in St. Patrick's Day mode, Mr. Speaker.

To answer the hon. member's question, as a department and government we have identified tourism as one of the most important industries that we have. It's our fourth largest, employs some 120,000 people, generates about \$6 billion in sales, some \$700 million or \$800 million in revenue to this government. Every particular member in this House knows the importance of it. So I thank the hon. member for the question.

One of the ways that we're looking at getting some kind of sustained funding is the hotel tax. I don't have an answer for you, but I can tell you that the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, the Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, the Member for West Yellowhead, the Member for Banff-Cochrane, both of the members from Calgary who are on the committee are supportive of it, and we will bring it forward, and because this government is so forward-thinking, I would suspect that the answer will be, hopefully, yes.

The Speaker: See what you've done, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Education Survey

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ministry of Learning is circulating a questionnaire to parents asking them how satisfied they are about the quality of education their children are receiving at schools. Many parents have called us to express their frustration and to deplore the fact that while the questionnaire does ask how satisfied they are with teachers, principals, and the school environment, nowhere are they asked how satisfied they are about the government's own policies which negatively impact schools and classrooms, issues such as class size, user fees, and fundraising. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Why are only local schools and teachers being evaluated, while parents are being denied the right to evaluate the provincial government's own role in the learning system?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This was a questionnaire that was put out not just to be a random questionnaire. This is a very important element of the accountability pillar of our new funding framework, and this questionnaire will provide the baseline for responses for now and into the future. This is a questionnaire that will be given to parents and teachers and students over the next 10 to 20 years. This will provide the baseline.

Included in the questionnaire are some of the questions that the hon. member has raised, but there are also questions that relate to class sizes, questions that are related to the government's role in general. Mr. Speaker, I must emphasize that the reason and rationale for this questionnaire was to be able to report back to the constituents from the school boards. We are indeed the ones who are putting it forward.

This is the first of its kind probably in North America. It certainly is the first of its kind in Canada. It's something that we may have some growing pains with – there's no doubt about that – but it will

provide a very good baseline for information now and well into the future.

2:30

Dr. Pannu: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is the minister holding school boards, local schools, teachers, and principals to a standard of accountability to which he is not prepared to hold himself?

Dr. Oberg: I find that question absolutely hilarious, Mr. Speaker. Each and every day that I come in here, I am held accountable for the actions of 980-some employees within my department. I am also held accountable for about 64, 65 schools boards that are around the province, and indeed I'm often held accountable for each and every one of the schoolteachers in this province. So that notion is absolutely hilarious, and it's something that, realistically, the hon. member should have known better.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. My second supplementary to the same minister: will the minister redesign the survey questionnaire to include questions about class size, user fees, and parent fundraising, or does the government wish to continue to avoid parents' scrutiny by failing to ask these questions?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the rationale behind the questionnaire, as I stated, was to improve the outcomes of learning by setting a baseline as to what was actually happening in the classroom. We are talking the classroom. That's where children learn. I think the hon. member has something that he's quite mistaken about. We are looking at what is actually happening physically in the classroom. We're using this questionnaire as a baseline. It is something that will be moved on well into the future and probably will provide us with information that is extremely valuable when it comes to assessing exactly what the school boards do.

Mr. Speaker, there have been several groups of parents, of teachers, of students who have been asked to fulfill this questionnaire, and the information will be made public. It will be made public by us. It will also be made public by the school boards. So this is a very, very important element of the accountability pillar of the new funding framework.

The Speaker: Hon. members, as an addendum to yesterday's question period I believe the hon. Minister of Transportation wants to supplement an answer to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry. It was in response to the question and answer there. So under our rules if the minister wishes to proceed, you, sir, will have an additional opportunity to ask a question and for a response as well.

The hon. minister.

Transportation Department Survey

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to a question asked yesterday by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry, I am pleased to table five copies of a letter that has been sent to a resident of Medicine Hat. That letter answers all of the questions raised by the hon. member plus additional information.*

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

Mr. Bonner: Yes. Thank you for that, Mr. Minister.

*See p. 638, right col., para. 4

One question: would the minister also table copies of the survey that was sent out to various people around the province?

Mr. Stelmach: I can provide a sample of the survey, but I can't provide the thousands of surveys that were sent to all Albertans. I can certainly table a copy of the survey that went out to Albertans. This survey is to gather client satisfaction. We include that information in our annual report, that goes out to all Albertans at the completion of the fiscal year.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds I'll call upon the first of seven who will participate today.

Before calling on the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce a very interesting group today. They are called the Willow Creek home-school support group. They're from various different areas in my constituency as well as the constituencies of a couple of other MLAs. They're spread out quite far geographically. There are 35 home-school students ranging from I believe kindergarten to grade 12, there are 17 home-school support group parents, and their field trip leader, who sort of organized the trip today, is Mrs. Ute Stiller. So I would ask if this very distinguished group would please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two couples that drove all the way up here from the great heart of Alberta, central Alberta, to take part in the budget speech. First of all, I'd like to introduce Gary and Linda Yargeau, who are no strangers to politics. Gary is a town councillor with the town of Penhold, and Linda was a school trustee, I think, for about five terms before regionalization for the county of Red Deer and now still advocates for children working for Diamond Willow children's services.

Dennis and Sherry Cooper are also with them. Dennis is also a town councillor for the town of Penhold. Together they own Skyways Aviation at the Red Deer airport. Sherry is also a pilot instructor and, I understand, is one of the best pilots of their fleet. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and to members of this Assembly a good friend and constituent, Louise Kidney, who is here visiting with us today. She's also been working for the past couple of years on an exciting project that's been talked about in question period, the SuperNet, and has done some excellent work. She could tell you some great things if we had the opportunity to tell you about SuperNet. If Louise would rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Recognitions

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

Organ Donor and Transplant Awareness

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise in the Assembly today to bring awareness to an area of extreme importance to all of us: organ donor and transplantation programs. We are all aware that just yesterday our good friend and former colleague Mr. Peter Elzinga underwent surgery to donate a kidney for transplant. It comes as no surprise that this man who has served Albertans for so many years continues to give with this most personal and important gift to another human being.

Alberta is a leader in transplant surgery, but there is a chronic shortage of donor organs. It is imperative to honour those who have given life to others by educating ourselves about donation, making a decision about donation, and sharing that decision with our families. Transplants save lives, and I encourage all Albertans to consider making life-saving differences to someone in need. The gift of an organ is truly a gift of life, a gift that we all have the capacity to provide.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Families of the Miners of Hinton

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the families of the miners of Hinton and area. That's why I am elaborating on the Elk Valley Coal Partnership's important announcement to develop the Cheviot Creek mine south of the town of Hinton.

I'd like to bring to your attention the families that have worked for Cardinal River Coals for over 30 years. A majority of them enjoy the area and have had to leave the community to find employment. A lot of them would like to retire in the area and have left behind their wives, children, family, friends, and relatives while they seek employment elsewhere. As their husbands are usually away for two weeks and maybe back for two weeks, you can see the disruption in the family unit. As well, a number of these workers have been great supporters of local community groups, involved in such things as being hockey coaches and volunteer firefighters.

This is great news for the families of Hinton and surrounding areas and especially for those who have sought employment outside. I'd like to thank Elk Valley Coal Partnership for taking the initiative to finally proceed with the Cheviot mine.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:40

Jaylene Norris

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to recognize one of Alberta's Great Kids, 15-year-old Jaylene Norris of Red Deer, who was presented with the Great Kids award on March 12, 2004, by the Premier, Colleen Klein, and the Minister of Children's Services. Jaylene has overcome many struggles and challenges in her young life, and with the encouragement and love of her foster family, her social worker, her teachers, and the Boys and Girls Club of Red Deer, Jaylene has transformed herself into a helpful, considerate, caring, and dedicated young lady.

Jaylene began to see life differently when she became a counsellor in training with the Youth and Volunteer Centre. Although Jaylene wondered what she could possibly have to offer other children, she ignored her insecurities and went to camp to help with seven to nine year olds. For the first time in Jaylene's life others depended on her for help and encouragement.

Jaylene is now a volunteer at the Red Deer handicapped riding association and the Red Deer Native Friendship Centre. She was one of 38 high school students across Canada recognized by the Foundation for the Advancement of Aboriginal Youth with a bursary for academic achievement, contributions to community, and leadership qualities.

Jaylene is a Great Kid who has demonstrated that everyone has much to offer. She's an inspiration. Congratulations to Jaylene for being the best that she can be, and congratulations as well to the Friske family in Red Deer for being a big part of her success.

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

World Theatre Day

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This Saturday, March 27, is World Theatre Day. Created in 1961, World Theatre Day is particularly meaningful in Alberta, where our theatre community thrives. I'm especially proud to salute the thousands of Albertans who make their living in the theatre, and I'm very pleased to acknowledge the remarkable roles played by actors, technicians, volunteers, and, of course, audiences and the other artistic teams in more than 235 live theatre groups in Alberta.

Here in Edmonton we support more live theatre per capita than anywhere else in North America, and our very own Vern Thiessen is the winner of this year's Governor General's award for drama. Vern just happens to be a constituent of Edmonton-Centre. He wrote Canada's World Theatre Day message this year, and here's an excerpt: "As parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, we have a personal duty to inspire respect for the playwright, actor, director, designer, and educator, and the risks they take."

This Saturday we honour these extraordinarily talented people who bring us such wonderful theatre. Thank you.

Edmonton Oilers

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, our Edmonton Oilers have proven once again that the Alberta spirit is alive and well in their hearts and in their fans, a spirit that Albertans are famous for, a spirit that won't ever let them give up. The same spirit drove the Oilers to win the last five games and gave them a chance at the western division of the Stanley Cup playoffs. The team has shown true grit in its skate towards the playoff run. Our hockey heroes will have to continue without error to stay ahead of the St. Louis Blues and the L.A. Kings. Both teams want the prize as much as Edmonton but lack our Alberta spirit.

As all of us long-time Oiler supporters know, Edmonton's home team will wage the battle to hang on to their precious playoff spot with fierce determination and skill. Northern Alberta will see tonight a spirited and exciting matchup as their Edmonton Oilers take on a classic rival from past playoffs, the Dallas Stars. I hope, Mr. Speaker, the Stars fade tonight.

Thank you.

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

Bob Wasylyshen

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to recognize the tremendous work and successful career of Edmonton's former police chief Bob Wasylyshen. On March 12 Bob retired from the Edmonton Police Service. Before becoming chief of police, Bob succeeded in many important positions, including field training officer, sergeant, staff sergeant, superintendent, and deputy chief of the investigative services bureau. Throughout his 32-year

career Chief Wasylyshen spearheaded numerous reforms in police investigation including the use of DNA evidence in crime scenes and the introduction of photoenforcement technology in traffic operations.

Bob Wasylyshen was appointed chief of police by the Police Commission on September 22, 2000. Building community partnerships had always been one of his major overriding goals during his time in office. It's been said that Bob Wasylyshen exceeded expectations as chief of police because of his keen understanding of policing from street level up to the executive offices.

His retirement is well deserved, and his presence with the Edmonton Police Service will be missed. Building a reputation and ensuring the well-being of the Edmonton Police Service were the most important goals for Chief Wasylyshen. Regardless of who becomes the next chief of police, they will have large shoes to fill.

I wish my friend Bob Wasylyshen all the best in life after policing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

David Thompson and Capital Health Regions

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the co-operative work done by the David Thompson and Capital health regions in opening an expanded renal dialysis unit in the Wetaskiwin hospital and care centre. This facility provides seamless service to patients from not only the David Thompson and Capital health regions but surrounding health regions as well. In this expanded facility more patients will experience the benefits of dialysis closer to home.

Since its opening in 1987 this dialysis unit has done over 26,000 dialysis treatments on 220 patients. This specialized health care that is occurring outside urban centres is extremely important for the sustainability of our health care system and for the health of rural patients. The co-operation between David Thompson health and Capital health is seen through this facility as Capital health runs the program in David Thompson's facilities.

I would like to publicly thank the CEOs of the David Thompson and Capital health regions, John Vogelzang and Sheila Weatherill, as well as all board members, whose co-operation benefits the province of Alberta as a whole.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of Alberta Learning's parent survey 2004, which parents complain has failed to ask the most important questions on the state of education, such as the teachers' and kids' learning conditions, class sizes, fundraising, and overall funding.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table this afternoon on behalf of a constituent of Edmonton-Gold Bar, Benjamin Atkinson, his opinions on photoradar and what he would like to see us do to make it better.

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document

was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mrs. Nelson, Minister of Finance: pursuant to the Alberta Capital Finance Authority Act, the Alberta Capital Finance Authority annual report.

Speaker's Ruling

Amendment to Motion for a Return 10

The Speaker: On Monday, March 22, there was a point of order raised by the Government House Leader. Essentially, the point of order was that since the Assembly had passed an amendment to Motion for a Return 10 and approved the amended Motion for a Return 10, then other motions for returns should come off the Order Paper although they had not been explicitly dealt with. The discussion of this point of order and related matters is found at pages 611 to 617 of *Alberta Hansard* for that day.

The Government House Leader's argument was that to consider the other motions for returns he cited in light of the decision on Motion for a Return 10 would mean that the Assembly was considering the same issue on repeated occasions and cited paragraph 558 of *Beauchesne's*, the sixth edition, as authority for that proposition.

On this point the chair finds that the amended Motion for a Return 10 that was approved differed from the wording of the other motions for returns that the Government House Leader indicated were similar. In the chair's view the amendment would have to be virtually identical to the wording of the other motions for returns for such a rule to be applied.

Therefore, the chair finds that the motions for returns referred to by the Government House Leader in his point of order that were not expressly dealt with by the Assembly – namely, 14, 15, 18, 61, 62, 70, 71, 72, 73, 103, 122, 123, and 146 – will remain on the Order Paper.

Speaker's Ruling

Private Members' Business

The Speaker: The chair is very much aware that Monday afternoons are private members' time. In dealing with written questions and motions for returns, it is the chair's view that the greatest leeway should be afforded private members, consistent with the rules and practices under which these items of business are conducted.

2:50

The chair is not oblivious to the fact that there is a certain angst about the time devoted to dealing with the many written questions and motions for returns that there are on the Order Paper. When there are difficulties or problems encountered like this, the chair's view is that the primary responsibility for resolving them should rest with the House leaders.

The chair is reluctant to get involved in a situation where unique approaches to the rules and practices are being proposed. It is your Assembly, hon. members, and it is to you that the responsibility falls for dealing with the business of the Assembly.

The chair would point out that based on the chair's research to date, Alberta has a unique way of dealing with written questions and motions for returns that was adopted in 1993 to accord private members and the Assembly a greater role in this item of business. In the chair's view addressing the issue of the Assembly's consideration of written questions and motions for returns brings in some of the basic principles of parliamentary law; namely, "to enable every member to express opinions within limits necessary to preserve decorum and prevent an unnecessary waste of time." Members may wish to acquaint themselves with paragraph 1 of *Beauchesne's* and page 210 of *Marleau and Montpetit*, where the basic principles governing the operation of parliament are discussed.

Now, hon. members, in order to adequately prepare us all for the

Budget Address by the Minister of Finance this afternoon, the House is recessed until 3:30 this afternoon.

[The Assembly adjourned from 2:51 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.]

3:30

Orders of the Day

Transmittal of Estimates

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I have received certain messages from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! Please rise in the gallery.

The Speaker: The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province and of certain sums required from the lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

Government Motions

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, before moving Government Motion 13, I now wish to table the 2004-2005 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates as well as the 2004-2005 government and lottery fund estimates. In addition, I am tabling the government's consolidated fiscal and business plans for Budget 2004, as required under sections 4 and 7 of the Government Accountability Act. Also provided for the information of the Legislative Assembly are business plans for each ministry, which must be made public under section 13 of the same act.

Budget Address

13. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, in just over nine months Alberta will begin to celebrate its 100th birthday, and what a remarkable hundred years it has been. Like most landmark birthdays, celebrating our province's centennial is an opportunity to look back at the amazing changes that have taken place since the early settlers ventured out west to break ground and build a new future. It's also an opportunity to look ahead and to envision Alberta's next century. As Premier Klein said, let's "make sure Albertans enter the province's second century with the same spirit of hope, determination and confidence as the Albertans of 1905 had when [our] first century began."

Before I get into the details of this year's budget, I want to take us back where this all began, and that's with Alberta's very first budget. Picture this: Edmonton, May 7, 1906. The hon. A.C. Rutherford, then called the Prime Minister of Alberta and also Provincial Treasurer, stood not in this building but a few blocks away at McKay Avenue school and delivered Alberta's first budget. Looking at that budget today, two things are striking: first, the simplicity and how small the numbers were and, second, the parallels between then and now.

Fiscal responsibility seems to have been bred in the bones of Albertans. Alberta's very first budget was balanced; in fact, they

projected a surplus of \$283,373.32. This year I'm proud to tell you that Alberta's budget is balanced for the 11th straight year.

Back in 1906, Mr. Speaker, when Alberta was brand new, one of the top priorities was infrastructure: building roads and bridges, building schools, digging ditches and water wells, and building the very first normal school for teachers. Investing in Alberta's infrastructure was critical at the beginning of Alberta's first century, and it is just as critical as we approach Alberta's second century. Look through that first budget and you'll see a line item outlining an investment of \$140,000 for the construction of this beautiful building, Alberta's Legislature. Imagine what \$140,000 would build today, and then imagine the foresight they had in designing this wonderful legacy.

Even in 1906 Alberta's leaders were looking at value-added agriculture and how to build a strong agricultural economy. Back then they invested \$250,000 in creameries to launch the province's dairy industry. Today we're struggling to deal with the impact of BSE, to get the borders open, and to rebuild confidence in Alberta's food industry. Mr. Speaker, we will succeed.

Education was another big priority in that first budget, just as it is today. But back then they spent the whopping sum of \$200,000 and had ambitious plans for 800 schools by the end of the year. Today \$200,000 would pay for about two classrooms, and we have thousands of them across the province.

One striking difference is in health care. You'll see today that health care is taking up more and more and more and more of our provincial budget, and its costs are growing at a dramatic rate. Not so in 1906. The entire budget for what was then called hospitals, charities, and public health was \$33,500, and it warranted only one line in the budget speech.

Taxes. There was no such thing as personal income taxes, but – and here it comes – Premier Rutherford served notice that it would be right and proper to tax lands outside school districts for school purposes, and because most of the other provinces received revenue from corporations like insurance companies, banks, loan companies, and telephone companies, he could see no reason why Alberta shouldn't as well. So corporate taxes were launched.

Much to my surprise, even then they were talking about Ottawa and guns. In this case the budget set aside \$1,200 for the Provincial Rifle Association to go to competitions in Ottawa.

Mr. Speaker, it's fun to look back at the numbers and see how things have changed since our province's early days. But to me, the most important lesson in Alberta's first budget comes in this quote from Premier Rutherford. He said:

We have no pessimists in Alberta – a pessimist could not succeed. We are optimistic and always look on the brighter side of affairs, and so long as we keep progressing in the future as we have in the past, we will, without a doubt, become the great premier Province in British North America.

In 1906 there was no room for pessimists in Alberta, and there's no room for pessimists today.

Albertans are mavericks, people who look challenges square in the face and see hope: hope for better solutions, hope for a better future for ourselves, our families, and our province. That was true in 1906, and it's certainly true today. Mr. Speaker, optimism and hope for the future are what this year's budget is all about.

3:40

This is a budget for Albertans. It's the budget that Albertans have asked for through countless meetings, letters, e-mails, phone calls, and consultations. Albertans want their children and young people to have the best education we can provide, and they'll get that with this budget. They want their health system to be there when they

need it, and this budget will help make that possible. They want strong and safe communities, a thriving economy with jobs for themselves, and a strong future for their children right here in Alberta. They want to make sure that their children get a safe and healthy start in life, that family violence becomes a thing of the past, and seniors and people who need help get the support they need. All those expectations are addressed in Budget 2004.

Frankly, Mr. Speaker, this is a budget that would only be possible in a province like Alberta. We have choices that are simply out of the question in any other parts of the country. We are a prosperous province, a province blessed with an abundance of resources and driven by the hard work of determined Albertans. The obligation of a prosperous province is to invest wisely, not to squander resources but also not to refuse to spend money where there are pressing needs and the opportunity to build a better future. That's the goal of Budget 2004: to seize every opportunity and to put our province on route and on course for an unparalleled success in our second century.

Let me now turn to the big picture and the highlights of Budget 2004. With this budget we will spend a total of \$22.6 billion. That's an increase of 6.1 per cent in operating spending for government programs and services. We expect the province's total revenues to be just under \$23 billion. That's a 9 per cent decrease from the current year's budget, primarily because like most private-sector forecasters we are assuming that the price of oil and gas will return to more sustainable levels this year. As announced, the amount of resource revenues we can spend each year on programs will increase from \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion this year. That's an amount we are confident that we can sustain.

In 1906 Premier Rutherford served notice to corporations to get ready to pay taxes to support essential government programs. Today I'm serving notice that for the fourth straight year taxes for Alberta's businesses will go down. The general corporate tax rate will drop from 12 and a half per cent to 11 and a half per cent. That's one step closer to our target of 8 per cent. The small business rate will drop from 4 per cent to 3 per cent. Together these reductions amount to savings of \$142 million this year for businesses, businesses that drive Alberta's economy and create lasting jobs for Albertans. We will also take steps to enhance Alberta's reputation as a business-friendly jurisdiction. Legislation dealing with income trusts and unlimited liability companies will be introduced this year.

Mr. Speaker, businesses are not the only ones to benefit from tax changes this year. Thanks to indexing of our 10 per cent single-rate personal tax, Albertans will save \$150 million in personal income taxes this year alone. School property tax rates are going down by 2.3 per cent, saving Albertans and Alberta businesses about \$20 million. Since 1993, Mr. Speaker, our government has dropped education property tax rates by over 27 per cent. So overall Albertans pay the lowest personal and business taxes in the country, and there's still no sales tax.

Mr. Speaker, our record on debt repayment is unparalleled. In the early 1990s our province was burdened by a crippling debt of \$23 billion. My fondest wish would be to stand here today and say that by the end of this year Alberta's debt will be gone, but that would be speculation, and budgets are not about speculation.

By March 2005 our debt will have dropped to just under \$3 billion, a drop of nearly 90 per cent. That puts us within striking distance of eliminating the debt, a truly remarkable achievement. I can tell you that if – and I say "if" – resource revenues are considerably higher than our forecast, my vote and the Premier's vote will be to seize the opportunity and hand Albertans, especially young Albertans like my son Troy, the best gift we could give, the gift of a debt-free province.

Mr. Speaker, I know that many people looking at today's budget will say that the forecasts are too low: how could we expect oil and gas prices and our resource revenues to drop when things are looking so good? Most industry observers expect energy prices to go down. The question is when and by how much. Because energy prices are always an unknown factor, our forecasts may be too low; they may be too high.

The reality is that with Alberta's new fiscal framework our budgets are no longer tied to the ups and downs of oil and gas prices. We don't need to watch the daily news wondering what impact the latest shock will have on our budget. We have protected Albertans against those shocks. Spending \$4 billion from resource revenues is the limit. That's all we can or will spend in the budget.

The only difference that the price of oil and gas makes is at the end of the year, when we have some real choices to make. If oil and gas revenues are higher than we expect – and I truly hope that they are – we have two choices and only two choices: we can put more money on the debt, or we can invest more in assets including capital.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot underestimate the strength of this new fiscal framework. Not only does the sustainability fund protect us from ups and downs in resource revenues, but it also allows us to respond to emergencies when they occur. This past year alone the sustainability fund was there to provide assistance to farmers and ranchers, to cover the extraordinary costs of last year's forest fires, and to shelter Albertans from high natural gas prices. This new fiscal plan works. It works for Albertans today, and it will keep working for Albertans as we begin the next century.

Another concern some may have about today's budget is the level of spending. It's a lot of money, and for someone like me who keeps a careful eye on the bottom line, I have to admit that it gives me some pause for thought. But I am convinced of two things. First, we are investing wisely in things that matter most and will help build a better future, and second, to quote Premier Rutherford: there are no pessimists in Alberta. We are confident that Alberta's economy will continue to grow, creating jobs and prosperity for Albertans and for our province, and with the continuing strong growth we will be able to afford this level of spending now and in the years to come.

3:50

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, we're not going to leave Alberta's future prosperity to chance. Last week our government unveiled a comprehensive 20-year plan to build a strong future for our province. The plan is built on four key pillars: unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in the global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Budget 2004 is designed to address each of these pillars and to put Alberta on course to a bright and prosperous future.

Today I want to highlight four key areas that underpin our plans. First, on learning. Our strategic plan commits us to be leaders in learning, and action on that commitment begins today. With Budget 2004 program spending on basic and postsecondary education will increase by 5.7 per cent to \$5.3 billion. In basic education an additional \$216 million will be spent in 2004-2005. The vast majority of that funding will go directly to school boards to be spent in classrooms across the province.

A new funding framework will be implemented giving school boards the flexibility they need to meet local priorities and local needs. Our approach is not to tell school boards how to spend the money, but we are confident that with the increases provided today, they will take positive steps to address parents' number one concern, and that's class sizes.

The first priority should be making sure that children who are just starting school have the opportunity to learn and succeed in classes

where they are not lost in the crowd. Our government has stated its commitment to implement other key recommendations from the Learning Commission report and further plans will unfold in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr. Speaker, the importance of education doesn't end when students graduate from high school. In a highly competitive global marketplace success depends on a qualified, highly-skilled, and productive workforce driven not just by hard work but by ideas, creativity, and innovation. With Budget 2004 we will provide an additional \$85 million in ongoing funding to colleges, technical institutions, universities, and apprenticeship programs across the province.

On top of a base funding increase of 4 per cent, increased access funding will create up to 2,000 new spaces over the next four years in high-priority program areas. Funding for scholarships, bursaries, and grants will increase by over 10 per cent, and close to 28,000 students will benefit from scholarships in 2004-2005 alone. We will also invest \$39 million to reduce students' debt load and reward them for successful completion of their programs.

Budget 2004 also begins our government's new investment in the future of Alberta's children. Through the Alberta centennial education savings plan our government will join with families across the province in investing in registered education savings plans for each and every child born or adopted in Alberta starting in January 2005.

Let me turn from education to the second big area in this year's budget, and that's health care. In Budget 2004 health will continue to take up the largest share of total government spending. This year alone spending by Health and Wellness will increase by 8.4 per cent, to a total of \$8 billion.

Mr. Speaker, increasing costs in health are causing alarm bells not only here in Alberta but all across the country. Our Premier has led the charge, warning Albertans that the future sustainability of our health system is at risk if we continue to pour more and more money into the status quo. Premiers across the country unanimously have said that unless there are major changes, Canada's health care system as we know it will not survive the decade.

The health care spending path we are on today is simply not sustainable. In the last nine years spending on health has more than doubled. More than 50 cents of every additional operating dollar in this year's budget goes to health care. That can't continue. In the past three years our government has taken good steps to renew and sustain our health system, but our message to Albertans, to the federal government, and to all Canadians is: something has to give.

We're spending more and more and more money on health care, and I have no doubt that you will hear in the weeks and months ahead that it isn't enough. If an increase of 8.4 per cent is not enough in the province of Alberta, how can other provinces expect to sustain their health systems?

Mr. Speaker, this is a national issue that will be played out in every province across the land. Yesterday's federal budget provided some welcome cash but no long-term commitment to sustainable funding. Canadians deserve better.

We're not waiting for the federal government. Once again Alberta will take a strong leadership role, trying new ideas and implementing new solutions to keep our health system on a sustainable track. As Premier Klein has often said, we should put up road signs welcoming people to Alberta, saying: welcome to Alberta; be prepared to think differently.

Albertans can expect to hear more this year about new ways to renew and sustain the health care system. I encourage them to consider each of the ideas with an open mind and with a fresh willingness to embrace change because that's the only way we will preserve and protect Alberta's public health care system.

The third area I want to highlight is our capital plan. All forecasts point to continued strong growth in Alberta's economy. In fact, we expect Alberta's economy to grow by 3.6 per cent in 2004. That translates into close to 43,000 new jobs this year and the lowest unemployment rate in the country. It also means that more people are choosing Alberta as the place to invest and to build their futures.

All that is good news to an already prosperous province, but it also means increasing strain on Alberta's infrastructure. For that reason, our new capital plan will increase our investment in essential capital projects to \$6.5 billion over the next three years, an increase of \$900 million. Mr. Speaker, that level of capital investment is not matched anywhere in Canada.

With that investment we can assure Albertans, though, that new schools will be built and others will get the renovations that they need. New spaces will be added to universities, colleges, and technical institutes. Leading-edge health facilities, long-term care centres, and new health equipment will help give Albertans access to quality health services. Alberta's network of roads and highways will be expanded and improved, and money will be invested in important capital projects including parks, housing, water and wastewater treatment, centennial projects, and community facilities.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, the final area I want to highlight today is communities. I've heard it said that everything that's important happens close to home, in communities where people live, work, and raise their families. A key part of Alberta's new strategic plan is to make Alberta the best place to live, to work, and to visit, and that starts with safe, secure, and vibrant communities. In recent months we've heard about the fiscal challenges faced by Alberta's municipalities, and today we're introducing a package of initiatives to address some of those concerns.

The first is policing. Provincial support for policing programs will increase by 50 per cent this year to a total of \$174 million. As a result of that increase, municipalities with populations under 5,000 will no longer pay for policing costs. That's a direct benefit to an additional 20 small communities across the province. Thirty-seven million dollars will be spent on new per capita policing grants for larger municipalities, and additional funds will be available to address other critical policing issues.

Important changes will also be made this year to ambulance services. Our government has received several reports indicating that ambulance services are health services and should be integrated with the health system. During this year we will begin the transition. We will consult with municipalities and health regions and develop plans for shifting responsibility for ground ambulance services, and by 2005-2006 funding to health regions for ambulance services will increase by \$55 million. The good news for municipalities is that this will free up money they can spend to meet other pressing needs.

Work is also underway on a new rural development strategy. While our government works hard to reopen the borders and restore confidence in Alberta's food industry, the impact on many rural communities has been devastating. This year our government will build on the work done by two MLAs, the hon. Member for Wainwright and the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, to develop a comprehensive Alberta strategy for rural development.

On top of those initiatives, Mr. Speaker, municipalities will also receive \$934 million over the next three years for transportation projects, supported through the municipal share of gas taxes and other provincial grants; increased funding for Alberta's centennial celebrations to support community, cultural, and historic facilities; additional capital funding for projects such as water and wastewater treatment projects; and interest-free loans to improve energy

efficiency. Mr. Speaker, that package of initiatives may not solve all the challenges faced by municipalities, but it will go a long way to free up essential funds and relieve the burden on local taxpayers.

As usual, there is never enough time to highlight all of the many initiatives in our government's annual budget. I can tell you that additional funds are also included for expanding programs for children, implementing a comprehensive approach to preventing family violence, improving maintenance enforcement, supporting people with disabilities, and providing much-needed assistance to seniors and to people who need our support. I encourage all Albertans to review the budget and find out more about these important developments.

So, Mr. Speaker, let me close today by summarizing the highlights of Budget 2004. It's a budget for Albertans, a budget that reflects our hopes, our dreams, and our optimism for the future. It's a budget that will provide our children with the best education and the best opportunity to learn, succeed, and build their futures. It's a budget that invests heavily in our health care system but also positions us to explore innovative approaches and seize the opportunity to secure a sustainable future for health care. It's a budget that will see new schools, new buildings on postsecondary campuses, new health facilities, new roads and highways. It's a budget that keeps Alberta's taxes the lowest in Canada, and it's a budget that puts us firmly en route to a prosperous and successful second century.

Mr. Speaker, it's a deep honour and privilege to serve Albertans and to present the province's 99th budget. Budgets reflect the hard work of a team of people working countless hours behind the scenes. Today I'd like to extend a special thanks to one member of the team, Alex Fowlie. He's here today with his family. He has been instrumental in 17 straight budgets, and now he thinks he's going to retire. Treasury Board meetings will never be the same. I don't know that we'll let him go, but we ask everyone to thank Alex for 17 years.

Mr. Speaker, like Finance ministers before me I stand here today filled with hope about the future of our province and confident that our budget plans will help secure the kind of future we all want for ourselves, our family, and our province. As Premier Klein has often said, given a choice between the past and the future, Albertans will choose the future every time.

Albertans began our first century with their eyes on a better future. They were filled with hope, ready to take on tough challenges, and confident that they would succeed. That same confidence, that same spirit of optimism and determination, remains a hallmark of Alberta today. Premier Rutherford was right: there are no pessimists in Alberta, not then and not now. We have become the great province Premier Rutherford envisioned back in 1906. Now we are en route to Alberta's next century, and I have no doubt that it will be even better than the first.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the House adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:10 p.m.]