

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 29, 2004**

**1:30 p.m.**

Date: 2004/03/29

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

### Prayers

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, at the conclusion of the prayer would you please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Now, would you please join in in the singing of our national anthem in the language of your choice. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

### Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!  
True patriot love in all thy sons command.  
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,  
The True North strong and free!  
From far and wide, O Canada,  
We stand on guard for thee.  
God keep our land glorious and free!  
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.  
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

**The Speaker:** Please be seated.

head:

### Introduction of Guests

**Ms Evans:** Mr. Speaker, I am actually thrilled today to rise and introduce a former neighbour and her accompanying guests. Anne Eastham is a well-known community advocate, a Guide leader, and a stalwart in our community. She and her husband, David, have made it a privilege and a lifetime to do community service. Today they are here with James Eastham – and in a moment I'll tell you why they are here – and Deven Doucette. A page in this Assembly, a beautiful young girl that's grown up to be a wonderful young lady, Beverly Eastham, is the object of their attention this afternoon. So on behalf of this Assembly, on behalf of Beverly I'd like to welcome her mother, her brother, and a friend. Please join me in that welcome.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Wamer.

**Mr. Jacobs:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly an honour for me today to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two very special people in my life. Seated in the members' gallery is my lovely and devoted wife, Linda, whom I welcome today. With her is our daughter Mrs. Candice Bullock, who is visiting with us today. Her mother and I are very proud and happy to have Candice with us today. I would invite them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Transportation.

**Mr. Stelmach:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I wish to introduce to you and through you to Members of this Legislative Assembly 53 visitors from Tofield high school. The sheer number of them visiting today has put them in both galleries, both in the public and mem-

bers' galleries. They are accompanied by a group leader, no stranger to this Assembly, who has brought many, many students to this Assembly for a visit, Mr. Fred Yachimec. Another teacher is Rick Bobier, and parent helpers are Sandra Borton and Lynn Sharpe. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Seniors.

**Mr. Woloshyn:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a frequent guest of this Assembly. He is a former constituent, former board member, and, I hope, a continuing supporter. I'd like to ask Gary Horan to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to introduce to you three members of the staff in my department who are involved in the communication of all the great news that our department has to offer. I would ask Cheryl Robb and Sheri Segin and Chris Bourdeau from communications of Community Development to please stand and take a very well-deserved bow and receive the thanks of all members here for the work you do.

Sorry, Mr. Speaker. I neglected Jennifer Mikula. If she would stand as well. Thank you.

**The Speaker:** Hon. the Premier, did you have an introduction?

**Mr. Klein:** No. He just did them.

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

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of people who've worked very hard over the last five weeks. They're here in the public gallery today to honour the Member for Edmonton-Riverview as he takes his place as the new leader for the Alberta Liberals and the Official Opposition. I'd like to ask them to rise as I call their names, please: Jeanette Boman, who would also be known as the partner of the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, his son Spencer Taft, Darryl Youzefowich, Kristin Murray, Dan Carroll, Barb Krahn, Shannon Sampert, Marie Carlson, Kieran Leblanc, Rick Miller, David Coumoyer, Kim Miller, Kevin McLuckie, Shannon Leblanc, and the rest of the Taft team. They've risen. If we can please give them the appropriate welcome for joining us in the gallery.

Thank you.

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

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm truly delighted today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House some of Edmonton's most vibrant, witty, and charming activists, known as the Raging Grannies. They bring style and humour to political struggles facing Albertans, Canadians, and the world. As I read their names I would ask them to please rise and remain standing until I ask the House to give them a warm welcome. They are seated in the public gallery: Betty Mardiros, Kathryn Sinclair, Marg Stephen, Annette Hik, Elvira Leibovitz, Virginia Daniel, Louise Swift, Linnie Chamberlin, and Gretchen Brundin. I'd now ask the House to give them a warm welcome.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for St. Albert.

**Mrs. O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two St. Albert constituents who I see are in the public gallery, Ken and Sandy Kordyback. They are both teachers in St. Albert. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

**Mr. Norris:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the House two constituents of mine who are seated in your gallery. Dave and Cheryl Andrews are the proud parents of the Speaker's page in the Legislature, Greg Andrews. I would ask that they rise and please accept the warm welcome of this House today.

1:40

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, earlier today I received a letter from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, a letter informing of his resignation of his position as the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition. In his letter he requested that the newly elected leader of the Liberal Party of Alberta, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, be recognized as the Leader of the Official Opposition. I will therefore recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview as the Leader of the Official Opposition of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta and now call on him for his first introduction.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, most of the guests that came today who I was going to introduce have already been introduced. But there are a couple who I would like to single out in particular, and those are Beth Kordyback and Alison Willard.\* Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of all members of the Assembly.

Thank you.

head:

### Oral Question Period

#### Rail Link to Fort McMurray

**Dr. Taft:** Mr. Speaker, NovAtel, Swan Hills, Gainers, the Magnesium Company of Canada: this government has a history of pouring millions of taxpayers' dollars into projects that become financial flops. Now Albertans are wondering if the Premier's latest project, the railroad to Fort McMurray, will be another money pit for the taxpayer, kind of like Homer Simpson's Springfield monorail. My questions are to the Premier. Alberta taxpayers want to know: if this is an economically viable project, why isn't the private sector paying 100 per cent of the bill?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, before answering that question, I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview for his decisive victory in this weekend's Liberal leadership vote. In our democratic society there is perhaps no greater honour for elected members than to be chosen as leader of the parties they serve, and I know the hon. member will lead his party with skill and passion and distinction. So on behalf of my colleagues in government it is my pleasure to welcome you, hon. member, to the position of Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition and to wish you well in your endeavours.

In response to the question, Mr. Speaker, there was an announcement today in Fort McMurray, as I understand it. Basically, our involvement at this point is to participate in a feasibility study to determine if in fact such a rail line is warranted. Beyond that, if it is

warranted and the decision is made, then a functional study will have to be undertaken, and of course there will have to be consideration as to the participation, if any, of the government. So this project has a long way to go yet.

**The Speaker:** The hon. leader.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why are the taxpayers footing the bill for a private-sector feasibility study? Aren't you just getting back into the business of being in business, Mr. Premier?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, this is in accordance with our policy, and that policy, as the hon. member points out, is absolutely right. The Financial Administration Act prohibits this government from becoming involved in the business of being in business. However, it is the policy of this government to participate in projects whereby infrastructure can be provided to accommodate major resource developments, in this case the oil sands.

Mr. Speaker, this speaks to the whole issue of not only rail transportation but the government's obligation down the road to do something with the vehicular transportation corridors, i.e. highway 63 and highway 881. This is truly a public/private partnership. Down the road there may be an opportunity for the government to become involved, and it might not be cash. It might be right-of-way, or it might be other ways to participate with the private-sector partners, those being the oil companies operating in the north – Syncrude, Suncor, Shell, CNRL, and others – and, of course, the railway company.

So, Mr. Speaker, this project has a long way to go. That's why we are participating now in the feasibility study to see if it makes sense.

**The Speaker:** The hon. leader.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you. Well, if the Alberta government does contribute taxpayer dollars to the feasibility study, how will the Premier ensure that those funds do not flow right back to his former chief of staff, who is the head lobbyist for this project?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, my chief of staff is not the head lobbyist for this particular endeavour. I think that on the surface the project has some merit, but that remains to be seen, and the feasibility study will determine that.

Relative to the flow back of money that is impossible. There will be a committee of ministers to act as the point people for the government's involvement. That committee is being headed by the hon. Minister of Economic Development and tourism. It involves the Minister of Municipal Affairs, one of the MLAs for the constituency; the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, the other MLA who's involved in the constituency; the Minister of Transportation, of course; and the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. So, Mr. Speaker, there are five ministers involved in overseeing and making sure that any government dollars are spent appropriately and in the right places and for the right reasons.

**The Speaker:** Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

#### Health Care Reform

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's launch of health care reform is sounding more and more like its launch of electricity deregulation. It's working hard to create artificial crises

\*These spellings could not be verified at the time of publication.

instead of addressing legitimate needs and making a host of promises that will never come true. Just like the government threw the electricity system into turmoil through its fumbled management, the government is throwing the health care system into needless turmoil too. To the Premier: will deregulated health care offer the same poor service and higher cost that deregulated electricity has brought to Albertans?

**Mr. Klein:** Well, Mr. Speaker, what we are saying is indeed what all Premiers and ministers of health are saying across the country, including the federal government, Liberals, Conservatives, and NDs alike. That is that the health care system as we know it today, the status quo, is simply not acceptable, and it needs reform as well as more dollars. But more dollars, as I've said before, represents one small piece of the puzzle. It needs substantial reform.

We have a program laid out relative to the steps we propose to take to bring about reform, and with respect to those specifics I'll have the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness respond.

**Mr. Mar:** Mr. Speaker, this provincial government is quite interested in learning from other jurisdictions throughout the world what works in their health care systems. We live in a multicultural nation. We live in a multicultural province. We benefit from the fact that people come from all over the world to live in this province, to live in this country. If we take advantage of health care professionals that we recruit from around the world, we should also be prepared to entertain the ideas that they bring with them from the health care systems in places like France or Sweden, Italy or New Zealand.

So, again, Mr. Speaker, our plan is to first lay out for Albertans to see what our current system is like in terms of its sustainability. I think that the Premier and others across Canada have come to the conclusion that it's not sustainable. Then we need to import ideas from around the world and ask: what will make sense here in this province? What can help make our system sustainable?

1:50

**The Speaker:** The hon. leader.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Premier: how does the Premier explain that his government is now spending more per capita on health care than 10 years ago, yet we have fewer hospital beds, we employ fewer RNs, and we have longer waiting lists? Where is the mismanagement?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, what the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition says is not entirely true. More procedures than ever are now being accommodated. We have more MRIs, more joint surgeries, more heart surgeries, more treatments for a variety of ailments and injuries than we ever had before. But the simple fact is that health care costs are due to a number of factors arising in every jurisdiction in the country, to the point where some Atlantic provinces now are seeing 50 per cent of their total provincial budgets consumed by health care spending.

Mr. Speaker, I said previously that the health care system as we know it today is simply not sustainable and changes need to be made. There is nothing wrong with looking at the best practices and taking the best out of various countries and other jurisdictions that rank higher than Canada in the delivery of health care services. What is wrong with that?

You know, this province has always had the courage to do things differently, and we've always had the courage to admit that maybe other jurisdictions do things better and to look at what those jurisdictions are doing and to do the same thing here. Mr. Speaker,

we want to do what is best for the taxpayers, what is best for the patients, and we want to do it at a price people can afford.

**The Speaker:** The hon. leader.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Romanow commission in fact did look at jurisdictions across Europe, many of the ones that have been listed by the Premier and the Minister of Health and Wellness, why don't they just accept the recommendations of the Romanow report?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, there were no recommendations relative to best practices used in other jurisdictions, no recommendations as to how those best practices could be implemented. The key to the Romanow report was to close the so-called gap between federal government spending on health care, which averages about 16 per cent, I believe, of total health care costs, to 25 per cent. That is the key to the Romanow recommendations, and when the Premiers and the health ministers meet, they talk about closing the Romanow gap. There's very little, if any, discussion whatsoever on any other components or aspects of his report.

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

#### Police Services

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on Friday the Solicitor General released a response to the Policing Alberta MLA review, a report which has cost tens of thousands of dollars and truly failed to deliver for many Albertans the answers to the concerns they had. My questions are to the Solicitor General. After two years of waiting, why did the Solicitor General fail to one way or another address the issue of photoradar on Alberta's highways?

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the hon. member. I think this government has done a fine job in addressing what was important to Albertans, and that's \$58 million of new funding to help municipalities in this province.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you. Again to the Solicitor General: given that the police feel that they can't clear their names and Albertans don't see resolution in cases of police wrongdoing, why didn't the Solicitor General take concrete action on the civilian oversight and police-investigating-police issue?

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I'd like to say that I take exception to that remark and that I think the police in this province do a very good job. Secondly, when she talks about citizens' oversight – and I've read some of her comments in the *Journal* – I don't think she really understands what citizens' oversight is about.

We are currently looking at all of the models available to us, Mr. Speaker, and there are two issues that I think have to be clearly identified. The first one is general complaints in regard to the police. There is a process in place that works very well for the citizens in this province. If they have a complaint against a police officer, they have the ability to have a complaint, and the chief of police at that particular time deals with that complaint. If they do not like what the chief of police comes back with, they have the ability to go to the Law Enforcement Review Board, which is an independent body from

government, to deal with that complaint. The Law Enforcement Review Board does a fantastic job for the citizens of this province.

One of the things that the hon. member is bringing forward is: how do we investigate serious complaints involved with the police? That could be an accident that has happened. It could go with criminal charges. One of the things that we're looking at at this particular time is that if an incident like that happens, it goes directly to my director of law enforcement. He then has the ability to call an outside police force and let them investigate, or if they need a special investigation team, then we will do that.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you. Again to the Solicitor General: since it took two years for the Solicitor General to deliver the government's response to this report, how long do Albertans have to wait for the corrections review and the victims of crime consultation report?

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has asked this question before. I had told her to please be patient because those reviews have financial implications to her. The police report was released on Friday, and she can stay tuned for the other two.

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

#### Insurance Costs

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Small businesses told this government last September that rising cost for business and auto insurance is their number one concern. A survey done by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which I will table at the appropriate time, shows that over half of their Alberta members experienced insurance rate hikes of at least 20 per cent last year. Meanwhile, the Insurance Bureau of Canada has reported that insurance industry profits were up 673 per cent in 2003. My question is to the Premier. Why has the government done nothing to address the number one concern of small business, namely skyrocketing insurance costs? Doesn't this government care about small business?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, I really take exception to the last part of his comment. Of course we care about small business. That's why we lowered taxes for small business.

If the truth be known, the whole government initiative relative to insurances was launched because of the concerns of small business, particularly those who use vehicles, plumbing outfits and welding outfits, and those involved in apprenticeship programs. Basically there were a number of complaints to this government that these small businesses couldn't hire people between the ages of 16 and 25 because their insurance rates would go sky high. So we took action. We took very definitive and very positive action to make it illegal for insurance companies to penalize good male drivers between the ages of 16 and 25, whereas under the old rules those people were penalized simply because they were between the ages of 16 and 25 and because they were male. There was no reward for being a good driver. Now there is. That to me is positive and definitive action.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given the Premier's evasive reply and his failure to address the real insurance issue, not auto insurance, why has the government failed to act on

the CFIB's call for an independent review of the insurance industry as a whole and the government's failure to regulate it?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, we weren't getting complaints vis-à-vis other forms of insurance; i.e., home insurance, building insurance, life insurance. The bulk of the complaints were over automobile insurance, PL/PD.

Relative to other insurance I'll have the minister respond. I don't know whether it would be the hon. Minister of Finance or the Minister of Government Services or both.

2:00

**Mrs. Nelson:** Well, Mr. Speaker, clearly, hon. members opposite know, as do Albertans, that we have been focusing on the issue that was brought to us by a number of our small businesses and a number of young people who were involved in apprenticeship programs or training programs where the price of automobile insurance was prohibitive and was keeping young people from entering some of the trades. This was a real concern in a province that's growing as rapidly as Alberta is growing and desperately needs young people entering trades, that they were not able to be hired because of the price of automobile insurance.

This led us into a very long, protracted review of automobile insurance in this province. As you know, we appointed the Member for Medicine Hat to head up an implementation team to bring forward recommendations that would provide Albertans with accessible, affordable, and comparably priced insurance so that they would not be precluded from entering some of the programs that were there. This has been a long process, Mr. Speaker, and I believe that we are on target and on track to being operational, finally, with the co-operation of the industry that works within this province to have a new structure to present to Albertans this summer.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that no one over there has apparently read the CFIB report, will the Premier support the New Democrats' call for an all-party Legislature committee to review skyrocketing insurance rates for small business and the nonprofit sector, and if not, why not?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is correct; I haven't read the report. This is a national federation, as I understand it, and what the hon. member is talking about is obviously not exclusive to Alberta or peculiar to Alberta but is a problem across Canada. I would suggest that he contact the appropriate federal authorities through, perhaps, Mr. Layton, who heads his national party, to see if something can be done on the national scene.

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

#### Education Property Tax Rate

**Mr. Vandermeer:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In last week's budget this government announced that the mill rate for education property taxes was going down. However, discussions with stakeholders have reported the opposite to be true. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Can the minister please explain this inconsistency?

**Mrs. Nelson:** Well, Mr. Speaker, in the budget that I tabled here last week, we did clearly indicate that the property tax rate would in fact go down by 2.3 per cent insofar as the school property tax rate within the province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I can say that the hon. member may be confusing the issue of the additional dollars that would be collected overall in the province because, quite frankly, we have more people living in the province today, this year than we did a year ago. We have a huge migration of people that come to this province on an annual basis, and as such there is more money that is in fact collected. We've said many times that people come to Alberta, but they don't bring their roads and their schools and their hospitals with them, so they participate in the taxation base in the province of Alberta willingly because this is a place of choice.

So we did lower the burden by reducing it 2.3 per cent, but there are more people who are paying the school property assessment.

**Mr. Vandermeer:** Can the minister please explain why in 2001 the government promised Albertans that we would cap revenue from education property taxes at \$1.2 billion and now with the recent budget we've moved away from this policy again?

**Mrs. Nelson:** Well, Mr. Speaker, three years ago when we introduced a budget, we recognized that the migration to this province was large – there was construction going on – and as such the impact and the stress on our education system had to be addressed. Clearly, the direction was in fact to capture the growth, freeze the mill rates or reduce them and capture the growth of the province from the migration here, and that's what we've done. But that's not new. This is three years old.

**Mr. Vandermeer:** In light of all this, why does this government expect municipalities, who are already hard-pressed for adequate funding, to collect provincial education property taxes and send it in?

**Mrs. Nelson:** Well, Mr. Speaker, the vehicle that we have today to collect dollars for support of education has been through the local property assessment. Now, I know that there have been talks of other mechanisms, but this is the vehicle that we have in place today.

Now, I can tell you – and the Minister of Municipal Affairs may want to supplement my answer – that municipalities had an awful lot of initiatives in a package that went forward to help them address some of the pressure points that they were facing this current year. I think they received a tremendous benefit from this year's budget package, and I would ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs to respond to some of the initiatives in that package.

**The Speaker:** I think we're going to move on. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

#### Support for Low-income Albertans

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to look after the interests of millionaires and forgets about the interests of the poor and the unfortunate of this province. The horse racing industry and government spin doctors receive an increase any time they seem to ask for it, it appears, but again the poor and unfortunate do not. My first question is to the Premier. Given that the Premier spends on occasion more in a restaurant for one meal than some welfare recipients get in a month, when will this government increase the benefit package for welfare recipients and also those who are on AISH?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, the preamble is very offensive, provocative, untrue. As a matter of fact, for lunch today I had one of those microwaveable things. From time to time I do take people out for lunch but don't spend that much on myself at lunch.

**An Hon. Member:** What about the orange juice?

**Mr. Klein:** The orange juice was \$2.70 a glass, which is not unreasonable. It's only unreasonable for the Liberals, who I'm sure at their convention this weekend were spending a lot more per glass of orange juice than \$2.70. I'm addressing the preamble because the preamble was, as I said, unnecessary, provocative, and offensive, Mr. Speaker.

The money that the hon. member alludes to relative to horse racing, the \$45 million, is not a taxpayer handout to the horse racing industry. These are funds raised from slot machines at racing entertainment centres located at horse racing tracks. The \$45 million is what we estimate the industry will receive this year. It is not a subsidy. It is the proceeds that the industry will earn by opening and operating a racing entertainment centre.

I will add that this money helps support the horse racing industry, which employs, I understand, about 7,000 or 8,000 people, many Albertans, many of whom, relative to racing in Edmonton, reside in the constituency of Edmonton-Highlands and other constituencies around the racetrack.

Mr. Speaker, approximately one-third of the revenue from these racing entertainment centres goes into the Alberta lottery fund, so it comes to government, and it supports other programs such as community-based programs, health programs, education programs.

So this is not, as the hon. member suggests, a \$45 million handout by the government. This is something that was negotiated with the horse racing industry and does a tremendous amount of good relative to employment and a tremendous amount of good relative to facilitating various community endeavors.

2:10

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, I'd like to remind you all that as I look at the agenda for the next two months, this being March, going into April and then into May, I see something like 29 to 30 days being devoted to the debate of the budget. This is the question period.

The hon. member.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: can the hon. Premier live on \$855 a month? That is the maximum amount that one of the 8,000 people in Calgary living on AISH gets. Can you live on that amount?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, it's not a matter of whether I live on it or not. I do not apply, nor am I a beneficiary of the program called assured income for the severely handicapped. I am not a recipient of that particular program, which, by the way, is unique in Canada.

Relative to the program itself and the funding for that program I'll have the hon. minister responsible for that program respond.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Dunford:** Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The AISH program, that has been in this province now for probably 20 years, has evolved over time. There have been changes to the benefit level. More importantly, what the hon. member asking the question seems to refuse to acknowledge both today and in previous questions regarding this particular matter – he wants to ignore the flexibility that we've put in the AISH system. There are people on AISH that every once in a while will incur an emergency situation. When that happens, we have the flexibility inside that program to move that person temporarily off AISH onto some other type of program and deal with the matter and then, of course, have them back on AISH.

People in this province like AISH because, just as the Premier mentioned, it's assured income for the severely handicapped, and it's meant to provide, then, for the kinds of things that they face and that they have to endure. Mr. Speaker, families help out as well. You ought to be clear on this.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier. Given that since 1997 this government has increased spending by over 50 per cent, why have AISH and SFI recipients not received even an increase that will match the increase in the cost of living? Why are you neglecting the poor of this province?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, I can allude generally to the philosophy and the policy of this government. That policy is to provide help wherever necessary to people who are on SFI or, indeed, on AISH. We help them obtain employment. We put in skills upgrading programs, job retraining programs. The hon. minister had the opportunity to announce today a program that addresses specifically those on SFI, and I'll have him elaborate on that program.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Dunford:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We did in fact announce Alberta Works earlier today. In that system what we are doing is bringing a more individualized approach. We are going to work with all of the people that come forward looking for our assistance. We're going to deal with them on a more individualized basis, and we're going to deal to a great extent in terms of need.

Now, no one would deny that there's some income that's going to be required and there are going to have to be shelter allowances. We know all that. But if anyone fixates on the actual income itself, I believe that they're in danger of asking us as a government to basically keep these people inside a welfare wall.

What we in Human Resources and Employment have said is that we're going to bring forward benefits, benefits that are in kind in many cases, things that support the person as they try to move, then, from dependence on government to independence, as most Albertans want. They want to be self-reliant. We're trying to help with that.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

#### Funding for Policing

**Mrs. O'Neill:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In last week's budget, which was tabled in this Assembly, the Solicitor General or her department was identified as allocating significant new funding to municipalities for policing costs. My understanding is that the amount quoted was \$16 per capita. However, there seems to be some confusion as to how that money is to be allocated. So my question is to the Solicitor General. Is the \$16 all new money for policing for each municipality?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated earlier, the government under Budget 2004 includes \$58 million in extra funding to bolster the police services in Alberta. I have to say that it's a 50 per cent increase and brings our total funding for policing to \$174 million for 2004-2005. This increase includes reallocating the 16 and a half million dollars from the unconditional municipal grant program to policing programs. Municipalities required to pay for policing will get, as indicated, a \$16 per capita grant for policing,

which does not include previous funding but is now directed to policing. For example, hon. Member for St. Albert, the old unconditional grant that you had previously received was approximately \$287,000. Now provincial money for policing in St. Albert is about \$849,000, or an increase of about 195 per cent.

**Mrs. O'Neill:** My first supplemental is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. In the previous allocation of unconditional grants to municipalities are you aware that each municipality allocated the full amount to policing, or are they variable around the province?

**Mr. Boutilier:** Mr. Speaker, the \$16.5 million that has been distributed to Alberta municipalities, both urban and rural, in the past was going to the municipalities as unconditional grants. Wherever municipalities chose to use it was their own decision. I can say that a large majority of those municipalities used them specifically for policing. So, ultimately, at the end of the day, in meeting with both the rural association and the urban association, which is the AUMA and the AAMD and C, it was considered that a chunk of money, that the Solicitor General has talked about, would go directly into policing based on a top priority that was identified by their citizens in the individual municipalities.

**Mrs. O'Neill:** My second supplemental is back to the Solicitor General, Mr. Speaker. With respect to more funding for policing will some of it go to crime prevention measures within respective communities, or will they be province-wide programs?

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Well, Mr. Speaker, that's a good question. Crime prevention and restorative justice are also vital as we keep our communities safe, so in the budget we've announced another extra \$1 million for crime prevention and restorative justice, which will help, we believe, keep the communities safe, and they can apply for a grant.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, we are also continuing funding for our IROC, which is the integrated response to organized crime, which is an additional \$5 million so that they can deal with organized crime, which is affecting communities all over the province.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

#### Support for Low-income Albertans

*(continued)*

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is again to the hon. Premier. Given that 1 in 5 children in the city of Edmonton grow up in poverty, when will this government cut its excessive travel and communications budget, take the \$50 million in savings and reinvest it in those children?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, our Minister of Children's Services is here. I don't know if that figure, 1 in 5, is in fact true. Edmonton is approximately 1 million people, give or take. What he's saying is that 200,000 children are living in poverty. That is absolutely astounding. That is unbelievable. I think that the hon. member doth exaggerate a lot, a tremendous amount. That is unbelievable in this day and age in this city in particular. I travel this city. I have never seen 200,000 impoverished kids. Never. Never. Never.

That reminds me of a statement that was made by, well, an interim leader. I think there were about nine leaders of the Liberal Party across the way including the one we have right now. One of the Liberal leaders made this outrageous statement, and she was a

respected . . . [interjection] No, no. She was well respected, but she talked about all of these people like every one was living in a dumpster. This hon. member is making the same kind of statement, a grossly, severely, inaccurately exaggerated statement.

Relative to the real situation I'll have the hon. minister respond.

2:20

**Ms Evans:** Mr. Speaker, quite specifically for children in need we have a child need program, but this is the government that five years ago spent \$467 million. In this budget that was just announced, five years later, this government spent on children's services \$740 million, higher than anyplace in the country.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that 8,000 Calgarians receiving AISH have seen no substantial increase to match inflation in that city, why does this government continue to support the horse racing industry and leave those recipients on AISH wondering where their next meal is going to come from or how they're going to pay their rent?

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, I've already set the record straight relative to the horse racing industry and the 7,000 or 8,000 people that that industry employs – many of those people wouldn't otherwise be employed – and how they have to earn the money they get and how it is not a government handout.

Relative to the situation with respect to AISH the hon. minister responded, but I'll have him respond again if he so desires.

**Mr. Dunford:** Yes. Thank you. Perhaps for the benefit of the hon. member and other members, Mr. Speaker, they need to be advised that we will be organizing and carrying out a formal review of AISH come this fall.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that this government wants recipients of AISH and SFI to be more self-reliant, why does that not apply to the horse racing industry? Why is that industry not self-reliant? Why does it need \$45 million?

**The Speaker:** Well, actually, there are three questions there.

**Mr. Klein:** Mr. Speaker, it's revenue generated by the horse racing industry. All we have done as a government is allowed through legislation or regulation the vehicle for them to raise revenues. So the hon. member is comparing apples and oranges and pears and grapefruits and grapes and everything else he can, but that is so typical of the way they operate. It is a philosophy of creating confusion or, better said, a philosophy of not knowing what they're talking about and thereby creating confusion.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

### Rail Link to Fort McMurray

(continued)

**Mr. Danyluk:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As indicated earlier, there is much interest and discussion throughout the province about the proposed northern rail link to Fort McMurray and the oil sands. In the Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency this project has also instigated conversation and questions. My first question is to the Minister of Transportation. How will this proposed rail link affect our current highway system and the current project scheduled for highway 881?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Stelmach:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Thursday last the government of Alberta tabled its three-year construction and preservation plan for the Ministry of Transportation. Included in that plan are I believe seven projects on highway 881, six projects on highway 63 north of Fort McMurray, three projects on highway 813, and numerous other very badly needed highway projects in that part of Alberta.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Danyluk:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the Minister of Energy. Why are we considering this rail link proposal at this stage of the oil sands development?

**Mr. Smith:** Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a good question because the oil sands are actually going to be the new royalty base for this province. If you look at the mining projects, the magnitude of the mining projects that are going on up there, we need to provide safe, reliable, dependable transportation that moves fabricated product, vessels, and items of such size and magnitude that cannot be normally moved through normal highway transport means by rail. This in fact could increase productivity and lessen the Crown's exposure to cost overruns. If you think that by 2017 some 3 million barrels per day may be produced up there, the benefit to Albertans at roughly today's oil prices would be in the neighbourhood of a billion dollars a month.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Danyluk:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the Minister of Economic Development. What economic development could we expect from a project of this magnitude if it was to go ahead?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Norris:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you're aware, we returned from Fort McMurray this morning, where the project was reviewed and announced that the government will partake in it.

I wanted to correct an erroneous statement made by the opposition before I answer the hon. member's question. This study is in no way committing the government to anything other than looking at the 30-year horizon of transportation challenges that are facing that area in highway 881, highway 63, and the rail links. To make some loose association to MagCan, NovAtel, and things of that nature is just preposterous. This is a great opportunity for Albertans to sort of tackle the problem that's coming out of that massive economic spinoff that's going to come there.

The bottom line of all this, Mr. Speaker, is that we anticipate about \$55 billion worth of projects to be going ahead now or in the future. The economic spinoff that is generally accepted is about 20 per cent of that, so for that northeast region you could be looking at about \$11 billion worth of potential economic spinoff. As a prudent government we have to do everything in our power to make sure that that investment is not only maximized but takes place and doesn't go to Venezuela or somewhere else.

### Edmonton Ring Road

**Mr. Bonner:** Mr. Speaker, on its own web site this government states that the southeast leg of the Edmonton ring road would cost \$225 million under the public model. To the Minister of Transportation: what is the estimated cost of the southeast ring road extension as a P3 project?

**Mr. Stelmach:** The cost of the project will be better determined once we proceed to the next stage of the request for proposals. As I mentioned earlier, there were six companies that had answered the request for qualifications. We boiled that down to three, and the next stage will be proceeding soon.

**Mr. Bonner:** To the same minister: what are the estimated annual lease payments and the principal and interest costs of this project expected to be?

**Mr. Stelmach:** Mr. Speaker, I believe that what the hon. member is trying to get at – and once again the opposition is opposing all kinds of public/private partnerships, whether they make good economic sense or not. I'd mentioned in this House that when we get to that particular point, when we have looked at the project and the kinds of proposals that come in – I've also said in this House before that we also have some cost comparison models, public cost comparison models, we can use. We have projects in Calgary of equal size and also the southwest leg of the Anthony Henday, which has quite similar construction interchanges and bridges and some of those other issues that we have to deal with on that particular leg. So those two will be good cost comparisons to see if we're getting a good investment on behalf of the taxpayers here in the province.

2:30

**Mr. Bonner:** Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how can this minister allocate hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to a P3 project without knowing the cost?

**Mr. Stelmach:** Mr. Speaker, when we put out a highway to tender, we don't run out there and say, "Well, you know, this highway from Edmonton to Calgary is going to be \$200 million, and the closest company to come to \$200 million gets the contract." We don't do business that way. We actually put it out for a request for proposal, and we get the best deal, the best value for the dollar. We won't know that until such time as this portion, the next stage of the request for proposals, comes forward. Then those particular companies will tell us how much they're going to pay, what will be the annual lease payments.

But over and above, Mr. Speaker, now is the time for innovation, when companies come forward and rather than using maybe straight steel on some of the interchanges, maybe a mixture of steel and concrete in terms of getting another better value because right now, you know, steel has increased by at least 30 per cent. Those are some of the cost drivers we're dealing with recently. So I believe that at the end of this period, in about six months, we'll have some good news for the hon. member and all Albertans.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, on Thursday last an exchange of questions between the Minister of Seniors and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre occurred. I believe today that the Minister of Seniors would like to supplement an answer, which would allow the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to ask an additional question.

### Seniors' Benefits

**Mr. Woloshyn:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You're right; on Thursday I did indicate some figures, and I'd like to clarify my answers.

A single senior whose income is up to \$23,440 and a senior couple with an income of up to \$37,880 receive a full premium exemption. Single seniors with incomes between \$23,441 and \$26,960 and a senior couple between \$37,881 and \$44,920 receive a partial premium exemption. The total result, Mr. Speaker, is that

approximately 58 per cent of seniors receive either a full or partial exemption.\*

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Ms Blakeman:** Well, I continue on my earlier question, which is: what is the minister doing to work with his colleagues to eliminate all health care premiums for all seniors?

**Mr. Woloshyn:** Well, Mr. Speaker, my position on that issue is on the record. I will continue to work with my colleagues to ensure that we can get whatever programs we can to enhance seniors' programs in this province.

head:

### Recognitions

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

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

### Alberta Scene

**Mr. Maskell:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize Alberta's artists, our arts organizations, and supporters of the arts, all of whom contribute so much to the vibrancy of our great province. In this regard it was my great pleasure recently to join our Minister of Community Development at the Citadel Theatre for the announcement of Alberta Scene. Hosted by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Alberta Scene will showcase over 600 of our province's artists and arts organizations at 94 events in 19 venues over 13 days during April and May 2005. Artists from all disciplines across Alberta are invited to submit an application to attend, which can be downloaded from [www.albertascene.ca](http://www.albertascene.ca).

Alberta Scene will attract even more national and international opportunities for our artists during Alberta's centennial year, and in the fall of 2005 the National Arts Centre orchestra will tour several Alberta communities thanks to EPCOR.

Promoting our province through the arts is a great way to salute and thank the dynamic art sector of Alberta.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

### Lesla Stringer

**Mr. Lord:** Well, Mr. Speaker, Calgary-Currie is certainly the constituency of champions. Recently I introduced my musician friend Lee Mayes here, and you may know Malcolm Mayes, the *Edmonton Journal's* outstanding political cartoonist. Well, my constituent is their cousin. You may have heard of Reuben Mayes, the Saskatchewan phenomenon, arguably the best football player to ever come out of Canada, and my constituent is Reuben's little sister. Pierre Lueders, world champion bobsledder, brother-in-law of our minister of economic affairs, is this lady's coach.

She's Lesla Stringer, a proud mother of three. She is also second runner-up for the Mrs. Calgary contest and a Nike and P & G model. But never mind her good looks and public speaking abilities; what she's really famous for is her athletic abilities. A Canadian national track and field champion, winner of numerous honours, she now has her sights set on winning gold for Canada in the 2006 Olympics as one of our top national women's bobsled team athletes.

So far she has three American Cup second place finishes, she finished fourth overall in the World Cup, and she broke two international start time records, thus helping qualify the first-ever Canadian women's bobsled team that got into the Olympics.

Way to go, Lesla. Calgary-Currie and all of Canada are proud of you.

\*See p. 702, right col., para. 12



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

### Raging Grannies

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Premier confirmed that he has dire plans for health care in Alberta, plans that will usher in a two-tiered health care system. Well, I'm proud to stand and recognize the Raging Grannies, who fight against health care privatization using good humour, wit, and dedication. The Edmonton chapter of the Raging Grannies has a dozen or so members who can be seen in their trademark eye-catching hats and granny clothing singing their own brand of politically conscious satire.

The Premier told the federal Tory convention that the Grannies like to protest and would attack his plan for a two-tiered health care system. Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier was right on this one. But far from being mere placard-waving protesters, I know them to be true crowd-pleasers and favourites among Edmontonians, the vast majority of whom support a public health care system.

Mr. Speaker, it's truly an honour to recognize the Raging Grannies and to thank them for their unwavering defence of public health care and their campaign for the implementation of the Romanow recommendations in order to further strengthen and transform our health care system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

### Taryn Penrice

**Mrs. Jablonski:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great honour to rise in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to recognize one of Alberta's Great Kids, 18-year-old Taryn Penrice of Red Deer. Taryn was just 13 years old when she was diagnosed with T-cell leukemia and admitted to the Children's hospital in Calgary in critical condition to begin two years of intensive cancer treatment. Although doctors feared for Taryn's life, she was able to make it through and managed to inspire all those around her.

Taryn decided during her battle with cancer that she wanted to help others. In May 2003 she organized a head-shaving fundraiser at her high school, Hunting Hills, that raised over \$14,000. Her greatest fundraising accomplishment to date was a golf tournament called Golf a Kid to Cure, which she organized with two of her friends and raised \$76,000 for cancer. Taryn hopes to organize an annual Golf a Kid to Cure tournament, and this year she hopes to raise \$100,000.

Thanks to her loving, supportive family, her strength, and her dedication to others Taryn has already made a big difference in this world and was recognized on March 12, 2004, by the Premier, Colleen Klein, and the Minister of Children's Services for her achievements.

I would ask all members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating Taryn for her personal victory over cancer and for all the great work that she does for others. She's truly one of Alberta's Great Kids.

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

### Lamont High School Boys Curling Team

**Rev. Abbott:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Transportation, the MLA for Vegreville-Viking, I wish to recognize and congratulate the Lamont high school boys team on winning the provincial gold medal in curling. The gold-medal team

consists of skip Nick Koroluk; third Jason Starko, who is the minister's grand-nephew; second Colin Sheptycki; and lead Chris Cholak; coaches Rick Koroluk and Joanne Martz; and teacher/adviser Irene Hackett.

Mr. Speaker, this team won their league in Lamont, the zone finals in Lac La Biche, and the provincial championship, which was held in Drayton Valley, Alberta. I hear that in typical curling fashion this game was a nail-biter all the way. I would ask all the colleagues to join the minister and I in congratulating the Lamont high school boys team.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

2:40

### Calgary's International Avenue

**Mr. Cao:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to rise and speak about a group of people who have brought an innovative approach in urban community planning. I want to recognize the key players in this process: graduate student Gian-Carlo Carra and Professor Robert Kirby of the U of C, Alison Karim-McSwiney and the staff of the International Avenue Business Revitalization Zone, and the FGL Society, the city planning staff, and the caring community leaders, residents, and business owners in this area.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, this area is well known in Calgary as International Avenue, a stretch of 17th Avenue in the southeast of Calgary from Deerfoot Trail to the eastern city border. This International Avenue is about 35 blocks in length with over 400 businesses. The avenue is an authentic mix of businesses of almost all cultural heritages. It's a mosaic of the world in the city of Calgary.

Last week the group launched a charrette. Charrette is a French word for small cart. The idea is to bring all stakeholders together and collect their ideas and have sessions on problem solving and vision design. The charrette process will bring greatness to our corner of the city.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

### Lee Ridge School

**Dr. Massey:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I recognize the outstanding work being done by the principal and staff of Lee Ridge school in Edmonton-Mill Woods. This school will do almost anything to bring students and books together. Their recent readathon is a case in point.

Organizer Allison Winchester brokered a contract with the following terms: if the students read over 3,000 hours, Principal Caroline Missal would (a) dye her hair green, (b) eat something blecky, and (c) kiss a donkey. Well, Principal Missal needs a new business adviser, for last week the students met the contract. In total they read over 4,140 hours. True to the terms of the agreement, last Wednesday the principal sat on the gym stage and had her hair dyed green; then, as she tried to avoid her fate, something blecky, a haggis, was piped into the gym and she was force-fed three helpings; and finally, Andy the donkey was led onto the stage, and she planted three big smackers on his nose, all of this royally presided over by Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor of the province, Lois Hole.

Congratulations, Lee Ridge. Your students gain not only the reading but an appreciation of what dedicated, professional teachers are willing to do on their behalf.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising to table today five copies of a letter written to myself from the Minister of Learning signed by the Minister of Learning, the Minister of Alberta Seniors, the leader of the New Democrat opposition, and the MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods, being the Liberal critic with respect to Learning and, I gather, Seniors. The gist of the letter is that they have switched positions on the Committee of Supply. It was agreed to by the opposition and agreed that we should table it today just so that the House is aware of the agreement to switch the time so that Alberta Learning would appear on the afternoon of April 22 and Alberta Seniors would appear before the Legislature on the afternoon of May 6, rather than as was designated in the memo tabled previously.

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

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands I'd like to table a document. It's a letter from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business dated September 5, 2003, warning the Finance minister of the increasing cost of and difficulty of access to commercial insurance for small- and medium-sized business.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Speaker:** Others?

Hon. members, I'm tabling today the appropriate number of copies of a letter from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods advising of his resignation as Interim Leader of the Official Opposition and also advising that the Alberta Liberal Party had selected the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview as its new leader.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 25, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, and 45.

[Motion carried]

**Property Theft in Agriculture,  
Food and Rural Development Department**

Q28. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

**Ms Blakeman:** Mr. Speaker, I urge all members to accept this. It's a reasonable request. I hope the government is going to accept it. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to rise to move an amendment to the motion in the interest of dealing with a number of questions on the Order Paper dealing with the same matter but with respect to different departments. The amendment would read

that Written Question 28 be amended by adding "and the departments referred to in written questions 29, 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive, 72, 73, 80, and 81," after "Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development."

The amended question would then read as follows:

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and the departments referred to in written questions 29, 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive, 72, 73, 80, and 81 for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

I understand that the amendment has been appropriately circulated.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the amendment.

**Ms Blakeman:** Yes. Thank you. I will note that the Official Opposition was in receipt of this amendment, faxed over at 10:49 a.m. today, and it is signed off by Parliamentary Counsel on the 25th of March, the last sitting day prior to the amendment being proposed in the House. So those two tests have been met, Mr. Speaker.

I also note and I will happily note that this is a good way to start off this afternoon. My commendation to the House leader for the government. What we have here is exactly the situation, I think, that the Speaker was guiding us toward last week, in that we have an identical question that has merely been enlarged to refer to other departments that are referred to in other written questions. So from the point of view of the opposition, who was seeking that information, assuming that the government is going to provide us with that information, at this point we are willing to accept the amendment.

Essentially, what it's doing is then: "What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and . . ." and then the departments referred to in the written questions that are listed as part of the amendment include Economic Development, Transportation, Municipal Affairs, Infrastructure, Solicitor General, Seniors, Justice and the Attorney General, Gaming, Community Development, Children's Services, Innovation and Science, Learning, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and Health and Wellness. Those are the departments that actually correspond to the written question numbers that are contained in this amendment.

This is exactly the kind of leadership we were looking for the government to take. We are more than happy to support this amendment, and we look forward to receiving the information that would flow from the acceptance of this amendment and, indeed, of the question.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

2:50

**The Speaker:** Now, on the motion as amended, do you wish to close the debate, hon. member?

**Ms Blakeman:** No. I'm happy to support it with the amendment as it is.

[Written Question 28 as amended carried]

**The Speaker:** Now, what this means, hon. members, is that you should take your pencils out and cross out Written Question 28, having been dealt with, Written Question 29, having been dealt with, written questions 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive, and 72, 73 and 80, 81.

### Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped and Supports for Independence

Q31. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How many of the 30,271 assured income for the severely handicapped and 28,278 supports for independence cases recorded in the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment 2002-2003 annual report included children?

**Mr. MacDonald:** Mr. Speaker, this is vital information. There have been comments made earlier, as late as question period today but earlier on, in regard to the number of children who are unfortunately living in poverty or in poverty-related conditions in this province.

Certainly, one only had to go to the mac and cheese luncheon last week, that so many of the hon. members from the government side attended, found the time out of their busy schedules to attend. It was at that event where the Inner City Agencies Foundation gave to each and every person who was at the mac and cheese dinner a fact sheet. The fact sheet started with the simple headline Poverty Hurts and then went on to point out that 1 in 5 children in Edmonton live in poverty and that over 16,000 Edmonton families earn less than \$15,000 annually.

Now, this written question would go a long, long way to answering some of those questions. We can't fault the children. We've got to support and encourage the children. If we know just exactly who is most likely to be affected by low benefit rates for families who are living on AISH or for those who are living on supports for independence, or welfare – there's the perception that a lot of these individuals can work, but that is known not to be true. Many of the AISH recipients for one reason or another, through no fault of their own have a disability and cannot work. People who can work are usually working.

The same applies to supports for independence, or welfare. You look at the drop in caseloads over 10 years. It's gone down from over 90,000 to, in this case, for welfare rates, 28,278. To find out how many of these files or cases would include children is important in light of the hon. Premier's reaction to my question earlier in question period.

We have to improve. We have to improve the benefit packages for those cases if for no other reason than for the children. No child should be left without in this province. Other jurisdictions are talking about no child being left behind. There's certainly been a corporate campaign to increase public awareness of children and issues surrounding them and the circumstances of poverty. But I would remind all members of this House when we're discussing Written Question 31 that SFI is the income source of last resort for Albertans, and it is sort of the finest mesh in the social welfare net. We cannot forget the children, Mr. Speaker.

So, in conclusion, let's look at a couple receiving SFI, and if they get \$772 a month and they have one child, how much does that leave? If there was one adult and one child and they were to receive 820 bucks, let's say, plus medical benefits, there's not going to be much money left at the end of the month.

We need to know how many children are currently living, shall I say, within those individual files? We have to improve their circumstances. It is inconceivable that in a province as wealthy as this, where we have increased budgets in other manners with no regard it seems, we're willing to allow these people to grow up frustrated and marginalized.

I certainly hope that I will receive the information that I am seeking under Written Question 31. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Seniors.

**Mr. Woloshyn:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague the Minister of Human Resources and Employment I'd like to say that the government is prepared to accept Written Question 31.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes. To conclude debate, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. Minister of Seniors and thank the Department of Human Resources and Employment. I look forward to receiving the information.

[Written Question 31 carried]

### Correctional Facilities

Q35. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

Which correctional facilities is the Solicitor General planning to close, and what is the timetable for the closures?

**Ms Blakeman:** The Solicitor General had mused at one time about closing certain correctional facilities in the province because they were underutilized. I am seeking information of a more detailed nature, then, of what plans the Solicitor General has around closing correctional facilities, which correctional facilities she is planning to close, and what would be the timetable that would be expected to be put in place for the closures if in fact there are any.

So that's the information I'm seeking through this written question. Thank you.

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

**Mrs. Forsyth:** Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that Written Question 35 be rejected. The answer to the question is the subject of the recommendations contained within the government MLA review of corrections report. As I previously indicated, the government has been taking the time to carefully review the report and will release it when these considerations are completed. I'm confident that this release will occur in the very near future.

3:00

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

**Ms Blakeman:** How tantalizing. Well, you know, this underlines the difficulty that the opposition has in seeking information. We keep being dangled little tidbits of "stay tuned" and "soon" and "stay with us." It's really very difficult to . . . [interjection] I'm sorry; I'll correct myself: "stay with us" and other rather cliched phrases.

The Solicitor General has raised it herself. We are still waiting for a corrections review that is now, I think, some two years out and no additional information. We don't know whether any information that we seek is contained in that particular report or not, Mr. Speaker, but for every question she gets from me around corrections, it's: wait for the review. Well, the review could come out and we still won't have the information on that particular question.

I guess I've been told that we'll have to wait for it; all Albertans will have to wait for it. Frankly, I think that is a shame, and it's problematic when we try to hold the government to account. There's

a lot of hiding behind these reports, and I hope that the Solicitor General will be able to table them as soon as possible.

Thank you very much. I regret that they won't support it.

[Written Question 35 lost]

#### Seniors Shelter Intake Survey

Q36. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry and Department of Seniors on the development and implementation of the Alberta Seniors shelter intake survey form between April 1, 2002, and February 17, 2004?

**Ms Blakeman:** Now, we're interested in how much money was spent developing this survey, that I think is not still in use. So what sort of resources were put toward it? I'm interested in receiving that information. I hope the Minister of Seniors is able to co-operate.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Seniors.

**Mr. Woloshyn:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the government we will accept Written Question 36.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you.

[Written Question 36 carried]

#### Fraud Charges against Government Employees

Q37. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total number of government employees who have been charged with fraud against the Alberta government between January 1, 1993, and February 17, 2004, inclusive?

**Ms Blakeman:** Oh, now, that's interesting, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure if I can say this person's name. It's in public documents, but this is . . . [interjection] All right. This is coming out of a case of an individual who I believe was a deputy minister.

**Mr. MacDonald:** A high-ranking official.

**Ms Blakeman:** A high-ranking official, a deputy minister in the government, who was charged with fraud, and the question that follows from that is: how many others have been charged with fraud during this government's tenure under this Premier?

Thank you very much.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, I have to reject this particular question. The scope of the question, from January 1, 1993, to February 17, 2004, goes far beyond what might be appropriately found within records without doing a great amount of research.

The hon. member has referred to a deputy minister. I wish to make it clear in the House that I'm not aware of any deputy ministers that have been charged with fraud. With the appropriate audit processes that we have in place to hold accountability, there have been instances where senior officials have been accused of fraudulent activity in those circumstances. There's only been, I think, one or maybe two in my recent memory.

The question goes back to January 1, 1993, and in order to obtain this information, we'd have to go back and manually check every file that's been closed since 1993 from each of the Crown prosecutors' offices across Alberta because it talks, again, about any government employee. So in order to answer this question accurately, we would have to check every closed file in Crown prosecutors' offices since 1993. There is no formal or automated system in place to access specific Crown files, and given the timeline of the question, many of these files will already have been sent to the Provincial Archives for storage.

Mr. Speaker, the breadth of this question is such that even bringing in an amendment to bring down the scope, as we sometimes often do, to make the question answerable, in this case I couldn't find any way to actually bring the scope into the realm of answerability within any reasonable sense of time frame or numbers. It's with regret.

I think it's important for people to understand, however, that in every case where fraud is committed or where there's an alleged fraud committed, charges are laid and those individuals prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm disappointed to hear the response and the rejection of the request for information. Truly I believe that the breadth of the question is what requires it to be put forward as a written question or if it were a document then as a motion for a return. This is exactly the venue that we should be able to use to get detailed answers from government on exactly this kind of issue.

I think I'm also more than a little alarmed that the government doesn't seem to keep track and learn the lessons from any employees that they have who in fact have been charged with fraud against themselves. I find it a little chilling that the government doesn't seem to be able to do that. So I'm disappointed that we cannot gather this information today.

Thank you.

[Written Question 37 lost]

#### Speaker's Ruling Written Questions

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, I make little notations to some of these questions. These written questions have to come through a process, but before they get on the Order Paper, they also require my signature. Quite frankly, I should not have signed on that one, and I'm going to make a comment after the House has already made a decision.

The question is: "What is the total number of government employees who have been charged with fraud?" It's a mere fact in our society, one of the principal rules of law, that we're not guilty until we're found guilty. People are charged. It doesn't mean that they are guilty of anything, and their good name comes into disrepute and into question when the charges are sometimes put out. We all know by reading the decisions of judges that charges are thrown out or people are found not guilty for dozens and dozens and dozens of reasons. Just simply because somebody has been charged should really mean nothing, if I understand the rule of law in our society, and it's only when you're found guilty that in fact there is a public record for that.

I'll take the responsibility for all the people who see these before I do, but I should not have signed off on that particular question.

### Gas Bill Complaints

Q38. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How many complaints did the government call centre receive from Albertans regarding high natural gas bills between January 1, 2000, and February 17, 2004?

**Mr. MacDonald:** Mr. Speaker, certainly, within that period of time many Albertans expressed concern and displeasure over the high cost of natural gas for domestic purposes and in regard to this government's natural gas policies for domestic and commercial purposes throughout the province. There's no doubt that there would have been a significant number of complaints to the government call centre.

We've had many reactions to the high price of natural gas for domestic consumption from this government and from the Minister of Energy. In fact, it's probably a little over a year ago that the hon. Minister of Energy glibly assured Albertans: well, you can turn down the thermostat and put on a sweater if you're that concerned.

3:10

Between January 1, 2000, and February 17, 2004, surely there must have been a very accurate record kept as to how many calls were coming in and what parts of the province they were coming from. I for one would like to have a look at this information for my own interest. When we consider how much money we've spent on natural gas rebates over the years and how much more we may spend in the future with the election rolling around, who is to say how much of a natural gas rebate will be offered? Certainly, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East and others in this Assembly worked very hard last winter to convince the government to not renege on the promise of natural gas rebates whenever prices went up. Prices went up, and they're still up a lot higher than that budget estimate that was tabled here last week.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is information that I and other Albertans would find noteworthy and of a great deal of public interest, and I urge the government to provide the information. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Coutts:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is prepared to accept Written Question 38 with some amendments. Those amendments have been provided to our opposition colleague here by 11 o'clock as per the proper procedures. I know that the amendments have been circulated to the rest of the members, and I'll gladly read for the record what the amendments would be. We're suggesting to amend this motion by striking out the word "government" and substituting "Utilities Consumer Advocate" in that place and then by striking out "January 1, 2000," and substituting "November 23, 2003."

Mr. Speaker, the Utilities Consumer Advocate was put in place in the latter part of October, and the office became up and running in November of 2003. The Utilities Consumer Advocate is responsible for taking these calls, and we can provide the kind of feedback that the member opposite is looking for in a very accurate way through the calls that have come in to the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

So we would accept this by amending it to have the Utilities Consumer Advocate's calls from November 23 available in written form. The amended written question would now read as follows:

How many complaints did the Utilities Consumer Advocate call centre receive from Albertans regarding high natural gas bills between November 23, 2003, and February 17, 2004?

I now move that motion.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the amendment.

**Mr. MacDonald:** On the amendment, yes, Mr. Speaker. Well, this certainly is interesting. This amendment certainly reduces considerably the impact and the scope of the question. The time frame has changed, but the information that the hon. minister with this amended motion is willing to provide, in my view, is already public knowledge.

There were two articles, as a matter of fact, one in a Calgary paper and one in an Edmonton paper. The Edmonton paper I believe stated – and it was an earlier article – that there were 700 complaints. There was an updated article that indicated that there were 800 complaints to the Utilities Consumer Advocate since the advocate opened for business.

Now, this doesn't tell us anything about the number of complaints that citizens lodged with their government previous to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. By denying us this information in providing this amendment, we will never know how many complaints it took to force the government to change its mind and do the right thing and share the natural resource wealth of this province with the citizens who own it by providing them with credits on their natural gas bills.

So, certainly, we know already the number of complaints the Utilities Consumer Advocate has received. To the minister's credit we don't have the breakdown as to how many of them are related to natural gas and how many of them are related to electricity. One would only assume that 80 per cent of these are based on electricity complaints and 20 per cent are based on natural gas complaints because that's the method that's been used to fund this office through industry: 80 per cent of the costs are coming from the electricity side and 20 per cent are coming from the natural gas side.

Now, I also see in the budget – and I realize that we're not discussing the budget here today, Mr. Speaker – that there's a considerable increase of almost \$2 million in the budget of this Utilities Consumer Advocate for the current fiscal year. Obviously, there is anticipation that there will be an increased number of calls.

This amendment doesn't do anything to respond and document the complaints that were received leading up to and during the election of 2001 and the subsequent years leading up to the creation of this Utilities Consumer Advocate. I am, Mr. Speaker, disappointed that not all the information would be provided, just the information that is almost up to date as a result of the due diligence of the press in regard to the activities surrounding the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I'd like to speak to the amendment. The effect of the amendment if the House accepted it would be to radically cut down the period for which the minister is willing to report to the House. As a matter of fact, cut it down to a little over two and a half months. That, in my view, would be not very helpful.

Albertans have been complaining to the government and to opposition parties about the skyrocketing natural gas prices and how they've affected their pocketbooks over the last nearly three and a half, four years. So I think it's important for the minister to make a distinction between the complaints that have been received by the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office since that office came into being and became operational – that's quite legitimate, but then

there's a period before that, prior to November 23, 2003, from January 1, 2000. For those two and a half years or so, a little more than two and a half years, I think, almost three years, the government must have the information, information that Albertans would like to have, information that this House certainly would like to see disclosed and made transparent.

So I'm speaking, Mr. Speaker, against this amendment because, in my view, it will not oblige the government to disclose information for that very important period of nearly three years from January 1, 2000, to November 23, 2003. To accept this amendment really would be tantamount to defeating the real purpose of the original question, so I would certainly be opposed to this amendment, and I would hope that the House would reject this as well.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

3:20

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say at this time that the amended Written Question 38 will provide us a benchmark for the future on the activities of the Utilities Consumer Advocate. If we know how many complaints have been received there in regard to natural gas bills, we can check to make sure that the 20-80 split on the industry cost sharing of this office is accurate. For that reason there will be some advantage to having this information with Written Question 38 as amended.

Thank you.

[Written Question 38 as amended carried]

#### Deregulation and Electricity Bill Complaints

Q39. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How many complaints did the government call centre receive from Albertans regarding deregulation or high electricity bills between January 1, 2000, and February 17, 2004?

**Mr. MacDonald:** Mr. Speaker, this is a government that keeps a keen eye to the polling numbers or, some would say these days, a keen ear to the rail line to see which locomotive is coming down the track and at what speed and pulling what. Certainly, there has not been such a public policy failure in the entire country, whether it be a provincial or a federal government, that would match this electricity deregulation boondoggle that this province has for whatever reason decided to implement.

I would love to have seen a cost-benefit analysis on electricity deregulation. I have certainly searched for one from this government. It has not been provided. So the barometer of success or failure of a public policy is the citizens' response, and in this case it would be the citizens' outrage over the high cost of electricity, not only the cost of electricity but the billing process surrounding the distribution and transmission of electricity.

Between this period, January 1, 2000, to February 17, 2004, we have gone in this province – for instance, everyone is always asking me to table my own power bill. Well, I'm going to talk about my own power bill this afternoon. Before deregulation it had two line items on it, one for energy costs and one for distribution. Now I have many, many, many more line items on my bill. I hear from rural Albertans, and they tell me that I'm lucky because they have in

some cases, Mr. Speaker, if you can imagine this, more than 10 line items on their bills.

So there would be no doubt that there would be significant consumer frustration expressed through the government call centre to the respective offices, whether it's the Premier's office or whether it's the office of the Minister of Energy or the office of the hon. Minister of Government Services. There's no doubt that there have been significant calls.

Now, there's also no doubt that those calls of frustration fell on deaf ears because this government does not seem to be in any hurry to unplug electricity deregulation. In fact, documents that I have received indicate that they seem to be anxious to go full steam ahead with this. It puzzles me why. There's been no benefit to this, and prices haven't gone down. I'm sure calls to the call centre haven't gone down either. I would say, depending on the local billing cycle, that there would be calls throughout the month.

Now, to analyze the failure of electricity deregulation, it would be very interesting to see how many calls have come from rural Alberta, how many calls have come from urban Alberta, how many calls come from, for instance, Stony Plain, how many calls come from Medicine Hat. No, we'd have to leave Medicine Hat out of this argument, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Taylor:** None from Medicine Hat.

**Mr. MacDonald:** None from Medicine Hat because Medicine Hat citizens had the common sense to stay out of this. They had their own utilities there. They seemed quite wise, and I'm sure that if we were to compare the prices of utilities in Medicine Hat to those in Edmonton, Calgary, Grande Prairie, Stony Plain, well, we would be wishing that we had followed the lead of the citizens of Medicine Hat and had stayed clear of electricity deregulation.

You know, Rudyard Kipling would be very, very proud of the present-day citizens of Medicine Hat. It was one of his favourite places, as we all know, Mr. Speaker.

In regard to Written Question 39 I certainly hope that the government will provide all the information that I have asked for, and the citizens themselves can have a look and see where all the complaints about electricity deregulation were coming from prior to the 2001 election up until February 17, 2004.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. Coutts:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We're prepared to accept Written Question 39, again with amendments. The amendments have been provided to the member opposite, the original mover, and also the amendments have been circulated.

For the record I would like to read what those amendments would be. The amendment would read such: striking out the word "government" and substituting "Utilities Consumer Advocate" and, secondly, by striking out "January 1, 2000," and substituting "November 23, 2003."

The reason for these amendments would be because the Utilities Consumer Advocate had set up shop and was prepared to take these calls, and we have a good, accurate record of these calls. We will provide them in writing to the member opposite.

So the amended written question would read as follows, Mr. Speaker.

How many complaints did the Utilities Consumer Advocate call centre receive from Albertans regarding deregulation or high electricity bills between November 23, 2003, and February 17, 2004?

I move that amendment.

**The Speaker:** On the amendment, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, this amendment is quite similar to the amendment for Written Question 38. We are really restricting and limiting the information that will be provided. What little information a person does get from this government is always considered a bonus, certainly. But, again, the fact that the Utilities Consumer Advocate has just set up shop, the fact that 80 per cent of the budget is coming from the electricity sector – there might be some interesting information in this amended question, but I'm disappointed that we can't get all the information going back to 2000. Certainly, there were significant price spikes in electricity costs. In fact, it got so high at one point that we had to cap it at 11 cents and wait until after the election and recover the rest of that money over a two-year period.

3:30

Now, surely we can be provided with more information than just from the Utilities Consumer Advocate. Albertans, I think, deserve to know. If we're going to be this open and transparent and accountable government, well, let's start. Let's not start by amending this written question and just providing any information from the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office starting the third week in November.

With that being said, I guess, Mr. Speaker, a little bit of information is better than none, but I must express my disappointment in light of the fact that this is an \$8 billion price tag and growing for this electricity deregulation scheme. This amendment is limiting. I guess under the circumstances I can understand why the government would be reluctant to release the volume of calls that it has received, where they're from in the province, and what specific discontent was expressed by the electricity consumer in regard to electricity deregulation. [interjection] Well, that's what I was hoping to get.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I cede the floor to another hon. colleague. Thank you.

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

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to the amendment proposed by the Minister of Government Services to Written Question 39. This amendment is identical to the amendment proposed by the same minister to Written Question 38, and for similar reasons I find it very unhelpful to getting the information that Albertans want to have with respect to, in this case, whether or not they have found deregulation of electricity to be extremely detrimental to their family budgets, to their businesses. One measure of that would of course be to look at the number of complaints, the frequency of complaints since the time that deregulation has been actively implemented with respect to electricity in this province.

Mr. Speaker, the New Democrat opposition has presented petitions from thousands upon thousands upon thousands of Albertans who have called on this government to scrap deregulation of electricity and return to regulated electricity provision in this province. They signed those petitions because they rely on their common sense and experience over the many decades in this province when electricity was produced and transmitted and sold and used under a regulated system. Whether they were families, whether they were small businesses or large businesses, everyone enormously benefited from the production and provision of electricity under a regulated system.

That system has alas been destroyed by deregulation, and Albertans have, I think, a legitimate right to know whether or not

their complaints are being recorded, are available to them as an historical record so that they can hear their own voices, sort of, reflected back to them.

Mr. Speaker, I think the city of Medicine Hat represents a shining example of how a smart community can use common ownership of a resource, in this case natural gas, to produce electricity and supply that electricity to the residents of Medicine Hat at a most reasonable rate – the same is true with natural gas – and sell the rest at market rates, from which then the residents of Medicine Hat benefit. So Medicine Hat presents, I think, an ideal model for the rest of Alberta to adopt to see what arrangements work best to both take advantage of market rates for a commonly owned resource and at the same time protect from market rates and market fluctuations the owners of that resource themselves.

The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, I think, since he holds an important portfolio in the cabinet – the ministry of environmental protection is under his charge – should be selling this Medicine Hat model to the rest of his cabinet colleagues and to this House so that we can return to a decent model that protects us from exorbitant market rates and from the unpredictability, instability, and fluctuations that markets are characterized by under normal circumstances. But he is not willing to use the experience of his own constituents, who have benefited greatly from this common ownership, to make sure that Albertans in general, who are the owners of natural gas and still are to some extent of electricity production, would benefit in the same way.

This amendment, therefore, Mr. Speaker, is really counterproductive because it would allow the government not to disclose very important information that Albertans would like to have, the very Albertans who are paying sky-high electricity bills and natural gas bills to keep their houses heated and to keep their businesses going. If this information is not disclosed, they will not know how many others like them have complained to this government and how this government has ignored their complaints and refused to listen to their concerns and to the advice to this government.

So for that reason, Mr. Speaker, I personally am opposed to this amendment, and I ask my colleagues in the House to express their opposition to it as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment carried]

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes, Mr. Speaker. This time I will be quite brief. Certainly, the information that is provided as a result of this amended Written Question 39 will help this member determine exactly what is going on with the Utilities Consumer Advocate as far as the percentage of complaints which originate with electricity and which originate with natural gas and see if there will be any changes in this industry-funded consumer office. I don't know how it can be useful and serve a purpose representing consumers when it's being funded by industry, but we will get that information, and we will analyze it.

Thank you.

[Written Question 39 as amended carried]

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 3:40

### Introduction of Guests (reversion)

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

**Mr. Hlady:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate this. I have a gentleman to introduce here today. His name is Doug McBain. He's the president of the Western Barley Growers. He's here in the House today and was hoping to have a chance to see some discussion on private members' bills as there is a bill that affects him and his constituents and all of rural Alberta in a major way. I'm hoping that sometime in the near future we'll get to the bill that he's looking for, but we won't necessarily have that chance today, which is unfortunate. However, I would ask him to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

**The Speaker:** Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, an introduction?

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce a constituent of mine. Diane Oxenford is here today to watch the proceedings. She's in the public gallery. Diane is one of those golden volunteers who's out for everything, works very hard, is very committed. She's been active on the Rosedale power plant project, so the Minister of Community Development would be well acquainted with her. She's always full of very positive suggestions on how to move things forward. I would ask Diane to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you.

head:

### Written Questions (continued)

#### Private Surgical Facilities

Q40. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that the following question be accepted.  
What calculations have been used by the Department of Health and Wellness as required under section 8(3)(d)(v) of the Health Care Protection Act to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of contracts for services with private surgical facilities for each contract approved under the Health Care Protection Act?

**Dr. Nicol:** Mr. Speaker, this question is being moved to in effect get some parameters that the government uses when it starts to evaluate contract-out options in the health care system. When we went through the whole debate on Bill 11, on the two-tiered health care system, there was a commitment by the government that this kind of evaluation would be made; it's part of the bill. We wanted to see what they were going through in terms of the cost comparisons and the cost-effectiveness of these contracts.

It's past now to where there are a number of these contracts in place, so we're asking the government to release for public scrutiny the parameters and the relative data so that the public can evaluate how well the government looked after their tax dollars and made sure that good value-for-dollar was being received. So we would ask the government to provide us with that information.

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

**Ms Evans:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness I would respond and indicate that the government is rejecting Written Question 40.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

**Dr. Nicol:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's really a disappointment because during the whole debate on the bill the discussion was that this kind of evaluation would be done in the open, that the information that was used and the parameters that were set for the government to evaluate contract-out options would be dealt with in a public way. You know, if the government is going to make those kinds of commitments to Albertans during the debate on a piece of legislation, I think it's imperative that they do carry through with that after the fact, when they've actually utilized a component within the Health Care Protection Act, and that we do have the option to find and review the kind of decision-making that they go through on behalf of Albertans.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think it's imperative that everybody in this Legislature vote to accept this even though the minister wants it rejected. We need to vote and accept it so that Albertans can get this information for scrutiny of the effectiveness of the government in spending their dollars.

Thank you.

[Written Question 40 lost]

### Intergovernmental Agreements

Q41. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What progress has the government made in implementing the Auditor General's recommendation that the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations adhere to the laws of Alberta by enhancing its intergovernmental agreements systems to comply with section 11 and schedule 6 of the Government Organization Act?

**Dr. Nicol:** Mr. Speaker, this is another one of the issues that we wanted to in effect see where the government is at when they tell us that they're going to accept a recommendation. It's imperative that Albertans get information that allows them to evaluate and become aware of the position the government is in in implementing the recommendations being made by the Auditor General because, obviously, when the Auditor General makes these recommendations, it's an indication that there's a sense that the government's procedure can be improved. So on behalf of Albertans we're asking the government to tell us where they're at in implementing these recommendations of the Auditor General.

**Mr. Jonson:** Mr. Speaker, I would like to indicate that the government will accept this particular question.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

**Dr. Nicol:** I'd just like to thank the minister. That's great that Albertans will find out how far along they're getting on this process.

[Written Question 41 carried]

### Government Accounting Practices

Q42. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What stage of the process is the government at in implementing the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report to change government accounting practices in order to improve accountability for the government's spending of taxpayers' dollars?



**Dr. Nicol:** Mr. Speaker, this is again another one of the arguments that we need to have public disclosure in terms of where they're at in the implementation process when they've already said that they will be accepting a recommendation. We need to make sure that Albertans are aware of the status of that implementation and what progress is being made to allow both Albertans and the Auditor General to feel confident that our dollars are being wisely spent. So I would encourage all members of the Legislature to accept Written Question 42.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on behalf of the government to indicate that we're prepared to accept Written Question 42. As the hon. member opposite indicated, the government had indicated acceptance in principle of the Auditor General's recommendation that the government's corporate accounting policies continue to be reviewed on an ongoing basis in consultation with the ministries and the office of the Auditor General. That was communicated to the chair of the Public Accounts Committee on December 15, 2003, I'm given to understand, by the hon. Minister of Finance, and progress has been made in this area. But we would be more than happy to respond by accepting the written question and respond more formally in due course.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

**Dr. Nicol:** Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie and all Albertans I thank the government for agreeing to provide us with that information. Thank you.

[Written Question 42 carried]

### 3:50 Health Care Premiums

Q43. **Dr. Pannu** moved that the following question be accepted. Of the monies the government receives annually from health care premiums, what amount was remitted by employers for the fiscal year 2002-03 and from April 1, 2003, to February 20, 2004, and of that amount how much was paid by employers on behalf of employees?

**Dr. Pannu:** Mr. Speaker, the health care premiums in this province certainly are seen as a heavy burden both by middle-class families that pay out of their own pocket and also by employers who choose to pay either all or part of the health care premiums on behalf of their employees. There has been a considerable debate in this province that has been going on for some time on whether or not the health care premiums should be scrapped altogether, thereby removing this tax burden on Albertans whether they're employers or families or individuals who pay that premium. That premium, Mr. Speaker, is quite high: \$1,056 for a family of two or more and half of that amount for Albertans who are single.

As far as businesses in this province and employers are concerned, this health care premium tax really is a payroll tax. It adds to the cost of doing business in this province and makes this province, in relative terms, uncompetitive with most other provincial jurisdictions or territorial jurisdictions in this country. So it is important to pay attention to the magnitude of the cost of health care premium payments by employers on behalf of their employees to see how much this burden is.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's worth noting that the difference between a corporate tax and a payroll tax is as follows: payroll tax is not a tax

that is imposed or implemented or required to be paid on net revenue or on profits. It is preprofit, adds to the costs of running a business in the province, whereas the corporate tax is always assessed on the net revenue or the net profits of a business or a corporation. So in the judgment of the New Democrat opposition this payroll tax that employers pay reduces their competitiveness. It adds to the costs of doing business in the province and needs, therefore, to be scrapped.

The request for information that's made by way of this question, therefore, is intended to disclose the magnitude of the burden that employers carry because this payroll tax, in the form of a health care premium tax, is a part of the continuing policy of the government that most Albertans would like to see, in fact, discontinued and scrapped.

So, Mr. Speaker, I hope that the government will accept this request, and I look forward to the response from the House leader and the ministry.

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

**Ms Evans:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is prepared to accept Written Question 43 with amendments. These amendments have been circulated with our opposition colleague prior to 11 a.m. today.

I would like to move that Written Question 43 be amended by striking out "February 20, 2004," and substituting "February 29, 2004," and striking out "and of that amount how much was paid by employers on behalf of employees." So the amended written question will read as follows.

Of the monies the government receives annually from health care premiums, what amount was remitted by employers for the fiscal year 2002-2003 and from April 1, 2003, to February 29, 2004?

So I'd respectfully submit that and hope that the hon. member opposite would be prepared to accept that as an amended question.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to report that we received the proposed amendment this morning in compliance with the requirements of the Standing Orders. I'm also pleased to note that I find the amendment quite acceptable. In fact, the amendment changes the date from February 20 to February 29, which I think is extremely helpful. As well, I think the second part of the amendment simply clarifies the language of the written question.

So I'm pleased to accept both parts of this amendment and thank the Minister of Children's Services, who had presented this amendment on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness. I'll sit down, Mr. Speaker, with declaring my acceptance of the amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

**Dr. Pannu:** Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to move the acceptance of the amended Written Question 43.

[Written Question 43 as amended carried]

### Health Care Premium Arrears

Q44. **Dr. Pannu** moved that the following question be accepted. For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03 and from April 1, 2003, to February 20, 2004, what was the total amount paid to collections agencies for collecting arrears on health care premiums broken down by agency?

**Dr. Pannu:** Mr. Speaker, again, the intent of the request that is contained in this question is to seek and make public information that's deemed important both by the New Democrat opposition and in the judgment of the New Democrat opposition by most Albertans when they are invited or asked to assess the value of the ongoing policy of this government with respect to the imposition of a health care premiums tax on Albertans, who either pay it out of their own pockets or have someone pay a portion of it or all of it on their behalf, be it this government, be it their employers, or whoever else.

Mr. Speaker, there are lots of Albertans who find it simply impossible to pay these very, very heavy health care premium taxes and in fact find themselves running into default because they fail to be able to pay these premiums on time because they really find it hard on their budgets and on their pocketbooks.

So it's important, I think, for us as a House to be able to assess the variety of costs for implementing this very unpopular and unhelpful taxation policy that the government of Alberta insists on continuing with. Hence the rationale for this question, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to respond on behalf of the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness that he has an amendment that he wishes me to bring forward at this time. I'd like to move the amendment which would read as follows: "For the fiscal years 2001-2002, 2002-2003, and from April 1, 2003, to February 29, 2004, what was the total amount paid to collections agencies for collecting arrears on health care premiums broken down by agency?" I would move that particular amendment at this time.

4:00

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

**Dr. Pannu:** Mr. Speaker, I rise to accept the proposed amendment to the language of Written Question 44. I want to thank the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Deputy Government House Leader for proposing that amendment on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Speaker, the amendment simply changes one date in Written Question 44; that is, it changes the date from February 20 to February 29, 2004. I think it's an eminently reasonable amendment, and I gladly accept it and thank the minister for his co-operation.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

**The Speaker:** Now on the motion as amended. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to close the debate.

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Written Question 44 as amended be accepted and supported by my colleagues in this House. I'm pleased that the amended question is an improvement. I want to note that it's an improvement over the text of the question as noted in the Order Paper.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 44 as amended carried]

#### Health Care Premium Arrears

Q45. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted.  
For the fiscal year 2002-03 and from April 1, 2003, to

February 20, 2004, how many health care premium accounts were in arrears by one day or more, by three months or more, and by one year or more, and what is the total amount of those arrears in each of these fiscal years?

**Dr. Pannu:** Mr. Speaker, again, the intent of the question is clear, transparent. It's simply an attempt to get information on record which will help us assess the costs of health care premiums policy implementation, the difficulties that arise for ordinary Albertans, middle-class Albertans, when they try to meet the requirements of paying these premiums, which are exorbitant: \$1,056 for a two-member family or more and half of that amount for individuals. Certainly, it is a burden on all kinds of businesses in this province, which makes running their businesses more expensive than would be the case if the health care premium tax were scrapped.

So, Mr. Speaker, this information with respect to arrears in these different periods in each fiscal year would help us evaluate the real costs and the burdensomeness of this unnecessary tax on Albertans, whether those Albertans are businesspersons, businesses, families, or individuals.

I move the acceptance of this question, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Zwozdesky:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise with respect to Written Question 45 on behalf of the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness to table an amendment to that particular written question, and the amended written question would read as follows:

For the fiscal year 2002-2003 and from April 1, 2003, to February 29, 2004, how many health care premium accounts were in arrears by one day or more, by three months or more, and by one year or more, and what is the total amount of those arrears in each of these fiscal years?

Mr. Speaker, that having been said, I would move that particular amendment at this time.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Deputy Government House Leader for moving this amendment on behalf of the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. I'm pleased to note that the minister has accepted the spirit and letter of the question and simply makes the one and only change in the question as originally asked, and that is to change the date from February 20, 2004, to February 29, 2004.

I think that it certainly is most acceptable to me to see this date changed as proposed by this amendment. So I would ask everyone, of course, to support this and get on our way to the next question. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to close debate on the motion as amended.

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move the acceptance of Written Question 45 as amended by the amendment on which the House has just voted unanimously.

Thank you.

[Written Question 45 as amended carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 25, I would move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 14 to 19 inclusive, 23 to 31 inclusive, 34 to 42 inclusive, 44 to 87 inclusive, 90, 93, 94, 96 to 103 inclusive, 106, 107, 122 to 146 inclusive, 159, 160, 162, and 164 to 180 inclusive.

[Motion carried]

#### **Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations IT Costs**

M14. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would be prepared to accept the motion for a return on behalf of government in the event that an amendment is approved by the House. I move that Motion for a Return 14 be amended by (a) striking out "Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations" and substituting "government of Alberta;" (b) striking out "broken down by company and total dollar amount for each" and substituting "and a listing of vendors providing these services;" and (c) adding at the end thereof "motions for returns currently appearing on the Order Paper as MR15, MR18, MR56, MR60, MR61, MR62, MR70, MR71, MR72, MR73, MR103, MR122, MR123, MR146, MR204, and MR205 be struck from the Order Paper as having been dealt with." A copy of this motion has been provided to the opposition.

**Ms Blakeman:** Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Hancock:** A copy of this motion was provided to Parliamentary Counsel for approval on Thursday, as is required by Standing Order, but was not approved by Parliamentary Counsel pursuant to the Standing Order. I propose that the matter of it being in order be dealt with by the House. I'd be prepared to speak to it now or cede to the hon. member for the point of order.

4:10

**The Speaker:** Well, we're going to deal with the point of order first.

#### **Point of Order**

##### **Amendment to Motion for a Return 14**

**Ms Blakeman:** Mr. Speaker, I regret that this amendment to amend Motion for a Return 14 is out of order. I'll direct your attention to Standing Order 34(2.1), in which it notes that "amendments to written questions and motions for returns must (a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved." I have a copy of what was both circulated here in the House and was sent to the Official Opposition this morning, and it does not contain the approval stamp of Parliamentary Counsel.

I note in *Beauchesne 579(2)* that "an amendment may not raise a new question which can only be considered as a distinct motion after proper notice." In effect, what is being proposed by the Government House Leader here is a new question in that it is substantially changing the intent and the information requested by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

She had requested that the information be broken down. So we're looking for the total dollar amount spent on contracts for information technology services, and what we're going to get here is a listing of vendors. That is a very different response, a different set of information than what was being requested. It was requested in the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's motion that it be broken down by company and by the total dollar amount that each got and for the fiscal year.

So what we have before us, the amendment that's being proposed, is out of order on two points. One, it has not been signed off by Parliamentary Counsel and therefore cannot be considered here, and two, given its very content, it's asking us to consider a different question than what was asked for by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

I'll note that in *Marleau and Montpetit*, page 655, an amendment is out of order "if it is inconsistent with a decision that the committee has made regarding a former amendment." Looking at the Speaker's ruling on the amendment to Motion for a Return 10 – and that's now appearing on page 681 of *Hansard* for March 24, 2004 – the Speaker wisely says 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." I would argue that that is the same case that is being brought forward here.

That Motion for a Return 10 also asked that a number of other motions for returns be struck from the order paper as having been dealt with, and I would argue, Mr. Speaker, that the original intent has not been carried forward into the amendment brought forward by the Government House Leader, and therefore those additional motions for returns that are added in should not be struck as they have not in fact been dealt with and, in providing this information, they wouldn't be dealt with.

I understand what the Government House Leader is trying to do, and I wish I could support him in doing that, but the Official Opposition is well within our rights to ask for the information. As a matter of fact, the government has directed us numerous times to ask for the information through motions for returns and written questions. We've followed their request and brought the request for information through, and we would expect to get the information that we requested.

Having the government amend the original intent to a point where it's no longer what the Official Opposition has asked for – I can't support what the Government House Leader is trying to do. I regret that. I would have been more than willing to work with the government in grouping together motions for returns or written questions if the government had been willing to bring forward the information that we were requesting. In fact, we've already done that today, and I have acknowledged it when it has happened. I'm more than willing to do that.

**Rev. Abbott:** All you're interested in doing is wasting the time of the House.

**Ms Blakeman:** There is some heckling happening here from Drayton Valley-Calmar. I'm sure he can join in on the point of order.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, based on Standing Order 34 with the lack of parliamentary approval, on *Beauchesne 579(2)* with the amendment raising a new question, on *Marleau and Montpetit* noticing that it is out of order if it's inconsistent with the decision that the committee has already made, setting a standard which in fact the Speaker gave us the ruling on, I would argue that the Government House Leader's amendment is out of order.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, first of all, there is no amendment on the floor. We have a point of order.

The Government House Leader on this point of order.

**Mr. Hancock:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a number of points that need to be addressed with respect to the question of whether the amendment can be ruled in order and put on the floor, and I'll start with the last part first, with respect to the argument put by the hon. member opposite that somehow by amending the motion we are changing the scope of the motion.

I would suggest to you that in her own argument she's negative to her argument, because she's indicated that in fact we passed a motion last Monday which made a very similar amendment in terms of the A and B sections of the amendment. The House passed that amendment and passed the motion as amended. Therefore, those portions of the amendment are not out of order.

The same amendment was done to Motion for a Return 10 last week and, in fact, is similar to many types of amendments that are brought before the House from time to time with respect to motions for returns in accordance with, I would suggest, *Beauchesne's 567*, that says that "the object of an amendment may be either to modify a question in such a way as to increase its acceptability," which is what we've been doing all afternoon by changing dates and things like that and which we did last Monday on Motion for a Return 10 by changing the motion so that it's all government departments and then broken down by company and dollar amounts and a listing of vendors providing those services. We dealt with that at some length last Monday and then passed the motion.

The question that came up as a result of it last Monday was whether by passing that motion as amended it was applicable to all the other motions. Now, that – I'd have to correct the hon. member opposite – was not included in the motion. In fact, it was a point of order that I raised after the motion was passed to ask that it be made applicable to the other motions and that the other motions be struck from the Order Paper.

Mr. Speaker, you quite rightly reserved on that and then came back and advised the House that the motion as passed was not the same as the motions that were still on the Order Paper, and therefore you weren't prepared to strike the other motions on the Order Paper as being redundant. Because the motion passed was amended and the motions that were still on the Order Paper had not been amended, you said: well, it isn't on all fours, and therefore you can't just take them off the Order Paper.

Now, I would direct your attention to what was discussed. In fact, in the March 22 *Hansard* at page 613 you indicated:

During the debate something else was added to this discussion, and it had to do with the number of other written questions or motions for returns that this was to apply to. That's not part of the motion. It's not part of the amendment. I have no idea how the chair is supposed to determine subjectively to which one of these other motions for returns this particular amendment is to apply. That would be a very unfair situation.

So, Mr. Speaker, the response to that is to make it a part of the motion, bring forward exactly to what other motions it is to apply, and make it a direction of the House in passing the motion that it is to apply to those other motions.

Now, is it appropriate to have one motion apply to other motions? Well, earlier today on one of the written questions there was an amendment put forward to have that written question apply to – and that was Written Question 28 – "the departments referred to in written questions 29, 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive," et cetera. So, obviously, it's in order to have a written motion apply to other motions on the Order Paper. It's been done. In fact, it was done earlier today, and that was approved by Parliamentary Counsel.

So we have a situation where the first part of the amendment is clearly in order. We have a situation where the second part of the amendment is clearly in order. It's very difficult to understand how the two parts of the amendment put together are not in order.

4:20

Then we come to the question of Standing Order 34(2.1). Standing Order 34(2.1) clearly states, "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must (a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved." That's the Standing Order. That's the hurdle I have to get over here because clearly Parliamentary Counsel did not approve this amendment on that date.

Now, the question, Mr. Speaker, is: what is Parliamentary Counsel's role as provided for in the Standing Order? Clearly, the question for Parliamentary Counsel is not whether or not the motion itself is in order or out of order on a substantive basis but, rather, whether it's in an appropriate form to come to the House. Otherwise, Parliamentary Counsel would be usurping the authority of this House in determining what business it can discuss and what is substantive. Clearly, Parliamentary Counsel cannot be in a position where it makes substantive decisions with respect to business that can come before the House. Clearly, it can make decisions with respect to whether it's an appropriate form for the House, and in support of that proposition I would quote again your rulings and discussion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, on March 24 in *Hansard* at page 681: "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." I skip a sentence, and then it goes on to say, "It is your Assembly, hon. members, and it is to you that the responsibility falls for dealing with the business of the Assembly." The business of the Assembly deals with how we deal with these written questions and motions for returns. They're an opportunity for private members to put questions on the floor and to request return of documents. Clearly, it's in order for those questions to be on the floor.

But now we have this unique situation where we have on the Order Paper 88 written questions and 210 motions for returns. Even though with the most recent changes of the rules we've expanded the time that's available to private members for private members' business by moving private members' motions to the evening on Mondays and having the hour for private members' motions there, freeing up the afternoon to deal with written questions, motions for returns, and private members' bills, clearly by putting this number of questions on the Order Paper, we will never get to private members' bills unless we find some method of aggregating the business.

Now, it would seem to me, Mr. Speaker, that it is entirely inappropriate to say that the only way that business can be aggregated, that questions can be aggregated is if they're to be accepted or rejected on the face of them, so that the only way you could deal with more than one question would be to accept or reject without amendment. That would seem to be an inappropriate way to deal with this matter because that leaves, then, the only way of dealing with questions, if you're not prepared to accept or reject on the face of them, as dealing with them individually, one by one, and making the amendments.

Then, Mr. Speaker, you're going on to make the same amendment to similar motions which differ only with respect to which department they apply to or which member they apply to. So you're making the same amendment that you would make to all of them, but you'd have to make them individually because the ruling would say that you couldn't aggregate those questions.

The simple answer here, a very straightforward answer, is that there's an amendment that's being proposed. It ought to have been approved by Parliamentary Counsel, not in terms of substance, because it's always for the Speaker on the floor of the House or members on the floor in raising a point of order to argue whether a motion or a bill or anything else is in order or out of order. It is always available on the floor of the House to do that. But I would suggest that it's not in order for Parliamentary Counsel to make that determination. Parliamentary Counsel's role is to determine form, whether it's an appropriate form to come before the House.

So I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that 34(2.1)(a) must be read in that context. If you read it in any other way, it gives Parliamentary Counsel a role which cannot be afforded Parliamentary Counsel but is the order of the Speaker in the House and the members of the House on the floor of the House. I would argue that Parliamentary Counsel should be determined to have approved this because it is in an appropriate form, that it is in order for the House to deal with the motion.

Then the question is: is the motion itself in order? That question has been answered. Written Question 10 last week made the first part of the amendment. Written Question 28 today made the second part of the amendment. If the first is in order and the second is in order, then the whole thing is in order. So substantively it must be in order, and therefore it's open to the House to deal with that question today.

I would submit, Mr. Speaker, then, that we should allow the amendment to proceed and deal with these written questions and motions for returns in a timely way so that the House can deal with the questions that have been put before it, deal with them in a straightforward manner, and then also allow time for private members to deal with private members' bills.

[Ms Blakeman rose]

**The Speaker:** Hon. member, it was your point of order. You've already participated.

Does anybody else want to participate on this point of order? Hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, I saw you move on the point of order.

**Rev. Abbott:** Yeah, Mr. Speaker. I was going to make some comments, but the hon. Government House Leader said it all. Thank you.

**The Speaker:** Others on this point of order?

Hon. members, I can understand. I used the word "angst" the other day with respect to the number of questions that might be on the Order Paper. But Monday is private members' day, and it is within the rights of the members to participate by way of written questions and motions for returns.

There were several points raised here this afternoon, and brief comments will be made with respect to these several points. First of all, there were statements made in the House the other day by myself with respect to this particular matter. Actually, considerable progress has been made today with respect to a certain number of these written questions and motions for returns.

The Standing Orders are the rules of this Assembly. The Standing Orders are written by the members of this particular Assembly. If we have a Standing Order, regardless of whether or not the chair likes the Standing Order, the Standing Order has been written by the members after consultation among the members after due diligence by the three House leaders with respect to it. Sometimes they don't even have to consult and sometimes they do not consult with the chair.

So let's take a look at Standing Order 34(2.1), written by the members of the House. It says, "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must" – not may be, could be, should be but must – "(a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved" and so on. Now, I look at that. The word "must" says to me that it has to be done. It means that you can't really be subjective about this.

Now, there's one way we could get around this: by asking for unanimous consent to give it the interpretation the Government House Leader has. I dare say and suspect that that probably wouldn't get unanimous consent, but I can do that. Any time we have unanimous consent, we can put away all of this so that we don't have to deal with it. But I suspect that we're not going to get that, so it's kind of hard to deal with an amendment from that perspective.

Secondly, I do believe that I heard the Government House Leader refer to *Beauchesne* 567, but I also heard the Opposition House Leader refer to *Beauchesne* 579(2): "An amendment may not raise a new question which can only be considered as a distinct motion after proper notice."

Now, the other day when I stood here, I suggested that, well, there's a way of grouping these things. Number one is that there could be harmony among the three House leaders. They can get together and they can work this out, and that's always the preferred route – always the preferred route – and there seemed to be some approach with respect to that today. The second way, basically, could be by following the procedures that were followed today with respect to the groupings where there are no substantial differences from the original motion to the new amendment, where they're not substantial; that's very important. If you take a group of them and you put them all together and there's no substantial change, what you're doing is just bunching them, and we all agreed that that would be a fine way to go.

4:30

This particular amendment, proposed amendment to Motion for a Return 14, which did not meet the test under Standing Order 34(2.1), in essence would not meet the substantive amendment test either. So there are actually several ways of dealing with this if one wants to. One could have a distinct motion. Notice could be given, say, tomorrow or Wednesday, and a motion could be dealt with on a Thursday afternoon to basically group 100 or 125 or 50 of them and say either yes or no to them. That's another way of dealing with it. Can't do it on the following Monday because that's private members' day, so it would have to be done in another way.

So I'm afraid that the point of order has to be upheld. In essence, we cannot proceed with this proposed amendment to Motion for a Return 14. Motion for a Return 14 retains its place on the Order Paper as it currently is. We can leave it there now and make good use of the remaining time this afternoon to deal with some of these other motions for returns which have met the test and could see some further progress this afternoon with respect to what we have. Hopefully, in the ensuing days and the ensuing weeks – perhaps the three House leaders would be able to meet during the Easter break, say four, five, six days. They could spend time on solving this problem and dealing with the House itself pending further review.

The hon. Government House Leader.

### Point of Order

#### Explanation of Speaker's Rulings

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under the provisions of 13(2) asking for you to "explain the reasons for any decision," because I'd like to have you explain to the House in greater scope what you, then, believe the authority of Parliamentary Counsel is

with respect to taking substantive decisions away from the House rather than process oriented. You've indicated that 34(2.1) has to be read on the face of it, but is it your understanding that Parliamentary Counsel can make adjudicative decisions with respect to substantive measures and, therefore, take them away from the House? Or is it your understanding of Parliamentary Counsel's role to simply deal with respect to the form of matters coming before the House?

The second question I'd like to understand your rationale on is your ruling with respect to the substantive nature of the motion, because we have dealt in this House, as I mentioned in my argument, with Motion for a Return 10, which did exactly those substantive, if that's what they are, amendments to the motion. We have done that on a regular basis throughout.

We've also dealt earlier today with the question of bringing other motions into the motion, having the House say that by dealing with this motion, we've dealt with those motions. Now, your ruling would purport to say that you can only do that, presumably because we did it today, if you don't amend the motion. However, taking that subsection (c) by itself, I would suggest, belies what you've said. So I'd like to understand better your rationale for saying that that's more substantive than the motion which apparently was in order earlier today.

**The Speaker:** The chair is not going to get into debate in this Assembly with anyone. The chair will explain and will explain again, and the Government House Leader will listen attentively, please.

The Standing Orders are written by the members of the House. The tradition with respect to Standing Orders and the constitution of the House is essentially that, if at least it's a caring group of people, the three House leaders – that's why we have House leaders in here – will get together, will put ideas on the table, will work towards a resolution of what the constitution or the rules for governance of the House should be.

They are written by the members of the House. Sometimes the chair, the Speaker, may be aware of them. Sometimes the Speaker may not be aware of them. Sometimes the Speaker may be consulted as to whether or not a provision under Standing Orders is an intelligent one, an appropriate one, a functioning one, a desirable one. Sometimes the Speaker might even suggest to the drafters of these Standing Orders that that's really quite inappropriate, that it's not the best direction to go, but it still rests with the House if the House wants to proceed.

Generally – generally – when major changes are made to Standing Orders, governments can use their majority to basically bring about what it is that they want, and sometimes the minority can use its position to veto if in fact you're dealing with respect to questions that require unanimous consent.

But in the case of 34(2.1), "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must," it says "must," not may be, could be, should be. Now, if the hon. Government House Leader wants me to determine and define what the word "must" is, I will ask for one of the pages to get me a thesaurus. I think that "must" has the connotation that means it's mandatory, that it's not subjective. It doesn't apply in this situation when it works to one's advantage, but it applies in a different situation when it works to someone else's disadvantage.

I repeat again because I don't want any misunderstanding on this at all: "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved." There's no suggestion in here that there has to be a subjective interpretation by anyone with respect to what that means. I dare say that I would suggest that on

the basis of the discussion that we just had here a few minutes ago, there seems to be a subjective view of what it means.

I did not write these Standing Orders. They're your Standing Orders. If there's a requirement in the Standing Orders to have a group of three or four members, then, be the interpreters of the constitution, of what these words mean – and perhaps a thesaurus or other dictionary might be found that provides what the word "must" would mean to somebody's satisfaction – then that is an option.

But the fact of the matter is that this is what it says. I can't define that any further than what I've already done on two or three occasions in the last little while. It's not the intent of this chair to basically define the word "must." It's very clear as to what the word "must" would be. As far as anything else, it's been repeated on at least two occasions with respect to that: there is the point of order. This amendment will not be proceeded with under the Standing Orders that we have in this Assembly at this time.

If the hon. members want to get together and change the Standing Orders, that's another subject, but these are our Standing Orders now. *Beauchesne* is very clear to me on what it says, and I repeat: 579(2). I've always provided another alternative as to how this might be dealt with. There's no further explanation that I can provide with respect to this.

If the hon. Government House Leader or any other member wants to have a private discussion with me in my office, I'd be very happy to have it, but we can't waste any more time in the House. This is private members' day. This is not a debate for lawyers to have a nice court appearance debate.

**Mr. Hancock:** Mr. Speaker, with respect, again rising under section 13(2) asking for an explanation. You've read to us Standing Order 34(2.1), and you've emphasized the word "must," but you have not dealt with the word "approved." Nor have you dealt with the way that that Standing Order can be read, which says that "motions for returns must . . . be approved."

So you could read the Standing Order exactly as it's written to say that Parliamentary Counsel must approve an amendment when it's brought to him. Now, clearly that doesn't make sense. The reason for the Parliamentary Counsel to have a role in the process is to make sure that everything is in appropriate form. So what I was asking – and I don't believe this is a lawyer's debate, and I do believe this is important for this House to have discussion on – is the question of what the role of Parliamentary Counsel is in approving an amendment that is brought to him.

Now, I would submit to you that the role of Parliamentary Counsel is approval as to form. But if you wish to say that the Standing Orders prevail and have to be read as they're written, then I would suggest that you have to read it to say that motions for returns must be approved by Parliamentary Counsel; he has no discretion not to approve them. That hardly makes sense, Mr. Speaker.

So, clearly, the role of Parliamentary Counsel must be defined, and that was the interpretation I was asking you for: what's Parliamentary Counsel's role in approving an amendment before it comes before the House? We have many amendments that are brought before the House. They're always initialled by Parliamentary Counsel before introduction. We've argued on occasion as to whether or not they're in order after the Parliamentary Counsel has initialled them. Clearly, the Parliamentary Counsel's function is one as to approval as to form, and that's what we need interpretation on, because if his role is more substantive than that, then you're absolutely right: the Standing Orders need to be amended.

4:40

**The Speaker:** Well, we're having a debate, hon. Government House

Leader, and the hon. Government House Leader should refer to Standing Order 104.

Parliamentary Counsel

- (a) are responsible for the correctness of Bills and of amendments to Bills.

Emphasis on the word “correctness.”

- (b) shall be present, whenever required, at the Table, when any Bill is being considered in Committee of the Whole;
- (c) in the absence of the Clerk and the Clerk Assistant, shall substitute for the Clerk and exercise the authority and discharge the responsibilities normally vested in the Clerk;
- (d) shall act as counsel to the Assembly and members, to committees of the Assembly, to officers of the Assembly and to officers of the Legislature, as required;
- (e) shall assist members in drafting private members’ public Bills when requested;
- (f) shall act as examiner of private Bills in the fulfillment of counsel’s duties under Standing Orders 90 and 99;
- (g) shall transmit to the Clerk of the Assembly for delivery to all members, prior to the commencement of each session of the Legislature, a list of the reports or other periodic statements which it is the duty of any officer or department of the Government or any corporate body to make to the Assembly,
- (i) referring to the resolution or Act wherein each is ordered,
- (ii) placing under the name of each officer, department, or corporate body a list of reports or returns required, and
- (iii) stating the time by which the report or periodic statement is to be tabled; and
- (h) shall prepare, for printing as statutes, the official copies of the Bills enacted by the Legislature; and
- (i) shall transmit to the Clerk for delivery to the Secretary of State, certified, sealed copies of the Bills enacted by the Legislature;

subject to such orders as counsel may receive from the Speaker or the Clerk

and to respond to the duties of the Parliamentary Counsel and always dealing with the traditions and the customs and the heritage of parliaments as we have in terms of how we deal with them in other matters.

Now, if the argument is with the table officers and the Standing Orders, then this Assembly should basically change the Standing Orders, if that’s the argument, and the Assembly always has the choice and the chance to change the Standing Orders. If the argument here is an interpretation asked for of the chair, the Speaker, because the Speaker upholds the Standing Orders, and if the debate now is a question of confidence in the chair, then the Assembly also has a major responsibility to deal with this by notice of a substantive motion in the chair.

The Standing Orders are very, very clear. They’re written by the Assembly. The chair has written and dealt with the Standing Orders on one or two occasions. The chair has pointed out on the basis of the other materials that we have in here that if there’s going to be a major change, a substantive change in the scope of the question – and if you look at the amendment to Motion for a Return 14, it strikes out “Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations” and substitutes “government of Alberta” – no problem with that – and in (c) adds the following. No problem with that. The substantive change comes in striking out “broken down by company and total dollar amount for each” and substituting “and a listing of vendors providing these services.” There’s a dramatic difference of intent.

This is private members’ day. If an hon. member wants to stand up and move a motion, that member has the right to stand up in this Assembly to move the motion. It is not the government’s afternoon; it’s a private members’ afternoon.

Now, if the motions are the same, if there would have been no change in what was requested in the motion and it would have simply applied to all departments, no problem. If it would have been outlined what they were, no problem. But if there’s going to be a substantive difference, what in essence is happening here is denigrating the role of a private member.

There’s an assumption here that one question having been dealt with would then be dealt with in the same way for all others. These are different questions sometimes from different members to different departments. What their intent is I do not know. I can’t get in anybody’s mind.

All I can ask for is the greatest degree of sense that goes along with this as private members’ day, recognizing that we look at the best utilization of time in this Assembly, recognizing that this is a democracy, recognizing that the majority will always win, understanding that there still is a role for private members.

The hon. Government House Leader.

### Debate Continued

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On the basis of your ruling I’m pleased to reject Written Question 14 on behalf of the government.

**Ms Blakeman:** I’m sorry to hear that, and I regret that the government is refusing to provide the information that we’re looking for, which is fairly simply information just on the contracts for information technology broken down by company and total dollar amounts. I’m sorry that they’re rejecting the request for information.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 14 lost]

### Department of Sustainable Resource Development IT Costs

M15. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the discussion that we’ve just had relative to Motion for a Return 14, I would note in looking at Motion for a Return 15 that it is almost exactly identical to Motion for a Return 14. The difference between Motion for a Return 15 and Motion for a Return 14 is that Motion for a Return 15 talks about the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development and Motion for a Return 14 talks about the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations. In all other respects it would appear that those motions are identical.

Now, I would refer the House to Motion for a Return 10, which was dealt with last Monday. I don’t have it exactly in front of me, but I think it was dealt with by way of an amendment, which deleted the title – in this case it would be Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development and substituting “government of Alberta” – and deleted a section of it: do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the ministry on contracts for information broken down by company and total dollar amount. So it deleted “broken down by company and dollar amount” and substituted “and a listing of vendors providing these services.” That amendment was passed,

as I recall it, on MR 10, and then the amended motion was passed by the House.

It's unfortunate that we passed a motion which is presumably out of order as per your ruling this afternoon, but in any event that's what was done. So we have that amendment and we have MR 10 passed, which provides for the government of Alberta to provide for a return showing the contracts for the government of Alberta broken down by company and dollar amount. Hence, Motion for a Return 15 is redundant, and therefore I would say that it should be rejected on behalf of the government.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close debate.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much. Well, I'm afraid I disagree with the Minister of Justice and the Government House Leader. I find that there is a substantial difference between the ministries of Sustainable Resource Development and International and Intergovernmental Relations. I would argue that that is the key to what makes these motions different.

There's going to be a campaign now, I think, from government to try and make it look like we are somehow remiss or at fault for trying to get information from the government, and I think that we're well within our rights to ask for this information. We would like to get it. I don't see that it's that difficult for the government to provide it for us. It's not being provided, and I can't speculate on why the government refuses to provide it, but it's obviously refusing to provide some fairly simple information here.

The minister keeps going back to Motion for a Return 10 and that somehow in the passing of that, all other motions should follow the same example. Again, I look at the division records, and it's quite clear that the government members have a majority and were able to use that majority to force the passage of Motion for a Return 10. That does not mean that that was the information that the Official Opposition was looking for. It does not mean that it then becomes an example to be used in all other instances where the Official Opposition is seeking information and the government does not give it to us and wants to amend and make it more vague. So I would refute the constant reference that the Government House Leader makes to Motion for a Return 10 that it is somehow an example of what should happen here.

4:50

As I've said before, Mr. Speaker, I'm more than happy to work with the Government House Leader and the third party House leader where we are able to successfully negotiate that we will get the information we are seeking. I did already use the example that happened earlier today where the motion was exactly the same except that it was allowing the inclusion of other named ministries. But to have a motion that now comes in two parts, one amending the intent or the information being sought and the second asking that additional motions be struck because they are included in it, is simply not acceptable, and the Speaker has already ruled on that.

You know, the government has all the power here. We're merely the opposition doing our best to seek information. The government repeatedly put us towards asking these questions in this venue and has refused to provide us the information in other venues. So what we've come down to is once again the government using its overwhelming majority to try and bash the Official Opposition on the head. I regret that such simple information as a dollar amount spent on technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for the 2002-2003 fiscal year is beyond the government's ability to provide, and I do once again plead for common

sense, some cool heads, and support for the motion as presented. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 15 lost]

### Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development IT Contracts

M16. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for the Ministry and Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move an amendment to Motion 16 such that the amendment would strike out "the Ministry and Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development" and substitute "all ministries and departments in the government of Alberta referred to in motions for returns 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206." The motion as amended would then read:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for all ministries and departments in the government of Alberta referred to in motions for returns 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206.

Mr. Speaker, in speaking to the amendment, I would point out to the House that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the previous motion has complained about the lack of information that the government is prepared to provide. In fact, by substituting the amendment here, which deals with all ministries and departments of the government, we're expanding the information that's going to be provided because it will be done for all departments of government rather than being done on an individual basis as and when a particular critic might put their three or four motions on the table.

In fact, what's happened in this House under our Order Paper is that if you look at it, there are groupings of written questions and motions for returns, so it would appear – and I don't intend to make any allegation against any member, but I just surmised from looking at it that each opposition critic has decided to come forward with virtually the same question with respect to each of their departments, and one or two haven't done it. So we have written questions that are identical for all intents and purposes with respect to most but all not all departments of government.

Well, I think we can correct that oversight, Mr. Speaker, by having it deal with all departments of government. Rather than dealing with it on an individual one-by-one basis, we can approve an amendment which aggregates them all into the same motion and deals with them all at one time, thus saving some essential time in this House so that we can deal with other private members' business.

Now, I don't deny for a moment that private members have the right to put questions on the Order Paper, but when questions are put on the Order Paper where they deal with each individual department and deal with exactly the same return for each department, then it seems to me that it makes sense to aggregate them together and to deal with them all at once.

You've ruled earlier, Mr. Speaker, that one can't make a substantive amendment to a motion. On the previous motion the member was saying that we weren't providing all of the information. Well, in fact, the reality is that the amended Motion for a Return 10, just to use as an example when speaking to this amendment, actually does expand the information which is available to the opposition.



Now, it doesn't necessarily put it in a form that's easy for them to read. I grant that. What it does is provide the same information for all departments of government. What it does is show the dollar amount on contracts and a listing of vendors for the services. This is relevant because now they're asking for the policies relating to the contracts.

So what they will get under Motion for a Return 10 is a return on all departments of government with the dollar value of contracts and a listing of the vendors, and of course they can find out how much each vendor gets by looking at what we colloquially call the blue book or the listing that's published every year with respect to how much is paid to any individual or corporation in the province of Alberta. That's all a matter of public record.

Now, one of the problems with motions for returns is that it's not so simple as to say: why not give us this information? We have civil servants in this province who are doing yeoman's service on behalf of Albertans providing the services that they've been hired to provide, and we want to keep them doing that. We do not believe it's appropriate or useful to sideline those people who are out there making sure the courts are open every day, making sure the cheques are delivered on time, making sure that the program delivery happens. To take them off those tasks to squirrel through files or through information to prepare a report so that we can table it and give it to the opposition when that information is readily available to the opposition in documents that are already published does not make sense.

So to aggregate the questions as one, to say that we'll respond on behalf of all departments to save them the time of cluttering the Order Paper with the individual departments and to amend the motion in a way, not in this motion but in others, to aggregate the information, to put it in a more answerable form is an entirely appropriate way to go. It results, Mr. Speaker, in the opposition getting more information, not less, and points them in a manner in which they can use that information.

They can get the additional information they need from already published material without the downside of using up civil service time. These people are being paid to do useful jobs on behalf of the people of Alberta, to serve Albertans, and instead they want to sidetrack them to find answers to 210 motions for returns and then complain when we try and put them together so that you can get a comprehensive report that's got more information than was requested, not necessarily in the same form, because sometimes in order to get the information, it's necessary to change the question to get it into a more answerable form, and that's what we've purported to do.

I would ask the House to support this amendment so that we can take a number of those questions – in fact, 17 plus the one we're debating, so 18 – off the Order Paper and save us the problem of dealing with another four or five when they get around to putting those ones on the Order Paper, Mr. Speaker. So I'd ask the House to accept this amendment.

5:00

**Ms Blakeman:** I'm very happy to support this amendment. It cannot have gone by the notice of the Government House Leader, who is a learned man and particularly learned in exactly the sort of issues we're dealing with here, which is the specificity of language and administrative law, that the argument that he and I are having today, ably watched over by the Speaker, is about whether or not the changes substantially change the motion. Right here I'm more than willing to accept this because the information that the opposition is seeking is exactly the same and it is adding in the rest of those departments.

Now, why did we do this one by one and name every department? Because we wanted the information from every department. If the government is willing to give us the exact the information that we asked for for every department, we don't have a problem, and I've been very clear about that.

The wording is exactly the same between the two. We've got: "Current information technology services." Looking at the amended motion: "Current information technology services." "Contract tendering policy and process." "Contract tendering policy and process" for all ministries or for the ministry. We are very happy to accept this when you are going to give us the information we are seeking. Therefore, I am very happy to support this.

The opposition has no interest in being intransigent on this one. We have interest in getting information – and that is why we are here – when the information that is being offered and the information that is being sought are the same. But when the Government House Leader tries to extrapolate this further on and make some other motion in which Parliamentary Counsel will recognize that it is not the same, the Speaker recognizes that it's not the same, then we are not in agreement any longer.

I'm more than willing to support this motion. It gives us the information we're seeking. It gives it for all of the ministries that we're seeking it for, which includes the office of the Premier, Economic Development, Environment, Government Services, Energy, Seniors, Justice and Attorney General, Community Development, Innovation and Science, Learning, Solicitor General, Gaming, Public Affairs, Transportation, Infrastructure, Municipal Affairs, and Children's Services.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment carried]

**The Speaker:** Now we'll close the debate. The motion is amended then.

**Mr. Hancock:** Could we not continue debate on the motion itself?

**The Speaker:** Well, we can. I haven't recognized . . .

**Mr. Hancock:** I've already spoken.

**The Speaker:** You've already spoken on it. So who else wants to debate?

**Mr. Hancock:** I just assumed that others might wish to.

**The Speaker:** Anybody else?

Then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you for the information.

[Motion for a Return 16 as amended carried]

**The Speaker:** This motion having been done now takes off the Order Paper the following aggregated motions as well: 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206. They're not to return; they're gone. It can be done.

The hon. Government House Leader.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would request unanimous consent of the House to leave this order of business and move to private members' bills.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

**Public Bills and Orders Other than  
Government Bills and Orders  
Second Reading**

**Bill 203  
Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes  
Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate March 1: Mr. Lord]

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

**Mr. Cao:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to join the debate on second reading of Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the Member for Calgary-West. This bill seems to propose reasonable amendments to the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act.

I do not think that the bill will be a cause for concern by the Alberta government. No one is going to get rich from the CPP credits. However, these credits will become very important for people living on fixed incomes in their retirement years. I agree with other speakers who believe that Bill 203 addresses an issue that should receive more attention. The notion of opting out of the CPP credit-splitting program was granted to the provinces by the federal government almost 18 years ago.

**Rev. Abbott:** Eighteen?

**Mr. Cao:** Yes, 18 years ago.

Alberta would not be the first province to take advantage of this option. This isn't groundbreaking legislation, but it is a sensible amendment.

For most people planning for retirement or living with financial independence in their later years is a distant concern. Retirement, pensions, and RRSPs are a minor consideration for most Canadians. In their initial form CPP credits may not be as valuable as other property; however, some people qualify for coverage from the CPP. The real value of CPP credits shows their monetary value in the form of a regular cheque sent by the federal government.

Bill 203 will hopefully motivate divorced couples to reconsider the importance of their public pension regardless of its size. This bill clears the way for divorced and separated couples to equally split or otherwise divide their Canada pension plan credits gained during their marriage.

As we heard through our debate last Monday, people place varying degrees of importance on CPP credits. Some believe that credits should be on the bargaining table as an asset when proceeding with a divorce or separation settlement. Others feel that CPP credits do not offer a great deal of wealth compared to other savings and are therefore easily discarded. I think that the attitude towards CPP credits will change over time. As a person comes closer to retirement age, they will look for opportunities to gain as much equity as possible in an effort to secure more financial independence.

CPP credits may not be as highly regarded by people in their late 30s or early 40s. Some people in their peak income-earning years do not believe that CPP credits are worth a great deal and can be easily traded for some other property gained during marriage. This attitude changes when people seriously consider their financial options as they approach retirement. The seemingly insignificant CPP credits can be a valuable and stable source of income to offset regular expenses such as utility bills.

Right now without Bill 203 a person can attempt to reclaim at any future date the CPP credits that were agreed to be the rightful

property of their former spouse in the spousal agreement. Legally there is little recourse for people who lose this portion of their credits even though the signed waiver is a standard legal agreement.

The federal legislation states that in order for the provinces to opt out of the program and agree not to split their CPP benefits, they must pass provincial legislation allowing for this agreement. Bill 203 will take this loophole away from people who attempt to reclaim a part of their portion that they willingly gave to their former spouse during a divorce.

**5:10**

This bill goes further. Assuming former spouses find out about this legal grey area, there is an important provision that makes the CPP credit-splitting agreement binding to June 4 of 1986. As we've heard from the Member for Calgary-West, this date was not chosen randomly. Amendments to the Canada Pension Plan Act to allow provinces to opt out of credit splitting were introduced on June 4, 1986. Section 55.2(3) states that a spousal agreement entered into on or after June 4, 1986, contains a provision that indicates the intention of the spouses or former spouses that there be no division of unadjusted pensionable earnings.

A few speakers here in second reading, some in Canada's legal community, have argued that CPP credits are part of the federal social program and should not be negotiable. I would agree that there is a significant social theme to the Canada pension plan. However, we must remember that a divorce is based mostly on division of property. The negotiating that goes along with the divorce fuels angry feelings and ill will exchanged between the two parties.

Private and provincial pension plans can be split or otherwise distributed in a divorce. From a financial perspective the only difference between the Canada pension plan and other pensions is the source of funds. During a divorce property is seen by some couples as much more than simple material items. It is seen as an entitlement. As a result, everything gained during a divorce is negotiable, and this includes CPP credits. At the time of a divorce CPP credits may seem useless to some Albertans, but over time and in the event of retirement or disability these credits become a stable source of income.

Mr. Speaker, imagine if a former spouse were able to claim other property attained during the marriage, such as a vehicle or house. I can assure you that the debate would be short and action from the government to remedy the situation would be swift. However, one of the differences between CPP credits and other property is that credits do not provide an immediate financial gain. The importance placed upon CPP credits will vary with every divorce. Bill 203 simply ensures that couples divorced since June 1986 adhere to their signed agreement and no future entitlement can be claimed. The bill also ensures that couples going through a divorce in the future will have the choice to choose how the CPP credits are divided.

Mr. Speaker, according to Statistics Canada there were 8,176 divorces in Alberta in the year 2000. This is a significant number of people who may not be aware of the provision surrounding the splitting of CPP benefits. Bill 203 could serve to bring a heightened understanding of this issue.

Some may argue that this bill overestimates the importance of CPP credits. The amount of time and money Canadians dedicate to retirement should be enough for this Assembly to move forward and pass Bill 203. According to the national survey only 1 in 3 Canadians have adequately planned for retirement. Another way of looking at this is that over 65 per cent of Canadians will not have financial independence when they reach their retirement age.

Passing Bill 203 will help people realize that the CPP credit-

splitting program is available to divorced couples. Albertans should be encouraged to take some responsibility to plan for their retirement. CPP credits will not be enough to provide full financial security after retirement.

Hopefully, Bill 203 will send a message to Albertans that pension credits do have value and that retirement options should be taken more seriously. Not proceeding with Bill 203 would mean that this government will continue to allow the opportunity by some to claim CPP credits that are not rightfully theirs. This bill fills a significant legislative gap that will become very important as Canada's aging population reaches retirement.

Mr. Speaker, the other part of Bill 203 that I would like to refer to is the protection clause. Bill 203 also protects former spouses from people who may see an opportunity to nullify the agreement to share CPP pensions. For this I want to support the bill.

**The Speaker:** Hon. Member for Calgary-West, by recognizing you, this would end the debate. I've noticed that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford still wishes to participate. Sorry. Debate continues until all members have had a chance within the time frame.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

**Mr. McClelland:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be brief just so that the hon. member opposite has plenty of occasion to get her words on the record before time expires.

As all members know and understand, when a marriage does break down, it is the mandatory policy of the federal government for the partners to equally split the Canada pension plan credits accrued during the marriage. This policy was brought forward in 1987 to recognize that both spouses, regardless of whether they worked outside or inside the home, are guaranteed some form of pension on retirement.

The policy was designed to be automatic. The point is, Mr. Speaker, that it is not automatic, and at any time after the dissolution of the marriage either partner is able to apply for a share of the pension plan benefits. This bill seeks to put some certainty to that, and for that reason I endorse it wholeheartedly.

Thank you.

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

**Dr. Pannu:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak on Bill 203, Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. This bill, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-West, has far-reaching implications for men and women who break a matrimonial relationship and then seek to carve out their own futures.

We have widely consulted with groups likely to be affected by this bill and the amendment that it seeks to make to Canada pension plan credits statutes as they exist now. We've been receiving some expressions of concern which are extremely serious if this bill were to become law.

Currently in the case of a relationship breakdown either spouse can apply for division of CPP credits accumulated during that relationship. If such a request is made by either partner, the credits are totalled and divided equally between the spouses. There are no mechanisms for appealing or disputing whether the credits should be split. If a request is made, the split is automatic. It is not affected by whether a divorce settlement has stipulated that the credits not be split. So the bill amends the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act to eliminate the automatic splitting and to encourage or force ex-spouses to make an intentional decision about whether CPP credits will be split as part of the settlement.

5:20

Mr. Speaker, we need to keep in mind the fact that marital relationships, particularly those that break down and lead to dissolution of the relationship, a split in the relationship, are often bitterly contested relationships. They are attended by bitter disputes, contestations, arguments before those relationships reach a breaking point.

Now, there are certain assumptions in the bill. The bill talks about providing choice to spouses who may have walked away from their relationship, and the choice is seen as a good thing, no doubt. Choice also appeals to the question of equality. It provides sort of equal opportunities for former spouses to choose between either splitting the CPP credits or not. On the face of it it sounds very nice, sounds very reasonable, Mr. Speaker.

When you look at it from the point of view of spouses who as a rule in a marital relationship are in a position of inequality, in a position of not being able to act as if they were equal partners – and this situation of unequal partnership is a result of not just one particular law but long-held traditions and histories of spousal relationships – then I think that one needs to acknowledge that merely seeking formal equality is not enough. Conditions, a substantive side of the equation, need to be taken into account.

I think I needn't remind the House that it's only in recent years, perhaps less than 20 years ago, closer to 15 years ago, in 1986, '87 I think, that the legislation was changed, issuing an entitlement to a fairer split in the course of marriage. That was, Mr. Speaker, the mid-80s, the late '80s. It was the era when 50-50 property split came about. Before '87 women would be missing out on access to public pension plans and a fair split in the matrimonial property that was created during the period of marriage. There used to be a three-year limit to apply, and the government removed that ultimately. So no matrimonial legislation could take that federally entrenched right away from the spouse who sought this split, in most cases the women in the relationships. This current legislation before us, Bill 203, would allow people to contract out of this requirement.

The problem is, Mr. Speaker, that those rights, when opened back to negotiation, are often given away for nothing in a relationship when it is a relationship of unequal power, unequal means, and unequal standing. There is very little consideration given in this bill to that kind of situation. In a marriage where one spouse is at a disadvantage by not being able to get that split, I think that's a situation that, in my view, is not appropriately addressed in this bill. It's especially, I think, important for older women.

It's very difficult to quantify the worth of these legislated rights to equal split in CPP credits, Mr. Speaker. People often in desperation are not able to assess what they may be giving up. The current law, as it presently exists, in a sense guarantees that there is no way that the CPP split can become a bargaining chip, but if this legislation is passed, this is precisely what would happen. Spouses in that kind of conflict relationship, particularly mothers and women, would sometimes find that they're desperate about getting some sort of a settlement, especially when children are involved, and under those conditions a woman could feel enormous pressure to give up a CPP split in return for a speedier settlement. Currently some women give joint custody just to get the divorce settled.

So, Mr. Speaker, it's those kinds of concerns that have been brought to our attention by people that we have been consulting on this bill, and we have consulted quite broadly with respect to this bill. The bill is sort of typical of minds that make assumptions that we are all treated equally and we are in fact all living under conditions of not only formal equality that the law might entitle us to but actual material conditions. That is not the case, unfortunately. I have in my hand a document which is . . .

**The Speaker:** Hon. member, your time has now elapsed.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thought the bell had expired debate.

I appreciate an opportunity to also get on the record regarding Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act. Certainly, we are considering amending the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act so that spouses or common-law partners may enter into a written agreement that notwithstanding the Canada pension plan there will be no division between them of unadjusted pensionable earnings. Now, the amendments of Bill 203 certainly deal with the division of assets after a divorce or a separation, as was mentioned, but Bill 203 has the potential to negatively discriminate against the lower income earner in the relationship, which is more often than not the female.

Now, I would urge all hon. members to be careful when debating Bill 203. When we have a bill that seeks to govern the division of

unadjusted pensionable earnings and the entitlement to the subsequent pension and thus will have an impact on spouses and common-law partners after a divorce or a separation, the inevitable consequence of a written agreement made under Bill 203 is that the spouse or partner with the larger pension will benefit over the spouse or partner with the smaller pension. More often than not, Mr. Speaker, this will penalize the female in the relationship, especially, as I said earlier, older women who are homemakers and did not earn a pension.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, the Assembly stands adjourned till 8 o'clock.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]