

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 3, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/05/03

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Legal Drinking Age

508. Mr. McFarland moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to raise the legal drinking age in Alberta to 19, as is the current requirement in the neighbouring provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise in the Assembly tonight and to begin discussion and debate on Motion 508 and the potential increase of Alberta's legal drinking age to 19 years of age.

Before I begin, Mr. Speaker, I did want to acknowledge that earlier this evening I did have the opportunity to speak with many of the young students from the Forum for Young Albertans who are up behind us in the members' gallery. One of the things that they asked was how MLAs responded to constituents' concerns, how they brought them forward, and I tried to indicate to them that this is one of the methods that we use to reflect constituents' wishes.

The other thing that they asked was how useful things like surveys were. I said, Mr. Speaker, that although surveys are useful, in some areas they're not useful at all, and sometimes just by experience you can tell what the reception is to a certain idea. I told them that tonight's speech might be a little bit short simply because I could tell from the reception that I got from the youth that they weren't exactly enamoured with the potential of raising the drinking age. However, I'll do my best. I do have to say that the folks that you're looking at over my shoulder here are probably some of the most responsible youth and probably not the ones that we have to worry about.

I'm getting off my speech, but maybe that's the best way to do it, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hlady: Just go from the heart.

Mr. McFarland: It is from the heart.

You know, maybe you and I and some of the students in the gallery have known somebody who's been the victim of a horrible accident. When a person's gone out that night to have a little bit of fun and maybe have a beer or two with a friend, they don't really expect that anything is going to happen except that they will arrive back home safe and sound. How many of them, including myself, are aware of kids in that very same circumstance who might have gone out to an otherwise innocent party knowing that they were going to come home and one thing led to another, somebody that was under the influence happened to get behind the wheel or in the worst case the responsible four or five in a vehicle were going home with a designated driver and were hit by somebody who was totally impaired and didn't have the responsibility that many of our young people today exercise?

Mr. Speaker, I proposed this idea as a private member's bill in 1999, and I continue to feel very strongly about this initiative and believe that it's a measure that we need now more than ever. The

overriding objective of this motion is to reduce the negative impacts of alcohol on Alberta's youth. Motion 508 has a crucial role in achieving a safe and more responsible use of alcohol.

I would like to shift my focus and speak briefly about a news article that appeared in the paper over a month ago. This article expressed that Albertans outpace most provinces in drinking as well as driving while drunk. This news story was reporting the findings of a study conducted by the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.

The results of the research indicated that Alberta outdrank all of the other provinces in 2000. I can see a couple of grins from a few of the colleagues, but when you consider that the average Albertan was consuming 8.8 litres of alcohol – and that includes every Albertan – it's an amazing statistic, Mr. Speaker. The only territory that outdrank Alberta, so to speak, was the Yukon, and I find this very unsettling. The increasing alcohol consumption rates are alarming, and they'll have an impact on all Albertans.

In this province we promote the ideal of wellness and healthy living. We talk and express concern about FAS, the effects on young women who are pregnant who consume alcohol and the horrible costs . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, we have a lot of young visitors, and I think the noise level is fairly high. The hon. Member for Little Bow has the floor, and I hope we can accord him the courtesy to at least listen to what he has to say.

The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, I believe alcohol is the one area where we've kind of fallen down. We talk about FAS, we try to curb smoking, we try to get in everyone's face at every turn of the road, but the one thing that we don't seem to want to address, maybe more for political and voting reasons than any, is the alarming rate of statistics that involve our youth in alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents.

The Alberta Medical Association and the Alberta Motor Association endorsed raising the drinking age one year when I proposed this in '99. I believe they still raise it as a substantial issue. I have to be totally honest. Although one of the highest numbers of alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents does occur during the ages of 18 to 21, the other significant number is 21 to 24 years of age. I know that those that don't agree with this motion will simply point to that statistic, but I'm ahead of you. I'm aware of that. I will throw this back at the Assembly, Mr. Speaker, that when you combine a relatively young driver who may have had at best two years' driving experience along with an alcohol component in their body, it's a recipe for an accident.

I can't understand, Mr. Speaker, that when our provinces to the east and to the west of us are already at 19, Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec are the only provinces in Canada, including the territories, who are not at least at 19. It would only make sense to me to standardize it when we look at the overall effects that alcohol can have on a family.

You know, there was a time when a young girl in a community that I'm very familiar with – the kids at that time would go out to the bush, and they would have a party on Wednesday night, and they would kind of plan a party for the Friday or Saturday that followed. Well, unfortunately, one night this young gal had gone out with her boyfriend. Over the course of the night it was decided that she should get back home. On the way back home two of her school classmates met them on a hill, and the classmates coming back with more liquor for the party were the only survivors. The sad part was that when the RCMP knocked on this young gal's mother and dad's door to ask if, in fact, they had this person in their house, the mother

responded: yes, she's asleep in bed. Well, she wasn't, Mr. Speaker. She had snuck out.

You know, those kinds of things will happen. It's a horrible thing to inflict on any family, but at the same time, Mr. Speaker, had this life been saved with this proposed amendment, just the one life, it would've been worth it. As it is, it happens too often. Sometimes it happens every week.

Mr. Speaker, I'll go back to the comment that I made earlier. If we would only sit back and look at the measures that we seem to get in front of everyone in Alberta on a yearly basis, again whether it's FAS, making people aware of the things that are not in their best interest – we're trying to do things that make Alberta a better place – I believe you might see the merit in this motion.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, I want to again congratulate the young people that are here tonight. I did appreciate their comments. I would recognize the young gal from Austria who's here on a student exchange. She asked me if I knew what the age limit was in some of the other countries, and although I couldn't tell her that this country was 16 or that one was 17, she did tell me that in her home country of Austria they can drink when they're 16. I don't really have an answer for that except to say that this is Canada. We've always done things a little bit differently. In Alberta we do things quite a bit differently.

I would ask for the concurrence of this Assembly to support the motion. This is not a private member's bill for those in the audience. It's a motion just urging the government to consider raising the legal drinking age to 19.

Thank you.

8:10

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with interest that I rise to participate in the discussion around Motion 508 to raise the legal drinking age in this province from 18 to 19 years. Certainly, there are compelling reasons why we need to have this discussion in this Assembly. As a parent of three children who are constantly being influenced by marketers, this is a very interesting motion.

Along with a discussion on raising the legal drinking age in this province, perhaps it's also time that we have a discussion or a debate on curtailing some of the marketing that goes out to young people and how young people and alcohol relate. I certainly would want us to look at some of the ad campaigns that are bombarding some of our postsecondary institutions and some of our technical schools. If one were to believe those ads, you can't have fun unless you drink. I think that is unfortunate, and I think we are doing the young people of this province a disservice when we neglect to discuss this. Advertising can have an enormous influence on young people. As a matter of fact, it can have an enormous influence on anyone, but the idea that you can't have fun without a beer or a cooler is not something that we should promote, Mr. Speaker.

When we consider looking at raising the drinking age from 18 to 19, I would urge all members to just reflect on the implications of an advertising campaign. Let's say that a beer company, for instance, hosts an event at NAIT, or we could pick the university during frosh week or orientation week. We're trying to build at that age a brand loyalty, and we're doing that by associating drinking with fun. If one is to visit, like the hon. Member for Little Bow has suggested, the hospital where there have been some young people involved in a traffic fatality or to visit a police station where the police have just come back from a call in the middle of the night where, unfortunately, someone has been in a serious accident as the result of

alcohol consumption, it is a sobering reminder, so to speak, to all of us of our activities surrounding young people and drinking.

Even before people are of the legal age, there is a pressure. There's peer pressure, and also there is in my view pressure from the advertisers to start drinking. This is a consumer that has to be, so to speak, Mr. Speaker, captured and programmed to be satisfied with one brand or another or one product.

I was looking before I had my opportunity to speak at the number of coolers that are sold in this province. It's quite significant. That's another brand of alcohol, if I could use that term, that is targeted, in my view, at young people.

It was, I believe, last week in Public Accounts where in the Gaming minister's annual report from 2003 there was a list of beverages and the government revenue as a result of those. I could be mistaken on this, but I believe, for whatever reason, it was in Gaming estimates in the annual report. I was shocked to see that in some of the categories there was a slight decrease in total volume sales but not in coolers.

So that would be another reason to have a good debate on increasing the minimum legal drinking age in this province. We are one of the few Canadian provinces – there are others who use 19 as their age of permission, but here it is 18. Certainly, the hon. member is correct. If you look at Austria, 16 is the minimum drinking age, and that's probably the lowest. Egypt is 21. Belgium, again, is 15. But in Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec it is 18. All other provinces are 19.

There are many people, Mr. Speaker, who would like to get some remarks on the record in regard to this very important motion, and I would cede the floor to another member of this Assembly. I would be interested to hear what they think of this motion.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming. [some applause]

Mr. Stevens: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker and fans. First of all, I'd like to commend the Member for Little Bow for bringing forward this motion. As he indicated in his preliminary comments, he brought a private member's bill in '99, I believe, so this is a matter that is of concern to him and of concern to some of his constituents.

As the Minister of Gaming it's my pleasure to respond. However, I must say that I will be speaking against Motion 508, which proposes to raise the legal drinking age to 19 years. To explain why, I'd like to introduce to you two hypothetical Albertans whose experience reflect the typical youth in Alberta: Bill and Sharon. Bill and Sharon are two young adults who turn 18 in May 2003. They were high school sweethearts, and they got married last year right after they graduated. In August Bill and Sharon announced that they were expecting their first child. A month later, in September, Sharon started school at the University of Calgary. At this time Bill decided to enlist in the armed forces, and they bought their first house in December.

I would like to ask all the members here a rhetorical question. Are Bill and Sharon responsible enough to drink? Of course they are. They are hard-working, taxpaying Albertans that have as many rights as 19 year olds. Most of Alberta's young people are responsible people who make responsible choices every day. As the argument as old as time goes: how can we deny an adult, who is by every other right an adult, the privilege to make the choice whether or not to drink?

8:20

Mr. Speaker, there's much evidence to support my position. First

of all, I'd like to say that the drinking age in this province has been 18 years since 1971, and as such anybody who has been born in this province since 1952 has been raised in a jurisdiction where the drinking age has been 18 years.

In the fall of 2003 AADAC released a report that took a look at the drinking activities of youths in grades 7 to 12. The Alberta youth experience survey was a major study of youth in Alberta's schools. The information in this study is valuable as it allows us to compare the experiences of our youth to youth throughout North America.

The survey shows that adolescent alcohol use in Alberta is 56 per cent. This trend is prevalent across a number of provinces, including those where the legal drinking age is 19. In fact, Alberta's rate of adolescent alcohol use is lower than Ontario's, which is at 65 per cent, and the legal drinking age in that province is 19. All of the information that has been released in the last year clearly demonstrates that the legal drinking age has little bearing on the number of adolescents who consume alcohol.

As AADAC conducted the Alberta youth experiences survey, it is understandable why they have also taken a position against raising the legal drinking age in Alberta. I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that AADAC has been in this business for 50 years at this point in time.

Recently AADAC released a position paper on this issue, which is available on their web site. It states:

Raising the legal drinking age can encourage and promote increased illegal activities such as bootlegging, binge drinking or drinking in high-risk situations, procuring false identification, and possibly the use of other drugs as substitutes for alcohol.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that AADAC does not support raising the legal drinking age. Its commitment is to the education of Albertans in order to encourage responsible and informed decisions about alcohol use. They have resources for parents, teachers, and children that provide information about making responsible choices. Education is the key. We all need to take responsibility for ensuring that our children have the tools to make responsible choices.

The teachers in Alberta meet this challenge every day. Alberta Learning provides materials and resources to help teach children how to make responsible decisions regarding drinking and regarding drinking and driving. Programs that have been developed by Alberta Transportation are also in place to educate, enforce, and increase the awareness of the effects of drinking and driving.

Overall, national statistics have shown that young drivers are the least likely of any age group to drink and drive or to have a blood alcohol content in excess of the legal limit. Unfortunately, however, of all the provinces in Canada, Alberta and Saskatchewan do have the highest proportion of adolescent drivers who are fatally injured and are legally impaired. Given that this trend is common to both provinces, which have different legal drinking ages, Saskatchewan being 19, you can't substantiate the argument that a higher legal drinking age will ultimately decrease impaired driving among youth.

As I've pointed out, the government is actively working to ensure that adolescents have the tools to make responsible choices when it comes to alcohol. As the minister responsible for the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, my role is to ensure that there are effective enforcement and education programs in place for licensees, and it's the top priority to ensure that minors are not being served alcohol by our licensees.

In fact, over the past two years I've overseen three initiatives that have emphasized that commitment as a priority. The first is that the AGLC increased penalties to licensees who were found in violation of policies relating to minors accessing alcohol. Secondly, the AGLC increased awareness and enforcement of its under-25 ID policy, and thirdly, the AGLC initiated a joint effort with all liquor

industry stakeholders to create a uniform training program for licensees and their staff.

You may have heard of the significant efforts taken by the AGLC to increase awareness under the under-25 ID policy, which helps ensure that minors are not obtaining alcohol. The AGLC has taken significant steps to increase the number of licensees asking for ID from people who appear to be under 25, including sending letters to licensees and stakeholders, providing training sessions, and providing awareness materials such as the It's the Law poster. The AGLC found that almost 67 per cent of licensees, including liquor stores, bars, and lounges, complied with the policy in 2003, and I have directed the AGLC to conduct another audit this year, which we expect will show another significant increase in compliance.

The third initiative mentioned that will help combat underage drinking is the new mandatory training program, that is a collaborative initiative. This program is called the Alberta server intervention program, or ASIP. It's a uniform training program that has the highest level of standards. Everyone involved in the sale or service of liquor will be required to take ASIP.

Alberta's young adults have the ability to make responsible choices when it comes to alcohol, and they prove that every day. It is imperative that parents of our young adults take responsibility and teach their children by example how to consume alcohol responsibly. It's important that parents find the time to teach their children how to make responsible choices. In today's world of drugs and violence kids have to grow up fast, and they have to make the choice to drink or not long before they're 18. Every day children, adolescents, and young adults make responsible choices because they have learned how to.

I'd like to conclude my remarks by congratulating the young adults who make the choice to be responsible and drink responsibly.

As a last comment, often in this House we hear people talk about how we can get our young people involved in the democratic process and in political issues, and I must congratulate the hon. member opposite for bringing this matter forward because if indeed it does go beyond a mere vote here today, I imagine that we will have gained the interest of all of the 17 and 18 year olds in Alberta, who I'm sure will take the time to find out where their MLAs live so that they can communicate with us.

So once again, Mr. Speaker, I recommend to my colleagues in the Assembly that this motion be turned down.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and join in the debate on Motion 508 this evening. I think this motion is very important, and I'm glad that those of us here this evening have an opportunity to debate this issue.

We've heard a few times this evening that the intent of this motion is to "urge the government to raise the legal drinking age in Alberta to 19" years. This would be quite a change, Mr. Speaker, and would affect a large number of Albertans in this province. That being said, I find it's very pleasing that we can discuss this issue tonight, and we can discover what's good about this motion and what's not.

The legal drinking age has been 18 years of age for quite a long time in this province, over 30 years, so making a change like this would have to be done after a significant consultation process with Albertans. That being said, if we do decide to support this motion before us today, I think the government should begin the process of consulting with Albertans immediately to see what their views on this subject would be. I assume that the debate would be quite divisive across Alberta because there are many around the province

who like the freedom to choose whatever they want when they reach that age that's considered adult.

Then we have before us a motion that will affect Albertans who reside in our high schools and in our universities. I would be very interested to find out how some of our young Albertans feel about this motion.

Mr. Speaker, the evidence that has been collected over the years does not conclusively conclude that having a higher drinking age is better suited to stopping things like alcohol abuse or drinking and driving. I think we'll find that these problems are going to continue regardless of what our drinking age is. I think the best strategy for stopping these problems is still through our education programs, such as those offered by AADAC or through local high schools. I also believe that these programs are working somewhat as we are seeing fewer cases of young people drinking and driving.

8:30

However, this motion does have one strong advantage going for it, and that is that it will eliminate drinking, albeit legal drinking, from our high schools. It is the case that many students in our high school system are at a legal age where they can drink. There are many who enter grade 12 at the age of 17 and turn 18 before the end of June. Those kids do get that opportunity to be adults, and they can currently choose to drink. What I worry about are those kids who are 17 who are at parties with the 18 year olds that bring all the alcohol they want and feel peer pressure to drink.

Now, I'm not so ignorant to think that this would stop outright if the drinking age were increased. Kids will be kids, and if there's an opportunity to make poor choices, they usually do, but that's how they learn. If we raised the drinking age, I think that would limit the access that many 17 year olds have to alcohol, because I don't feel that it's the 18 year olds that are truly at fault for underage drinking but, rather, those 17 year olds who are not strong enough to realize when a choice they are about to make is not the wisest.

I think that it's important to realize that 17 year olds would know more 18 year olds than 19 year olds; therefore, I think that an increase in our drinking age would stop some of those 17 year olds from getting their older friends to bootleg for them.

As well, we can look at the graduation ceremonies that will be happening across Alberta during the next couple of months. There are a lot of high schools that have what are termed wet grads. This is where there's a bar and alcohol is served. The only way you can purchase a drink is if you receive a stamp or a tag that shows that you are at least 18. But we all know what happens. Little Johnny 17 year old gets his buddy who turned 18 three days prior to the grad party to buy him some drinks. Then Johnny is passed out sick in the bathroom, looking like he's been run over by a drunk tank.

I think that if the legal drinking age was 19, we could avoid some of these situations. I think that a lot more graduating classes would choose to have dry grads because none of the graduates or very few of the graduates would be able to legally drink. When the option to drink is taken away, a lot of the time the problems that usually follow are diminished. I think that it's those problems that come with drinking alcohol that we should try to eliminate.

I realize that there are plenty of kids who are very responsible when it comes to drinking, but we have to face the facts that most kids are not all that responsible, especially when they've just turned 18. Responsibility is a lesson that some of them must learn.

Alcohol is a very dangerous substance, Mr. Speaker. If we went across the province, I'm sure we could find many instances of bar brawls, domestic disputes, and other instances that can be directly related to alcohol. If we can stop a kid who is still in high school from having those problems so early in life, I think that we will be better off.

I'm reminded of the tragedies that happened in Calgary that are alcohol related. I think of the tragedy that occurred in the Member for Peace River's constituency a few weeks ago, where a young man was killed in a bar fight. As well, there was a tragedy in Lethbridge I think four years ago where a young man was killed in a fight after a night in the bar. All the tragedies are related in that they are linked to alcohol. Would these tragedies have been avoided by having a higher legal drinking age?

Mr. Speaker, I think that one thing we really should realize is that there might be an argument made that when a person turns 18, there are rights that are given that person. The biggest right is of course the right to vote. I think that a lot of 18 year olds believe that since they are of the age that is considered adult, they should be allowed to do those things that adults do. They should magically have the same rights as the rest of the adult population.

I agree wholeheartedly with that assumption and that 18 year olds should be given every right that's coming to them, but drinking is not a right. It never has been a right, and I think that is where we run into the problems when we debate issues such as this one before us tonight. There are too many young people out there who think that drinking alcohol is a right. However, it's not a right; it's a privilege. It's a privilege that can be taken away if that is what the majority of Albertans prefer.

If we pass this motion today and we eventually decide to raise the legal drinking age, what benefits are we going to see from this move? For one, I think it may stop cross-border drinking, meaning that there might be fewer kids from Saskatchewan, where the drinking age is 19, coming to Alberta to get in a night of partying. I think that that would keep our children safer. As well, a higher drinking age would keep alcohol predominantly out of the high school system. I'm not saying that that's in the school lockers of our local high schools, but I think that children who have yet to learn about responsibility have far too easy access to alcohol. I think that raising the drinking age just might reduce that peer pressure to drink.

As I stressed earlier this evening, I still think that education is the best way to alert our youth to the problems that are associated with alcohol. If we as a government decide to raise the legal drinking age, we should do it for the right reasons. We must study the impact that such a move would have on Albertans.

As well, I don't think this should be the only thing that we do in this area. One of the big reasons for raising the legal drinking age is not only to get alcohol out of our schools but to curb the traffic deaths that are related to alcohol. Since this is the case, I think that we should come up with a comprehensive strategy so that raising the legal drinking age is not all that we do. I think it should be part and parcel of a far-reaching, Alberta-wide strategy to curb the abuse that is seen in regard to alcohol.

I'm looking forward to seeing what other members have to say on this motion this evening, and with that I'll conclude my remarks. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to join in the debate on Motion 508, which calls for raising the legal drinking in Alberta from 18 to 19. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my colleague from Little Bow for having the vision and initiative to introduce a motion which aims to protect some of the most influenced and vulnerable members of our society, our youth.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the intent of Motion 508 is not to demonize the consumption of alcohol. I am of the belief that most adult Albertans are responsible consumers who are aware of the health and social risks associated with the abuse of this particular substance. By

having this knowledge and experience, adults are able to make informed decisions with regard to how much they choose to drink and what amount is right for them.

However, while adults have the luxury of knowing how much they can drink before it starts to affect them in an adverse manner, younger Albertans, especially teenagers, may not be aware of the inherent dangers associated with alcohol abuse. Furthermore, those who are aware of the dangers choose to ignore them as a result of the it-won't-happen-to-me type of mentality. What they don't realize is that drinking, especially binge drinking, which many adolescents are prone to, can lead to some serious physical, emotional, and social consequences.

One of the risks associated with adolescent drinking in our province, Mr. Speaker, is traffic accidents. According to Alberta Transportation, young males, especially those between the ages of 18 and 24, are most likely to be involved in collisions involving alcohol. However, it should be noted that those at the highest risk of drinking and driving tend to be in the 20 to 21 age group. This suggests that raising the legal drinking age to 19, as proposed in Motion 508, may not help lower the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents because the motion does not target the age group that is most likely to partake in such high-risk activities. While this may be true, I still believe that Motion 508 is a step in the right direction because it will hopefully raise further awareness of the dangers associated with drinking and driving.

With this in mind I believe that raising the legal drinking age to 19 would also complement our province's graduated driver licensing program, which was introduced in May of last year. Alberta Transportation instituted the program to provide first-time drivers with the necessary driving experience and training and to minimize the number of traffic accidents that are caused by driver inexperience.

The graduated driver's licence, GDL, as this program is commonly referred to, consists of two stages, the learning and probationary stages. During both of those periods new drivers are taught how to operate motor vehicles and follow traffic laws in a safe and responsible manner. The instruction also includes a strong message concerning the dangers of drinking and driving and emphasizes the legal and social implications of such dangerous behaviour.

8:40

While new drivers are enrolled in the program, a strict zero-tolerance alcohol policy is enforced, and any student drivers who violate the policy face an immediate licence suspension. Judging by the experiences of other jurisdictions like Ontario, which has had a similar program in place since April of '94, results have been extremely positive. According to the latest collision statistics the number of traffic accidents in Ontario since '94 has decreased by 30 per cent. It should also be mentioned, Mr. Speaker, that the legal drinking age in Ontario is 19.

I believe that through the provisions outlined in Motion 508 and the goals of Alberta's graduated driver's licensing program, our province would be in a position to achieve results similar to those achieved in Ontario. I say this because by the time young new drivers complete the program, they would still be too young to legally purchase liquor. More specifically, Mr. Speaker, most young drivers enrol into the GDL program at the age of 15, and it takes them three years to complete the course. They would still be one year away from being legally entitled to buy alcohol.

It is my hope that through the training and instruction they receive as part of the GDL program and the fact that they would have one more year left before they could legally purchase liquor, young Albertans would have the time to consider the risks associated with

drinking and driving and make the right choices and decisions. I believe that through a combination of such measures and positive reinforcement, we will be able to address the systemic problem of impaired driving and lower alcohol-related collisions in our province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, in my remarks today I have mainly focused on the dangers of drinking and driving among young Albertans. However, it's also important to highlight other equally dangerous consequences associated with adolescent drinking. Medical studies have found that there is a direct correlation between alcohol abuse and physiological development. More specifically, teenagers who are prone to binge drinking may inadvertently be compromising their physical growth due to the fact that alcohol can suppress the growth hormones, that are fundamental to the development of their bones and muscles.

In other cases alcohol abuse leads to learning difficulties, depression, brain damage, liver problems, and many other health-related complications. Furthermore, adolescents who start drinking before the age of 15 are approximately four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence later on in their lives compared to those who have their first drink at the age of 20 or older.

As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, Mr. Speaker, peer pressure is one of the main reasons why teenage Albertans pick up the bottle for the first time. This is further encouraged by the fact that the current legal drinking age of 18 has created a situation where students can legally purchase alcohol before many of them graduate from high school. I believe that this sends the wrong kind of message to younger students, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 17, who try to emulate the behaviour of their older peers. Undoubtedly, seeing their older friends consume alcohol will encourage them to do the same, thus risking their physical and emotional health and well-being and their future success.

Motion 508, Mr. Speaker, would help alleviate this problem by raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 19, which means that the majority of students will have graduated from high school before being able to purchase liquor products. Therefore, by making it illegal for 18-year-old students to purchase alcohol, Motion 508 would help create a deterrent for younger students to follow the actions of their older high school peers.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that we as Albertans must take it upon ourselves to educate and warn our younger generations of the inherent dangers of alcohol use and abuse. We have to teach them to treat this potentially dangerous substance with respect and caution. We need to get the message out to them that alcohol abuse, especially at their young age, is extremely dangerous and may end up costing them dearly. In order to get this message out, we need the full co-operation of the parents, schools, communities, media, and the government.

Motion 508, Mr. Speaker, provides us with one of the means to accomplish these goals and, as such, requires our full support. Concerns that raising the age to 19 will increase illegal activities such as bootlegging and false ID, et cetera, already happen, and I think that it already happens to the maximum. I don't think that you can increase it any more. Although it's legal to marry at the age of 18 and perhaps younger with the consent of your parents, not too many young people do that nowadays. They kind of intrinsically know that that's not such a great idea.

We know that we have a problem with alcohol in Alberta because we are forbidding the use of alcohol in some of our provincial parks over the long weekend this year. It's a pilot project, and if it works in helping families and groups and associations have a better holiday during the long weekend, we may take that regulation and use it for other long weekends.

Also, in Red Deer we know that we have a serious drinking problem with youth in our clubs because we have a bar owner who owns two of the largest clubs in Red Deer who is seriously considering making his clubs only for people 21 years and over, because he insists that it's basically people under 21 who are drinking to levels that create all kinds of complications in his bar. He recognizes that the age of 21 and over is important for him.

I don't think there's much difference between teens in Canada and the United States. I have a couple of facts here that are American facts, but I don't think we're that different, so I think that they could probably apply to us. Certainly, I think it's something for us to think about. Using national data on alcohol and drug use among high school seniors from 1976 to 1987, one study found a decrease in marijuana use associated with increases in the legal drinking age. Between '79 and '84 the suicide rate was 9.7 per cent greater among adolescents and young adults who could legally consume alcohol than among their peers who could not. The earlier a person begins using alcohol, the greater the risk of current and adult drug use and harm to the developing brain.

I, too, like the Minister of Gaming, would like to congratulate all those young adults who drink responsibly, and I thank all those good friends that take their turn as designated drivers and safely return their friends to their homes.

This is a good motion even if it only serves to raise the issue of our deep concern for the safety of our young adults. Motion 508, Mr. Speaker, provides us with one of the means to accomplish these goals and, as such, requires support. As a result, I urge all my colleagues present today to support our youth and their safety and vote in favour of Motion 508. Thank you.

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity this evening to address the Assembly and share my thoughts about Motion 508. I think the idea of raising the legal drinking age to 19 is worthy of discussion, and I would like to express my thanks to the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing it forward.

What is interesting about the legal drinking age is that it is one of the laws that almost all Albertans know about. Just this evening, Mr. Speaker, talking to my five students at the Forum for Young Albertans, this was a subject that was very much on their mind. In Alberta turning 18 becomes a right of passage as it is on this birthday that society begins to look at you differently. You are afforded the right to vote, the legal system looks at you as an adult and expects you to act accordingly, and legally you become old enough to consume alcohol.

When such a law becomes so ingrained in our being, we accept it without thinking because it seems that this is the way that things have always been. The member presenting this motion is right in questioning whether we could better serve Albertans by making changes to this long-standing law. While most Albertans consume alcohol in a responsible manner, this substance does create problems in our society, and that is why there is a legislated age for alcohol in Alberta in the first place and in just about every other country in the world.

Mr. Speaker, as a former counsellor and minister I know first-hand that alcohol has wrecked marriages, cost people jobs, and killed people on our roads. It has affected our unborn children, our communities, and our province. Now, to make this clear, I am not arguing in favour of prohibition; I am just stating that with the use of alcohol comes great responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, the main crux of my argument revolves around the

fact that by allowing youth to wait the extra year to legally drink, we are also giving them an extra year to mature. It is my hope that young adults then would be in a better position to make the right decisions when it comes to alcohol-related matters. I also think that by extending the drinking age to 19, we would have an opportunity to reduce alcohol use among underage Albertans, thereby curbing some of the social problems associated with youth and alcohol. I believe that we need to do what we can as legislators to make Alberta as safe as possible and to create an environment where our children have the best opportunity to safely enter adulthood.

Now, I'm not naive enough to believe that by changing the legal drinking age, we would eliminate the practice of underage drinking. It is a fact that youth under 18 currently do consume alcohol. That will continue if the legal drinking age is changed to 19. According to the Alberta Youth Experience Survey 2002 as conducted by AADAC, Alberta adolescents in grades 7 to 12 are consuming alcohol. The survey indicated that 56.3 per cent of this demographic had consumed alcohol in the previous 12 months to being questioned. To me this number is too high, Mr. Speaker, and we need to be open to options that would help to lower the number of youths that participate in drinking alcohol.

8:50

An age change would make it more difficult for youths to have access to the substance. As many grade 12 students in this province turn 18 before they graduate, they are able to legally purchase alcohol. But what also happens is they have the ability to illegally purchase it for their 16- and 17-year-old friends. Of course, not all 18-year-old grade 12 students participate in this practice, but they are put in a position where they may be pressured to do so. While this measure would probably do little to curb the will of youth to experience the drink before they turn the legal age, there's no question that it would make it harder for high school students to purchase alcohol for other students not yet of age.

Research has shown that the behaviour exhibited by 18 year olds is partially influential on youth 15 to 17 years old. Younger students typically imitate the actions of slightly older individuals rather than those who are significantly older. If we can reduce the drinking influence that an 18-year-old student could have on others through school relationships, it may reduce the number of younger students who engage in this activity.

Mr. Speaker, alcohol impairs the good judgment of adults and youth alike. As I would like to speak to some of the social problems that can be experienced by youth who drink, I would like to make my intentions very clear. The problems with alcohol do not discriminate by age. I say this because I don't want to come across as someone who's picking on our youth. On the contrary, I believe that our youth are among the most talented in the world, and I believe they have proven this on an ongoing basis. During this debate it's important to recognize that fact. If we intentionally or unintentionally paint our youth as a segment of our population that is prone to drink, well, then, we make the suggestion that we expect them to drink.

This is prevalent in how postsecondary school students are viewed in our society. The misconception that young adults go off to college and will become involved in heavy drinking is not only false, but it's dangerous as well. If this mindset becomes ingrained in future college and university students, they will more likely engage in this behaviour or in alcohol abuse as an effort to conform.

So with this disclaimer I'd like to continue with some of the negative effects that alcohol has on our youth. Suicide, unplanned pregnancy, automobile deaths are just some of the issues that Alberta teenagers face. I would argue that all three of these issues are a

result of poor planning and bad decisions. However, when we also add alcohol to the mix, I believe that the occurrence of these incidents is increased. I would like to quickly address each of these issues.

Suicide is tragic in itself, but it is further disturbing when one takes into account the number of extended people that it affects. Tragically, suicide is the second leading cause of death for males and females who are 15 to 24 years of age. According to the United States National Committee for Injury Prevention and Control the use of alcohol is often a contributing factor for suicide. Research indicates several possible explanations. Drinking, as well as drugs, may reduce inhibitions and impair the judgment of someone contemplating suicide, making that act more likely. Further, alcohol may also aggravate other risk factors for suicide, such as depression or other mental illnesses.

Moving on to teen pregnancy, I'd like to touch once again on the issue of impaired judgment. Add alcohol and peer pressure to the mix, and you may have a recipe for a poor decision and, subsequently, an unplanned pregnancy.

Finally, I'd like to touch on drinking and driving. While alcohol impairs all drivers of all ages, inexperience behind the wheel makes drinking and driving especially dangerous among youth. Recently it seems as though there are more graduations in this province where a certain amount of time is put aside to honour a friend and a classmate who was lost in an automobile accident, sometimes – not always, but sometimes – where alcohol was involved.

It's worth noting that Alberta Transportation has implemented the graduated driver's licencing program, an initiative that allows progressively greater authority to drive based on experience and demonstrated competency. One of the restrictions placed on young drivers under this program is a zero tolerance attitude for alcohol consumption. Violation of this will result in an immediate licence suspension. This motion ties in nicely with what the Ministry of Transportation has put forward on this issue, as the hon. Member for Red Deer-North has aptly stated.

Mr. Speaker, it's probable that raising the legal drinking age to 19 would reduce the access that school-age children would have to the substance, and in turn it would be my hope that the negative effects of alcohol would also be curbed. If anything, the move would provide some consistency among the provinces of western Canada in having a standard drinking age.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to once again state that I believe that raising the legal drinking age could be an important step to reducing some of the negative social effects that plague our youth. If young Albertans are able to deal with alcohol in a responsible manner at a young age, I expect they will also become more productive adults in the future.

I'd like to once again thank the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing forward this important motion and allowing us a forum to discuss this excellent idea. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What do I have: about two minutes?

The Acting Speaker: No. We have until 9.

Mr. Maskell: Until 9. So this will be a *Reader's Digest* version. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and speak . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, you will have an opportunity to continue next Monday as well.

Mr. Maskell: Next Monday?

The Acting Speaker: Yeah. You're not limited to four minutes.

Mr. Maskell: This still may be the *Reader's Digest* version.

Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 508, which urges the government to raise the legal drinking age to 19. I believe measures like the one being suggested by the Member for Little Bow are important to consider if we want to continue to make forward progress where alcohol and youth are concerned, and I certainly appreciate the comments earlier from the hon. Minister of Gaming and the AADAC stats that he provided us.

Alcohol can be a dangerous substance to all members of society. It affects young and old Albertans alike. However, it is necessary to do everything in our power to teach our youth that with the use of alcohol comes responsibility. Youth who learn the lesson at an early age are less likely to have alcohol-related problems later on in life.

This has been suggested in many studies. The *Journal of Substance Abuse* finds that the younger a person is before using alcohol, the greater the chance he or she will become dependent on the substance or will abuse alcohol later on. About 16.6 per cent of those who begin drinking at age 18 will become dependent on alcohol, with 7.8 per cent of those abusing alcohol at some point in their lives. However, the same statistics show that if a person waits until they are 21 years old before taking their first drink, these risks decrease by over 60 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, even if we raise the legal drinking age, there will be underage youth who will drink and sometimes drive, but I believe that raising the legal drinking age could help to reduce this trend.

The big mistake we made over 30 years ago, of course, is that we changed it from 21 to 18, and there are some people in this room who remember the coming of age was 21 years of age, and this has changed our society, changed our youth a whole lot.

I was really disturbed when I heard the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow talk about wet grads. I mean, I'm flabbergasted to believe that there are schools in this province that have wet grads. I spent over 32 years in this business and more than 20 years of them as a high school principal, and I can't remember wet grads. They were dry grads, and we were not a part of any of this whole business of after grads. We would not in any way allow that to even be organized within the school, as least formally. This must be happening south of Red Deer somewhere because it certainly isn't happening in the Edmonton area, certainly not in any school I was involved in and not in the district that I was involved in.

Also, what happened when we reduced it from 21 to 18 is that there was a time when students went to football games, they went to watch high school basketball games, they went to the dances, and so on. Now when there's a high school basketball game or a football game or whatever, the girlfriends or boyfriends are there, maybe the odd parent cheerleader . . .

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

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

Bill 26
Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004

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

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to rise and move

third reading of Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004.

The legislation is the result of the most comprehensive review of the K to 12 education system in more than 30 years. As a member of Alberta's Commission on Learning I am proud to state that all the stakeholders as well as any interested Albertans were involved in the process.

I know that all members in this Assembly agree with me when I state that improving student achievement must be a priority. This legislation will contribute significantly to that end.

I urge all members to vote in favour of Bill 26 in third reading. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for bringing in this bill. This bill does some very important things. One of the things it does is operationalize the practice review process, which is a way of getting rid of incompetent teachers. It's a fairer way. It's a way that is a lot easier. It's cheaper. But, most importantly, it is a fairer way.

Mr. Speaker, I will say that there is some controversy with this bill between the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association when it comes to the central office administrators. The Alberta Teachers' Association is concerned about the central office administrators not having any disciplinary process. The Alberta School Boards Association is wanting all of the central office administrators out of the union altogether. Included in this bill is a provision for regulation-making powers to set the category of central office administrators that will be out of the union.

In conjunction with the Alberta Teachers' Association I have looked at this, and I have decided that it will not be proclaimed until the regulations are done. Once the regulations are done which define the class of central office administrators, that portion of the bill will then be proclaimed. Mr. Speaker, this is something that has been done in conjunction after a lot of discussion with the Alberta Teachers' Association, keeping in mind that the bill is at third reading. The discussion also was that this bill be put over until the fall.

The important thing about this bill is not the central office administrators, Mr. Speaker. The important thing about this is the practice review process, which has to be put in in order to operationalize it. Once the regulations are brought in, the specific central office administrators will then be potentially taken out of the union.

Mr. Speaker, it is a good bill. It is a bill that operationalizes a lot of things that were done in the Learning Commission, and I would urge all members to vote for this bill.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like the opportunity to make a couple of comments about Bill 26. One of the things that I find really unfortunate was that I supported the bill and expedited it as much as I could at second reading based on the assurance that both the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association had agreed to the amendments. It's much to my chagrin that I find that that's not the case.

I think it's unfortunate that what happened happened. It's not just that I was misled, Mr. Speaker, but I in turn misled my colleagues, and that, I think, is regrettable. We have a tradition in the House of dealing with each other frankly and in a spirit of co-operation to try to move legislation through as quickly as we can, and when things

like this happen and there's deliberate misleading, I think that makes that kind of process much more difficult.

I'm pleased that the minister has addressed the problem and spoken to the ATA and agreed to address through regulation some of the concerns they've had, but I don't think that that excuses not having the courtesy to let me know that before the amendments were pushed through the House as quickly as we did.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make some comments on Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004, in its third reading.

I want to begin by saying that it's my considered view that the education system has been well served by having a unified association that represents teachers both in their professional capacity and represents them in collective bargaining. In fact, if you look back, I believe the evidence shows that a unified association representing teachers in both of these capacities has worked as well or better than it has where different organizations represent the professional and collective bargaining sides.

In fact, what's remarkable is how few times Alberta teachers have taken job action. Other than the job action of two years ago, which was precipitated by an unusual set of circumstances including a ham-fisted attempt by the Tory government to impose wage controls on teachers, teachers' strikes in Alberta have tended to be few and far between.

If you look at the track record of the provinces that have separated the professional and collective bargaining functions into separate organizations, again Alberta compares very favourably. To me this demonstrates the success of the existing legislation and arrangements. There's an old saying that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I'm concerned that by moving away, as Bill 26 does, from the principle that all certificated teachers should be represented by a single association, we may be going a ways down the road from something that's been working well.

Last October the Learning Commission submitted what was a very good and in some respects even a visionary report into the future of K to 12 education in this province. There was one area, however, where the Learning Commission report uncharacteristically missed the mark. This was the report's recommendations dealing with the teaching profession. The Learning Commission did not favour eliminating the teachers' right to strike nor completely breaking up the ATA into separate professional collective bargaining organizations despite the fact that these two policy options seemed to have considerable support in the Tory government caucus. I believe it's somewhat of a relief that the Learning Commission rejected these more radical options.

Nevertheless, the recommendations the Learning Commission did make – namely, the removal of principals and assistant principals as well as certificated teachers performing central office functions from the ATA – in my view were not conducive to enhancing the learning system.

Bill 26 further refines the Learning Commission recommendations to make membership in the Alberta Teachers' Association optional for teachers who carry out central office administrative functions for a school board. The existing Teaching Profession Act exempts only school superintendents from membership in the ATA. I listened to the minister's remarks carefully, and I hope that this issue, which is a matter of concern to the ATA, will be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties through regulation.

Going back to the exemption, the existing Teaching Profession

Act exempts only school superintendents from the membership. While this is a limited exemption affecting only several hundred certificated teachers across the province, I'm concerned about the incremental approach being taken eroding the membership of the ATA. I remain unconvinced that even this step is warranted, and I am further concerned that this step may be followed by more serious ones in the future.

9:10

The Bill 26 amendments point to a policy direction whereby the ATA represents only teachers in the classroom and not the teaching profession as a whole. What is the purpose of this fragmentation of the teaching profession, however limited it may be, in Bill 26? That's the question. I simply don't see the justification at this stage or a compelling argument made to justify moving in this direction.

I see other practical problems as well, Mr. Speaker. Individual teachers go back and forth between being classroom teachers and performing central administrative functions. It's been the case, and there has been very healthy movement back and forth between teaching and nonteaching positions. Each time they move, they will be required to make a choice as to whether they wish to be represented by the ATA or not. Will school boards favour teachers who opt out of the ATA or those who choose to stay in the ATA when they're hiring for central administrative positions? Does this open up the possibility of new conflicts between the ATA and school boards? These are some of the questions that come to mind and cause me to worry about the impact that this bill could have whether it's intended or unintended.

For all of the above reasons I'm not supportive of this particular change to Bill 26 despite the fact that I'm aware that the government has gone some ways to try to accommodate the concerns of the teaching profession as articulated by the ATA.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you and take my seat.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark to close debate.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would just like to speak to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods' comments that he feels that he was misled. I, along with the minister's EA, met with the hon. member and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to discuss the amendments. At that meeting – and I know people were rushed to get back into the House – we did state, both the EA and myself, to the members that everything was moving ahead except for that one piece, the central office staff, and that the minister and the president of the ATA were going to be discussing these and working out the bits there. I mean, that was made very clear in that meeting as we discussed these amendments, so I'm very sorry if that wasn't stated clearly enough to the hon. member and that it appeared to him that he had been misled. That's something that I would not do, and I am very disturbed by those comments.

Mr. Speaker, I move closure and the vote on the question. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 26 read a third time]

Bill 25 School Amendment Act, 2004

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to move third reading of Bill 25, the School Amendment Act, 2004.

As mentioned during second reading, Bill 25 reflects this govern-

ment's action on yet another recommendation from the Learning Commission. It balances the interests of teachers with the rights of our children to receive an education that is responsive to their needs. It will achieve this by improving the functioning of the Board of Reference to make sure there is a process to deal with situations where an educator might not fulfill the high standards of his or her peers.

The intent of this bill is quite simple. We need appropriate measures in place to ensure the highest quality of service in the profession, and all measures taken must be effective and fair. As amended, Bill 25 will ensure a good education for all Alberta students.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 25 will add the following responsibilities for Alberta's teachers. They will

- (a) participate in curriculum development and field testing of new curriculum;
- (b) develop, field test and mark provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations;
- (c) supervise student teachers.

Section 18 adds on to the current statutory responsibilities of teachers.

As mentioned earlier, Bill 25 will also allow the Board of Reference to function more smoothly and more in accordance with Bill 26. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark with his bill that we've just passed will work in conjunction with Bill 25 in order to ensure that Alberta's teachers are performing to the ability that all Albertans expect them to and know that they can.

Mr. Speaker, with regard to the amendments and everything that has been accepted, the changes to the Board of Reference and to the teachers' responsibilities, I would like to move third reading and would leave it at that.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 25 in its third reading. Bill 25 is the School Amendment Act, 2004. In many respects Bill 25 makes parallel amendments to the School Act that Bill 26 made to the Teaching Profession Act. I'll focus my remarks about some changes that are made in Bill 25.

I'm pleased that Bill 25 retains the Board of Reference and did not follow the Learning Commission's recommendation to abolish it. The government is taking the view, not surprisingly, that changes proposed in Bill 25 will improve the effectiveness of the Board of Reference.

That remains to be seen, Mr. Speaker. The jury is still very much out on this. In fact, the changes proposed to the Board of Reference are illustrative of a more fundamental problem that I have with Bill 25. Quite frankly, I'm not sure that any of us can reasonably predict whether the changes being brought about through Bill 25 will improve the learning system or not. It's a bit too early to hazard that guess.

To further complicate matters, the bill's sponsor, the Member for Drayton-Valley-Calmar, last week brought significant new amendments during the Committee of the Whole debate. These were amendments to what's already in the amending bill, Mr. Speaker, creating even more uncertainties about how these changes to the School Act will improve or harm the learning system.

Bill 25 as amended makes a number of complex, highly technical changes to the School Act which have largely unknown implications for school boards, teachers, and students. I would have much preferred, Mr. Speaker, to have had more opportunity to examine and consult on the proposed changes prior to being asked to give third and final reading approval to Bill 25.

Be that as it may, this is all too typical of how this government

sometimes operates and is yet another indicator of the severe democratic deficit that exists in this province. There are no all-party committees to examine a bill such as this and to question and ascertain the views of education stakeholders, whether school boards, teachers, parents, or school administrators. Instead, an amendment is brought to this Assembly late in the evening, receives limited debate, and is approved that very same evening.

While there are a number of areas in Bill 25 where I have questions, there is at least one provision in Bill 25 to which I'm strongly opposed, and I want my opposition to be clearly on the record. This has to do with the changes to section 18 which redefine activities that are now voluntary or extracurricular and makes them mandatory. These have to do with requiring teachers to participate in the curriculum, supervise student teachers, and mark and field test provincial diploma exams. Most teachers undertake these extra responsibilities voluntarily, and I remain unconvinced that it is necessary to make them mandatory.

Requiring teachers to mark, for instance, diploma exams as a condition of their employment by a school board is particularly heavy-handed. Finding teachers to mark diploma exams was only a problem two years ago during the dispute when the government itself provoked the teachers and attempted to interfere with the collective bargaining by imposing those controls on teachers. It has not been a problem in any other year. Again, the government's approach is akin to using a sledgehammer to swat a flea.

In conclusion, given the lack of consultation prior to the introduction of Bill 25 and particularly given the lack of time to examine the amendment introduced only last week, I would urge somebody to take the necessary time to consult all education stakeholders – parents, school administrators, teachers, and school boards – before proclaiming this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a third time]

head: 9:20

**Private Bills
Second Reading**

Bill Pr. 4

Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004

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

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to move Bill Pr. 4, the Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004, for second reading.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood to close debate.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If there's nothing further, I'd like to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 4 read a second time]

head:

**Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate April 28: Mrs. McClellan]

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to stand today and speak to Bill 29, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004. As the minister stated when moving second reading, this bill will amend the current act to allow AFSC to make loans or execute guarantees in excess of \$2 million to businesses with two or more investors. Currently AFSC is only able to make loans to specific businesses for a maximum of \$2 million regardless of how many investors are involved in a project.

The amended act, while increasing available funding from AFSC, will still limit the amount of debt an individual investor can carry at \$2 million. Presently AFSC is limited by section 29 of the act to \$2 million in loans or guarantees to or for the benefit of any person. The term "benefit" has been cautiously interpreted by AFSC, and as a result loans made to a company are considered a benefit to the shareholders, and similarly loans made to a shareholder are considered a benefit to the company.

Mr. Speaker, the reason the act is being amended is to allow AFSC to facilitate investment in larger value-added projects as well as lend support to investment vehicles such as new generation co-operatives. Farmers are looking for ways to add value to their product right here in Alberta. They want to improve their profitability and limit their exposure to risks such as export restrictions.

The BSE crisis is a vivid reminder of how vulnerable we are to the uncertainties of the export market. We need to process more of our product here in Alberta, and that also goes for all of our primary products: wheat, barley, beef, pork, and others. Of course, we'd have to have wheat and barley outside of the board to do that, but we're working on that, Mr. Speaker.

Alberta needs to develop more processing capacity to add value to these products. There are farmers and others out there ready to invest. Whether it is through a new generation co-operative or some other investment vehicle, there are groups out there that are anxious to get their projects off the ground. However, some of the projects being proposed require millions of dollars of investment. While farmers may have the capacity to borrow for such investments, conventional lenders are being extremely cautious in the current environment. AFSC has the capacity to fill this important void.

This government does not want it to be difficult to do business here, Mr. Speaker, nor have we made it so, so we're amending the act to allow entrepreneurs to capitalize on the opportunities that are in front of them. Whether it's the development of a new slaughter plant or a grain-processing facility, we want to help Alberta investors expand our value-added industry. This investment will create jobs and opportunities, particularly in rural Alberta communities.

Mr. Speaker, the risk to the lender, AFSC, will not increase with the changes to this act. All of the loans and guarantees will still need to satisfy all the requirements as set out in the regulations regarding eligibility and all of the normal lending criteria established by AFSC.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of this Legislature to give this bill their full support. Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly with interest that I listened to the remarks from the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert and the minister of agriculture last week in regard to Bill 29. If one listens to the remarks from the hon. member, it would certainly warrant support, but what he's also talking about is that we are gradually getting back in the business of being in business as far as supporting some enterprises over others. This isn't about supporting the family farm. This is about increasing the ways that corporate agriculture can get more and more money from Agriculture Financial Services Corporation.

I don't know what the object of this bill really is. Is it to provide funding for meat processors, beef processors? Certainly, we all know that the BSE crisis has alerted both urban and rural Albertans to the fact that we do not control in this province our processing industry. It's controlled from another country, in this case America. We have lost control of that industry.

At one point in this city's history there were many meat-packing plants, both for beef and for pork. That no longer happens. We have two large processing facilities and another one that is not so large, but it is vital to the interests of the producers.

On the face of it, it appears that the goal of this legislation is to eliminate provisions preventing individual persons from receiving more than one loan of up to \$2 million, but the question here is why. I would be grateful for an answer. Is this because farms have become such large corporations? Up until this bill the total amount, as I understand it, that any person could get was 2 million bucks. Indeed, even after this bill, if it's to become law, there would be an appearance that the total amount of any loan or guarantee would be \$2 million. But that said, more than one individual could get that \$2 million. Where would all this end? How much will this cost?

An Hon. Member: Wrong.

Mr. MacDonald: This is wrong. Okay.

How much additional money will we as taxpayers have to set aside for the Alberta Agriculture Financial Services Corporation? Who will be eligible for these loans? These are very important questions. There are hon. members in this Assembly who receive support payments from the Alberta Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. Farmers from across the province receive money. How much in additional funds will be needed if we make these changes?

Those are my questions at this time, and hopefully they can be addressed at committee or later on in debate in second reading. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a second time]

head: 9:30

**Private Bills
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

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

**Bill Pr. 4
Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004**

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

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There is an amendment. The following is added after section 5: 6 Section 6 is amended by striking out "academic".

[The clauses of Bill Pr. 4 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

**Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Bill 28

Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004

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

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise and speak to the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act at Committee of the Whole. I would like to start off by thanking Mr. Andrew Horton and Brad Fournier for their backup and help in bringing this forward.

As I mentioned during second reading, this bill expands the mandate of the act by allowing feeder pigs to be included under the act, allowing Alberta's hog producers to take advantage of Alberta's successful feeder association structure. Consultations have occurred with the hog industry, the AFRD staff, the feeding industry, and even the trucking industry.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona raised some very legitimate questions at that time that I'd like to address. The actual cost of the program is two and a half full-time equivalents who run the program for Alberta Agriculture, significantly less than the \$52 million listed in the lottery fund estimates. We need to recognize that this is a producer-driven process, and they bear much of the cost of that particular program. In fact, the \$52 million is the liability of guarantee that is allocated to a feeder association, and it's held as the guarantee for the feeder association loans. The total guaranteed cap for the program is at \$55 million, so that leaves about \$3 million to expand the guarantee to the hog feeding industry. It's important to remember that over the past 10 years the government guaranteed draw has been less than 5/10,000ths of a percentage, a very stunningly low number for any industry.

There was also some question as to how this program would affect producers under the Canadian agricultural income stabilization program, or the CAIS program as we know it. Because there are no actual dollars delivered to producers and members of feeder associations, the feeder association program does not affect producers when it comes to their CAIS claims.

Both hon. members asked why hog producers should be eligible to use Alberta's feeder association structure. When I spoke about this bill at second reading, I noted that the hog industry has now defined two distinct feeding industries, much like the cattle industry. A straight feeding operation now exists that did not exist a decade ago where feeder pigs are introduced to the barn and fed until finished. This is similar to what occurs in the cattle industry. The second more traditional operation continues to be the farrow-to-finish operations. It's important to remember that the act itself does not restrict either operation from getting involved, and it will be again through a thorough industry consultation process that regulations will be developed and in place to build a program that is legitimately useful for hog producers.

Both hon. members wondered how many hog producers would use the feeder association program. While I'd love to give them an exact number, I really can't. However, a simple questionnaire recently done of all the hog producers in the province estimated that up to one-quarter of the feeder pigs may be contracted, depending on the

full implications of interest rates and administrative fees. There's a potential to save some dollars on both these aspects, but without the full regulations in place it is difficult to establish exact estimates of producer and hog involvement.

I know that there was some concern expressed on the tracking of hogs that were purchased through a feeder association. Obviously, Mr. Chairman, branding a hog is out of the question, and while there hasn't been a final decision made about how a hog purchased through a feeder association will be identified, there are a number of options already in use on farms across Canada. These options include anything from tattooing feeder pigs to the use of the national identification program that Canada's pork industry has been working on. The pork quality assurance program is also widely used in the province of Alberta. Identification in co-ordination with inspection of hogs should all but eliminate the risk involved with contracting feeder hogs.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona was concerned that this bill would help the large hog operations but not the small ones. In fact, Mr. Chairman, on the contrary, Bill 28 gives more decision-making capabilities to smaller pork producers. It offers smaller producers more financial alternatives than simply going to the bank, which will allow them to increase their competitiveness. There are maximum loan limits that are placed on members. This benefits mostly our smaller family-operated units therefore.

He was also concerned about the possible environmental damage that can occur with feeding operations. The hog producers that would commit to a membership with a feeders association would meet and comply with any environmental regulation within the province, just as members of feeder associations already do. In fact, I would argue that these hog producers would be leaders within the industry that are involved with the quality of pork initiative and food trace-back systems. There is no more jeopardy to the environment from having hogs defined within the definition of livestock within the Feeder Associations Guarantee Act.

I'm sure that all hon. members are interested to know what the next steps would be if Bill 28 is passed, and I'm pleased to share that with them. The time frame once Bill 28 is passed in this House – there will be further consultation with the pork industry and current feeder association members and those involved with the current feeder association structure. This includes the lenders of feeder associations. Thus, consultation will continue over the next few months. Once a comprehensive set of guidelines has been established to govern feeder pig association contracts, only then can eligible members take advantage of the new opportunity. I estimate this to be sometime in the late summer or fall. It could go as late as early 2005.

I hope that I've answered your questions in a satisfactory manner, and I urge every member to give this amendment their full support. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

9:40

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the hon. Member for Dunvegan's answers to questions that were posed earlier in debate at second reading on Bill 28. That certainly answers my question satisfactorily in regard to the CAIS program.

I have now this question for the hon. member: what is the total of all loans to feeder associations at the current time that are partially guaranteed by the province? If this bill was to become law, in the future how many additional loans or how much additional money would have to be set aside or guaranteed by the province if we were

to allow hogs as well as cattle and sheep to be a part of the feeder associations?

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The province has set aside \$55 million in total for the guaranteed portion of that particular program. Presently \$52 million is being used as a guarantee to the livestock feeder associations, and that leaves \$3 million available as a guarantee for the hog industry. That's exactly what it is. It is a guarantee, and it's not actual cash that's given out to the producers or to the associations. It's money set aside in case there's a massive amount of default that occurs in the industry. Then those dollars would come in as a guarantee.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again I would like to express my gratitude to the hon. member for that answer. My next question would be: has there ever been a default involving the feeder associations before, and if there has been a default, how much money was involved?

Mr. Goudreau: If you remember my comments when I discussed this in committee a little earlier, I talked about 5/10,000ths of a percentage in the last 10 years as what the province has paid out in default. So, basically, it's very, very insignificant and nonexistent. In the 65-year history I believe that there were only three claims against the feeder association program. We're 65 years in existence. So the claim numbers have been very, very low.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 28 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to take just a couple of minutes to address some of the issues that were raised during second reading. The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar had a couple of questions, and I'm certainly appreciative of his commenting that the amendment does warrant our support.

I just wanted to bring some clarity to some of the comments that he made with respect to the loan limits. I wanted to emphasize that this amendment will not allow AFSC to make larger loans to companies. The loan limit for a company will remain at \$2 million. What the amendment does is allow individual shareholders in a company to access loans up to \$2 million. It does increase the

aggregate amount available for a single project, which is something that we need to do in this province for our value-added agriculture sector, which I know our Minister of Economic Development is very keen to do. Certainly, on the rural development side it is very, very important that we have these types of available lending institutions to get value added off the ground.

The goal of the amendment is to provide a provision so that we can have a value-added facility that is larger than the \$2 million, although each individual borrower would have to come up with his own repayment terms and his own assets to back up the maximum \$2 million loan.

The other question was how much additional dollars and who would be eligible for the loans. The people that are going to be eligible for the loans are the same people that are eligible for the loans today, and that is the family farm in Alberta, Mr. Chairman. AFSC will handle this additional program absorbed within its approved business plans today. They had a \$25 million proposal for value added already in their budget with limited take-up because of the fact that these projects are much larger than an individual \$2 million.

I can give you an example for the members' benefit, Mr. Chairman, of five family farms. The family farm of today is different from the family farm of 50 years ago; it may have four brothers, and it may be a \$10 million operation. But let's say we had five different family farms. Each one wanted to invest into a facility that would value add what they're doing in the province of Alberta.

Under this proposal each one can only borrow the maximum \$2 million. The company that they create can only borrow \$2 million, but each one of them could borrow on their own \$2 million and actually invest that in the project. So individually they are only borrowing \$2 million, and AFSC would take the same due diligence on that credit facility that they would take on any other credit facility that they do today. The only difference that we're doing here is we're allowing a facility, like a new generation co-op, to be able to have those investors access financing through AFSC. So the whole objective here is to actually add value-added facilities in our agricultural sector.

I think that answers the questions that the hon. member had. Again, they were good comments, Mr. Chair, and I think we've added that clarity for him. With that I will conclude my comments.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. I appreciate that response from the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. Now, if this bill were to become law, would the interest rates that would be available to the borrowers be slightly matched with the Alberta Agriculture Financial Services Corporation? Would there be a better rate than what they could find at, say, a commercial bank?

Thank you.

Mr. Horner: To clarify the comments. Again, Mr. Chairman, this amendment is simply taking the one aspect of the \$2 million aggregate or for the benefit of. It's not changing anything in the way that AFSC operates in terms of the interest rates, their due diligence, how the farm community or AOC community would approach AFSC. It doesn't change any of that type of criteria with AFSC at all.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. It's interesting, Mr. Chairman, to

participate in this debate this evening, particularly in light of the fact that we are expanding the loan provisions, essentially, in one sector of the economy backed up by the government, yet in another sector of the economy or another sector of the government we're promoting this notion of a P3, this private/public partnership, or pity, pity, pity, as some would say.

I find it quite ironic that we're making more government money available to one sector, yet with schools and hospitals and specifically courthouses and in some cases roads, we're going gung-ho for the private sector. We're forgetting just how much financial muscle a government with a good credit rating can provide.

Thank you.

9:50

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, just for clarity. I don't want to play politics with this because this is something that our agriculture community really needs to help value add our province's commodity-based ag community.

The funding under this amendment is not restricted to simply agriculture value-added products. I'm sure the member is aware that AFSC is an amalgamation of the Alberta Opportunity Company as well, so that expanded the corporation's mandate to provide loans to many small-business ventures, especially those that will enhance rural development. That really is the key. This is not a change, really, in the *raison d'être* for the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. In that regard, I think this will only add to what it can do today.

[The clauses of Bill 29 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would move that the Committee of the Whole now rise and report Bill Pr. 4, Bill 28, and Bill 29.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

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

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 28, Bill 29. The committee reports Bill Pr. 4 with some amendments. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very good night of progress, and I hope the Calgary Flames have equally good progress in their business. It's sometimes hard for an Oilers fan just to admit that, but we're all cheering for Calgary.

I would move that the Assembly now stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; at 9:55 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]