

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, April 28, 2005**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 05/04/28

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. On this day let each of us pray in our own way for all who have been killed or injured in the workplace. Life is precious. When it is lost, all of us are impacted.

In a moment of silent contemplation may we now allow our thoughts to remember those taken before their time, those who have suffered through tragedies and reach out to the families, friends, neighbours, and communities most immediately impacted. May God provide them eternal peace. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am proud today to introduce to you students from the St. Francis of Assisi school, which is located in Red Deer. There are four classes of grade 6 students. This school has the privilege of using Alberta technology, Smart board technology, in all of their classrooms. I'd like to introduce to you the students as well as their teachers, Miss O'Brien, Mrs. Kelly, Mr. Munro, Mr. Diduch, Mrs. Snow, Miss Musgrove, and teacher assistants Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. McEachern along with the parents. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to be able to introduce to you and through you to the Legislative Assembly two people today. The first is Garnett Genuis, who is an 18-year-old student at Old Scona academic school in Edmonton, where he is the president of the debating society. He's graduating this year and is off to Ottawa, where he just received a scholarship to study public policy at Carleton. He's received numerous awards, including top youth parliamentarian in Alberta, where he has played the role of Premier in the model Legislature. He has represented Canada for the last two years in the international speech and debate competitions, and I believe the last one was in Cyprus. He hopes to study law and to serve the Canadian public in some capacity in the future. His favourite activity is to engage in question period.

The second introduction is actually that of his father, Dr. Stephen Genuis, who is an obstetrician/gynecologist in the city. I've had the privilege of knowing Stephen on two occasions, first of all as a resident, when he was a resident and I was a medical student during medical school, and secondly, as a member of the Premier's council on the family.

I would ask both of them to rise and receive the very warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a great pleasure to rise today and introduce some very special guests who are here. I'd like to introduce them to you and through you to all

members in fact. First of all, a very, very dear friend of mine, Shahnawaz Ahmad, and his lovely wife, Hildegard. Today they are accompanied by two special guests from Austria, Mrs. Leopoldine Stefan and her son Michael. We had a wonderful tour of the Legislature earlier. I think they're seated behind me, and I would ask all four of them to please rise and receive the thunderous applause of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Innisfail artist Andy Davies. This time last year Andy was pushing an oil drum from Red Deer to the steps of the Legislature to draw attention to Alberta's low oil and gas royalty regime. I would ask that Andy now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm so pleased to have the opportunity this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Legislature a young man from my constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford. His name is David Taylor. David is a grade 12 student at J.H. Picard high school. He is currently the president of the students' union there and recently won the best delegate award at the University of Alberta's high school model United Nations. He has most recently been selected as a page for the Senate and will be going off to Ottawa this August and also plans on studying ethics at the University of Ottawa. I would ask David to please rise and receive the very warmest welcome.

Mr. Speaker, if I could just say, I did have the honour as well of presenting David with one of the silver centennial medals this afternoon in my office, and I was very pleased to be able to do so.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two executives from TD Meloche Monnex, the third largest provider of automobile insurance in Alberta, employing over 500 Albertans. I'll ask our guests to stand as I introduce them. We have Mr. Chris Daniel, who is the Alberta chairman of the affinity market group, and Mr. Richard Evans, senior vice-president of claims. I would ask our hon. members to give these gentlemen a warm welcome.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to rise to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Maria José da Silva, who is a founder of the formation of rural women workers' program in the state of Alagoas, Brazil. She's leading the struggle of rural women in Brazil's northeast for dignity, human rights, gender equity, and sustainable family income and is in Canada as a special guest of the 30th anniversary celebration of the Rainbow of Hope for Children Society. Her presence here is to thank the Alberta government for helping to achieve what women in Canada struggled for and achieved only a few generations ago: gender equity. She's accompanied by Sister Claire Novacosky, a Canadian who has worked in Brazil for over 30 years, and Dr. George Bunz, president of the Rainbow of Hope for Children

Society and a member of the beautiful constituency of Battle River-Wainwright. I'd ask the three people to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce Ms Vicki Lindsay, a tireless volunteer in the constituency of Edmonton-Castle Downs, who is a retired nurse and also shares her talents with the Victory Church and their hot soup kitchen, helping out the less fortunate in Edmonton. I would ask her to rise – she is in the public gallery – and accept the traditional welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

1:40 **National Day of Mourning**

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. April 28 is the National Day of Mourning for workers who have been killed on the job. Last year in Alberta 124 people died from job-related injuries or illness, and 124 families, of course, and countless friends were left devastated.

We must do more to ensure that all Alberta workers return to their families safe and healthy at the end of each workday. Occupational health and safety is a social responsibility. The government remains committed, with our partners in industry and labour, to reducing workplace fatalities and injuries throughout the Work Safe Alberta initiative. We will continue to assist employers and workers to make safety part of everything they do at work. As an employer the government of Alberta strives to provide a safe place for the employees. The public service recently developed a workplace health framework that includes an occupational health and safety component.

Workplace safety is an important issue. A death in the workplace touches all of us. We honour our fallen workers by remembering them at ceremonies being held in communities across the province and by renewing our commitment to safer workplaces.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the minister for his thoughtful statement, and I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the very appropriate moment of silence to commemorate our workers who died in 2004. These men and women were co-workers, they were friends, and they were family. They were somehow working to build their lives to help their families and ultimately to build Alberta and make it work.

A death in the workplace is sudden and often shocking. When it happens on a large construction site, for example, the news, the feelings, the hurt spread like electricity. Most often that job site is shut down for the rest of the day. This shutdown is always in honour of the fallen but also reflects the altered state of mind that happens to everyone close by. It simply is not safe to work. People must reflect and mourn. Days like this help as well.

I have seen the aftermath of job site death. It is often not very pretty. Most times it seems senseless. Sometimes it is shameful. A little bit of hurry up or a little bit of oversight or even cutting corners leads to tragedy. We must be ever vigilant to ensure that job site safety is of the highest standard and has full acceptance from all levels of the workplace.

Often when a worker dies in the workplace, a collection of donations for the family takes place. These donations give some solace, some closing for those that give, as they hope to help sustain those that are left behind. I have delivered donation cheques to widows, and it is a very difficult thing to do. The future ended yesterday for them. Life as they knew it ends abruptly. The shock, the hurt, the sheer tragedy is hard for them to overcome. I've had a widow break down, sob and cry for 10 minutes as I held her. I said nothing. Then she said that the thought and the money helped, but the hurt would not stop.

Everyone must try to end workplace deaths so that we can stem those tears so that they will never flow again. A hundred and twenty-four deaths of Alberta workers in 2004 was 124 deaths too many.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party to request unanimous consent to participate?

Mr. Mason: Yes, for my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Hon. member, please proceed.

Mr. Martin: Thank you to the Assembly, and thank you, Mr. Speaker. This year's Day of Mourning reminds us of the stories that will go untold in our centennial celebrations. The Alberta Federation of Labour added up Alberta's workplace fatalities and found that 9,219 people have been killed in the workplace over the past 100 years. For much of our history the workplace fatality rate slowly dropped, but during the last 15 years further progress has eluded us. Today's National Day of Mourning comes on the heels of another report released yesterday by the Institutes of Health Research that shows that Alberta has the highest number of workplace injuries in Canada. Workplace deaths and injuries, attacks on collective bargaining, the weakest labour legislation in Canada: the list of wrongs that must be righted is long. However, today we remember all those people who have been killed on the job, and we're proud of all the women and men of the labour movement who have fought for an end to workplace deaths.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Securities Commission

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night at about 10 o'clock the Alberta Securities Commission issued a news release placing severe restrictions on the Auditor General's investigation into the commission. For example, the Auditor General will not be allowed to look into enforcement concerns, complainants must provide sworn testimony and submit to being cross-examined, and the ASC will have a representative working with the Auditor General in all dealings with the ASC staff. This pretty much guarantees that the Auditor General's investigation will have little credibility with investors or the public. My question is to the Minister of Finance. Has the minister received any concerns from business, from investors, or from others about the impact of this controversy on confidence in the ASC?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I have received limited correspondence on this from business and a small amount from the public. Most of the concern that's raised is raised over the controversy, not the actions of the commission.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition referred to the news release from the Alberta Securities Commission, and I would be pleased to provide that to the Assembly at the appropriate time. I think he was very selective in his use of that news release. It does state that the Alberta Securities Commission is required by section 45 of the Securities Act to hold confidential all information involving enforcement matters.

I have every confidence that the Auditor General and the Securities Commission and their legal people will interpret the appropriate sections and ensure that within the bounds of the legislation the Auditor General will receive all the information that's pertinent to his investigations.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the Alberta Securities Commission or perhaps the Auditor General provide legal counsel to employees being cross-examined?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I think that question could well be put to the Auditor General and certainly to the Alberta Securities Commission. I have not had a request from anybody involved to provide them with legal assistance, but if that does arise, it will be responded to appropriately.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: if the Auditor General cannot examine any enforcement matters, cannot review information subject to client/solicitor privilege, and can only accept sworn testimony from employees prepared to be identified and cross-examined, what exactly is left for the Auditor General to investigate?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously the Auditor General has fairly broad powers to do audits. The Auditor General had proposed an audit of the processes and systems of the Alberta Securities Commission. He's proceeding with that audit.

Again, the Auditor General is bound by an act of this Legislature. The Securities Commission is bound by an act that was passed in this Legislature. I have every confidence in the people that will work with them to do a legal interpretation of what authorities are accorded to either party under that act. I would not expect the Alberta Securities Commission to breach their legislation.

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

1:50

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Concerns with enforcement issues have been raised by a substantial number of the Alberta Securities Commission staff, by former staff of the commission, by national investor advocates, in court, and who knows where else. Not surprisingly, the Alberta securities commissioners themselves, whose job it is to oversee enforcement cases, dismiss any claims of enforcement irregularities. Again to the Minister of Finance: why is this minister wholeheartedly accepting the commissioners' claims that there are no enforcement issues at the ASC, when this group would be essentially turning itself in?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we plow this ground day after day, week after week. The Alberta Securities Commission did engage an external person, a Mr. Perry Mack, I understand a very highly regarded lawyer from the city of Calgary. Mr. Mack prepared two reports. He provided those to the part-time commissioners, and they provided me with their assurance that from those reports the issues around enforcement and regulatory matters were being handled consistently and even-handedly and fairly.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know what will satisfy this hon. member because I receive far more innuendo or supposition. I have asked repeatedly, if he has anything that can be substantiated, that has any fact behind it, to please give it to me, and I will respond to it. To this date I have had none of the above.

Dr. Taft: Again to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that Mr. Mack's first report did convey concerns about irregularities in investigations, isn't the very reason for investigating allegations to see whether or not they are true?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, again, that was the second part of the report by Mr. Mack.

Mr. Speaker, I live in a province where I believe that if persons have concerns, they have the ability to raise them, but I also believe that the persons who they may be raised against have the ability to be heard. That is what I consider fairness in a democratic society, and that's what I expect to happen in this case.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: when so many people – staff, national investor advocates, courts, and so on – are witnessing these allegations, how will investors ever know if they are true or not unless they are investigated?

Mrs. McClellan: Allegations. Allegations. You investigate the allegations to see if there is any substance or fact or basis to them. Frankly, the investors are not calling me saying, "We have a great deal of concern with the credibility of the Alberta Securities Commission." The person who is most obsessed with this is the Leader of the Official Opposition, and he's doing the least to move this along.

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

Electricity Marketing

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's advice to electricity consumers to hang on if they're on the regulated rate option didn't sit well with Mr. Robert Hemstock, Direct Energy Marketing Limited vice-president of government and regulatory affairs, who suggested that the Premier was out of line to provide sweeping advice to Albertans. He stated, quote, it does have important implications to our business. End of quote. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Given this government was so desperate to get some retail competition in Alberta's electricity market, did this government guarantee Direct Energy that the regulated rate option would end in 2006?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, I don't know of any promises in the past. There was a policy that was put in place that the regulated rate option would be put in place till July of 2006. I don't know that there were promises that it would continue or not continue. That's part of why we're actually even doing a review at this stage.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: why is this govern-

ment allowing electricity retailers 45 per cent markups from wholesale power prices, which add an additional \$200 million to as high as \$300 million extra on already skyrocketing power bills?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, those assumptions as to the rates that people are paying are entirely false. We have the lowest nonhydro electricity prices in this country. The wholesale market has benefited the residential consumer substantially. They are paying and getting tremendous benefits, tremendous savings today.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: why did this government deliberately create an electricity market that uses a fear factor to drive small electricity consumers into the hands of the greedy retailers of electricity?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, it's easy to throw out lots of innuendo and slander. Let me continue to emphasize the many benefits that have happened from this. We have the most supply that's come on in a growing economy; over 3,000 megawatts have come on. We have the lowest consumer prices of nonhydro. We don't have the capacity of the hydro, but we have the innovation of wind, of biomass, of green alternatives, quite an inventiveness that's come across from this electricity deregulation, plus residential consumers are benefiting and are being protected very well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do have a question today. Yesterday the government tried to pass off an April 14, 2005, report by the Utilities Consumer Advocate Advisory Council as some sort of vindication of retail electricity deregulation. Nonsense. In fact, the report concludes that residential farm and small business customers will face electricity rates 40 to 45 per cent higher than they are now under the Tory deregulation scheme than they would under the model proposed by the advisory council. My question is to the Minister of Energy. [interjection] It's your council.

Given that next year's deadline forcing utilities consumers onto these high-priced contracts is coming up fast, will the minister stand up and commit to reversing this high-cost, anticonsumer policy?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, it's convenient to select a few paragraphs. Let me start with the executive summary in that same report that was tabled. "We believe that the deregulation of the Alberta electricity market has been successful in many ways . . . We characterize the success as the 'New Alberta Advantage'."

Mr. Mason: Will the minister commit to not forcing small electricity consumers onto a long-term contract? Yes or no?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, this has all been about consumers having choice, that they are not being compelled to do anything. There are many great products that are being offered to fit the individual needs of those customers.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, the choice the minister talks about is either 40 per cent more or 45 per cent more. Will he cancel this policy?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, I don't know how anybody foresees the

crystal ball of the future as to predicting those prices. Today consumers, as a result of tremendous success in deregulation, are seeing the best prices in this country.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

West Nile Virus

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Despite the cold wind blowing today, I am confident that spring and summer are coming. Last summer the province introduced a mosquito control program to help Alberta communities reduce the risk of infection from the West Nile virus. My first question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Do Albertans have reason to be concerned this year about the West Nile virus, and will the larviciding program continue?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, the program will continue. Too little is known about the prevalence and the patterns of West Nile. We had last year, for example, only one case of the West Nile virus, and it, purportedly, was a case where the person was infected in Arizona, but the year before we had 275 cases. With the Minister of Municipal Affairs we have sent letters to municipalities. This year 104 municipalities will be funded. We're spending about \$1.25 million, and we are providing this funding for those municipalities selected based on what we perceive to be, with the best advice from Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, the best places in the southeast portion of the province predominantly.

2:00

Ms Haley: Well, my second supplementary to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: could the minister elaborate on her explanation about giving assistance on the larviciding program to some municipalities versus others such as the MD of Rocky View, where right beside it the municipalities are being funded for this program?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question from the hon. member. In the consultation we did about monitoring and seeing where the most appropriate course of action was to fight this potential situation, we consulted with Environment; Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; Municipal Affairs; and Sustainable Resource Development. We noted that there's no direct scientific evidence to be conclusive that the larviciding program actually works, but I think we feel a greater degree of confidence that when we use it, we will prevent it. It was deemed that the MD of Rocky View is in a lower risk area albeit, as the member has noted, adjacent to that area.

If municipalities choose to fund larviciding and if there can be some indication that we should consider that at some future point, we certainly will. But, Mr. Speaker, presently this is the decision that we have made with the resources we have available. That's not to say that that MD could not consider doing it on their own.

Ms Haley: My last supplemental is to the Minister of Environment. Could the minister please indicate what his department is doing to ensure that mosquito control is effective and safe for all Albertans, not just those areas where there's a larviciding program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to say that within the Ministry of Environment we have insect experts, and we've been able in the four quadrants across our province to

determine the high, medium, and low risk areas. To the hon. member in the Airdrie-Chestermere area it certainly must be welcome news to realize that it's been determined that this is in the lowest risk area. We continue to work with our municipal partners, and, as the hon. minister of health indicated, certainly it's still an option for the municipality to consider. We continue to work with and train our municipal partners in terms of dealing with this important issue.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Long-term Care Standards

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In Camrose on Monday an 86-year-old diabetic woman goes on a hunger strike to bring the government's attention to underfunding and staff shortages in long-term care. In Edmonton on Wednesday a glistening stretch limo glides Tory caucus members to steak and lobster dinners sponsored by an unnamed lobby group looking to bring the attention of government to their interests. Who gets the Alberta advantage? My questions today are to the minister of health. Given that the long-term care sector has asked for \$86 million for long-term care facilities, why did the government fund only \$10 million, a mere 11 per cent of what was asked?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I want to clarify that I've been in no stretch limos lately. It's been years and years since anybody asked me on a date.

Mr. Speaker, I would clarify that we gave a 10.3 per cent increase to the regional health authorities. We gave \$522 million to the regional health authorities, and we added \$15 million over and above that – not \$10 million but \$15 million: \$5 million at the conclusion of the 2004-05 budget and \$10 million in this new budget – to make sure that we work towards quality of care and continue to accelerate the work we're doing on standards for long-term care. We moved, also, from a staffing ratio of 3 to 3.4 this year. Our expectation is that regional health authorities will continue to work to improve care wherever that is needed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the same minister: why were four brand new living units constructed for 56 seniors in Camrose, but staffing levels were not changed to cope with the heavier demands?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, always surprises, and now an offer for a date.

Mr. Speaker, I can't tell you exactly why that proportion of residents was put into that particular facility. Regional health authorities have the responsibility of setting priorities, establishing standards, and providing the opportunity for care where care is needed. We also have partners in the private sector, not-for-profit societies that get involved. So that's a question that I can gladly take from the hon. member and direct to the regional health authority.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: why has the minister allowed LPNs to be delegated medication duties, effectively adding to their workload and making it difficult to get all of their assigned work done?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, in the early '60s I went into the honourable

profession of nursing at the Holy Cross hospital, and at that time as a student nurse I learned that there are many hands that are involved in the care of and the proper professional attention to the patient.

Mr. Speaker, I have noted the concern of the hon. member opposite, but I've noted something else. The most important thing to do for a patient is to treat the patient holistically with caring, professional, supportive staff in whatever kind of discipline most clearly affects the work that's required to make them as healthy as possible. Sometimes an occupational health and safety worker is the person who can break the barrier; for example, for people who have dementia or Alzheimer's. So you can't simply define a program for a facility without looking at the patient themselves, considering their needs, the capacity of the family, or the adjacent caregiver.

Mr. Speaker, if people would only listen to my response, perhaps it would be clear what I'm trying to say.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Cattle Rustling

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been hearing concerns from my constituents in Cypress-Medicine Hat about cattle going missing under suspicious circumstances. Farmers and ranchers depend on their livestock, and some of their herd being stolen or disappearing mysteriously seriously and needlessly affects their income and livelihood. For example, for one rancher 35 calves and seven heifers over a one-year period is indeed serious. Calls to the RCMP have not resulted in anything achieved substantially at this time. My first question is to the Solicitor General. What's the RCMP doing to deal with the cases of cattle rustling?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, cattle rustling is something that may sound from the days of the Old West, but it is, exactly as the hon. member mentioned, a very serious issue in Alberta when you look at the geographics of the size of this province.

Cattle rustling is pure theft, and the RCMP are combatting this issue by having two experts that are learned in the area of the livestock industry. They have one officer that works in northern Alberta and one officer that works in southern Alberta. They provide the training and the expertise to other RCMP officers and municipal services that have any issues with regard to this type of theft in their communities. They're there to assist, provide support to those RCMP officers as well as doing enforcement on the highways, livestock inspections, and being members of the livestock association and the rural crime watch association. So they have the skilled-expertise officers providing this service throughout the province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental, then, is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What role does brand inspection play in cattle rustling cases?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Brand inspection plays a very important part in the recovery of stolen cattle. When the cattle are stolen and the RCMP report is made, it is sent to our

Livestock Identification Services unit. LIS is the brief for that. It provides brand inspection services to the livestock producers in all of Alberta. They work with the RCMP to ensure that the investigator that is in charge of the case has all of the information they need, including the brand records. If the missing cattle were branded, all brand inspectors at slaughterhouses, at the stockyards, at sales rings would also be put on the alert to look for those brands, so it is quite an important part of the investigation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

2:10

Workplace Safety

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we commemorate today those 124 Alberta workers who died last year, it is absolutely imperative that job site safety see renewed emphasis. Syncrude and other oil sands plants have created remarkable records of safety in difficult work environments and should be congratulated and copied, but a just-released study places Alberta, with 10 per cent of its trauma cases a result of workplace injury, the worst and highest level in the nation. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Will the minister push for and hire new occupational health and safety inspectors to stem this shocking statistic?

Speaker's Ruling Anticipation

The Speaker: Hon. member, the question is fine. It's just that this afternoon the estimates we're dealing with are exactly that of the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. If the question has to deal with his budget, then I'm afraid we're going to have to move on to another one. If it's policy, that would be accepted.

The hon. minister? Okay.

Please proceed with your second one.

Workplace Safety (continued)

Mr. Backs: Mr. Speaker, I'll just do a supplemental. Has your ministry investigated if hurry to get the resources out of the ground and too much overtime is putting Albertans at risk and, in the end, creating greater costs for the Alberta economy?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Of course, you know, we do have a very diversified, strong economy here in Alberta. We have over 1.8 million people working. Alberta also has the highest workforce participation rate in Canada, at 73 per cent. So we have more people working and more activity going on, which creates more challenges.

Of course, you know, the report the member is referring to I haven't seen yet. I will as soon as I can get hold of it.

We'll continue working – we do have over 80 officers already working, and you know they do a good job. The Work Safe Alberta initiative, which was implemented just a few years ago, resulted in just over 10,000 fewer lost-time claim injuries each year in this province, saving the employers over \$150 million. So we will continue doing our best to ensure that there is a reduction.

One of the things that's very, very important and that the Assembly should hear, Mr. Speaker, is that a lot of the accidents that happen do not happen on the work site but happen on the way to work and on the way home. No one has really identified that yet, and we're working on that.

Mr. Backs: Mr. Speaker, a supplemental to the same minister. Will the minister undertake an immediate investigation into why Alberta's trauma statistic for workplace injuries is twice the level of industrialized Ontario?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, I believe, you know, again, a lot of this is based on the economic activity. And, again, I want to make sure that when we're talking about work site injuries, et cetera, we haven't – I don't know if there's any jurisdiction in Canada that has identified and provided a breakdown of where the accidents are happening. I think that in order to deal with this effectively, we have to define exactly where the accidents are happening. Are they happening on the project sites, or are they happening on the way to work and back home? I tend to think a lot more accidents happen on the highways that are work related, but they do happen.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Foreign-trained Physicians

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a shortage of family physicians in Alberta, which has resulted in many general practitioners now interviewing prospective patients before agreeing to accept them. Concurrently, in Alberta we have many skilled immigrant doctors who are not able to practise their chosen profession and are underemployed in our society. My first question today is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Does the ministry know how many immigrant doctors are in Alberta who are currently unable to practise?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, we recognize the need for more physicians. We have acknowledged that there is a shortage. In terms of foreign-trained physicians who are in the province that are presently unable to practise, the number that I have just received is 224.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is also to the same minister. Why cannot we utilize these foreign-trained doctors to address the needs of Albertans?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are taking action to harness the capacity of these foreign-trained physicians. We have discussed this issue with the college, and we are working to try and resolve some of the issues surrounding it albeit there have been federal issues relative to immigration.

The issues in Alberta that we're working on and following up on are these. First of all, they have to have met the training standards in Canada. Doctors who are working in nonmedical fields are usually doing so because they are not meeting our licensing standards, and that's a fact. That's a licensing standard that they must meet before they are able to practise. We are, however, considering some of the opportunities we have to suggest to the college that they could work as attendants or residents in hospital settings in order to gain some practical experience if that's what's wanting. They can apply to be licensed by the college under its special register. Finally, Mr. Speaker, it allows the physician to practise on a basis for a 30-month maximum, usually only in communities that have an emergency medical need.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that it is not a new

issue and we have heard these ideas before, does the minister have any plans to improve the process so that these foreign-trained doctors either receive accreditation or are retrained in order that we can utilize them ASAP?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I think that this is a work in progress. There are certainly partnerships that are involved here with the colleges I've noted. Since 2001 the Alberta international medical graduate program has worked to place foreign-trained physicians living in Alberta, and they continue to do so. When they get their residency and complete their residency, they are fully licensed. The program has established 43 two-year family residency and 24 specialty residency positions. Nineteen physicians have completed their residencies. I think the challenge is now identifying sufficient sponsoring physicians so that they can gain that work experience.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Police Recruitment and Training Centre

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2002 the MLA Policing Review Committee report was issued. In the 2004 response to that review recommendation 11 was accepted, and it called for the creation of a centre of policing excellence which would deliver standard, high-quality recruiting and ongoing training. Rather than being shelved, I would prefer to think that this response is on the to-do list on the member's desk. My first question is to the Solicitor General. Given the importance of establishing standardized training, why has this government not acted sooner to begin this process?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a good question. In fact, this ministry is working on that very project at this time. We are developing the proposal. The review of the special constable's role is actually in the works right now, which will provide us with the level of education and training that those officers are going to require and may be legislated in the future to have.

For the training college itself, Mr. Speaker, we'll be working with the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Advanced Education regarding the curriculum that's going to be determined, that will be required, that the Alberta chiefs of police are going to want their officers and/or peace officers to have in the future.

So we are working on that, Mr. Speaker. The location has not been announced. The RFP has not been announced, but we'll be working towards that goal in the next month or so.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the same minister: given that Lethbridge Community College has all the tools needed to establish a provincial centre of police excellence, will the minister commit to meeting with officials to discuss the possibility of establishing such a centre in southern Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I have already met with officials from the college and with the police chiefs from southern Alberta as well with regard to that training college. Their college is one of a number of colleges that we have, including the Calgary Police Service's Chief Crowfoot Learning Centre as

well as the Edmonton Police Service's training centre. So, yes, there are three police colleges in the province. We're looking at one college to provide training to all police officers as well as the 3,000 peace officers that we have in this province.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the Minister of Advanced Education: given that there's an increasing demand for police officers in Alberta, will the minister honour the commitments made in the throne speech and provide some of the 15,000 promised seats to Lethbridge Community College?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't specifically indicate that additional seats will be promised to Lethbridge Community College. I can specifically indicate that the promise in the throne speech to expand our postsecondary system by 15,000 places for Alberta students will be kept.

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

Health Symposium

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Health and Wellness announced taking the government's third-way three-ring circus on the road in June, no doubt causing their Conservative cousins in Ottawa to wet their pants. In January the Premier went on his own speaking tour of his business-friendly audiences at the Canadian Club, the Empire Club, and the Montreal board of trade. In those speeches the Premier vowed that this time there's no turning back on finding a mythical third way. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: in the June consultations will the government be preaching its third-way message to the converted in front of Tory-friendly audiences, or are there plans to actually rub shoulders with average Albertans, who can't afford the two-tiered system the Premier's corporate buddies are pushing for?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his question. It's an excellent question indeed. What we have been attempting to do, without pre-empting the international symposium, is to have conversation about how we will proceed to use the information.

First of all, the symposium itself will give a number of good ideas, best practices world-wide. The attendees at this particular symposium are principally physicians, members of regional health authorities, and people that represent the health care disciplines. We will be most anxious, Mr. Speaker, to listen to their thoughts after, and when the Premier spoke in Calgary at the Canadian Club luncheon, he invited regional health authorities to be innovative and to look to their resources to create new opportunities. I will be listening to what they have to say after that symposium.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why won't the minister admit that next week's health symposium is a pretext for softening up Albertans to accept the government's third-way blueprint of user fees and further privatization?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I won't admit it because I speak the truth, and that's not the truth.

Dr. Pannu: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: if the minister is

sincere in saying that there's no agenda for user-pay health care, why is the Graydon report, which is a recipe book for new user fees, including health care deductibles, still an option being promoted by the minister in the June consultations?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member is referencing an oblique reference to the Graydon report as reported in an article today, that is not the source of conversation relative to how we are going to follow up. Our Premier distinctly said that the Mazankowski report gave us an excellent framework for reform and for looking to the third way for the thousand good ideas that would improve the health system.

What I hope for at the international symposium is that ideas and the best practices elsewhere are explored, that we have a full and open discussion. We have no preconceived notions about what will come forward, but we should be looking at the fact that in terms of the money we spend, Canada is in the top three OECD countries, yet we're very much in the middle of the pack for performance.

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

Long-term Care Standards

(continued)

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Red Deer has a number of very good long-term care facilities, many of which I have visited. Some are public, some are private, for-profit, some are private, not-for-profit, and one is a P3 partnership between the David Thompson health region, Red Deer College, and Bethany Care. In every one of these facilities I have been told two things. The staff who provide care are excellent. They are caring, compassionate, and gentle, but they would like more staff. Two, the food could taste a little better. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What are the current staffing requirements in Alberta's long-term care facilities?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to answer the hon. member's question and clarify the situation on a number of points. We recognize that we're an aging population, that there are increasing demands, and that we have to have a plan to deal with the fragile elderly. Appropriate staffing to meet the needs is important, so last year we requested that the regional health authorities move from 3.0 hours of direct care per day to 3.4. I think that the hours per day is part of the confusion. What you find when people go into these facilities is a care plan developed on their own particular needs. Some people need less, and some people clearly need more and more support. So it's important to note that these are average hours of care. The actual hours of individual care are set based on a person's needs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister explain, then, why the staffing requirements are measured in hours of care rather than a set number of residents per worker?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member poses an excellent question. This is, in fact, a formula that has been used because it creates a standard and it gives some known quantities for people to examine, but over this period of time and since I have assumed responsibility for this ministry, I have asked that we review and prepare new standards of care and examine these formulas. That

work will be discussed with regional health authorities, with members of the Long Term Care Association, with patients themselves, and with care providers in all sectors: public, private, and not-for-profit.

Mrs. Jablonski: My last question to the same minister: is there, then, an intent to change the basic care standards for all long-term care facilities in Alberta?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's clear that we need some improvements on the basic care standards if only to address the needs of an increasing population, if only to address the fact that many people are bringing their extended families here as they move to Alberta and gain jobs. We have noted, for example, announcements made last year in Calgary for a need for 600 more beds. We have to find ways, when families don't support their family members, the elderly at home, to look after these people in a better fashion. So I think we have to get creative and innovative. Yes, these new standards, I think, will reflect many of the good things that are going on, as the hon. member has noted, but, in fact, create improvements as well.

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

Métis Hunting Rights

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The interim now more than seven months old, and the provincial government has done little to explain this agreement. This, in turn, has created an uproar among the fish and game groups across the province because of the lack of communication they received before this agreement was signed. To the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development: given that the Métis nation is performing public consultation that will shape the new Métis harvesting agreement, can you explain the ministry's role in this consultation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Calahasen: Well, yes, Mr. Speaker. First of all, there are a number of other ministries that are involved with us. Number one, Alberta Justice will make sure that we deal with the issue from a context of what the Supreme Court of Canada has decided. Secondly, we have the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development, and Sustainable Resource Development will provide the information on what potential impacts could result as a result of the interim agreements. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development's job is to make sure that we continue to bring all the information together so that all three ministries can work together to see how we can address the concerns that have been brought forward not only by all Albertans but also by the Métis.

2:30

Mr. Tougas: To the same minister: will the minister commit to presenting the final Métis harvesting agreement to the government caucus for their input before it is signed?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that something that, certainly, our government intends to do is to be able to work with our caucus. As a matter of fact, we've had a few meetings that we'll be able to address the various concerns that their constituents have brought to our attention. We will certainly address those concerns as we move forward and will continue to work with our caucus. It

is, after all, this government's position that we work with our caucus and make sure that they know what issues are out there, and then that way, we can ensure that we bring that to the table as we move forward. Whether it is a final agreement or a series of agreements we don't know yet at this stage.

Mr. Tougas: Well, I didn't hear an answer to my question, Mr. Speaker, so I'll ask it again. Will the minister commit to presenting the final Métis harvesting agreement to the government caucus for their input before it is signed? Yes or no?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I indicated earlier, it is our rule to be able to ensure that our caucus is going to be involved in whatever decisions we come up with. Basically, once that information is presented, our caucus will have input. That input will then go to the regular process that we utilize within government, and we'll ensure that our caucus has input in terms of what is going to be, if there is going to be, a final agreement or a series of agreements. So we will make sure that our caucus will have that input. Definitely.

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

Affordable Housing in the North

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Northern Alberta is experiencing increased pressure on social housing and assisted living facilities in both the numbers and expectations. As a result, seniors in northern communities are leaving the places where they have lived and worked their entire lives due to the lack of adequate and affordable housing and support services. My question is to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. Can you advise what steps are being taken to support seniors in having the choice to remain in their northern and rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are two programs that come to mind for me in addressing the hon. member's question. The first, of course, is the lodge assistance program, and the second is the rural affordable supportive living program.

The lodge assistance program, Mr. Speaker, is for independent seniors who may require some assistance from the community through meal preparation or housekeeping or laundry. Over the past four months we have increased the lodge assistance grant itself by 40 per cent, and that's through a \$22 million budget. That program is ongoing, of course.

The rural affordable supportive living program is new. It's a \$50 million budget over two years, and that's to assist seniors with higher health care and personal care needs than in the lodges and to assist them to remain in their rural remote communities that the hon. member has asked about.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, my first supplemental question is again to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. The lack of affordable and adequate housing is also hurting recruitment and retention of labour necessary to maintain the northern industries. What steps are being taken to support northern remote and rural communities to address the affordable housing issue?

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Speaker, we assist the northern remote communities through the Canada/Alberta affordable housing program and, as well, through the sustainable remote housing initiative program. The

Canada affordable housing program has provided 2,400 homes to low-income people, hon. member, over the past three years, and that program is ongoing through a \$25 million allocation into the budget this year, which will assist the community. Also, the sustainable remote housing program: we have approved 50 housing units, and we are currently working with the community to assist with providing more housing units.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. Could the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports tell us whether she sees any merit in striking a committee to look at the housing challenges specifically related to the economic growth given the importance of housing to Alberta's social and economic well-being?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I indicated to the hon. member, I do share his concerns regarding housing in the northern remote areas of the province, you know, in the rural areas, for our seniors, for low-income individuals, for people with special needs. Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I'm not prepared to establish a committee at this time although I know the hon. member wishes that to happen. That's because I believe that our department is addressing the needs in the best way possible. Having said that, I would offer to the hon. member that we have staff who are very knowledgeable in this area, and they would assist the member as chair of the Northern Alberta Development Council.

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

Education Funding

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Education Week is an important time to take stock of our public education system to celebrate the successes as well as to take a hard look at where we can do better. This Conservative government, sitting with record resource revenues and bending to public and opposition pressure, has finally decided to reinvest in our kids. My question is to the Minister of Education. Can the minister assure this Assembly and Alberta's educational community that all school boards will in fact get the 5.4 per cent increase in base operating funding he has promised?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I don't have the exact percentage in my head, but I can tell you that overall the education budget has been increased by about 7 per cent. Within that 7 per cent there are \$287 million of new wealth, and those monies arise out of needs that they've identified in meetings that I had with them in January and February and in needs that have been presented to me by members of our caucus.

I should point out to the hon. member, who I know is new, that education spending has gone up consistently in this province since 1995, not just this year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. To the same minister: can you explain why some school boards might be anticipating that the financial impact of the budget will actually be less than 3 per cent, clearly not enough to keep pace with increased operating costs?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, I would invite school boards who feel that

they might not be receiving adequate funding under the renewed funding framework or through other increases such as the 30 per cent increase in ESL, such as the 11 per cent increase for special needs, particularly severe special needs, such as the increase we're giving for francization, such as the increase that we're giving for a number of areas: First Nations, Métis, Inuit initiatives. If they are having a problem there, they can certainly contact me or one of my officials. Mr. Speaker, I'd be more than happy to take a look at their extenuating circumstances if, in fact, there are some.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. To the same minister: will you immediately release the projected impact of the new budget for all school boards, including charter schools, so they can plan effectively?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, the process works like this. A school board submits its best available information on projections and statistics for the year coming up. Our officials work with them to renew that. We do sort of a quasi-soft audit, if you will, to make sure that the figures and projections are more or less in line with where they were projecting those from the year previous, and we work with them on what's called a jurisdiction profile. The member asking the question has some familiarity as a former teacher, in fact an administrator within the system, and if she'd like to request that information from the school board she taught with, for example, I'm sure they'd be willing to speak with her.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, very shortly I'll call upon the first of a number of members to participate, but I have a question, and I know it's one on everybody's mind. The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness announced that she had a date proposal. Our question is: are you going to accept it?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I'm accepting every one.

Ms Pastoor: Mr. Speaker, I might ask my hon. colleague across the table: if it's any good, might he have a brother? [laughter]

Rev. Abbott: It's springtime.

The Speaker: Yup. Thursday. Full moon.

head: 2:40

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright.

Rural Development

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three years ago I was elected, and three years ago the government of Alberta committed to extending the Alberta advantage to all Albertans through a rural development strategy. I was fortunate enough to begin this work on that rural development strategy with my hon. colleague from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake only days after I was elected, and I continue to do that today.

Meetings in fully 25 per cent of the communities of this province with hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals from all walks of life gave us a vision and a plan. That strategy recognizes the critical nature of thriving rural communities and makes recommendations around ensuring that the four pillars of a community are strong, those pillars being health care, learning and skill development, economic growth, and community infrastructure. It also

makes recommendations around components of a community such as youth, seniors, arts and culture, and environment.

Most importantly, it recognizes two critical elements, Mr. Speaker: first, that rural development is not a one-year fix or a two-year initiative but must be a 20-year plan for the future, not just for the benefit of rural Albertans but for the benefit of all Albertans. Secondly, it recognizes that rural development is not the sole responsibility of the provincial government, the federal government, or any local, municipal government. It's everyone's responsibility including the communities themselves. If a community is to survive, grow, and prosper, they must start the initiative, and then the governments must work with them if at all possible to make that vision happen.

The tip of the iceberg came with Budget '05, with over 30 initiatives, Mr. Speaker, that just begin the process of rural development. This is not the end of rural development; this is not even the beginning of the end of rural development, to quote an ancient colleague. It is only the end of the beginning. We know the road. We know our task. Now we undertake the long journey of success for rural Alberta and for all Albertans. To quote a gentleman named William Jennings Bryan: tear down your cities and watch them spring up again as if by magic; tear down your farms in our rural communities and watch the grass grow in every city street in this country.

Thank you.

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

Forum for Young Albertans

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to be able to rise and recognize a group of involved and engaged youth who are participating in the Forum for Young Albertans. The Forum for Young Albertans is a program allowing students the opportunity to gain insight into the parliamentary process and legislative system. Through speaker presentations and forums, which I also participated in, group discussions, tours, and formal activities students are able to listen, learn, and question various legislative staff, media, university professors, and MLAs on how government works.

It is important that we engage our youth more in government and politics in general. I'm not one to use clichés, but this one rings very true: Alberta's future is dependent on our youth, and we are in great hands.

I would like to thank the Forum for Young Albertans for helping to get more young Albertans educated and interested and involved in the parliamentary and the legislative process. Thank you to all of those involved, and thank you to the students who participated.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Glendale Elementary School

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This week schools and communities throughout our province are celebrating Education Week, and today the Minister of Education and I have an incredible success story to share. Students in grades 4, 5, and 6 at Glendale elementary school in Calgary recently produced a film called *Frankenstein*, which has gained international attention. *Frankenstein* is being screened at the prestigious New York International Independent Film and Video Festival on May 2, 2005.

This film explores Mary Shelley's popular story and its themes of love, acceptance, and belonging, with a particular focus on the consequences of separating spirit, intellect, and heart.

The students at Glendale school were responsible for every part of this film including editing the script, filming, acting, and set development. Judges were very impressed with the quality of their work. In fact, *Frankenstein* is the only Canadian film produced by children that is being screened at the festival.

This project is just one example of the great work being done in Alberta's classrooms.

I would like to congratulate the students and staff at Glendale school in Calgary, who are listening to this special recognition in their classroom, on their extraordinary achievement. Well done, Glendale. We are all very proud of you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Police Recruitment and Training Centre

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Five years ago this government commissioned the MLA policing review to examine policing in Alberta. Recommendation 11 of the 2004 accepted response to that review stated that a centre of policing excellence should be established that would deliver standardized, high-quality recruiting and ongoing training. A consortium of police services – Taber, Blood Tribe police, Medicine Hat, CP Rail, and the Lethbridge regional service. To be noted: it is the first regional police service in this province and an accredited member of CALEA.

This service has worked with the Lethbridge Community College, already a nationally recognized centre of excellence for their criminal justice program, and has created an approved curriculum as well as a memo of understanding and a business plan projecting the viability of this police centre of excellence. In addition, the community college has the infrastructure for gun training and other specific training techniques; for example, diving and taser training. This program will provide 30 credits and would allow a seamless transfer for further academic education at the university level.

The police chiefs of the future will require a masters level education. We have a very sophisticated criminal element in our society. Our police forces that protect our lives every day with their lives deserve no less.

There have been inquiries from other provinces and northern Alberta expressing support and wanting to send their members to Lethbridge for training. Southern Alberta is ready to go and serve. This provincial government's political will is now up to the plate. This initiative is the perfect fit for this government's own rural development strategy, and I paraphrase from that document: it looks to a future where rural Alberta is a place to grow new opportunities, new ideas, and new potential for the future.

I urge this government to look south of the 50th parallel to establish a true centre for policing excellence. The city of Lethbridge stands ready to deliver.

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

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to try and clear the smokescreen this government repeatedly deploys over electricity deregulation. The government likes to say that electricity deregulation created 3,000 megawatts of new generation in Alberta, but what they fail to mention is that most of this new generation is fuelled by expensive natural gas. Thirty-eight per cent of Alberta's power generation is gas fired, and gas almost always sets the price paid to all generators at the Power Pool. The electricity market is now so dependent on natural gas that a run-up in the price of natural gas

directly translates to a run-up in the price of electricity in Alberta. This leads to huge volatility in electricity prices.

This volatility will continue to grow in the future as new generation coming on stream is all gas fired and older, coal-fired power plants are decommissioned. This is yet another example of poor long-term planning from this government.

The government has also failed to properly plan for the long-term electricity needs of Alberta. Information from the Department of Energy shows that electricity supply and demand may come into critical balance in 2008. The Alberta Electric System Operator is less optimistic, stating that electricity demand in this province will outstrip supply by 2006. A shortage of electricity supply will cause prices to skyrocket just as they did in 2000 and 2001, when power prices tripled.

This government needs to realize that electricity is not a commodity: it's an essential service. It's something we use every day. It's something we can't live without.

We need to return to low-cost power in Alberta, and the Alberta Liberals have a plan to do it. Our plan will save electricity consumers money without being forced to shop around for the best deal. Consumers will get one low, stable rate without having to sign an expensive, long-term electricity contract. We would make power bills easier to understand, and our plan will be able to count on a steady supply of low-cost electricity power for years to come.

Thank you.

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

Public Health Care

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Next week the Alberta government will stage another expensive health care three-ring circus, this time to try to sell Albertans on a scheme to privatize their health care system by stealth with the so-called third way. The third way is a label stolen from the United Kingdom in order to import a health system from the United States. It's a cynical public relations ploy aimed at selling Albertans on an idea they totally reject: privatization. Albertans want the Canadian way, the best way, which is public health care.

2:50

The basis for the upcoming symposium and the consultations are the Mazankowski and Graydon reports, which recommend more user fees, delisting more services, and more private delivery. These proposals mean Albertans will pay more and get less from their health care system. No wonder Albertans have said to this government time and again that they don't want private health care.

Albertans' fears about privatization are well founded in all available research. Private health care in the United States costs taxpayers more. The U.S. spends more on health care while much of that money goes to bloated and bureaucratic health care corporations. Furthermore, Alberta's own misadventures with privately delivered health care show that wait times are longer and procedures are more expensive when done by for-profit providers. The people of Alberta want their government to defend public health care, not find elaborate public relations strategies to undermine it.

The NDP opposition, Mr. Speaker, is calling on this government to abandon its commitment to its friends in the for-profit health care industry and renew its commitment to universal public health care once and for all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Vignettes from Alberta's History

The Speaker: Hon. members, by way of a historical vignette for

today: at 4:10 a.m., April 29, 1903, a huge 74-million-ton slab of limestone slid off the east slope of Turtle Mountain and swept 1.6 kilometres through the Crowsnest Pass Valley and the coal-mining village of Frank, burying the mine entrance and killing at least 70 people in 100 seconds. Only 23 people survived, and 17 trapped miners dug themselves to safety 13 hours later. The slab was 400 metres high, 1,200 metres wide, and 150 metres thick.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a petition signed by Albertans who are very concerned about the dangerous driving conditions faced by people in northern Alberta who use highway 63 on a regular basis. Yesterday the minister committed to investing in improvements to highway 63, and I know that the 651 people who signed this petition will be watching to ensure that that promise is kept. With today's tabling the total signatures on this petition so far is 2,797.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to present a petition from a number of good Albertans in the communities of Calmar, Red Deer, Carvel, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, and other fine other Alberta communities. It reads:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to prohibit the importation of temporary foreign workers to work on the construction and/or maintenance of oil sands facilities and/or pipelines until the following groups have been accessed and/or trained: Unemployed Albertans and Canadians; Aboriginals; unemployed youth under 25; under-employed landed immigrants; and displaced farmers.

There are 102 good Albertans signing this petition.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition from 101 residents of Alberta asking the government of Alberta to

prohibit the importation of temporary foreign workers to work on the construction and/or maintenance of oil sands facilities and/or pipelines until the following groups have been accessed and/or trained: Unemployed Albertans and Canadians; Aboriginals; unemployed youth under 25; under-employed landed immigrants; and displaced farmers.

Thank you.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 24 to 31.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns 27 to 43 be dealt with on that day. There being no further motions for returns at this time, there are none to stand and retain their places.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Services.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Persons with Developmental Disabilities Provincial Board I am pleased to table five copies of the 2003-2004 annual report.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to rise and table five copies of a response to the Premier's request last night during Committee of Supply debate for a home page address of the secret website available only to Tory MLAs developed by the publicly funded Public Affairs Bureau. The Premier asked us to send the web page over if we had it, and so we will.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of the second part of a series of op-eds done by respected health policy analyst Paul Krugman, the op-ed piece in which Dr. Krugman, a professor of economics at Princeton University, flags private health care insurance for being far more expensive and concludes by asking: when will decision-makers understand that relative to health care, market competition is the problem, not the solution?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: Official Opposition House Leader, do you have a question? You're to ask a question of the government to see if they're going to release their agenda for next week.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not know the standing order number, and I'm not sure if I have to quote it, but I would like to ask the Deputy Government House Leader if he could share with us the projected government business for next week.

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: I think that was all clear enough. I've got a script. I know what I'm supposed to do.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The projected government business for the week of May 2, 2005, begins on the evening of Monday, May 2, at about 9 p.m. with Committee of Supply on International and Intergovernmental Relations, followed by Committee of the Whole on bills 31 and 34, third reading on Bill 16 and second reading on Bill 35, and as per the Order Paper.

Moving to Tuesday, May 3, in the afternoon there's Committee of Supply for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, followed that evening, commencing at 8 p.m., with Committee of Supply for Justice and Attorney General, and then at or about 10 p.m. third reading on Bill 1, second reading on Bill 36, Committee of the Whole on Bill 29, and as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, May 4, in the afternoon Committee of Supply will proceed for the Department of Economic Development, and then that evening at 8 p.m. Committee of Supply for Gaming, and at or about 10 p.m. third reading on bills 31 and 12, Committee of the Whole and third reading with respect to bills 36, 29, and 22, second readings on bills 40 and 39, and as per the Order Paper.

On the afternoon of Thursday, May 5, there will be the 60th anniversary Victory in Europe Day ceremony as per Government Motion 20, which passed on April 27, and then Committee of Supply for Municipal Affairs and as per the Order Paper.

The Speaker: Hon. members, today is a commemoration day for the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill. A number of years ago he arrived in this world.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2005-06**

Human Resources and Employment

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

3:00

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm here today, of course, to present the 2005-2006 estimates for Alberta Human Resources and Employment. In the gallery today I would like to recognize and thank some of the staff that have been involved in preparing these estimates: Ulysses Currie is our deputy minister; Alex Stewart, assistant deputy minister of corporate services; Duncan Campbell, senior financial officer; and there are also, I believe, some other staff that are here to lend their support. I'd like to thank them for all the good work they've done.

Human Resources and Employment is looking to build a better future for Albertans, a future in which Albertans are even less dependent on government support, where employers can find the skilled labour they need, and where the risk of workplace injury or death is minimal. To build that better future for Albertans, Mr. Chairman, I'm asking for \$778,691,000 to support the work of the ministry. The ministry includes the Department of Human Resources and Employment, the personnel administration office, the Alberta Labour Relations Board, the Appeals Commission for workers' compensation. Of course, the Workers' Compensation Board itself, which is an independent employer, a funded organization, is not included in the ministry's business plan.

We all know that Alberta is a great place to live and work. Our economy is booming, and continued growth is forecast for the coming year. We help ensure that everyone can benefit from our economy by helping people get and keep jobs while meeting the basic needs of those who cannot work. The ministry works with employers, training providers, and the people of Alberta to address labour shortages and skills deficits. For example, we encourage participation in the apprenticeship program by helping apprentices with their tuition and living expenses. We work to increase the participation of aboriginal people, people with disabilities, immigrants, youth, and older workers in the labour force. We match people with jobs. Human Resources and Employment delivers Alberta Works services, including income support, health benefits, training, and help to find and keep jobs. In addition, we reduce workplace injuries and disease through Work Safe Alberta.

The ministry strives to create a positive labour relations environment in the public and private sectors. We make sure that the workplace is fair, enforcing employment standards. HR and E makes it possible for Albertans to appeal decisions that impact them in certain areas such as workers' compensation, employment standards, and income support. As well, the ministry supports the ongoing development of Alberta's public service. By any measure our ministry is a significant contributor to the government's success and has been for many years.

In 1992 under this government the ministry implemented some major welfare reforms to help train and get Albertans to work. At that time, Mr. Chairman, 80 per cent of the welfare caseload was considered employable; in fact, couples without children and single people. If the welfare caseloads had remained at the same level as they were before the reforms in 1992, the government would have spent an additional average of \$600 million per year, or a total of \$8 billion. That is a lot of money saved as a result of the ministry's efforts.

We have 59 service centres located across the province, where we provide a wide range of services to give Albertans a hand up to become productive. Mr. Chairman, we don't have welfare offices anymore in Alberta. We have employment and training centres, and employers turn to us to help fill job vacancies. Eighty-five per cent of the over 1 million visitors to our offices are looking for employment and training assistance and not income support or welfare. Our services include resumé writing, career and education planning, job placement and maintenance services, and referrals to training. We have also developed innovative ways to work in partnership with business.

Income supports is a statutory program. Our budget requirement is lower in 2005-06 due to the success we've had with those clients who are able to work. Our focus is on getting these Albertans the skills they need to find work and keep the jobs. Alberta's approach to providing a hand up is working. Even with an increase in population the number of employable people receiving support has dropped drastically.

Alberta's unemployment rate remains the lowest in Canada at about 3.5 per cent in March, the lowest since October 1981. Last year we reduced our caseload of people who were able to work by almost 2,200 cases to less than 18,000. This success has been partially offset by an increase of about 1,900 cases of people who cannot work.

The Alberta government is committed to helping people in need, and the income supports program is targeted to help those who need it most. On August 1 more than 18,000 families receiving income support will also see their monthly income increase by \$17 per child. The province will flow the increase through the national child benefit supplement. For a family with three children this means an additional \$51 per month, or \$612 per year. People also receive health benefits and more money for needs such as daycare, work clothes, children's school expenses, and utility hookups.

The number of people receiving benefits through the Alberta child benefit and Alberta adult benefit programs has increased to almost 72,000. The increased number of Albertans receiving health benefits shows our success at moving people off income support and into employment. We want to continue to support and encourage people's desire to work by ensuring that funding is available for health care benefits.

Now, skills programs are not statutory; however, the skills programs are key to helping people get into the workforce and take away the pressure on the income supports program. We know that job skills training leads directly to employment for learners. In 2005-2006 HR and E expects to spend \$288 million to help people get the training and information they need so they can get meaningful employment. We will be able to help over 2,000 more learners than in 2004, bringing this year's total of learners helped to over 25,000.

Eleven hundred more people will also have access to academic upgrading and English as a Second Language, for a total of 15,300. There will be 630 more opportunities in job skills training, immigrant bridging, and integrated training programs, for a total of 5,400. Three hundred more apprenticeship opportunities will be available, for a total of 4,300.

Investing in the next Alberta means working with the underrepresented in our workforce by allocating \$6 million for First Nations training and employment programs for such things as skills to get a job, paid work experience, placement, and follow-up support services, spending \$1 million for enhanced language training for immigrants, and increasing spending by \$2.8 million to provide access to training and employment support for people with disabilities.

We've also increased the maximum tuition we will pay for a learner in year one from \$10,000 to \$15,000. This is to broaden the occupational training opportunities for individuals. Finally, we have set aside \$2.2 million to cover tuition fee increases for upgrading, English as a Second Language, and integrated training.

3:10

Phase 2 of the Work Safe Alberta strategy is under development and will identify new opportunities to reduce injuries on Alberta work sites in the next five years. The focus of this very successful program will be on youth and industry sectors with poor safety records. A stakeholder consultation is planned for the fall of 2005.

Since we have implemented the Work Safe Alberta initiative, the lost-time claim rate has been reduced from 3.4 in 2000 to an estimated 2.6 for 2004. A lost-time claim is the claim for an occupational injury or disease that disables the worker beyond the day of the injury. The lost-time claim rate represents the risk of disabling injury or disease to a worker during a period of one year of work and is calculated by dividing the number of lost-time claims by person-year estimates and multiplying the results by 100. Over the past few years in partnership with industry and labour we have planned and implemented our Work Safe Alberta initiative. This is a 24 per cent drop, a record low, and it means that there were 10,000 fewer workers injured last year compared to where we would have been if we didn't have this program in place. It also means an estimated injury claim cost savings of over \$151 million in workers' compensation payments in 2004. The number of workers being injured is decreasing in spite of yearly increases in our workforce, which is over 40,000 jobs. The Workers' Compensation Board funds the workplace health and safety program by contributing in excess of \$12 million to support Work Safe Alberta.

Now I'd like to take a few moments to explain the personnel administration office. It is important to continue having a strong public service, one able to help develop strong public policy and deliver the kinds of high-quality programs and services that Albertans expect and deserve. The Alberta government will face the same kind of demographic challenges as other employers in the next five to 10 years. Today 30 per cent of the public service executive managers are over the age of 55; 45 per cent of all public service managers will be eligible for retirement in 2008. We need to invest now in developing our future public service leaders if we want to minimize the impact of these changes that are coming.

The personnel administration office's 2005-06 budget has increased by over \$4 million to almost \$13 million, the first budget increase for the PAO since the mid-1990s. The initiatives that the PAO will be undertaking with this increase will benefit all ministries. They include the creation of a program where executive managers can enhance their skills by moving between ministries through development assignments and investment in other leadership development initiatives also, success in management strategies to make sure that there are public service employees ready to step into leadership positions when leaders are ready to retire.

Workplace strategies to improve overall health will begin for the public service, including the new workplace health framework for the public service, human resource information technology systems

so that public service managers have access to accurate and timely information when making human resource decisions, and other initiatives such as attracting and retaining talent in the public service, continuous learning, service excellence, and employee performance and recognition.

The other important area we have, Mr. Chairman, is the Appeals Commission for the Workers' Compensation Board. It is a separate government entity, independent from the Workers' Compensation Board. The commission hears appeals from workers or employers to a decision of the review bodies of the Workers' Compensation Board. The operating costs of the Appeals Commission are paid from the general revenue, which is reimbursed from the workers' compensation accident fund. The budget for the Appeals Commission has increased by \$1.5 million.

In the past two years the Appeals Commission has received 250 more appeals than in the past 5 years, which is a pretty good average. This has a significant impact on the timelines for processing appeals. The increase in funding will provide for additional hearing resources so the Appeals Commission can hear more appeals and, of course, gradually reduce the timeline for processing appeals to an acceptable level.

This year Alberta Human Resources and Employment will invest over \$770 million in Alberta's people skills and workplace investments. These dollars make a difference to people every day in communities across the province.

I look forward to hearing comments and questions from the hon. members about these estimates. Any questions, of course, I can't answer today, I'll get my staff to review *Hansard* and provide the answers in writing.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and reply to the hon. minister today. I do have a number of questions and a number of comments, and I'll go through them in sequence here.

First off, you know, many people have told me that they're quite pleased to see the minimum wage rise to \$7 in one move in 2005, but many students have in fact called me and said that they're not going to be able to have that increase to help them with saving for their tuition and learning expenses in the coming year because it will be after the summer.

One question in looking at some of these things. We've seen in some of the government statistics that there actually are presently in the public sector a certain percentage on the minimum wage. I wondered if there were any actually working in the public sector for the provincial government on the minimum wage, and will this \$7 dollar increase affect them, and how much will that, in fact, cost?

The low-income individuals in our society and poverty will certainly be helped by the working poor having a higher minimum wage. Certainly, 60 per cent of the people who are presently earning minimum wage are older than 20, I believe. The incidence of people on the minimum wage that are in the older age groups is increasing, and it shows an increasing tendency for our elderly who don't have pensions, who have not had the ability to save over the years, to have to augment their income. The minimum wage in places like fast-food outlets and in other types of employment are increasingly becoming important as an income augmenter to people with low pensions or no pensions. Certainly, the Canada pension and other supports for most individuals are not enough.

Some other questions. Why has the government reduced its commitment to youth seeking employment? There's been a reduction of \$1,113,000 for the Youth Connections career info

program. Why does this budget seem to abandon people who are in need of assistance but remain capable and willing to work? There are \$2,261,000 less in health benefits for people expected to work. What is the reasoning behind the significant reduction in living allowances for learners, which again affects youth and students more than any group? That's \$1,815,000.

We've seen quite a hold-the-line approach on STEP funding, and that program does provide a great deal of help for a lot of students in summer employment. Many members, in fact, employ STEP students in their constituency offices in the summer, and the numbers in the budget for that are not increased, yet we have still, even with the freeze on tuitions, a huge need for students to have at least some summer jobs to increase their ability to have a higher education.

3:20

The skills investments area is quite crucial, and in the supplementary estimates some time ago in this Legislature we were told that \$13 million at the end of the last budget year was transferred out of skills investments into other areas in human resources and not used to develop the skills of Albertans. Will the government ensure that skills investments does take a priority? The development of our workforce is important to ensure that we have the important skills to develop our economy and to ensure that we have the proper resources for our own people to learn and get the necessary skills for employment.

Some of the areas stayed the same. Youth Connections: \$4,767,000. Training for work, job skills training from the gross comparable '04-05 budget actually went down from \$63 million to \$62.7 million. The self-employment training, you know, is a very important area in our economy to encourage people to self employ. Many people are getting home offices, doing all of these things, and we've seen no increase in that area. As I mentioned, the STEP student allocation stayed the same at \$8.195 million to \$8.195 million again.

The actual lottery expenditure for immigrant supports went down even though there are a million dollars in there as a special expense, and I heard the minister speak about that shortly in his speech. I wonder if he could be more specific about what that million dollars is for. Is that for temporary foreign workers, to help in their transition back and forth? Or what, in fact, is that?

As well, there's a huge increase in R and D. Well, \$2,200,000 is pretty major for an HR department. I just wonder what that research and development is all about.

The WCB. You know, you mentioned that the Appeals Commission is reimbursed from the WCB accident fund, but in effect being reimbursed from the accident fund ensures that it's still charged to employers, and there is a connection. I've heard often enough of a lot of connections between case managers who are calling appeals case managers if they are in fact going to let their decision go, and I think that that's far too close a relationship. That sort of contact should be ended, and certainly the funding through the WCB accident fund should end so that it is not a cost to employers or to workers.

There's a great importance, I think, in ensuring that we have a productive workforce, and I think part of a productive workforce – it's certainly in the area of other ministries somewhat, but there are so many cross-ministry functions in government that I think HR and E should look very seriously at it. It does deal with ensuring of jobs for aboriginals, and I think that something like the roads from La Loche in Saskatchewan, where there's a strong and well-trained workforce of tradesmen, would be a very, very productive investment for Albertans and Alberta and our oil sands and our economy.

As well, there's a strong potential in transportation and upgrading some of the winter roads we have in other areas, certainly from Wabasca-Desmarais on the west side of the Athabasca River, without a bridge, without the huge cost of a bridge on that large river. Wabasca-Desmarais is a large population area in northern Alberta and quite often has continually high unemployment levels and good potential for work in the tar sands. You know, often construction and mining can be seasonal or cyclical. For those who'd like from time to time to get back to their homes in Wabasca-Desmarais or Red Earth or Sucker Creek or Driftpile or all those other areas, such a winter road would really I think provide a great deal of ease of access to the workplace and better employment levels and less cost in other areas.

I think that we must ensure that the aboriginal training programs – I was looking at the April 7 document – are fully implemented and that all efforts are made to ensure that our First Nations have a very strong ability, from all aspects, to enter the workforce and to be part of the prosperity of Alberta. Of course, much of that is under federal jurisdiction, but I think that increasingly, you know, we're seeing a burgeoning urban population that can be used to work in the huge economic area of the oil sands. We must help that in every way possible. I think there is a responsibility for the provincial government to do whatever they can.

In terms of the PAO I think there are some concerns that we have to look at in terms of the retention level. There are certainly demographic concerns. There are some internal reports, I think, that are saying that the demographics of the public sector and the public service here in Alberta are a time bomb. It is one of those areas where we will see some huge retirements in the near future. The necessity to train leadership: I was very pleased to hear that. I'm sure that there's a strong public service leadership that is multi-sectoral, multidepartmental. I was very pleased to hear that. I think that's a good innovation.

I'm not too pleased to hear the continued high percentage of dissatisfaction with employment in the public service: 1 out of 5. I think that's still far too high, and something must be done to somehow address that. You know, the target is only to move to an 83 per cent satisfaction level, which is still pretty close to 1 in 5 dissatisfied. When you have a dissatisfied workforce or at least a large percentage of it, it starts to affect the productivity and the ability of that workforce to function in a way that benefits in the best possible way the interests of all Albertans.

I think that there's a huge and crying need for proper information on labour supply. It's something that is, I think, of crucial importance as we enter the end of the baby boom.

3:30

I'll just make a note on the baby boom though. Some people try to put it forward as being something a little bit more immediate than it is. We were just talking about VE Day and having the people from the armed forces, the three branches, all here, and it's a wonderful thing, but if you look at VE Day, 1945, it is now 2005, 60 years later. The servicemen that came back in 1946, 1947 and got married – and it takes usually nine months to start a baby boom. Realistically, that baby boom started in about 1947 and continued to the mid-60s. So what that puts us at is an actual retirement date for those very first baby boomers seven years from now if we look at it as 65. You know, my colleague from St. Albert would probably argue with me that 65 might be a little young for retirement. The importance of using older workers I think will increase as we see a healthier older workforce, and these are issues that we must look at.

When we look farther down the road, realistically the middle area of the baby boom does not come into place for their retirement at an

age 65 level for another 17 years, and some of the baby boomers at the end of the baby boomers are still having children. So there are some aspects to that baby boom that I think are a little bit overblown, and it will be with us in the working sector of the population for quite some time.

As I said, the supply and demand area of what constitutes skills in our workforce is often thrown at us in many different ways. People will give us statistics if they have a particular axe to bear. We've seen a lot of demand studies that look to the interests of certain employer organizations, and certainly many of them have been well done and are comprehensive on the demand side. But if you look at the demand side, it is like looking at the interests of grade 2 students, for example, who are surveyed on their demand for candy three months down the road. Well, there will never be enough. Certainly, when you survey employers about their needs for employees six months or two years down the road, there will never be enough because that is an input that is absolutely crucial to them and they want to ensure that there is enough there.

It's important to the economy that we ensure that there's enough there and that people are well trained and that we keep the supply going, but often there is a danger to oversupply, and this is a concern for many Albertans. There have been a few petitions presented in this session that have spoken to that and the concern that many Albertans have to having temporary foreign workers brought in when they consider that it is not necessary to come into their certain occupational and skill areas.

Even the December study by the Alberta Economic Development Authority and the action plan on megaproject excellence did not forecast a huge need, and in fact many of the trades look at a lower level of demand in four years than we're actually seeing today. Actually, this year is a high-demand year for many trades. It fluctuates. It's the nature of the industry. It's the nature of the oil sands that we've been building for many years.

I first worked at Syncrude in the 1970s, and there was a huge blip and a huge necessity for people to come in and work. There were many people that came in from other provinces: from Quebec, from Ontario, from Newfoundland, and many from the Maritime provinces. These people helped build Alberta, became Albertans. Many of them went back, though, because that is the nature of our flow of labour in this country. It's actually the history and the interprovincial history of how it works.

To utilize temporary foreign workers to provide employees for companies just because many of the existing Albertans and Canadians do not want to work under the particular work regime creates huge problems and the potential for labour strife. The situation and the statistics that we look at from the labour board and all the other areas show that we have not seen very much labour strife. In fact, I don't think there's been a true strike in the oil sands from the unionized sector for quite some time. We're beginning to see the phenomena of the non-union strike, which is odd. We saw that last November. The *Fort McMurray Today* reported that when a whole parade of tradesmen decided to leave a job site at Suncor . . .

The Chair: I hate to interrupt, hon. member, but your time is elapsed.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much. Those are very, very good comments, very good suggestions, and very good questions. I'll try and answer starting off with your first question, which was on the minimum wage and possible, you know, support for youth in a special way.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, the minimum wage

increases to \$7 an hour starting September 1, 2005. All minimum wage earners, including students, youth, and hospitality workers, are equally deserving of the increase, of course, and the minimum wage will be equal for everybody at this time. I know that there was some talk, but there are no plans at this time to subsidize employers for the wages they provide to students.

There are some jurisdictions that have that now, and I'm looking at it closely. We'll monitor the first part of the changes in the minimum wage and closely look at other programs that are available. In the future if a process changes, then of course it will have to go through the normal approval process.

The Employment Standards Code sets the minimum wage that employers must pay workers within the province of Alberta. Higher minimum wages are negotiated between employers and employees or their unions. The minimum wage is intended to be an entry-level rate of pay. By increasing Alberta's minimum wage, the government of Alberta is ensuring that the workers have a better start in the workforce. Of course, due to Alberta's vibrant and booming economy, there are not too many people working for minimum wage.

The second area that was mentioned was Youth Connections, the cutback in the budget. Youth Connections has been reduced by a million dollars. Well, we can do it within the existing organization and the existing funding, and we'll monitor it closely. If in the future there is the need to increase the funding for Youth Connections, then of course we'll restore their dollars, but in the meantime we can do it within the existing organization.

In relation to the student temporary employment program, which is a very important program, the budget this year is projected to be \$8.2 million, which is the same as '04 and '05. Approximately 3,600 students will gain valuable work experience through the STEP program this summer, just about the same as last year. Eligible employers include registered nonprofit community organizations, First Nations, Métis settlements, municipalities, regional health authorities, regional school divisions, and postsecondary institutions. So, again, we will review the budget each year as we move forward to see what, if any, changes are required in that very valuable program.

3:40

The other area that I was mentioning was in relation to the enhanced immigration services that we provide. My department will spend about a million dollars in '05-06 on enhanced language training, and of course we'll continue providing that valuable service to the people that are coming here and require support.

The other part is that the immigration support services are not dollars for temporary foreign workers. That's a different program completely. We share responsibility for immigration with the federal government and other provinces under the Constitution and work collaboratively with Citizenship and Immigration Canada to support settlement programs through integrated services programs. Federal funding for settlement services in Alberta is mainly targeted at the government-assisted refugees in their first year of arrival. Alberta's funding, \$1.9 million in 2005-06, is for all newcomers who have been in Canada less than three years. So that is a very valuable program.

The other area that was mentioned was a productive workforce, which is very important. With a strong economy like we have in Alberta, we do need a strong, productive, local workforce of Albertans, Canadians, First Nations, and persons that require additional help.

The issue of jobs for aboriginal people was mentioned, and that is a must because definitely there's still high unemployment and

underemployment of our aboriginal people. A lot of people still live in poverty while the economy is booming out there, and we need to do a lot of work in that area to improve that.

On the provincial side the people that live off the reserve and the Métis people and, of course, the people that needed the support, through the welfare reforms that were done by this government – I mentioned earlier that 80 per cent of the cases were single people and couples without children using up most of the dollars that were needed for the high-needs area. Those people, through the reforms, are now gone. They're back into the workforce and have become independent and self-sufficient.

One of the things that we need to work with – and I hope you will support me on this and support our government at different levels – is to push for some changes at the federal level, to get the feds to try and change some of their socioeconomic policies on the reserves. The way they're structured right now the First Nations people are not happy. The chiefs are not happy. I don't think the taxpayer out there is happy to see people still caught living in poverty while they want to work. The feds I think should be encouraged to change their policies, to start using those same dollars they provide free for social supports to encourage people to train and get back into the workforce. So I could sure use your support there.

The other area, of course, is the integrated road network. It is necessary. The way our economy is growing, in order to continue the movement of the commerce that's required out there, we need to make sure that the roads are built. The member mentioned, you know, specifically 63, 813, La Loche road. All those roads need to be fixed up, in fact built and paved and fixed up. When you look at a road network from La Loche to Fort McMurray, Fort McMurray to Fort Chip and on to Fort Smith and then another road from Fort McMurray to Wabasca and on to Peace River and then another one from Rainbow Lake to Fort Nelson – that type of road network needs to be put in place. I know that it'll cost millions of dollars, but we're spending that now on social support programs. These people can commute to these job sites. Wabasca, for example, which the hon. member mentioned, has a population of 5,000 yet has 80 per cent unemployment and underemployment with our First Nations people.

So we definitely need to improve the infrastructure to ensure that people not only are provided with training but also have access to jobs and training that are out there.

The PAO, of course, was mentioned. Yes, definitely, we need to get more managers within our system to apply for jobs within a department or other departments that become available. I understand right now, in fact, that it's fairly difficult for a young person that just graduates, say, from a university or a technical school or that just wants to apply for jobs to access our government department. So we need to make sure that we look at how we may encourage a lot more young people also, not only the managers that are in our existing system, to better access government jobs.

There used to be wage position money available to hire people if there was work to be done, jobs to be done, and what happened was that a lot of those people then applied for regular jobs in the department, and it worked quite well. It brought a lot of people into the government system. I think we need to definitely look at that.

The other one that was mentioned, of course, is proper information as far as labour supply. I think that, you know, generally the governments at different levels – federal, provincial, municipal – and private industry and the unions, no doubt, are doing a fairly good job, but one of the things that's lacking is the ability for anyone to identify – for example, at Al-Pac, which is in my constituency, a thousand jobs, we really don't know what Al-Pac's needs are for the next 10 years. There's a postsecondary institution down the road that really doesn't know what the needs are for that specific project.

We need to make sure that we do an inventory of what's needed for 10 years and then design our programs to match that, not only in forestry but also in the oil and gas industry and agriculture and tourism. So definitely that's a very good point you brought up. It is a key to ensuring that we do provide the opportunities for people to be able to plan better than what we are right now.

The issue of temporary foreign workers. Again, I've mentioned here, you know, that the last resort for any company is to bring in foreign workers. Our policy, of course, as a government is to make sure that Albertans get hired first, Canadians, local people, First Nations people, persons with developmental disabilities, and persons that are caught in our social support system with very high needs, that need a lot of support to move off the Alberta Works program to become independent and self-sufficient.

You know, to bring in temporary foreign workers – like I've mentioned before, that it is a federal program. The federal government does the approval. We have a memorandum of understanding between the feds and the province to make sure that they follow a rigid criteria before they can bring in temporary foreign workers. They are more expensive to bring in, and it's definitely not cheap labour. We will continue to monitor that area very closely to ensure that Albertans are looked after first. That will be our top priority.

I believe those were some of the questions. I want to commend the member for being so thorough and for asking questions directly. Like I said earlier, you know, some things I might have missed. If I do, the staff will pick it up in *Hansard*, and we'll answer it in writing.

3:50

Again, there are areas where we will also need your support. A very important one is in relation to the First Nations and the federal policies. You know, all of us need to work together, I think, to see that change. I'd like to see that change in my lifetime because one of the reasons I got into politics was to work towards reforming the social support system in rural Alberta, diversifying the economy, and ensuring that people that wanted to be off welfare and working had that opportunity. At the provincial level I think we've been reasonably successful. We need to do a lot of work yet, but at the federal level changes need to happen, and it's not going to be easy. One government, one ministry cannot do it. We'll need your support to achieve that.

The other, of course, that continues to be challenging and quite complicated is the issue of bringing in foreign workers. You know, as a government we'd like to see Albertans work first, of course. Canadians, aboriginal people, personal development – that's another area where I think we need to continue working together as a government and this Legislature, to make sure that our people here are looked after first. If that can't be accommodated, then maybe there are times where, for a short period of time, people have to be brought in, but hopefully not at the cost of local jobs. People that have trades that want to work definitely should be given the first opportunity. I think that in this day and age we're advanced and sophisticated enough and have enough knowledge and expertise out there amongst us that we should be able to sit down and resolve these issues.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with regard to this ministry. I've got some specifics with individual criteria. The one that's on page 240, your internal government transfers. It says, "Contribution from Lottery Fund."

I'm not sure what that specifically would be used for. Some of these first questions, again, would be line-by-line items, and after that I'll go into some more general concerns with regard to that.

Also, the salary contingency that was listed under the Workers' Compensation appeals. It was just a one-time line item, but it no longer is there, so I'm just wondering why that particular piece disappeared. If I look at Workers' Compensation appeals there was, I believe, a \$200,000 increase for the appeals and \$1.3 million for the Appeals Commission as well, so I'm not sure why the increase there. Although I have an idea, I'd certainly like the minister to be able to comment specifically on that.

If I go to page 231 – and that is program 3, skills investments, Youth Connections – and if you look over the previous couple of notes in there, it went from \$4,767,000 to \$5,880,000, and then it's back down again. So it was up, and it was down. The question would be: why is there not a consistency with its increase? We are talking about youth. We are talking about connecting with youth with regard to employment.

The other one would have been – well, I'll just go on to another one here. This was raised in question period. We thought it might have been a little more relevant if we'd have raised it here. Will the minister hire new occupational safety inspectors, OHS, to ensure that the statistics of injured workers and those that are in fact killed on the job site don't increase? As we realize, we are trying to extract those resources at a very alarming rate. In fact, we have the industries continuing to do expansion pieces, so that just tells us that we are creating jobs. We're doing it very quickly, but we also have to do it at a rate that isn't going to jeopardize anybody. The question came out: are we in fact risking people's lives for the sake of extracting this stuff? Again, that's where the question on that particular piece comes from.

The money for – and you did answer this – new immigrants coming in. There was a million dollars to be going into training to deal with language barriers. I'm not sure if that was specifically intended for immigrants that are currently here, residing now, or if that would be to aid the temporary foreign workers with regard to language barriers. I find that a little disturbing. In fact, if we're bringing in people that are going to be expected to be able to work and take the jobs of Albertans and Canadians, why would we have to train them to deal with the language barrier? I thought there would certainly be something, a little bit more of a transition, so that we wouldn't have to worry about that.

I would like to see increased rates of apprenticeships with regard to the overall amount that we are in fact training. Right now I don't think we have a good way to monitor the group that is graduating. What I would like to see is it reported on a year-by-year basis until they reach journeyman status. Ideally, with your first year, for example, you've got maybe a thousand people that are applying for pipefitting and/or welding. After the second year what have you got there? The same with the third year and right up to the fourth year. If you have a difference in that, can you explain why they're not in fact seeking and continuing to retain these people, which has got great opportunities for employment, as we always say?

The other one is that I was just out front last night with a number of other MLAs, and there were at least a thousand people, and this is in direct response to the temporary foreign workers. There were about a thousand people who were coming out on a cold day. They've probably got better things to do, but they're very concerned – and again you did mention that – with the temporary foreign workers being brought in.

This is a little off topic, but it is relevant to this one. We've got an interim Métis harvesting agreement that, in fact, is ensuring that the Métis have hunting rights guaranteed. These people are only asking

the same thing that the Métis have been just granted. They're wanting to ensure that the jobs are going to be there not only today but tomorrow for them, their children, and their grandchildren. They want to ensure that that is going to be a consistent line and a commitment from this government.

When I hear about the people being brought in as temporary foreign workers, I get quite concerned as well. Like I said, we talk about the Alberta advantage, but when you're willing to bring in people, that in fact is very concerning. We talk about the amount of aboriginals that are unemployed. Certainly, we can add more to that stock and train them as well. I'll let you go on about that one.

I'll talk a little bit about the WCB. I was on WCB once myself, and I didn't have terrible treatment. In fact, I was quite pleased. [interjection] I can see that you did, then, as well. My concern is the push to get the people out of the system. I don't think that the WCB people that are dealing with the clients really show some empathy.

I've got a number of cases. The majority of the people that are coming through my office come and talk about the WCB, the process and the treatment. In fact, a number of them didn't feel that they were heard. They were being forced back to work because they were being constantly pushed to do more than their limit. These people know their limit, but the doctors or the people who are there are pushing them back at an alarming rate, they're saying, and they're further injuring themselves.

That's just outright crap when that happens. These people shouldn't be subjected to that. They were doing a job on behalf of an employer, and they're injured. We've got to have a little bit of compassion for these people. The biggest thing is that these people are being pushed back. Who do these doctors work for? I realize that they're being paid by the WCB, but whose best interest are they out for?

I've got a neighbour who said that he was further injured when he was trying to do the exercises that the doctor was explaining that he should be able to do. "It could be in your mind. No, I don't see any injuries here. You should be able to go back and be able to be completely and fully trained within a little bit here." In fact, some people are cut off because they are not doing some of the exercises. They're quite concerned about that, and that does concern me as well. I think we have to recognize and do a little bit more research on that.

We pay these people bonuses. I'm not sure why the bonuses are paid. Would the bonuses not be better served if they went right back to the employers that are paying these specific increases as a way of rewarding people for no injuries? I mean, we talked about today being International Day of Mourning for workers injured in the workplace. That would certainly be something if we, in fact, put money back to those companies, recognizing the number of injury-free workdays, as a matter of fact. I realize that they are given reductions after a certain amount of time. I can appreciate that.

My last thing that I'd probably comment on is about the \$7 which we're going to see as the minimum wage. Right now the minimum wage is \$5.90. I do know, in fact, that there are people who are working at the minimum wage. They may work at the minimum wage as a base salary, and then the rest of it will be, in fact, as perhaps a commission, but if the commission part doesn't fulfill itself, they're relying on that base of a minimum wage. I would have rather seen it in summer, when it's the busiest time, when the students have an opportunity to take full advantage, putting in 40 hours, versus in September when they're back in school and not able to take advantage of that increase.

Those would just be a couple of issues and concerns and ideas that I would raise for the minister. Thank you.

4:00

The Chair: Before I recognize the next speaker, I'd just like to caution the member on his choice of words in the last exchange. According to *Beauchesne's* 489 there was a term that was unparliamentary that you used.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much. Those were very good comments. Most of the issues in relation to the Workers' Compensation Board. Because it's an arm's-length operation and they're not here today, I'll get them to answer that in writing, except in the area of the Appeals Commission and the increase in their dollars.

The reason there is an increase in their dollars is that they're hiring more people so they can process the backlog of appeals. That's happening. The other thing, you know, is if there are any MLAs that have some difficulties with an officer, a worker at the Workers' Compensation Board, I have no problem arranging a meeting with the government liaison and also the chairman of the board and the MLA to sit down and put this stuff on the table and see if we can resolve it. I'm willing to do that. I have no problem with that, so if you want to do that, we can.

The Youth Connections. Again, I mentioned earlier that, you know, if additional money is needed to run that program, there is no problem. We will find the dollars. But what's happening there with the youth is that now a lot of the youth are going directly into jobs – they're not going into training – and there are lots of jobs out there, especially in the north half of Alberta and Edmonton and other areas. The youth are walking into jobs themselves without our support or our help. They're taking jobs, so you know I guess that's good in a lot of ways, but as far as statistics, then, in our budget, they don't show up. But we'll keep monitoring that. We'll monitor it closer. If there is more money needed, you can be assured we will find it and put it in because youth are our future as far as employment and training.

OHS, of course, continues to operate, you know, quite well. We're far from perfect, but they're doing a good job. We have 83 officers now that are out there working, doing inspections and reports and monitoring projects very closely. Again, if there is, you know, we'll monitor closely. Work safety is definitely still a top priority, and we will continue monitoring it closely. If there are additional needs for additional staff, then we'll have to look at it in next year's budget, no doubt.

Apprenticeship training is only mentioned, touched on briefly. Again, it's not under my department. Well, part of it is. The part of the apprenticeship support we do is to about 4,500 students. We support some of the living allowances because the EI portion was pulled out. I think you used to be able to access EI the first two years while you were taking your apprenticeship. That was pulled out. We are providing about 4,500 students a year to supplement some of their living expenses.

But the apprenticeship program, itself, I think we need to look at very closely because the average age of a journeyman in Canada is about 51 years old. The average age of a journeyman completing their four-year program in Alberta is about 26 years old, and when you look at schools like in Athabasca, Lac La Biche, that whole north half of the province, 65 per cent of the students want to take technical trades. They know by the time they're in grade 8 or 9. Why is it taking until 26 years old to complete the four-year program?

So, you know, although we train, I think, 20 per cent of all the apprentices in Canada – and no doubt we have the best program – still, because of our booming economy, our high demands in the future, we can't sit back and say it's good enough. I think we need

to keep moving forward to make sure that the proper apprenticeship programs are provided.

There are some. Careers: the Next Generation is in there, the RAP program is in there, the youth apprenticeship program, which I was involved partially in some of the design. It's designed to start apprenticeship training right in the regular K to 12 school at about the grade 8 level, and it's tied in with the technical schools. By the time you finish grade 12, you could have up to the equivalent of two years of training, say, in carpentry for an example. By the time you're 16, you've got two years of training already, and you walk into a job. The employer has a trained person. By the time you're 18 or 19, you've got your ticket. Those are some of the things we need to look at in the apprenticeship field, I believe.

Again, Youth Connections, of course, I mentioned, and the apprenticeship training. You mentioned lottery dollars, and I'll get the department to address that particular issue. The temporary foreign workers. Again, you know, we're going to need your help on that. It's challenging. It's a complicated issue. We want to keep pushing. The federal government does the approval. The employers have to first of all do an exhaustive process of advertising and recruiting and training of local people: Albertans, Canadians, aboriginal people, persons with developmental disabilities, and other people that are probably in a high-needs area of my department that could use support.

That has to be a top priority. Now, you know, it's going to be a challenge, no doubt. There will be times that we will maybe need some temporary foreign workers. I don't know that, but maybe in order to build some of the projects. We'll see. We'll have to monitor the system very closely.

The last item you mentioned I believe was the minimum wage, and again we'll monitor it as we move forward. We'll see what impact it has on the employers and the employees, see how many of our caseload of the 11,000 that are not expected to work because of the minimum wage and some of the financial support we provide in health care, see how many of those files may be closed and people will move on on their own, maybe with some transitional supports in health care and other areas. So we will monitor that closely.

In fact, when the minimum wage was designed here in Alberta, we did pull the figures out from Ontario on what youth programs they have there. They do have a program there where, you know, it's operated very similar to what we have except it involves a private industry, where the government topped off I think it was \$2 an hour to an employer that hired a student that is going back to university.

So we're looking at it. I mean, we're open to look at anything, and if you have any good suggestions in the future, we're sure open to look at that.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a few comments to make. Just to the hon. minister, it's nice to see him across the way because when I used to know him, he was standing beside me, usually heckling me over on that side. [interjections] Yeah. Something like that.

Mr. Chairman, just mainly comments. I want to just look into a couple of areas to begin with. It seems to me – correct me if I'm wrong – that the big losers in the ministry's budget are the people investment department, whose budget is being cut by about \$6 million, and workplace investment, whose budget was slashed by 46 per cent from last year. Within the people investment department the government is cutting the income supports program by about \$9 million. Especially hard hit within that program, the people

expected to work program was cut by some \$12 million. Now my understanding of the people expected to work program is that it's an income-support program designed to help folks out only for a short period of time. I guess what I'm saying is that the minister could perhaps tell us why that's happening.

4:10

But I want to come back to a debate that we held the other day when we were asking, perhaps, the demonstration about the unfortunate murders of people in the inner city, prostitutes. I made the case with the minister and got that there are some cases where people are actually in prostitution – you could talk to the prostitution awareness people. It's not me making it up – they actually know of people, young women with kids, that actually do make those sorts of decisions. I'm not saying all of them are, you know, but that is going on. I think that we've been pared back in terms of social assistance. The minister will take great pride in that, perhaps, as there are some good things that have happened, no doubt.

But I think now we're down to sort of the core people, and a lot of those are children and single parents. I think that we really have to, Mr. Chairman, review the social assistance rates. Definitely, we have to do that, and they have to be raised significantly because if we're just down to single parents, people struggling with children and the rest of it, then those are the people we really have to be somewhat concerned about. I was disappointed that it's not in this budget, and I'd ask the minister to comment when we might look for some increases in that area.

The minimum wage has already been discussed, Mr. Chairman, but I do have a few comments to make. I would say that it's long overdue. I think this is an embarrassment to me as an Albertan that we have the lowest right now, \$5.90 an hour. I know that it's been raised to \$7, but the point that I'd like to make: I don't know why we didn't do it right away rather than wait until September because the minister is well aware that there's going to be a flood of young people, students from universities, high schools, NAIT, SAIT, Mount Royal colleges, wherever in the province.

They're going to be coming out, looking for work, trying to make enough money to go back to university so they don't have big debts. They could have used that money because for many of them it would have been, well, almost a 20 per cent hike. That would have been very helpful. So I really suggest to the minister – and I know it's not going to happen – that it would have been helpful to have done that immediately, especially for those students.

Even though we've raised it to \$7 an hour, the minister talks about a boom economy, and he's right. We happen to have oil and gas here, and the economy is booming. I would say that even with the raise we're still fourth in the country in terms of the minimum wage. Yeah, we're in the middle, but fourth, if we can put it that way. That doesn't mean that some others might not raise it along the way too. In B.C. they have a booming economy right now because of their resources, and it's at \$8 an hour. I know that the minister knows this. Ontario and Quebec are at \$7.45 an hour.

Even with the raise coming in September, we're still in the middle. If you have expenses, in a boom economy your expenses are higher so you need to make more money just to be even, and we're not going to be there even with the \$7 an hour.

I've wondered if the government has always ruled out this idea. I could take it if it were raised to \$7 if they said, "Okay. We're going to look at the CPI or inflation," like MLAs' salaries or whatever, "and have an indexation to that minimum wage." Therefore, people wouldn't be falling behind at least. We can always review it from time to time, but that indexation, I think, would be important, and I'm wondering why the government would

not consider that. If it's good enough for MLAs, it should be good enough for the people that are lowest on the totem pole in terms of wage earning.

Moving along, Mr. Chairman, because I don't want to run out of time again, we had some discussion briefly about on-the-job injuries, and of course today, as the minister brought out in his ministerial statement, is the Day of Mourning. The figures, I think, in Alberta are not good. I alluded to this, and I think some others did too. Albertans who suffer serious injuries are more likely to get them on the job, according to a national trauma study. Nearly 10 per cent of major injuries requiring trauma treatment occurred in the workplace. When you look at the national average, it's 7 per cent. Ontario's average is 5.5 per cent.

Now, I think that's fairly serious, and again that may well be part of a boom economy, but it's there. These figures, I think the minister would agree, are unacceptable. I know he said in his statements that we have 80 officers, and I'm sure they're doing the best they can, but 80 officers across the province: with a boom economy, if we want to come back to the minister's statement that it's a boom economy, that's probably not enough. We've got to do something there.

I would caution the minister. When we get in, I'll have something to say, as I'm sure he'd be aware, about division 8 and temporary workers in apprenticeship. But I worry about us going the opposite way. There could be more serious injuries. In part, I see all this happening, the division 8 and temporary foreign workers and apprenticeship, all wrapped up in, sort of, one issue.

I notice that the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board is now – and I know that this doesn't fall in the minister's department necessarily, but he certainly has some influence, I would say. The Merit contractors, the non-union people, want to change the ratio of apprentices to journeymen from the current 3-1 to a 1-1 ratio. I recognize that not all the trades have the 3 to 1, but some of the most dangerous jobs do. Boilermakers, ironworkers, pipefitters have a 3 to 1 ratio. Of course, they are vehemently against this sort of change.

I would say to the minister that if we go ahead with this, this is a potential, again, for more injuries, more deaths on the job. I would say, Mr. Chairman, that for that reason I think we would have more skilled people because of the 1 to 1 ratio, but I think that there's a big safety thing here too. I really would say to the minister that if he has any influence at all and he cares, as I know the minister does from the statement about the Day of Mourning, that this is a very dangerous thing, I believe, if we move in that direction.

I know why the Merit contractors and CLAC and those people want it: because it's cheaper. It's good for them, but I don't think it's good for the people of Alberta, and I certainly don't think it's good for the tradespeople. I think that could even add to this high rate of trauma treatment that we have.

I know this is not going to change. I think that all the years I've been in the Legislature we've been talking about the weak labour laws in this province. I think that all those things, the cutbacks that happened, some of them necessary no doubt, the various things that have occurred, the weaker labour laws, add to this potential for injury. I think the lack of whistle-blowing legislation and these sorts of things can all lead to it. So I'm saying to the minister that, if possible, one minister could influence everybody else if we're really concerned about on-the-job injuries. I think all these things play into Alberta's high rate. I honestly believe that.

Let's just talk very briefly if I can, because we've had a fair amount of discussion, about so-called temporary foreign workers. I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Minister. It's tying all the things in together. I think the villain here is this division 8 of the labour code.

I can't believe that anywhere else in Canada we'd ever have this as part of the labour code. I know it's been used very sparingly, I believe maybe once or twice in the '70s. It is my understanding that the unions went along with it at that time. I think that was probably a mistake.

4:20

The cabinet, I believe, has made the decision that Horizon can if necessary use this as the code and do what they want. Now, this is very dictatorial, I think, and undemocratic because it virtually allows – and it's starting to happen with the negotiations. If you talk to the building trades people, they're trying to get cutbacks in terms of time, double time to time and a half, when people work, whether it's Saturday or Sunday. Those things are already occurring. What it does is give them an absolute hammer. This is why I think the people are so upset. They're tying all these things together, Mr. Minister. They see that, and then they believe and I believe that Horizon would do this. They could say: well, if you don't roll back and you don't do what we want, we'll have the right to look at another union that will be more amenable. That's where CLAC comes in, and that's where the Merit contractors come in.

That's why there's so much anger building, and the Member for Edmonton-Decore talked about the demonstration yesterday. They tie that in to the weakening of apprenticeship. They tie that in to this idea, then, that if the workers don't do what they're told by Horizon or any other groups up there, well, we'll bring in temporary foreign workers that will do that.

Now, the minister says that temporary foreign workers can be more expensive. In the short run that could be true, but if you can roll back all the collective bargaining rights and people are working for a lot cheaper, that might not necessarily be the case. What they're tying in and why the anger is there, I believe justifiably so, is that division 8 and where that could lead.

I say to the government that this would be a big mistake. The building trades unions have made this province. They've developed the tar sands. They've worked at times with no-strike contracts and all the rest of it. They're a very highly skilled group. If we want to move on with the tar sands, the last thing we need is labour unrest up there, and there will be labour unrest with that group if we continue in this pattern. So I see this as all together.

Now, we can argue whether there are shortages or not. The minister says 3.5 per cent unemployment. As he knows, the figures that we had were 6.1 per cent in the construction trades. The reality is that the Suncor memo said that there's no shortage of workers in Alberta, Canada, but only a shortage of workers who are willing to work on CLAC sites. Well, that's a difference from a shortage overall. A lot of the people that are in unions will not go to work for them. That's where the shortage is. So maybe CLAC should change, you know, and become part of the trade union movement rather than a company union.

There's another interesting thing, Minister. I don't know if the minister has had a chance to look at this; I just sort of got it myself. There is the Alberta Construction Association foreign workers survey results. The Construction Workforce Development Forecasting Committee, comprised of industry, labour, and government, concluded in May 2004, and I quote: if all the major industrial projects proceed as they are scheduled, we will again see considerable strain on our supply of skilled trades for 2005 running into the first quarter of 2007.

I wondered where they got that information. If it came from this survey that they did, they have 1,751 member companies. Only 60 responded. Now, if there's a shortage that they're talking about and they have 1,751 member companies, you would think that more than

60 would respond if there was a big problem there. Of the 3.4 per cent of the member companies that responded, only 68.3 per cent of those say they experienced a shortage of trades. So I don't know where they're coming from unless they want to move towards what I'm talking about, you know: slowing down and not employing the building trades so that they can move into CLAC and Merit.

So I'm saying to the minister that that's why the anger is there. It's not anti-immigration. It's not that. Everybody knows. The discussion has been held. The minister has said very clearly that we have to do more for aboriginal people in these areas. We have to do more for our landed immigrant people that are already here. We have to look after Canadians first. Well, I think it's greater than that. I think that this is big oil moving ahead trying to get into the market, get it out fast, and get it out to the American market as cheaply and as quickly as they can.

I'm probably going to be running out of time fairly soon. I thought I'd put it there, but I didn't.

Mr. Chairman, I'd just like to bring up one other thing that I meant to yesterday, but it seems to have been brought back. It's highway 63. I know the minister knows a lot about this because he's talked about this. There are a lot of accidents occurring going back and forth from the job. Frankly, highway 63 is one of those roads that is in desperate need. As the minister is aware, I've been presenting petitions. Today, the latest one we have, I think, is 2,797 petitions. It's not nicknamed Death Highway for no reason at all, especially by those people who work in Fort McMurray.

As the minister said, and I agree, if he can talk to his colleague to the left of him – and I doubt that he's on his left politically – that should be a very high priority with what's going on in Fort McMurray. As the minister talked about, protecting workers means more than just on-the-job protection. If he has any influence at all, that highway should be the highest priority that I can think of in the province because it's a death highway, and it's getting worse. The traffic is worse. I hope I made it in time.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Those were very good comments. There were some questions, but a lot were comments, and I really appreciate that. We'll definitely seriously consider some of your good suggestions.

The first item you mentioned was in relation to the skills investment and the needs of people, the high needs in particular. Right now, in fact, I am definitely looking at that along with the minimum wage. That's one thing we heard last election, that not all Albertans are gaining equally from the Alberta advantage, that we need to look at the AISH, the seniors, the persons that are not expected to work. The rates in those areas: although we increased some of the supports we provided, the dollars really haven't increased; I'll be very honest. The dollars haven't increased for the core benefits and the shelter for those people not expected to work. They haven't increased since '92-93.

Part of the reforms that we made was to tighten up on the system because the budget was \$1.7 billion back in '92-93. You know, 97,000 caseloads, 180,000 individuals, and 80 per cent of those people on the system were single people and couples without children that were very healthy and able to work. They were using up the dollars that the high-needs area were to use. What we did when we designed the program was to take those people off through training programs, and we spent hundreds of millions to train people to move them off. It worked successfully.

While we did that, part of the plan was to design a process that

would look after all the children in Alberta, which includes some of the individuals you mentioned possibly – you know, the real high-needs area, young people – to move those and create their own ministry with its own budget to deal with children. That has happened now at Children's Services as its own ministry to look after that particular portion.

The other portion that we said was real high needs was persons with developmental disabilities. What we did with that also was to design it so that it could move on with its own ministry. That has happened now. We have a minister in charge of that particular department with a fairly good budget. So parts of the welfare reforms moved those areas. What it allows us to do now, no doubt, with our debt paid off, our budget balanced – we will be able to in the very near future find the dollars that would increase the benefits for those people that are the most needy. I'll be very honest; I've already taken it through the standing policy committee. I've taken it to cabinet and caucus to look at an increase for those rates. As dollars become available, we will no doubt look at the implementation of increased benefits for those people most needy. They are needy. A lot of people still live in poverty. We have a healthy province, balanced budgets, and a lot of program dollars. We should be able to look after those people that are most needy. You know, those were good point you brought up because you hit it right on. That was one priority that I still have: to make sure that we look after.

4:30

You mentioned students a bit. Indexation is something we looked at also. Like I said earlier, we'll monitor that very closely through the summer, and if changes need to be made in relation to students, no doubt we'll be seeking your help to get some ideas on how we may improve the benefits for individuals attending postsecondary education and other schools.

Again, injuries on the job. One of the things I've asked the department to look at to work along with other ministries is in relation to how many of the injuries are actually happening at the job site. It may be that many are happening on the road to work and coming back. You know, let's face it: we're all in a hurry. The road network definitely needs to be improved – and I'll get to that very shortly – but we're all in a hurry out there. You know, we drive fast to get to work, come home fast, maybe to go to a second job or something else. We need to start looking at that. I want to make sure that in the near future we define how many of the accidents are actually happening at the work sites and how many are happening away from the work site. Once we define that and identify it, then we'll be able to design a program to target areas where we have the problem. It may mean the improvement of roads in some areas or speed limits in some areas.

The apprenticeship program and the ratios. That's not under my department, but definitely I'll be working very closely with the Minister of Advanced Education and the Minister of Economic Development in relation to some of the thoughts that are out there. You mentioned the ratio of electricians; for an example, how many journeymen do you need for one apprentice? That's out there, and it's being discussed a bit.

The other area, of course, is in relation to weak labour laws and stuff you mentioned. We always have to continue looking at that. I am going to definitely look at the labour code to see where we can improve it to strengthen it for the benefit of Albertans and for the benefit also, of course, of the employers and the staff we have.

The other area mentioned that's very, very important – I don't want to miss that – is in relation to the road network. Our economy is booming in Alberta, and it looks like it may continue like that.

It's a diversified economy. There are thousands of jobs now; there are going to be thousands of jobs in the future for Albertans. But I think we're a bit behind in the road network infrastructure.

You mentioned highway 63. It is critical that that road be improved. The other one, of course, along with that is 881 from Lac La Biche going north. Of course, we're working on that already, but it's not finished. The road to La Loche in Saskatchewan; of course, 813 north of Athabasca through Wabasca and on to Fort McMurray. Already Al-Pac has a road to Chip Lake. Add another hundred kilometres, and you're at the Fort McMurray oil sands, right in the middle of it, so we definitely need to connect those. Of course, another road to Peace River across Red Earth, another one from Fort McMurray to Fort Chip and on to Fort Smith, another one from Peace Point to Fort Vermilion and High Level, and a connector to Fort Nelson.

You definitely need to lay out a plan, I think. As you said, it's not under my jurisdiction, but I'll be working very closely with the minister. I think our government, of course, should look at definitely laying out a five-year plan, a timeline when it should be completed, even prioritize the construction timelines, and commit some dollars. While you're doing that, you're also creating a bottleneck north of Edmonton. There's highway 28, you know, and highway 2, that bypass around Edmonton on the west side, and other connector roads in the Fort Saskatchewan area. We definitely need to do that.

The other one that's important that I think we need to support in the whole transportation sector is the development of airports. I know CNRL is looking at developing an airport so that they can move people back and forth from, say, Edmonton or Calgary or other areas of Canada – so make sure that we hire local people in those jobs.

Again I'd just like to thank you. You know, if there's anything I didn't cover here, we'll do it in writing and pass it on to you. Thank you very much, and thanks for your comments. They're very valuable. You haven't changed in 16 years.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased on this day, when so many people wished to be able to engage in the debate on the Human Resources and Employment budget, that I, in fact, was able to get some speaking time. So thank you, and thank you, as well, to the Official Opposition critic, the Member for Edmonton-Manning.

A couple of things that I would like to raise today, just a discussion about organized labour and what could be done in the labour code, a short discussion on philanthropic foundations and what they're doing on gap funding given that the welfare rates are too low. I'd like to talk a bit about the aboriginal people's access to the workplace. There are some specific issues around female-headed single-parent families, living allowances for learners, which I know other hon. members have already raised, some questions on the pharmacy co-pays for people on welfare. And I think that's it. So that's the list. If I can get through it in 20 minutes, that will be great.

I just wanted to start out by again recognizing the role that organized labour has played in Alberta and, I think, the due that we owe the organized labour movement. It was through them that we got things like public education, and even some credit is due there for public health care. A number of systems and processes that we have come to see as needed and normal came as a result. You know, things like workplace safety codes and occupational health and safety have come about because of the work coming from that movement.

Two of the things that I continue to seek and I encourage the hon. minister to pursue are replacement worker legislation and first-contract certification. Those are the two reasons that we end up with very long-drawn-out and nasty labour disputes in this province. What's there as an incentive for a company to negotiate with its workers when they can bring in replacement workers? There's no incentive for them to sit at the table with their unions. So I think we need replacement worker legislation.

We also most definitely need first-contract certification legislation in that we get unions that are duly formed, that pass all of the hoops and hurdles that they are required to do by law and by legislation, and then they cannot get their employer to sit down and negotiate a first contract with them. That has led to very ugly labour disputes like the Shaw Conference Centre, the *Calgary Herald*, and Dynamic Furniture, to name a few. I know that that's not likely on the agenda for the government. It probably doesn't match a particular philosophy. Nonetheless, I will continue to urge the government to pursue those two pieces of legislation.

4:40

I've been reading a really interesting document, that I know was sent to various government members and ministries, from the Winspear Foundation special fund. It's an analysis of the Winspear Foundation special fund, 1997 to 2003, which was released in the fall of 2004. They raise a number of issues of where their special fund is addressing a funding gap, and they actually provided a fairly detailed sampling of one month's worth of disbursements from the special fund. If the minister does not have a copy, I'm happy to make a copy of mine and send it to him, but I'm sure that the Winspear Foundation would have provided him with a copy.

One of the issues that they're raising specifically is that a single person receiving social assistance, or welfare, or Alberta Works, they're saying in here, was at that time receiving \$402 a month, or less than \$5,000 a year. It's just not enough. It has not kept pace with cost increases in utility rates, insurance rates, food, transportation, medication, certainly not recreation. That's not even a dim possibility for people on social assistance.

I know that others have talked about the importance of indexing this. I agree, but I just think these rates are shockingly low. What we end up with now are philanthropic foundations, who have, essentially, different guidelines of disbursement of their funds, having to step in and pick up the gap that's been created between government support programs and the workforce. I don't know that it's appropriate for these groups to be doing that. They are doing it, and I think they're trying to flag to us that the government needs to pick up the pace here and pick up the slack.

They also note the difficulties around rent and damage deposits given that the rent structures always require a very high amount of let's call it front-end load. You're going to have to pay your first month's rent and the damage deposit, which is usually equivalent to the rent, and often first and last months' and a damage deposit. That's a lot of money even for people that have a savings account. It's an impossibility for most. They end up, basically, borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, and that eventually gets them into trouble. So they're suggesting that people need access to a payment structure that could be spread out over time, something like a rent bank, for example, where they could borrow money at a minimum rate and be able to pay it back over an extended period of time.

Of course, affordable housing and access to affordable housing is a key component, especially for people on social assistance. In Edmonton-Centre I have a very large stock of older housing and apartment buildings, which tend to be cheaper rent, but there are also issues around utilities because they're not well insulated, older wiring and plumbing and things. Everything doesn't operate as efficiently as it should, and that's reflected in higher utility costs.

Then there is the fact that we are paying 45 per cent more in utility costs than we were a short time ago.

These are all social determinants of health. If we're trying to create a healthier population and keep them out of the health system with acute health problems, this is where it starts. It starts with how much money they earn or they have to spend. It starts with the housing. It starts with education and personal safety.

Speaking specifically about personal safety, there continue to be gaps created for women, especially women with children, who are leaving abusive family situations. I know that the government has tried to address this, but it seems to not be successful. We have women that are trying to flee an abusive situation. That is one example. Two, they're trying to move out of second-stage transitional housing and make that bridge, that leap, to permanent housing somewhere. They end up going home. They go back to an abusive situation because it's just too hard, and they just can't get the money. That seems shocking and incredible to many of us, but that's what happens because they just can't get the money.

So when we're looking at things like – you know, again, the Winspear is suggesting a transition fund for reoccurring costs for people that are trying to start over where they're looking at moving expenses, storage costs, maybe replacement of some basic furniture, rent, utility hookups, and damage deposit. That's important stuff. Right now the Alberta Works program, which used to be welfare, used to be supports for independence – those programs are so narrow in what they cover that this is very difficult to get. I can tell you for sure that you can't get it on a Friday afternoon.

The second area that they have identified, and I've identified it as well, is around funding for learners. What's it called? Living allowance for learners. I notice that there's actually a reduction of almost \$2 million in this budget for those living allowances for learners. Now, I often am asked to go and speak to the classes at NorQuest College, and this they consistently raise as an issue: why is such a small amount of money made available to them in subsistence? It isn't even subsistence.

Since we're trying to capitalize on an asset there – that is, people who have likely come here as a refugee or an immigrant, want to contribute to society, and need that bridging and extra education – we make it very, very difficult for them to succeed. All they need is one thing to go wrong, and they're out of the system. All they need is to get sick and miss a couple of days of work, and then they don't have enough money to pay their rent. Then they're out and they're homeless, and there's no way they can continue their studies. It just strikes me as very, very short-sighted not to make that investment up front. That living allowance is too low for those folks, and it needs to be looked at. I just don't understand, and I never will, why this government insists on such a low subsistence rate for people. It is without dignity certainly.

The other issues that were raised by this are not specifically covered by the minister's department, so I'll raise those issues with other departments as they come up, but those were the ones specific to them.

I think it's very interesting that we're getting a special report, and it's not the first time. I've had a couple of conversations with philanthropic foundations recently that are really starting to comment on the lack of support from the government.

I think others have raised and I will underline the importance of those aboriginal peoples who have trade certification being able to get connected to the job, to physically get to the job. Very interesting. We've had a lot of discussions back and forth today about transportation and access to transportation: roads, airports, and planes. You know, this is what I expected the government to do last fall when we had an election. I expected that kind of big-picture thinking about where we were going to go. We've got all this

money. How do we make ourselves extraordinary? How do we make Alberta fantastic as compared to just good? This was the kind of big-picture thinking I was expecting, and I'm really disappointed that I didn't see it. We really have done nothing to move ourselves forward in those big pictures.

I have a constituent – and I've tabled letters from him in the Assembly – named Mike Beal. He keeps writing to me about people dying on the roads to Fort McMurray, and he's right. We should not have people dying as they try to get to a good job because the roads are so crappy. I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman. I used that word again. We'll just move right on.

You know, it's not as though this is a new problem. I mean, the oil sands were started – what? – 30 years ago now. It's the same dang road. It's no wider and no better. You know, this is a wealthy province. We should be able to do far, far better on that than we're doing.

4:50

The connected issue there is being able to get aboriginal peoples, who, by the way, get trade certification in Canada 20 per cent higher than the general public – very interesting. There's a group of people who really understand the importance of trade certification. They're getting it, and then they can't get to where the jobs are. There's been a lot of discussion about the roads and stuff that are needed, but I think that's the kind of big-picture thinking that we need. There's an issue with remote areas like Sucker Creek or La Loche, places like that, where they can't get out to get connected to the actual jobs.

I'm noticing that from the studies I've been looking at, there has been no improvement and in a number of cases there has been a backward trend for female-headed single-parent families slipping back in poverty. Again, we should be better at this by now. This is not a new game. We should be far ahead of this. If we're going to look at social determinants of health, if we're going to look at a healthier population, if we're going to look at getting people working, you can't look at this stuff in isolation. It is about hooking together all of those things I've mentioned: transportation, housing, utilities, education, the wage that they make, or the assistance level that they get.

Somehow people have got it in their heads that women are okay now. Well, they're 52 per cent of the population. We have an increasing number graduating from high school or from postsecondary education institutions. Everything should be great. Well, it's not. They're still not breaking the glass ceilings. In Alberta the wage gap is further apart than in other provinces, which is even worse, and those in poverty are overwhelmingly women. So, folks on the other side, what does that tell you? You've got a big problem. You're the ones in charge. Let's see the movement on this one because, frankly, I think the rest of those women are going to be voting for us.

There's already been a lot of discussion this afternoon about the fact that the welfare rates are too low, so I will just underline that as a concern for my constituents as well, and I won't repeat the arguments.

I've talked about the living allowances for learners.

One of the things that I would like to raise, and perhaps this has been phased out, but I don't think it has. A few years ago the government gave welfare recipients \$5 more a month, and they called it a medication copay allowance. Then they required the pharmacist to charge three prescription copays at \$2 each per month. So the patient had to pay out of pocket two bucks on each of these, so \$6 a month, and they were given five bucks to cover it. I remember that coming in a few years back, and I thought: I wonder if this ever got dealt with? I don't think it did, but the minister can get back to me on that one.

What tends to happen is that very few of the patients are able to

pay or do pay that three prescriptions times \$2 each copayment and in many cases use excuses for avoiding the payment. It's an unreasonable burden on the pharmacist, and it subjects the pharmacist to being a bill collector on \$2. I mean, this is ridiculous. So I'd like to know if that is still in place, and if it is, I'd like to know when the minister is going to remove it because that is a ridiculous amount. You know, it's another one of those: sounded like a good idea at the time but really doesn't work. Somehow it was supposed to make people value prescriptions more. Well, it didn't, so get rid of it.

I just want to loop back again to the last statements on division 8 and the bringing in of labour. You know, I come from a family of hard-working tradespeople. I believe very strongly that it should be Alberta first and then Canada, and I see no reason to be subjecting another country's disadvantaged people to be brought in here to somehow do slave labour and be sent back home. I don't think it's to their advantage, and it's not to our advantage. It should be Alberta first, followed by Canada first. We have enough skilled labourers here, union members, to do the work. I hear the minister saying that this is complicated. Yeah, life is complicated, but there's also a commitment to Alberta workers that I am not seeing come from this government.

I didn't give the minister many questions to answer. I mostly gave him comments. Sorry about that. Oh, I'm sorry. There are a few questions.

The budget has been reduced for people who are in need of assistance but remain capable and willing to work. I'm wondering if the welfare rate in the budget was a volume decrease to have fewer people asking for the programs, or are you paying out less money to each of those people? I'd like to know on the record why there was a reduction in the living allowance for learners. Again, are there fewer people asking for it, so it's a volume decrease, or is it a benefit decrease? Which of those? There has also been a reduction in the spending for freedom of information and privacy – why? – and a reduction for the Youth Connections career information program. So all of those had reductions, and I'd like to know why each of them had the reduction, please.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to get those questions on the record. I'll take my seat.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd just like to thank the member for all those comments and all those valuable recommendations she's made. I'll definitely, seriously have a look at those recommendations. Also, I wouldn't mind to get a copy of that report. I don't know if I have it. I haven't seen it yet. I'd like to get a copy of it so I can have a look at it.

A couple of pieces of legislation were talked about: replacement worker legislation and first-contract certification legislation. I'll let the department also have a look at that and respond.

Generally, the comments, again, were based on, I think, what we heard out there last election, that not all Albertans are gaining equally from the Alberta advantage and that we needed to look at the high-needs area. That, of course, includes persons with developmental disabilities, people on AISH, the seniors, the people that are not expected to work. That is why we started working on, for example, changing the minimum wage and reviewing the welfare which we do provide for those people that can't work or are not expected to work, although that particular caseload now is so far down compared to what it was in '92-93. We're down to under 28,000 total. Only half of those are expected to work. The other half are not for various reasons. But the half that is not expected to work no doubt will have to look at more supports in the existing supports we have.

At the same time, as we move forward in redesigning, you know, some of the benefits we provide, especially for those people that are expected to work, we need to make sure that the benefits provided in B.C. and Saskatchewan are comparable to what we have here in Alberta because people do move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction to access supports. If you design your program to accommodate that – and as a government the last thing we want to do is to design a system that will encourage people to come to Alberta, especially if they're not interested in working. I feel personally, and I think our government is in the same position, that the way to deal with poverty is, number one, to have a government that creates the environment for industry, private industry in particular, to create the jobs and the wealth – and I think that's happened here in Alberta – but at the same time give people, you know, the transition supports people need.

You know, the hon. member mentioned a number of areas, a lot of areas in fact, that need support. It goes into other departments also, but that's fine. They're very, very important issues. We want to make sure that people are offered the training they need, that people are provided with the jobs and the supports that are necessary, and continue their health care benefits while they transition to independence, self-sufficiency.

5:00

In the years that I worked in this field and in government and in private industry before, I don't know of anyone that wanted to be on social support systems or welfare. I don't know of anyone. I don't. No one wants to be on it. There are so many people that continue to remain on social support systems because of various reasons. And we need as a government, now that our budget is balanced and we have money to work with and the time I believe to deal with these high-needs areas – definitely I think we should continue working. I take your recommendations very seriously because they are important issues that, no doubt, you've identified through your work and your contacts. So I'd like to thank you for that.

The other area you mentioned towards the end, of course, was Youth Connections, that there was a reduction in the dollars. What happened there is that we can't provide the services that are needed out there right now. What's happening with the youth is that there are so many jobs out there, and they're accessing jobs directly, without coming through the processes we have in place. Or not as many.

The technical schools out there, the colleges are experiencing the same problems. There is a decline, and you'll see why there's some decline in allowances. There is a decline in the number of people entering the technical schools because people are going directly to work. That's, I guess, positive in a way. In the long run it may be negative. So we need to monitor that very closely and try and make sure that the changes that take place accommodate that process.

First Nations. Definitely a very important area. It definitely should be a priority for all of us in this province and in Canada to make sure that people do not continue to live in poverty because it creates a whole lot of other problems. I think we need to work with the federal government also and municipalities and jurisdictions across Canada to look at changing some of the socioeconomic policies that the federal government has. It can be done. We've proven in Alberta that we can work towards getting more people into the workforce, moving the dollars we save to high-needs areas, and we need to continue doing that. There's no reason why we can't do that across Canada because none of the First Nations that I know want to be on welfare. None of the chiefs want their people to be on welfare. So it is a priority. Again, we'll need your help in that particular area.

With that, I'll get my staff to have a look at *Hansard* and seriously, seriously look at the recommendations the opposition has made here today, and we'll see how much of it we can implement because we do realize, too, that there are people with high needs.

Again, I'd just like to say thank you very much, and thank you for giving me the time to present the budget.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to participate in this budget debate of Human Resources and Employment. I would love to add some more questions.

I'll start with the long-standing contentious claims, which are a huge burden on many, many Alberta families. When is the government going to direct the WCB to begin a process to at least start a review of long-standing contentious claims? Even a couple of panels with two private-sector qualified individuals and two WCB or Appeals Commission personnel could begin to make a difference. They could randomly select cases and begin to work through these contentious claims: a yes or a no to many, many claimants with reasons why they would either properly compensate them or give them closure in knowing why their claim might have no merit. This process would at least present some hope for those with long-standing, contentious claims.

Mr. Chairman, I want to talk about some other issues. On page 295, under Significant Opportunities and Challenges,

Alberta is expected to enjoy continued economic growth, low unemployment, high labour force participation rates, and high workforce productivity. Strong economic growth leads to labour shortages and skills deficits, wage demands and more pressure on the workplace. Other factors such as the value of the Canadian dollar . . . (BSE), U.S. protectionism and offshoring of jobs could result in the need for labour market adjustments and supports for transitions in some industries. The social fabric of Alberta is changing [no doubt about this]. The fast-growing population is aging and becoming more ethnically diverse with increased immigration. Despite the prosperity enjoyed by most Albertans, there are still people with incomes below the Market Basket Measure low-income threshold. There continues to be a need for greater labour force participation by groups under-represented in the workforce such as Aboriginal people and persons with disabilities. Also, the Government of Alberta continues to emphasize making government more efficient and effective and is striving to ensure the long-term sustainability of its programs and services . . . “The Alberta public service is respected for its attitudes, knowledge and skills, its effective management of public policy and its dedication to achieving quality, affordable services for [all] Albertans.” Achieving this vision within a competitive labour market with changing demographic and economic trends presents challenges for human resource management.

Mr. Chairman, the next issue I want to discuss is the Alberta Labour Relations Board.

The Alberta labour relations field is a dynamic one that responds to changes in the economy, demographics, technology and other factors. The Board must respond to these changes while maintaining the underlying principles of Alberta's labour relations legislation.

Specifically, the Board is currently meeting the challenges created by the Labour Relations (Regional Health Authorities Restructuring) Amendment Act, providing mediation and adjudication services for the affected parties as they deal with the transition from seventeen Regional Health Authorities to nine.

5:10

I have some general questions to ask the hon. minister. Why has the government reduced its commitment to youth seeking employment? [interjection] You already asked? Okay.

How will the new funds for immigrant support services benefit new immigrants to Alberta? Would you please share that with us if you have the time today, or maybe next time you can give it to us in writing. Other than wage increases what programs, services, or purchases will be made with the increase to corporate human resource services? I think it's \$1.57 million. What new or existing research and development projects require the R and D spending to increase by \$2.2 million?

In the budget, Mr. Chairman, this government has clearly abandoned people who are capable and willing to work but still require government assistance. This government has its priorities misplaced by not investing in people who are learning and students in general who are seeking new or better employment opportunities.

So these are the few questions I wanted to ask you. If you have the answers today, please, or otherwise give them to us in writing whenever you have the time.

The Chair: After considering the business plan and the proposed estimates for the Department of Human Resources and Employment for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Expense and Equipment / Inventory Purchases \$778,691,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

I will call on the Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report the vote for Human Resources and Employment and seek leave to meet again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006, for the following department.

Human Resources and Employment: expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$778,691,000.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

Before I call on the hon. Deputy Government House Leader, there are two things I'd like to remind the Assembly of: first of all, a memo to clear off your desktops for the weekend and, secondly, the Speaker's ruling in a memo of February 28, 2005, that speaks to the prohibition of cellphones, cameras, and pagers. They are prohibited in this Assembly. You can expect that the chair will be enforcing that in the future.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we call it 5:30 and adjourn until Monday at 1:30 in the afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 5:16 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]