

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 16, 2005**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 05/05/16

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

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

Postsecondary Education System Review

509. Mr. Mason moved on behalf of Dr. Pannu:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to establish a commission on advanced education to thoroughly review Alberta's public postsecondary education system and recommend changes to enhance accessibility and affordability while ensuring excellence in areas of research and instruction.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just speaking to that, I want to indicate that the NDP opposition has made this a priority. It formed part of our party's platform in the last provincial election. It is based primarily upon the success of the commission on education, the so-called Learning Commission, that I think has been an excellent example of this type of approach. We believe that this approach should be extended to postsecondary education in this province.

The government has committed to spend a great deal of money on postsecondary education, and that by itself is a good thing, Mr. Speaker, but the question is whether or not we should be pursuing a significant increase in funding without taking a good look at where we are, where we have been, and where we want to go.

If I can just talk a little bit about some of the issues facing postsecondary education at the present time, I'd like to start with the question of cost to students and accessibility to education. A student at the University of Alberta now pays \$4,537.20 in tuition fees plus another \$500 in mandatory fees. The average tuition, according to Advanced Education, is \$4,487 a year at a university, \$2,866 at a college, and \$2,971 at a technical institution. The average student debt after education is \$20,000.

Between 1992 and 2004 support for postsecondary institutions in Alberta dropped by 28 per cent when counted in 1992 dollars. One of the consequences of provincial underfunding is an increase in the amount of deferred maintenance at universities, colleges, and technical institutions, something the Auditor General has repeatedly pointed out in his reports. Buildings on university and college campuses are aging, and we need to make sure that the dollars are there on a consistent basis to do maintenance, repairs, and renovations. While there have been significant dollars put into the construction of new buildings at some public postsecondary campuses, many of these buildings are for research purposes and do not relieve the crowded lecture halls and labs that students are facing.

Mr. Speaker, barely half of Albertans today view the education system as affordable. This number has dropped by 24 per cent in the last three years alone. Meanwhile, universities, colleges, and technical institutions see operating grants that don't keep pace with inflation let alone accommodate rising utility costs, enrolment increases, deferred maintenance, and infrastructure needs or allow them to expand programs for the continuing demands of a growing economy.

Getting back to accessibility, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has the second-lowest postsecondary participation rate in Canada. Only British Columbia is worse. According to Missing Pieces, an annual report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Alberta is ranked seventh among Canadian provinces for its commitment to funding postsecondary education and ensuring its accessibility, this despite Alberta being the wealthiest province in the country. The minister has promised a review of the affordability of postsecondary education, but such a review would be far too narrow. A commission on advanced education would broadly examine the system in its entirety.

I'd like to speak briefly on the role of the private sector in postsecondary education. Certainly, the underfunding has resulted in universities placing greater reliance on private funding for research, scholarships, and so on. There is considerable evidence showing that biases appear in corporate-funded research. In particular, results tend to be positive more often when studies are funded privately. That's a very interesting observation, Mr. Speaker.

For-profit postsecondary education models pose a threat to important functions of universities, which are to investigate, debate, and propose things whether or not they are popular. A course may not be profitable. That does not mean it lacks social or scientific value. As Gordon Laxer has noted: "Bringing in private education institutions undermines the idea of equal public education access. Education becomes a commodity and those who have more money can have access to it." There are also important concerns about whether knowledge and research that comes from a university is public or whether it should be allowed to be privatized, commodified, or sold.

Mr. Speaker, just to conclude, the NDP opposition recommends the following terms of reference for an advanced education commission. It should have set out the timelines, composition of the commission. It should deal with accessibility to postsecondary institutions, affordability, quality, teaching and research: finding the appropriate balance at our public universities. It should deal with university governance. It should deal with the role of the private sector. It should deal in an overall way with the financing of the system. It should debate and discuss the future of the social sciences, arts, and the humanities.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would recommend passage of this motion of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. I believe that now is the time to take a good, in-depth look at our postsecondary institutions and provide the public with an opportunity to have their say as well. This process has proved very successful with respect to the K to 12 system through the Learning Commission. We believe that before we launch into a major expansion of funding for the postsecondary system, as the government has promised, we ought to take a good look at that system and determine exactly where it is that we want to go.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure that I rise tonight to join the debate on Motion 509, proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. First of all, I'd like to thank the hon. member for putting forward this motion. I know that I personally appreciate the opportunity to discuss Alberta's postsecondary education system. As the mother of four boys between the ages of 18 and 25 I'm riveted at this time by Alberta's postsecondary system. It's something we spend a lot of time in our household discussing and looking at as we try to help our sons prepare for their future.

As I look at the motion that the hon. member brings forward, he talks about establishing “a commission on advanced education to thoroughly review Alberta’s public postsecondary education system and recommend changes to enhance accessibility and affordability while ensuring excellence in areas of research and instruction.” I think those are all very, very plausible things to talk about. But, Mr. Speaker, as I think about where my boys are today and how long a commission actually takes to put together and to really do a very, very thorough job, I’m wondering if we can just wait that long. Part of my problem is that those issues are in front of us today, and I think we have on some levels a pretty good understanding of some of those issues.

Some of it has to do with access. I know that I’ve been in this House before and I’ve talked about a bubble that was moving. People go: what is a bubble? I just remember when my boys were all kind of clustered around the elementary years, and there was this bubble or this surge of population, and we didn’t fit in our elementary schools. We were struggling to get everybody into elementary in the city of Calgary, then that moved to junior high, and then it moved to high school. I would say to you today that it has hit our postsecondary system. Added to that, many learners and many people out there are returning to postsecondary education in order to upgrade. In a sense, you have this bubble moving through with this rise and people returning. So I think that the hon. member is right: one of the big issues is accessibility, and can kids access a postsecondary education?

8:10

I was very, very disturbed last week to read in the *Herald* the grade point averages that you have to have to get into things that are basic. You know, to me, when it comes to choosing education like engineering, teaching, nursing, things that we know in this province we’re going to need a lot more of in the future – we know that. I don’t really think that we need a major review in order to tell us those things. I think we understand that issue. As I was looking at those grade point averages, they reminded me of the kind of grade point averages kids used to have to have to get into, say, medical school. I thought: my word, we have an access issue in this province.

I think, though, when I start to look at what those issues are in postsecondary, that we as government are really focused on this issue. Bill 1 I think proved that in this session. We have spent a considerable amount of time as government focusing on the postsecondary issue. So while I support the general intent of the motion that’s before us today, there’s no question that the goals that this hon. member raises with his motion are some of the same goals that government also has in their aim.

I think the commitment to these goals was very clearly displayed in the 2005-2006 provincial budget. Funding to address accessibility, affordability, and to improve the overall quality of our postsecondary education system was laid out in the budget. The government increased the advanced education budget by nearly 30 per cent, \$433 million over the next three years with an immediate injection of \$196 million. The Alberta government has targeted these dollars to ensure that they are used to deal with the major areas of concern: affordability and accessibility.

Ninety million of those dollars have been specifically targeted for the access growth fund to achieve the goal of adding 15,000 postsecondary spaces over the next three years. I think that’s a really ambitious goal and one that government is prepared to back up and commit to. Additional dollars will follow to bring that number up to 30,000 and then eventually to 60,000. Undoubtedly, it’s a lofty goal, but with focus and an unwavering perseverance I have no doubt that we’ll see these projected spaces come to fruition.

In fact, another \$111 million has been budgeted in postsecondary capital projects alone this year. I look at the University of Alberta and the cranes that we see now emerging. I was at a groundbreaking ceremony just this last week at Mount Royal College as they broke ground again. I know that we are working on physically building the spaces as well.

Also included in this year’s budget is \$105 million for student loans, \$72 million in scholarships, bursaries, and grants. This is an increase of 11.7 per cent in those scholarship programs. Part of this increase will be used to fund the new Lois Hole humanities and social science scholarships. We spoke about all of these things in Bill 1, so I won’t go back into them tonight.

The two things that I did want to just put a little bit, you know, finer point on is that this year’s tuition fee gives government the time and the opportunity to create a tuition policy for Alberta. I quote the Premier. He laid out the reasons for this new tuition policy when he said in his annual televised address:

By the time post-secondary students head back in September 2006, Alberta will define a new tuition policy for the 21st century. It will be the most innovative, entrepreneurial, and affordable tuition policy in the country – one that reflects the shared responsibility of students, parents, educators, and administrators. We will do whatever it takes to make sure money isn’t a barrier to attending Alberta’s post-secondary institutions.

As this House has already heard, the Minister of Advanced Education has committed to follow up on the Premier’s statement. The hon. minister will be instituting a review of the postsecondary system in Alberta. While the exact framework has not yet been released, I know that affordability will be one of the main areas of focus.

That’s the main reason I don’t feel that I can support this motion. I support the aims, I support the ultimate goals that the hon. member has laid out, yet there has already been a commitment made by the Premier and the Minister of Advanced Education to undertake a review of our postsecondary system. I worry that if we were to pass this motion tonight, we might be hamstringing any upcoming review. I’m not prepared to limit the government’s review by a strict scope of this motion.

Once again, I appreciate the hon. member’s intention and his commitment to postsecondary education, but until I know exactly what shape the government review is going to take, I feel that this motion would be premature. I will be unable to support it tonight.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is with pleasure that I rise tonight to speak to Motion 509, moved by my colleague for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and to perhaps respond to some of the comments of my colleague across the way as well.

I had the great honour of attending the graduation ceremony of the Alberta College of Art and Design yesterday, where some 200 students received their degrees, mostly bachelor of fine arts, some bachelor of design. Of course, most of them were young and fresh-faced and eager to get out there with their degrees and change the world. Many of them had friends and family in the audience, and as they came up to receive their degree, they got cheers and whoops and whistles and all sorts of things and applause from their supporters and their friends in the audience. I couldn’t help but notice that the two students who got the loudest, biggest cheers were both mature students, very mature students, well into their 50s or perhaps beyond, I would guess. I think that point needs to be made to counteract this bubble myth that has just been presented from across the House.

Yes, there's a bubble; it's called the echo generation. We baby boomers hatched out in record numbers, of course, between 1946 and about 1964. Although the birth rate in Canada right now is perhaps lower than it has ever been, by sheer force of our numbers we baby boomers have hatched out another bumper crop of young'uns, young'uns who are of the age of majority, of the age of maturity, of the age of entrance into colleges and universities and technical institutes right now. I have an 18 year old, so I know a little whereof I speak, as does my colleague from across the aisle.

We talk a lot about access and affordability and excellence and questions of grade point averages and admission requirements to, you know, what used to be pretty basic four-year liberal arts, humanities, social sciences, and general science courses that didn't require the kind of grade 12 average that a medical school entrance did to get in, and now they do. That's an access problem, no question about it. Some of that access problem may in fact go away, lessen a little bit when the bubble, when the echo generation, moves through its baccalaureate years, but it won't all go away because we live in this culture of life-long learning, as we are told.

Many of us will go back to school and get second and third degrees and diplomas and certificates and whatever else is required. Someday when perhaps the Minister of Advanced Education has more than just a little grey around the temples, he'll go back. You know, after the voters have thrown him out or he's retired from politics or whatever, he'll go back, get a degree, and he'll get the biggest cheer at graduation ceremony. I don't know.

The point is that postsecondary education is phenomenally important to every person in the province of Alberta. It is important to Alberta society, and it is too important to simply approach as though you were a mechanic fixing an old car with a lot of problems: well, this week we need to throw some money at the brakes, and next week we're going to have to get new tires on the beast and get the wheel alignment redone, and a couple of weeks down the road we'll have to replace the windshield and then, you know, do some major engine repair, and on and on like that. What this system needs is for somebody to step back and take the long view, take a holistic approach, and do a comprehensive review of the whole thing.

So I would speak to the motion put forward by my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood with support with reservations, I guess. The reason why I say that I have some reservations about it is because I think this motion perhaps doesn't go quite far enough. The motion reads as follows:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to establish a commission on advanced education to thoroughly review Alberta's public postsecondary education system and recommend changes to enhance accessibility and affordability while ensuring excellence in areas of research and instruction.

If my colleague were the student and I were the instructor here, I would give my colleague a very high mark, but I wouldn't give him a perfect score because one of the things that's missing from the motion, I think, is a specific recommendation to make this a commission that is independent of the government.

8:20

I suspect that we can take it that that's implied, that that's what my colleagues had in mind when they crafted this motion, but the motion does not specify that the commission be independent of the government even to the extent that the K to 12 Commission on Learning was. We all know that even after accepting the idea of the K to 12 Learning Commission, the ministry of learning went to some lengths, I think, to make sure that the members that were appointed to the commission were seen as more or less relatively safe in most cases by the government.

After selection the commission had to struggle to maintain some of its independence. It succeeded in that, Mr. Speaker, and produced a fine report, and many of the recommendations of the K to 12 Commission on Learning were adopted by this government, although certainly not all of them have been acted upon yet, but many of them are still in progress.

One recommendation that wasn't accepted that was initially under review but then just seems to have dropped off the government's agenda was recommendation 12: "Undertake a comprehensive, independent review of Alberta's post-secondary education system." That is what we need in this province going forward. We need to make sure that the advanced education system that we have today – and by advanced education, by postsecondary education I mean college, technical institute, university, and apprenticeship programs. We need to make sure that they're going to meet the needs not just of the bubble, not just of the echo generation, not just of our kids but of our children and our children's children and the adult learners of the province of Alberta for the next 50 years. What's required here is some vision.

We've seen over the past five years, just to give an example, all sorts of ministry-driven reviews that haven't generated any significant improvement or even any significant action on key priorities such as funding increases or tuition controls. There was the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning in 1999, the 2000 MLA Funding Review Committee, the Campus Alberta Symposium in 2000, the Alberta learning accessibility study in 2001, the strategic framework review in 2002, the Post-secondary Learning Act in 2003-04, tuition fee policy consultations. I mean, this tuition review, this funding review or affordability review or whatever you want to call it that the government is about to undertake will be, I think, the fourth creation of the ultimate be-all and end-all tuition policy in the last 14 years in this province, and none of them have stuck for more than a season or two.

I would suggest that given this government's record in health care reform or lack thereof, if we wait for this government to do its own internal review to create the ultimate affordability policy, well, my children, both of them, will be through university. They'll be through any postgraduate work that they do. They'll be through their career, and they'll be retired and living off their pensions by the time you guys come up with the ultimate tuition policy. By then it'll be the 22nd century. But I quibble.

I think what's missing from this motion – and I wish that it had been put in and specified – is the word "independent." But in other respects I feel that this is worthy of this House's support: a comprehensive review done by outsiders of the postsecondary system in the province of Alberta, comprehensively, holistically so that out of that comes a series of recommendations that may not do anything for my colleague across the way's 18 to 25-year-old sons and may not do anything for my 18-year-old son and my 16-year-old daughter immediately but will produce a blueprint for a great, a world-class, a world-beating advanced education system in the province of Alberta that will do wonders for everybody in this province going forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, appreciate the opportunity to speak to Motion 509, calling for a commission on advanced education. I'll say right at the outset that I don't support the motion, but I want to make it clear that the reason I don't support the motion is because much of what is being asked for in the motion is already well under way. It's not that I don't agree with the

concept or the content. In fact, we do need a thorough review of Alberta's postsecondary system. We need to do that review, much as the member across the way has just said, to ensure that there is a clear vision for Alberta as a learning society, how we develop a system that is world-leading in postsecondary education so that every Albertan has the opportunity to obtain the education and skills that they need to be able to compete in a global economy.

Mr. Speaker, we have in this province a 20-year strategic plan. Actually, I think we're quite unique among governments, certainly in Canada, having had that kind of a vision and planning framework. I'm very proud of that. One of the things that's very clear when you have a 20-year strategic plan that talks about unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit is that the underpinning of that strategic plan is advancing our knowledge and advancing our education.

There are a number of things ongoing, a number of things that have been happening. In 2000, for example, there was a review of the postsecondary funding system. One of the things that the review committee at that time indicated was that a review should be conducted every five years to ensure that the principles of equity, adaptability, and stability continue to be reflected in the postsecondary funding framework. So this year we've promised and we've indicated that we will conduct a review of the funding framework. We've also indicated that there would be an affordability review, a review of the cost of going to school and how those costs are paid so that finances are not a barrier to any Albertan getting an education.

In looking at those two commitments and having had the opportunity and the privilege to lead the newly formed Ministry of Advanced Education, it quickly becomes apparent that in the context of our 20-year strategic plan, in the context of the new ministry going forward, in the context of our centennial year looking to our 21st century, now is an excellent time, an excellent opportunity to do more than just review funding and review affordability. So in January I met with representatives of all postsecondary stakeholders. We brought in some other members of the public to be, as I called them, agents provocateurs in the discussion, to actually have a robust discussion about what we needed to do going forward to fulfill the promise that the Premier made that postsecondary education should be our number one priority, to be able to provide some input and advice as to what should go into the Premier's speech at the beginning of February to Albertans about what might contextualize postsecondary being our number one priority, and in terms of what content might be available for a Bill 1, to really show that we were serious about putting the wheels on, so to speak.

During those discussions stakeholders indicated also a need for a full review, a full policy development on postsecondary in Alberta so that we could ensure that our postsecondary system was leading-edge in the world and to identify what needed to be done to articulate a clearer vision. Alberta's vision as stated by the Alberta government and, therefore, my ministry's vision, is to have "a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children."

What does that mean, Mr. Speaker, in terms of a vision for the postsecondary education system in Alberta? Well, it's a vision for higher learning where the postsecondary system has a place for every Albertan who wants to advance their education. That means that we must inspire Albertans to want one of those places, to want to advance their education, to become a part of that vision of the future of Alberta. It's a vision where cost is not a barrier to a person receiving a postsecondary education, and it's a vision where people

have all of the opportunity they want to explore their passions and their talents in a quality postsecondary system that provides an opportunity for an education in a way that's accessible and affordable and of a high quality.

Specifically, we will only succeed when we have a world-class postsecondary system based on access for all learners so that Albertans have access to the opportunities to achieve their expectations, affordability for all learners to ensure that cost is not a barrier to higher learning, and quality and innovation. To be a leader in learning, Alberta must continue to move ahead towards excellence.

More can always be done. Now, does that mean more dollars? Does it mean better use of existing resources? Does it mean new types of programs? Those are just some of the questions that a comprehensive review of the entire postsecondary system will answer.

Mr. Speaker, we've planned that full and comprehensive review of Alberta's postsecondary system. That's what the motion is calling for, but it's calling for it in the context of a learning commission. As we heard earlier, a learning commission puts a structure around it that may not be the best structure for that review in this year. We want to do it thoroughly, but we also want to do it quickly. We want to move ahead to make whatever changes are necessary, certainly on the urgent priority of access, on the very, very important priority of affordability, and of course on the always essential priority of quality. Our system must be dynamic, it must continue to change and adapt to meet current and future needs, and it must reflect the perspectives of all Albertans. So the review that we're talking about will not only review affordability, access, and quality but also roles and responsibilities.

8:30

Once we look at the system and say, "What do we need to be a world leader in education?" then we can look at our existing system and say: "What do we have? What are the gaps? What do we need to do to get there? What holes must be filled?" Our system must be dynamic. It must continue to change and adapt to meet current and future needs. So we must take that look, develop that policy, that strategy which says, "This is Alberta as a learning society" and identifies what we need to put into effect to get there.

One of our most valuable assets in our ability to create that postsecondary system that meets the demands of a changing world is the willingness of government and stakeholders to periodically sit down and assess where our postsecondary education system is. The success is in constantly looking at where we're at, figuring out where we need to be. Where do we need to be? Well, we need to have that first-class world-leading education system. If we aim any lower, we're aiming too low.

Do we need a learning commission? No, Mr. Speaker, because we have already moved forward to set up. In fact, the invitations have gone out to people to sit on a steering committee for a committee which will drive the process, which will ensure that there's research done on every aspect as identified by the conference that we had in mid-January, followed up with subconferences in early February with both the learning community and the aboriginal community to fill out the breadth of our scope and discussion.

We'll establish a learning steering committee that will have representatives from across the province bringing forward perspectives from students, from people who are dealing with literacy programs, people who are dealing with the learning communities in various methods across the province as well as people who know and understand the college system, know and understand the university system, know and understand the urban and rural issues and concerns, bringing in the aboriginal perspective; in short, a

comprehensive review which will culminate in a public discussion which will happen throughout the review but in a conference in late October so that people can reflect on the issues that we've talked about, the research that's been discussed, and find the best way forward, make recommendations on the best way forward.

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the interest of the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in putting the motion on the table and the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood in moving the motion. I certainly appreciate the comments from the other speakers tonight with respect to the need for this review. It's absolutely essential that we have a very strong vision of Alberta as a learning society: how we move forward with that, how we make sure that access is there when students will want to do it, but more importantly that we inspire every Albertan to want to advance their education so they can take advantage of the opportunities which present themselves in this province, not just the economic opportunities but the social responsibilities that are available for us all to maximize our own human potential, contribute back to our communities in the strongest way possible so that we continue to make Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to speak in favour of the motion proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. Part of the argument, as I see it, across the way by the Member for Calgary-Shaw and the minister seems to be that time is of the essence, that we have to move ahead. Well, it doesn't mean that if you have a commission, the whole advanced education system shuts down. There are things that will continue to go on as they did with the Learning Commission.

Mr. Speaker, I was somewhat dubious as a school board member when the Learning Commission was set up, I have to admit. I thought, well, you know, there would be some good Tories on there, and probably they'd do what the government said. But I was pleasantly surprised. I think that the Learning Commission came back with a very comprehensive report. Not that all of us would agree with every single item on there; there are obviously some things that we don't. But I think that above all it captured what needed to happen in public education.

I think, more importantly, what it's done is set a mark that we can all judge the government by. In other words, we can go through the points. I'll use one that's important to me. Is the government going to move on early childhood education, full-day kindergarten in high-needs areas? That was a recommendation, and we can look at that, Mr. Speaker, so we know exactly what the government is doing.

Now, Mr. Speaker, if that worked well in public education, I can't for the life of me see why a similar process would not work well in advanced education to make it broader, to make it more independent. That's certainly one of the key recommendations of the Commission on Learning, as has already been pointed out by the Member for Calgary-Currie. They could see that there were problems there when they looked into public education. They said that we should undertake a comprehensive, independent review of Alberta's postsecondary education. That's precisely what we're trying to do with this motion.

Now, if I may, Mr. Speaker – time is of the essence – there are a couple of things the government can do about two major things. They don't need to wait for a commission. We know that we have a problem with tuition fees. The temporary measure announced this year is creating uncertainty. We look at this. There are over

230,000 postsecondary students in Alberta. In exchange for receiving education, students sacrifice an average of nearly \$5,000 per year in tuition and other mandatory fees. They sacrifice income opportunities from jobs now so that they can get better jobs in the future. At the end of this most of them on average – and it goes higher – will have a \$20,000 debt. That's a considerable amount of money for people who are just starting out in the workforce if they don't have wealthy parents. Clearly, we could have done something about that. We could have put on a permanent freeze as other provinces have done.

The other thing that was alluded to, Mr. Speaker, was the accessibility, and that is a major issue. As my colleague has already talked about, we have the second-lowest participation rate in the country. That's a very serious matter. I think the Member for Calgary-Shaw is correct. I mean, a lot of us probably wouldn't have got into university with the marks that they need to get into university or NAIT or SAIT or Mount Royal. We have a serious problem with accessibility. We didn't have to wait for any review to know that, if we have the second-lowest participation rate in a rich province like this. We could have moved ahead. So time is of the essence, as I said. It's not that everything stops. We could have moved on those two major things.

We're moving ahead with some items. The minister has promised to undertake a review of the affordability of postsecondary education in Alberta. We're glad, Mr. Speaker, but what we're saying is: why don't we take a broad look as we did with public education? The government, I believe, says that it worked well there. I don't understand for the life of me why it won't work well in postsecondary education, especially with the recommendation that came from this group. It's a broad sense, and it would be independent. [interjection] To the minister, I'm glad that you're consulting and doing those sorts of things. That's an important role for the minister to participate in. But this commission, if it was set up like the learning commission on public education, would be independent of the government, would set some standards, would look at it broadly, right across. It wouldn't be sort of behind closed doors with smaller meetings, although some good things could come out of that. It sets a goal. It sets standards for into the future of what we might expect for our postsecondary education.

Just as with the Learning Commission now we can watch from year to year to year what's happening with class sizes, what's happening with some of the other recommendations that the government hasn't got around to yet. We have some way to judge, then, if the government is going in the right direction. We have sort of piecemeal things that occur, maybe some very good things for the minister with his consultations, but how do we have a measuring stick to know later on whether the government is following what they were told?

8:40

It seems to me that this review, rather than just a review of the affordability of postsecondary education and a lot of the other consultation, is behind closed doors. Tell us how broad it's going to be, Mr. Minister. We haven't seen what's going to happen laid down like when the commission was announced. That's the problem. If you're going to do something that we're advocating, I would have thought that we would know about it by now and that it would be laid out: here are the parameters of what we're looking at, this is what we're going to do, this is how we're going to be judged, and here's where the public hearings are going to be, as they did with the Learning Commission. I don't see that, Mr. Speaker. I don't see that at all.

The reality is that we need it, I believe, because we are spending a lot of money, and so we should, perhaps more or less. We have

private universities, private schools proliferating in the province. Is that the right way to go? Well, I have my doubts about it, but if a commission looked at it, maybe they could take a look at this and see if this is good or bad.

We've had discussions in here. I believe it was a member across the way that talked about wanting more fine arts in the schools. Well, that has implications for postsecondary education also. What is the role of arts and science at the universities? A lot of people say that they've been downgraded. We haven't had that discussion.

Mr. Speaker, this is what we're talking about. We lay it out like the Learning Commission. This is what we're going to do: we're going to have public hearings, we're going to do the work, we're going to come back and make a report, and then the government has the right and can respond to it. But at least we have a measuring stick.

The point that I want to make in a broad sense, Mr. Speaker, just to conclude, is that we deserve a true commitment to postsecondary education starting with a review. I just want to enlarge on this. It should examine a wide range of issues – this is a point to the minister – including accessibility, affordability, quality, balance between teaching and research, the role of the private sector, how to finance the system, and the future of the arts, sciences, and humanities.

If the minister could stand up and say: well, we're going to lay this out in a public way – I don't care if you call it a commission. [interjection] Well, you're saying it behind closed doors. [interjection] Well, we don't know exactly what's coming. It has not been laid out, Mr. Speaker. It has not been laid out the same way the Learning Commission was. That's all I'm saying.

I'm not saying to the minister that there aren't going to be some good things coming out of it. We're saying: let's put it in a broader way and set some measuring sticks so we can do as the Learning Commission. That's all we're saying. Let's do it right. Let's do it in a broad way. That doesn't mean that in the short term we don't deal with things like accessibility and affordability. Of course we do, Mr. Speaker. The whole system isn't going to shut down while we do this, just as the public education and Catholic education systems didn't shut down. Let's do it right. If we're going to spend this money and we want to look into it, let's do it right. Do it independently. Set it up and do the hearings, and then come back with a report that, hopefully, would be as good as the other one.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to add my comments to the debate concerning this Motion 509. I'm especially pleased to speak to the motion since I've been involved in the postsecondary education system for some years in a number of capacities.

I believe first of all that we have a system that is an excellent postsecondary system and one which is very responsive to the majority of Alberta students. It's a system that endows our students with not only facts and knowledge, but more importantly it endows them with the ability to think creatively and critically.

I don't think I'm overstating it when I say that one of the reasons that our province has done so well over the past hundred years is that we have had an excellent postsecondary education system here in the province of Alberta. Albertans by nature, Mr. Speaker, are creative and imaginative, hard-working, entrepreneurial, and these are the characteristics which one needs to be successful in postsecondary education.

With this in mind, I certainly agree with the sentiments of the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in bringing this motion. I would

agree that we need to continually work to improve and enhance our advanced education system. We certainly need to make sure that it is accessible, affordable, well funded, and effective when it comes to the areas of research. Certainly, our present and future realities would demand that we continue to hold the postsecondary education system high in our priorities. Indeed, the future growth and prosperity of our economy here in Alberta are dependent on our ability to invest in human capital and to train and attract skilled and enhanced and educated individuals that will be able to meet the needs of the future economy.

So by reviewing and investing in the advanced learning system, we certainly ensure that future generations of Albertans will be provided with the knowledge that they need to realize their goals and aspirations. In support of this vision I'm very pleased that the Minister of Advanced Education has announced that a review of our postsecondary education system will be taking place later this year. I'm certainly heartened to hear that the review will be comprehensive and inclusive and that it will involve stakeholders and partners from both within and outside the education system. In addition, I'm sure that that review will help to raise the awareness of some of the challenges that the system is presently facing and that it will hopefully generate a dialogue out of which a lot of insights and ideas and solutions and innovations could arise.

So while I applaud my colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona for his concern in bringing this motion and seeing that Alberta students receive the best higher learning that is possible, I certainly have some concerns, which I share with the hon. Government House Leader, that the motion calls for measures which are substantially the same as what the government is already in the process of doing.

Not only that, Mr. Speaker, but as the hon. minister has already mentioned, the government has been doing much more than planning a review. Aside from the review, the province has been looking at ways to improve accessibility, affordability, and the excellence of all of our advanced education institutions and by working with our partners and stakeholders in the field has made considerable gains in that regard. The recently announced budget allotments; legislation, including Bill 1, as has been mentioned; and other initiatives introduced by the government are a direct result of the collaborative approach.

Given my concerns, Mr. Speaker, I guess that in summary I would say that I do have concerns about the overlap between the commission that is requested in this motion and the comprehensive review that has already been announced by the Minister of Advanced Education. With that in mind, I will end my comments and will not be supporting the motion as presented.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, support Motion 509. I believe it's a starting point. I also prefer the idea of an independent commission due to the greater transparency afforded, as suggested by my fellow member from Calgary-Currie.

While I understand the Member for Calgary-Shaw's reluctance because of how commissions tend to drag out, it's up to the government to adopt the measures that commissions have put forward and quickly implement them so that we can start to benefit.

8:50

One of the most revolutionary reports of its time happened with the Kratzmann report in 1980, and if we had put in place the recommendation of that time, the major recommendation that Kratzmann put forward of 20 students per teacher in a classroom, just think how dramatically our education system would have advanced in the 25 years that followed. We're just starting through

the Learning Commission to approach some of those pupil-teacher ratios that were recommended way back in 1980.

Another recommendation that was made in 1980 and was one of the underlying reasons for the Calgary public teachers' strike that lasted the better part of three and a half months was the fact that at that time elementary teachers were given no preparation time. What happened immediately – while the Learning Commission was taking place and prior to it being set up, the government, basically, went into the contract, stripped out preparation time, and the idea of a pupil-teacher ratio was basically suspended.

Now, the Learning Commission – granted it's a slow process, but it is a process – and its independent nature I think added to its own credibility. The government accepted 86 of the independent Learning Commission's 100 recommendations. As a result, slowly but surely it seems that these recommendations are being acted upon. We still haven't got to the point where we're not closing inner-city schools and dealing with the larger issues, but it is a starting point.

The problems are acute at the postsecondary system. Bill 1 does not begin to address them. Bill 1 is not going to change the fact that at the U of C they're going to continue for the next four years to have a 5 per cent clawback on programming. That will not be addressed in Bill 1. Bill 1 cannot magically with the wave of a wand create 15,000 new spaces by 2008. It's great to hear that ground has been broken at Mount Royal. That ground, as I understand it from last week's release, will account for 10 new classrooms. I'm not sure how big those classrooms are, but it's certainly a small portion of the 15,000 seats that have been promised for 2008 and the 60,000 by 2020. These are wonderful goals, but unless we have some kind of a measuring stick, such as Motion 509 suggests, our chances of getting there are very much limited.

The hon. Member for Foothills-Rocky View questioned the validity of the *MacLean's* review, so let's just rewrite history. Say that *MacLean's* hasn't written these reviews over the years, which have unfortunately put my University of Calgary further down on its list. Let's look at the internal reviews by the students themselves, which recognized the University of Calgary as 47th out of 48 in terms of student satisfaction with the institution. Now, there have been good professors at the university. There continue to be good professors, and there are some very good programs in research, undergraduate, and postgraduate, but the institution itself has been forced to cannibalize, and as a result, the quality of education has been reduced. Class sizes are getting larger. Temporary, portable solutions are being sought rather than permanent infrastructure. These have to be addressed.

We currently have the lowest per capita postsecondary graduation level from this province, and again Bill 1, while it basically throws 3 and a half billion dollars of one-time funding at the problem, doesn't have a sequential solution to it. Twenty-five per cent of students were eligible students who had these high grade-point averages, as the hon. member alluded to, that would have kept at least myself and himself out of the institution at that time – or if current averages were being applied, we wouldn't have made it in – and students who have the money to afford these inflated tuitions, with this one-year exception of basically what amounts to a freeze and then it increases as usual.

Bill 1 does not in itself even approach the problem. Bill 1 is a one-shot, one-time postsecondary band-aid, as opposed to our opposition legacy fund, which would top up funds on an ongoing annual basis as a percentage of future surpluses, 35 per cent to be exact, with another support of 25 per cent to be set aside for infrastructure needs. So that's the type of long-term solution that we need, long-term funding.

What Motion 509 does is say that we've got to start somewhere, and let's start with Motion 509. The Learning Commission served as an independent measuring stick for public education. We desperately need such a device for postsecondary. You've got to start somewhere. I would suggest: the sooner the better. Let's start with Motion 509. We can always fine-tune it as the process gets under way. I thank the hon. members of the NDP opposition for putting it forward.

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

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to express some ideas about the need for a review of our postsecondary education. I'm very pleased to hear the minister today talking about the action he's going to take. If I can think back to what I read, some 2,500 years ago Confucius taught the rulers of the kingdoms in ancient China: to make society prosperous, provide them with education. This has been true for thousands of years. Even the recent study from Stanford University indicates that among nations in the world now the most prosperous, with the highest quality of life are the nations with high education participation.

It just happened that last February I had an opportunity to be in Toronto, and I visited the Ontario Assembly and had an opportunity there to meet with the hon. David Zimmer. He's a parliamentarian, assistant to the Attorney General. The coincidence is that at that time the government of Ontario released a report on postsecondary education. I had the privilege to receive a copy hot off the press. To my surprise when I read through that, there was a quotation about the things that we have done in Alberta. The outstanding part is that the hon. Bob Rae was commissioned to do the study on that. He was the former NDP Premier in Ontario. In his report to the government of Ontario he quoted the great things that Alberta did. I felt so proud, so great. We looked at that.

Anyway, I took that report and gave it to our Minister of Advanced Education. So from that perspective, I don't think we need to again have a study here, a study there. We should probably just look at the report from Ontario. It has been done quite extensively. There are a lot of good ideas in there as input for the minister to have the review.

Now, I'm for the review, to look at the funding of the institutions, particularly Calgary postsecondary education, the need for infrastructure funding, for equity funding, and on the other matters. But I am very glad that the minister already said a few minutes ago about that approach. I also want to emphasize that students are the target of any review and make sure that accessibility and affordability are addressed. I only want to say that I differ in the method of the review. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona is saying to organize a commission to study. I am quite concerned whenever we organize a commission to study. There are two things. If the government is doing it, hon. opposition, then you have a chance to criticize. But if an independent commission is to study it, you have to . . .

9:00

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, but under Standing Order 8(4), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close debate, I would invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood to close debate on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to close debate on this motion. I think this is an important motion to

come before this House since it represents one of the recommendations of the Learning Commission, one of the recommendations that has not been adopted by the government. The government has chosen instead to proceed with an ad hoc approach, a variety of approaches, but without a comprehensive plan, without a systematic look at our postsecondary system in this province with all of the pieces fitting together. Certainly, they'll deal with some things. They'll deal with tuition policy, for example, yet we don't know the direction, and we haven't had a degree of public input into that discussion.

When the Premier announced the freeze, there were some very serious weaknesses with that, Mr. Speaker, not the least of which was that it was simply the government paying an increase, not preventing an increase, which means that next year students may well be hit with a double increase as well. The use of the term "entrepreneurial" by the government when it comes to things like tuition fees sends shivers up my spine because it sounds like they're prepared to experiment with market forces where those are inappropriate once again.

Certainly, things like private education and the proliferation of public funding for private postsecondary institutions is not something the government seems to want to have public discussion on. The role of institutions. For example, there's been a bit of a debate within the government caucus, obviously disagreements on the question of Mount Royal College. All of these things need to be placed in context with one another. The whole system in its relationship to itself needs to be considered, and there needs to be a degree of public discussion in a comprehensive way before the government establishes long-term policy.

In conclusion, I'd urge all members to support this motion because what it does is it encapsulates the Learning Commission's recommendation. It avoids what the government is, I'm afraid, making the mistake of doing, and that is to take an ad hoc approach towards our postsecondary institutions and our system in this province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 509 lost]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading
Bill 41
Appropriation Act, 2005

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to move for second reading Bill 41, the Appropriation Act, 2005.

The Appropriation Act is the culmination of the month of discussion we've had in Committee of Supply, in which we've had a day for each department to discuss the estimates that have been brought forward. Particularly valuable in that discussion were the estimates, in my view, if you'll give me leave to say so, of Advanced Education, in which there's been a great leap forward in putting the wheels, if I can say, on our strategic plan. When we have a strategic plan in this province of unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit, certainly the underpinning of that strategic plan, that 20-year vision forward, is advancing our knowledge and advancing education.

So I am very pleased to move Bill 41 and move for the approval of the appropriation for the operation of the government in this year for many, many reasons, not the least of which, Mr. Speaker, is the important step that it's taking towards investing in the advancing of education, the advancing of knowledge in this province not only

through the Department of Advanced Education but also in terms of the estimates of Innovation and Science, the commitment that's been made to that direction; the major commitment that's been made in the Education portfolio; the acknowledgement through the Health portfolio of the need to continue to have a sustainable health system and invest in wellness, invest in the health status of our community; the important steps forward in Justice and so many other areas. We've had the opportunity to debate that at length, so I won't continue to do that now but would ask the House to approve second reading of Bill 41.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to lead off debate on behalf of the Official Opposition on Bill 41, the Appropriation Act, 2005.

Mr. Speaker, this bill, as the hon. minister indicates, has been debated at some length now over I believe the past 23 sitting days. I think we managed to squeeze two in in one night there. The bill includes a total of almost \$26 billion in spending. I think I've indicated it before, but I'm not afraid to say it again: \$26 billion is an awfully, awfully big number, a bigger number than I can really get my head around. The spending is up nearly 6 per cent from last year's budget, and unfortunately no substantial tax relief for the Alberta taxpayers. In fact, it's been suggested in some quarters that we should be calling this government the tax and spend Conservatives. I'm not so sure that that would be entirely inaccurate given the fact that, as I indicated, there's no real tax relief and, in fact, an awful, awful lot of money being spent.

Mr. Speaker, more than 1,000 full-time employment equivalents are being added to the government, so in fact the government is getting bigger, not smaller. For a government that has long touted the fact that they don't believe in big government, they seem to be going the opposite direction from what their ideology would indicate.

Probably the most ironic thing is that we now have one extra ministry, and the extra ministry is Restructuring and Government Efficiency, if you can imagine, a ministry designed to make government more efficient, and presumably that would mean smaller. In fact, we're going in the opposite direction and getting bigger. I find that quite ironic, and I know that several of my colleagues do as well. In fact, several of the people that I've spoken to in my constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford are quite amused at that, and I don't doubt that people across the province are making the same comments, Mr. Speaker. So I do appreciate the humour in that.

Mr. Speaker, early on in my term as an MLA we had a third-quarter update from the Finance minister as regards last year's budget, and at that time there were a number of very fancy documents produced and circulated. I can't recall the exact catchphrase on the cover of those documents, but it was something to the effect of: on track and on schedule. Boy, you talk about government spin. This was amazing to me because only a couple of months later we found out that, in fact, this government had spent nearly \$2 billion in excess of last year's original budget. How anybody could interpret that as meaning that they were on track and on schedule I'm not sure. Nevertheless, that's what we were told.

9:10

I've said this in the House before, but I do believe it bears repeating. Only by the grace of God and incredibly good fortune, the fact that natural gas and oil revenues were higher than anybody, even this member, had anticipated they might be last year, only by virtue of those facts did this government not break its own law last

year by going into a deficit situation, quite clearly, with \$2 billion in excess spending. In fact, Mr. Speaker, a lot of that spending was announced within weeks of the budget being approved last year. At that point in time, there was no certainty at all that oil and natural gas revenues would stay as high as they ultimately did. So, really, I think that quite clearly this government could very well have ended up in a deficit situation last year. I'm certainly not advocating that. I wouldn't want to see it happen, and I wouldn't want to see it happen this year either. But, boy, we have to be awfully careful with the way that we spend money without it being budgeted and planned for.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, again this year, literally within days of the Finance minister making the Budget Address in this Assembly, we had ministers going around talking about unbudgeted spending and the fact that if revenues stay high, there are all sorts of goodies that might be in store for Albertans. Again, I'm not suggesting that I have a problem necessarily with sharing the wealth, as it were, but the fact that within two days of a Budget Address we had ministers going around talking about unbudgeted spending really does, I believe, bring into question the entire budget process, especially in conjunction with the fact that we know that we were \$2 billion over budgeted spending last year.

Mr. Elsalhy: It's a mock budget.

Mr. R. Miller: A mock budget, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung calls it, and perhaps that's what it is.

You know, we came into this House later this year than is normal, ostensibly because ministers were struggling to put their budgets together. I've gone on record before as saying that I think it might well have had something to do with the fact, Mr. Speaker, that there was a certain amount of—I'm not sure if I would call it squabbling, but I think the words I used before were that everybody and his dog were scrambling to get their piece of the pie, knowing that the revenues were high and there was going to be this incredible amount of spending taking place this year, 6 per cent more than was done last year. I think everybody wanted to get in on that action and probably justifiably so.

Nevertheless, we came into the House at least a couple of weeks later than would normally be the case. We never even had a budget to debate prior to the end of last year's fiscal year. I'm not so sure that that's necessarily prudent planning on behalf of the government, that not only did we have to spend \$2 billion in supplementary supply to make up for the money that wasn't budgeted for last year but then 5 billion and some dollars in interim supply to get us through to the point where the budget could be approved by this House and money available to run the business of government. Really, I think the entire budget process is called into question by the actions of this government.

I know I mentioned earlier that the province of Saskatchewan last year, for the first time ever in history, Mr. Speaker, had to ask for some supplementary supply money. Really, considering that this government says that this is standard procedure, I would suggest that we should have an awfully careful look at what our neighbours to the east do in terms of . . .

Mr. Martin: NDs.

Mr. R. Miller: Well, it's not always been ND. The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview seems to think that the NDs deserve an awful lot of credit, but I said: the first time in a hundred-year history.

Mr. Speaker, quite clearly, there is with good planning and good budgeting a way to present a budget document that actually has some meaning and, if I can use the phrase, be worth the paper that it's written on.

Having complained about that a little bit, I would like to thank the various ministers. At least, certainly on every occasion that I had opportunity to be part of a budget debate, there was a real willingness, I think, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the ministers to provide reasonable answers to questions that were reasonably asked by the opposition and by some of the government backbenchers in terms of the budget that was presented before us for the various departments. Where the answers couldn't be given the night of the budget debate or the afternoon of the budget debate, certainly for the questions that I asked, most ministers were very timely in getting a written response back to us in advance of having to debate this bill this evening. I do appreciate that.

In fact, I would suggest that as one of the crop of rookie MLAs I found that perhaps to be one of the most productive parts of everything that we've done in the Assembly this spring: the budget debates. It was very informative. It was civil, and, as I say, provided good information, not only to members of this Assembly but ultimately to Albertans, and that really is what it's all about.

Mr. Speaker, I've commented before on the fact that this particular budget and this appropriation bill are based on a price of west Texas intermediate of \$42 a barrel for the coming year. While I have indicated that that is actually a little bit higher than I had thought the government might use, it is nevertheless, I believe, likely to be a bit on the low side. When we look back at the end of the year, of course, we'll know whether or not the Finance minister or the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford had better prognosticating skills, but certainly at this point I'm quite willing to suggest that I believe \$42 a barrel will likely end up having been on the low side. Having said that, I think our budget surplus at the end of the year is most likely going to be somewhat more than what the government has indicated. That would be consistent with the pattern that we've seen over the last several years.

Perhaps even a bigger factor, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that this budget is based on a dollar at 83 and a half cents. When I came into the office this morning, I heard that for the first time in some period of time now our dollar had actually sunk below 79 cents. So at this point it's a difference of 4 and a half cents, and that will have a big impact on the amount of the surplus if the dollar were to stay below 80 cents. Of course, again, nobody knows for sure, but I'd be very surprised if the dollar ends up at 83 and a half cents, averaged over the year, and certainly I don't expect that it will be higher than that.

In fact, the government's own budget material indicates that most of the stock houses and financial institutions are indicating somewhere below 82 cents as what the average prediction is for the coming year. Even the industry experts are indicating about a penny and a half or more less than what the government is using in their own budget figures. So, Mr. Speaker, again, based on the fact that we're using an unrealistically low price for the barrel of oil and, in my mind, an unrealistically high estimate for the Canadian dollar, I have no doubt that we're going to be looking at a very healthy surplus again at the end of this coming year.

That really probably begs the question: how much will the supplementary supply estimates be when we come to March next year? We were \$2 billion over budget this year, and I'll be surprised, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, if a year from now we're not debating supplementary supply estimates that are at least as high, if not higher. Again, given some of the comments from ministers and

others shortly after the budget was released, I have every reason to expect that we're going to be looking at some pretty big numbers.

Mr. Speaker, I'm just going to quickly touch on a couple of other points, and then I would like to speak specifically to the Solicitor General's department since I didn't have an opportunity to take part in that budget debate.

There's \$667 million in this budget this year for the Alberta heritage savings trust fund to begin inflation-proofing the fund, and that's something that the Alberta Liberals have long been calling for. All I can say is: it's about time. It's certainly better than not inflation-proofing. I would really, really like to have seen us make more of an effort there, but at least it is a step, albeit a small one, in the right direction.

There's \$250 million for the advanced education endowment fund, a small part of the money that the hon. Minister of Advanced Education referenced a few minutes ago. I know that I'm on record as saying this, but I'd like the opportunity to say it again. At that rate, Mr. Speaker, if we were to continue that, it would take 12 years for us to reach the magical \$3 billion cap. Under an Alberta Liberal plan, if I remember right, within three years we would virtually have made the cap. Although it's an effort, I think we could have done more.

9:20

Now, specific to the Department of Solicitor General, I've made an awful lot of comments in this House, Mr. Speaker, about Constable Green at Harry Ainlay high school and his black lab, Ebony, and the work they do in educating students about the dangers of particularly crystal meth but also drugs in general. Following some of my comments, the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner sort of took up the cause and started talking about having drug-sniffing dogs in every school, and even the Solicitor General seemed to pick up on that, and there was an awful lot of talk about having these dogs doing enforcement duties in the schools.

I just wanted to be on record, Mr. Speaker, as saying that that's not what this program is about at all. This program is an educational program designed to educate students about the dangers of drug use and, by bringing a dog in and showing them the capabilities of the dog, create awareness of the fact that this tool is there should it be needed. Never was it intended to sniff drugs out specifically and be used as an enforcement tool.

In fact, in the dogs for drug-free schools program outline, it outlines that the primary component is to provide education to youth using a passive-trained narcotic detection dog as the catalyst. In other words, this dog, when it does smell drugs, Mr. Speaker, will actually sit there and wait for the police member to come over as opposed to scratching or barking or whatever. It's a very well-behaved dog, and it's meant not to create any anxiety or animosity in the schools but, rather, to educate.

The secondary component of the program is visibility. Just simply by having the dogs in the school, Mr. Speaker, they provide a constant reminder to students that the ability is in fact available to locate drugs should that be required or desired by the school.

A member of the Medicine Hat police force, a school resource officer who's involved with the program in Medicine Hat, Mr. Speaker, was quoted as saying: "The purpose is not to search students and their lockers. It's to educate them about the use and misuse of illegal drugs." He also goes on to say, as I indicated, that "as opposed to scratching or barking, the dogs will be trained to search on command and sit when they detect the smell of narcotics." As I said, this is really meant to be an educational tool.

I'm just going to share with you some statistics about the program and how well it works and how inexpensive it is and really, I think,

something that if it's too late to squeeze into this year's budget, I sincerely hope that next year the Solicitor General will have a careful look at this. I do know that Constable Green has made these documents available to the Solicitor General, so he may well have had a chance to review them already, Mr. Speaker.

The cost sharing. I mentioned this before. This particular dog that's in the Harry Ainlay high school is a dog that belonged to Constable Green already. Constable Green was already the school resource officer at Harry Ainlay anyway, so the costs are really minimal. In fact, the Edmonton public school board and the Catholic school board in Edmonton are sharing: \$2,500 expense each so a total of \$5,000 to cover the cost of dog food, veterinary fees, equipment, and other incidentals. So for a very, very minimal price they've been able to bring Ebony into the schools.

Constable Green has provided a list of all of the presentations that they've made in this past school year, and it's far too exhaustive to run through right now, but I will say that from September of last year through to the Christmas break, there were a total 25 presentations made by Ebony and his handler or her handler. I can't recall if Ebony is male or female. Five hundred and twenty administration and staff and parents were able to view the presentation, and a total of 3,835 students were presented with this particular program. From January of this year, 2005, through to the end of the school year a further 21 presentations will take place, including at least 165 administrators and parents; 6,795 students will see the presentation this term.

It's unbelievable to me that for the small sum of \$5,000 and an incredible effort made by Constable Green he is able to take this presentation in the Edmonton area alone to well over 10,000 students. That is just a tremendous effort, Mr. Speaker, and I really believe that if the education component of this works, as it is hoped that it will, students will not only be educated in terms of the dangers of crystal meth in particular but drugs in general, certainly will have a better understanding of the capabilities of the dogs. My hope and the hope of Constable Green is that students will hence be reluctant to become involved in drugs and will be reluctant to bring drugs into the school.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to move adjournment on Bill 41.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head:

Private Bills Third Reading

Bill Pr. 1

Bow Valley Community Foundation Act

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane I'm pleased to move third reading of Bill Pr. 1, Bow Valley Community Foundation Act.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 1 read a third time]

Bill Pr. 2

Camrose Lutheran College Corporation Act

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I move third reading of Bill Pr. 2, Camrose Lutheran College Corporation Act.

This bill makes necessary changes as a consequence of the merger of Augustana University College with the University of Alberta to form the Augustana Faculty of the University of Alberta.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 2 read a third time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

**Bill Pr. 3
Medicine Hat Community Foundation
Amendment Act, 2005**

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move third reading of Bill Pr. 3, Medicine Hat Community Foundation Amendment Act, 2005.

This act was discussed in Private Bills Committee, and the amendment addresses and better reflects the mandate and the focus of this foundation.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 3 read a third time]

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

**Bill 40
Alberta Personal Income Tax
Amendment Act, 2005 (No. 2)**

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is the bill that I thought I was getting up to speak to before.

I'm pleased to move on behalf of the Minister of Finance Bill 40, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2005 (No. 2), which has been carried throughout in debate by the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

So I will relinquish my spot now and allow him to speak to the bill and its contents.

9:30

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak at third reading of Bill 40, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2005 (No. 2). This bill proposes amendments to the Alberta family employment tax credit that will enhance the credit available to low- and middle-income working families. This tax credit has two goals. The first is to provide some additional financial support for children in lower and middle-income families. The second objective is to support parents as they work.

One amendment in this bill would reduce the entry threshold to \$2,760 from \$6,500. This change will make low-income working families eligible for the program. Because the credit is phased in, lowering the threshold will also increase the amount many low-income working families receive.

As a further improvement to many Alberta families, amendments in this act will extend the credit to more children in the family. Under the new rules the third child will qualify for up to \$300 and the fourth for up to \$100. Currently only the first and second children qualify for the credit. We also propose to increase the maximum credit for the first child from \$500 to \$550. Overall, these changes will increase the benefits available to qualified working families.

Finally, to make sure these changes are protected over time, the Alberta family employment tax credit will be indexed to inflation.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, the changes proposed to the Alberta family employment tax credit will serve to expand the credit to more families, increase the amount available to many qualifying families, and index credits to inflation.

I urge all members to support Bill 40.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated when we were in committee stage on this bill, I really don't have any problems with it. I'm recommending to my caucus colleagues that we support it.

I did raise a couple of questions as to: why bother having an entry-level threshold of \$2,760 at all given that there may well be some workers who make less than that amount? If we're lowering it to that level, perhaps we should just dispense with an entry-level threshold at all and allow anybody who works and has any employment income to benefit to some extent from this tax credit.

Nevertheless, as the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake has described, it does certainly provide some further tax credit to families, recognizing those that have more than two children, and that is a good thing. I'm certainly going to, as I suggested, recommend to my caucus colleagues that we support this. With that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'll be very brief. We'll support this bill. It's a good step in the right direction. However, we must point out that it is only a partial solution.

It's hard to fathom the government's direction with support for families when they move in this direction on the one hand and on the other hand they retain the health care premiums, which hit families, especially low- and middle-income families, very hard. We see a real contradiction in the direction here and certainly would recommend to the government that if they really want to get serious about helping families financially in this province, they ought to get rid of the health care premium.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to commend the government for the indexing aspect. I hope that this represents a new trend and that we can see the indexing idea attached to other programs, like AISH and SFI and so on, so that programs wouldn't be so arbitrary but would gradually adjust as inflation increases through the years. So this is great. I'm glad this indexing aspect is here.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of Finance to close debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 40 read a third time]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, before we proceed with the next item before us, the chair is a little confused in looking at his watch and the clock before us. My time indicates 9:35. Is that correct?

An Hon. Member: Correct.

The Acting Speaker: Okay. We'll follow my watch. It seems like that clock has gone one hour ahead of time for some reason. There is an important vote that should happen at 10:45.

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

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

**Bill 38
Pharmacy and Drug Amendment Act, 2005**

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

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to address some of the issues that were raised in second reading of Bill 38. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre asked about future legislation regarding an expanded role for pharmacists in order to free up more doctors' time to care for patients. The scope of practice for pharmacists is dealt with separately under the health professions legislation for pharmacists in the Health Professions Act. On the other hand, the Pharmacy and Drug Act amendment removes the requirement for a specific amount of drugs to be stated on a prescription. This change allows more flexibility in the quantity the individual receives when the prescription is filled as long as it does not exceed the maximum amount stated on the prescription.

The member asked why institution pharmacies are not required to be licensed. This is a timely question. Institution pharmacies have not required a licence because of the limited scope of their operation. An institution pharmacy is only providing services to patients of the institution. An institution pharmacy that operates beyond the limited scope allowed under the act must be licensed.

It's important to note that while the act addresses the licensing and operation of pharmacies, individual pharmacists are regulated under separate legislation. The pharmacist in the institution pharmacy must be a licensed pharmacist and must adhere to the regulations, standards of practice, and code of ethics that apply to the members of the College of Pharmacists. Health and Wellness is working closely with the College of Pharmacists to ensure that the provisions for institution pharmacies maintain the requisite limitations.

In a few moments I will be introducing a House amendment to Bill 38 to more narrowly limit the definition of institution pharmacy.

Regarding self-regulated professions, it should be noted that none of the regulated health professions governed under the Health Professions Act exempt their members from regulation by their respective colleges. Bill 38 deals with the licensing of the pharmacy, not the individual pharmacist. The legislation provides the ability to set out the physical and operational requirements for a pharmacy. Mr. Chairman, when we look across Canada, the government is not aware of jurisdictions that allow licensed pharmacists to practise outside of their regulatory structures. Alberta is no different in this respect. All health professions in Alberta that are or will be governed under the Health Professions Act require their members to adhere to the regulation, including pharmacists.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview suggested regulating bulk shippers of crystal meth ingredients as an effective way to combat the use of crystal meth. Bulk shipments of products such as pseudoephedrine and ephedrine are being addressed at the federal level.

Another suggestion involved bulk purchasing of prescription medications used by health authorities in order to lower costs. In September 2004 first ministers announced the 10-year plan to strengthen health care. A key component was a desire to develop and implement a national pharmaceutical strategy. First ministers specifically identified a need to pursue purchasing strategies to obtain best prices for Canadians for drugs and vaccines. Bulk

purchasing is one strategy under consideration. In regard to a reference-based pricing strategy, again the 10-year plan to strengthen health care applies.

9:40

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview indicated that pharmaceutical education needs to be enhanced, especially in senior care. Mr. Chairman, the Alberta Management Committee on Drug Utilization is a multistakeholder committee that oversees the Alberta drug utilization program. The program includes activities that encourage optimal drug prescribing and use. These activities include drug utilization reviews to analyze drug use and behavioural change intervention to educate physicians/pharmacists on drug use options. Some of the behavioural change strategies include academic detailing, where a trained professional, often a pharmacist, will visit physicians to talk about specific drugs.

Another education piece is the recently implemented community patient safety initiative. The initiative involves pharmacists going over checklists as a type of risk assessment with certain patients who are receiving a new medication. By educating patients about all their medications and engaging them in discussions about their medication, the patients' health and safety through drug therapy will be enhanced.

I trust that this clarifies the points raised during second reading. I would now like to introduce a House amendment to Bill 38, and I believe that that has already been circulated. I previously noted that the questions on the scope of institutional pharmacies are timely. This is because I am proposing a related House amendment which will impact three sections of the Pharmacy and Drug Act.

First, subsection (1)(j)(v.i) will be repealed to exclude the possibility of the facility listed there operating an institutional pharmacy. This is appropriate as the amended definition of institution pharmacy allows for compounding, dispensing, and selling of all types of scheduled drugs. This change will not prevent these facilities from assisting their clients who are taking prescribed medication. The definition of "dispense" in the Government Organization Act does not include the administration of a drug. Therefore, this House amendment maintains the integrity of institution pharmacies.

The second change will repeal subsection (1)(j)(vii), which was designed to allow for any other facility "operated by or approved by the Minister of Health and Wellness" that may not otherwise be listed to have an institutional pharmacy. This clause is being removed to avoid the possibility that a private surgical facility that has been approved as such by the minister could operate an institutional pharmacy. This was clearly not the intent of the legislation as institution pharmacies are intended to be pharmacies operated and regulated by a regional health authority or other government agency. Also, the definition in section 4(4) of a patient of an institution pharmacy is more clearly defined to ensure that institution pharmacies only serve patients of the institution. Services to the general public will require the pharmacy to be licensed.

Finally, section 23.1(2) will be amended by striking out "giving a copy to" and substituting "serving a copy on." This change was recommended by the Legislative Review Committee of the Canadian Bar Association.

The Alberta College of Pharmacists has been consulted and supports this House amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I now move the amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the amendment that's being moved by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw shall be referred to as amendment A1.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to initially talk to amendment A1. I think that in general we are in agreement with this amendment, and I understand that there has been some communication between the hon. member and the Official Opposition health critic, so I'm going to be in favour of this amendment.

Maybe now is the time, or maybe when we go back to regular committee business would be the time, for a comment on licensing of institutional pharmacies because there is division on this issue and there is no consensus whether we should require institutional pharmacies to be licensed like regular community pharmacies, for example, and make them fall under the purview of the Alberta College of Pharmacists or whether this exemption should continue. Like I say, there is division in the profession, and there is division even in my own caucus. It's a subject for more discussion, I think. There is definitely a strong call for standardization and offering uniform standards of care. I think any reduction of the standard of the service offered is totally unacceptable.

So I'm going to talk a bit more about this in regular committee. I just wanted to highlight what I see as a very positive component of this amendment with respect to subsection (B)(viii), stipulating what is an institutional pharmacy. I commend the hon. sponsor of this amendment because this really offers clarity in that this facility or this institution has to be operated by the Crown and not a private provider. So pharmacies in private institutions will not be treated as institutional pharmacies, which is commendable.

To make it brief, I support this amendment, and I would encourage the other hon. members to do the same. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you again, Mr. Chairman. It is, of course, with extreme pride and pleasure that I rise today to participate in the regular debate on Bill 38, Pharmacy and Drug Amendment Act, 2005. As was previously expressed by my hon. colleague for Edmonton-Centre, the Official Opposition critic for Health and Wellness, our caucus is generally in favour of this bill because it was drafted in consultation with both the regulatory pharmacy body, the Alberta College of Pharmacists, or ACP, and the advocacy group, the Pharmacists Association of Alberta, or RxA. Very seldom does this government consult with the stakeholders, so this is definitely a welcome change.

I'm also in support of this bill because it really flows in tandem with Alberta Liberal policies that we shared with the people of this province during last November's election; namely, policy point 10, where we called for the restructuring of the health care workforce to free up physicians' time and take some stuff off the doctors' plates and let them focus only on what they can and should do. Pharmacists are trained and capable professionals, and now we're empowering them to perform more duties and accept more responsibility.

Further to that a bit was our policy point 22, calling for an enhanced pharmacare approach, and perhaps this will be coming our way soon too.

Pharmacists go through rigorous training in school. Our education is one of the most demanding out there. University of Alberta pharmacy graduates usually score the highest grades on the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada, PEBC, exams, and our professors and instructors are highly respected. Our graduates choose to practise in the community pharmacy setting, hospital or institutional pharmacy, the drug industry, or the military.

Pharmacists always rate as the number one professional that people feel comfortable talking to. Canadians say that the person they trust the most is their pharmacist – this is a survey conducted every year, Mr. Chairman – not their clergy, not their physician, and obviously not their lawyer. Their pharmacist is the number one trusted professional, and they feel he or she is the most approachable. I was an okay pharmacist. Actually, I still am, and I suspect that me being a good community pharmacist had a little something to do with my election success last November.

Pharmacists are required to abide by professional legislation and strict regulations. We also swear an oath and adhere to a comprehensive and strong code of ethics.

Furthermore, Mr. Chairman, a pharmacist never stops learning. After we graduate, we are required to keep up with current and new developments and protocols, check out new treatment modalities, and constantly improve our professional skills. We take courses by correspondence or on the Internet, and we attend seminars, lectures, and professional development conferences. We call that continuing education.

Pharmacists also subscribe to a large malpractice insurance policy. However, let me tell you, Mr. Chairman and all hon. colleagues in this Chamber, that very few lawsuits and claims were ever filed against Alberta pharmacists. This is mostly a self-policing sector, whose members take enormous pride in the work they do and the services they provide to their patients and their families. We perform our duties carefully and diligently out of a concern for public safety and adherence to the highest standards, not for fear of litigation or disciplinary action.

When I graduated in 1994, Mr. Chairman, I had a T-shirt that said on its back, "Pharmacists, pillars of society," spelled with an "e." Now, obviously this was meant to be a funny grad joke, but in reality pharmacists are pillars of society, spelled with an "a." I truly believe that.

9:50

Pharmacists are team players. We are sometimes the first line of defence and sometimes the last line. We get along very well with other health care providers and, obviously, with the patient and his or her family. Pharmacists have approached the government on numerous occasions urging it to recognize their role as essential, front-line health care providers and to allow them to exercise what they were trained to do. Pharmacists are not there to count pills, Mr. Chairman, or to simply lick and stick.

There is, unfortunately, a shortage of pharmacists in Alberta specifically but all over Canada in general. Older pharmacists are retiring, fewer are graduating, and a good percentage of the new grads go to the United States. At one point, Mr. Chairman, we may have a crisis on our hands.

Many issues are important when we're talking about pharmacy services. I'm cognizant of the time and the constraints, and I will try to briefly touch on just a few.

This bill appears to broaden the licence categories to include facilities such as compounding and repackaging centres, and I think it's high time we did. Although those establishments existed a few years ago, their numbers and roles have significantly grown over the years. They're increasingly becoming a factor in the distribution and supply of pharmaceuticals and medications, and there is definitely a need to align them more closely with the rest of the industry.

Also, this bill attempts to create an avenue of appeal and review if for some reason the registrar of the college will not issue a licence to a pharmacy. I think this is a healthy move. Registering the drug wholesalers is also a positive move.

Now, briefly, previously I talked about the two pharmacy organizations we have in this province, one being the licensing and discipline arm and the other being the advocacy, or representative, arm. In my humble opinion, as I expressed in my response to the amendment, I think institutional pharmacies ought to be included in the requirement to get licensed just exactly as a community pharmacy would. They're currently outside the purview of the College of Pharmacists, and this has to change. My approach is one of standardization. The same standard of care has to be offered, and the same expectations have to be met. Anything less would be unacceptable. This is a point of view that I am particularly passionate about, and I know many people out there share this sentiment.

Expanding the scope of pharmacy practice should not be seen in any way as stepping on other people's or other professionals' turf or potentially disrupting the delivery of health care services. In fact, allowing pharmacists to recognize their full potential would be a healthy move. They're definitely underutilized.

Pharmacists have advocated for so long that the province allow them some prescribing authority, with proper training and evaluation. It's no secret that pharmacists are drug experts and are well versed in disease management. The profession wants to work with other front-line professionals to streamline and facilitate patient care as it pertains to drug therapy. Safeguards will be in place, and proper training and follow-up will be offered to those pharmacists whose names are going to appear on the clinical register.

Pharmacists have also requested the capacity to administer drugs by injection, which in my view is not an unreasonable move. Things like insulin or vaccines, for example, are given by injection. Again, I believe qualified pharmacists will have no problem administering such drugs in such a format.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I think we support this bill. In the future – and I hope in the not too distant future – we could come back to the Legislature and talk about issues like reimbursement for cognitive services, the practice of Internet and cross-border pharmacy, immediately making printed prescriptions mandatory, and possibly even the relationship between Alberta Health and Wellness and an agency like Alberta Blue Cross. These are questions that are on my mind, and I would hope to discuss them later.

But for the purposes of Bill 38 we are in support. I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I would appreciate clarification as to who is permitted to administer medication, particularly in the case of long-term care facilities. It is my perception that the level of recognized health care professional permitted to give out medications has been reduced from registered nurses with a four-year degree to a certified licensed practical nurse, who has received considerably less medical training. I would like assurance from this government that life-and-death responsibility for patient well-being in the form of administering medication will not be reduced or further downloaded in the interest of cutting costs, warehousing rather than care-housing seniors in long-term care.

We are very aware of the pharmaceutical mix-ups that have led to deaths in considerably more closely controlled hospital environments, as was the case with the Calgary Foothills. If deaths and mix-ups can occur in those considerably more highly regulated environments, my concern is for seniors in long-term care.

The Auditor General pointed out the access to the medicinal carts and felt that that should be more closely monitored. To me this is a very scary circumstance. I'm hoping members from the government

who have proposed this pharmaceutical clarification bill would respond to these concerns.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just very quickly on this bill. I don't know how it fits in, but it may well. We've had a lot of discussion about the problems with crystal meth – I think it's Bill 204 – where there was some debate about how to stop it before it gets into the hands of people.

It's been suggested to us and I think to the government, and I wondered if as part of this – I think the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors is recommending striking at the source; that is, regulating bulk shippers of crystal meth inputs as an effective way of combatting the crystal meth epidemic. It may be. I don't know. I mean, I don't know enough about it, but that's a suggestion that they feel may be a better way to control crystal meth than trying to do it through the retail way, which could be quite messy. I know it's not specifically part of this bill, but I would hope from this bill, then – whether it would work or not, I don't know, but at least if that suggestion could get back to the government to take a look at it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The clauses of Bill 38 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 14

Student Financial Assistance Amendment Act, 2005

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to be able to get up and speak, I think relatively briefly, in committee to Bill 14, the Student Financial Assistance Amendment Act, 2005. It is, as the Minister of Advanced Education mentioned when he introduced the bill in first reading, really just housekeeping with respect to items that have been left over from the past, so there is not a great deal to talk about in this bill.

As we go through it clause by clause, on this side of the House we have essentially the same problems with it that we did in second reading. That is that the minister wishes to remove a referral to categories of students, purportedly to provide additional flexibility for the minister to adjust or set limits to respond to individual cases or extenuating circumstances. He also wants to change the lifetime loan limit definition, to move it from what he has described as a sort of revolving line of credit or outstanding principal amount of loans owed to a simple cap on lifetime loans.

I want to speak to the second part first. That really references part of section 17, which would delete subsection (2): "A student is not eligible for a loan if that loan would cause the outstanding principal amount of loans owed by the student to exceed the amount estab-

lished under subsection (1)(b) for the category in which that student falls." Now, I know that the minister wants to remove reference to categories in the bill, and it may seem that I'm putting the cart before the horse in speaking to this one first, but I think this is an important issue that we do need to discuss in this House.

10:00

We've touched – and we've done it, in fact, here tonight in discussion of Motion 509 – on the concept of lifelong learning and how that has become an integral part of our society and will be going forward. That means for many people, Mr. Chair, that they will be returning to resume their postsecondary education at some point in their future, perhaps at a number of points in their future, and in order for them to do that and take full advantage of it, we feel that they need the most flexible access possible to the system. That access becomes less flexible the moment that you change the regulation and change the rule, change the definition of a lifetime loan limit from an essentially outstanding principal amount of loans owed to a cap on lifetime loans.

In essence, one might almost go so far as to say that it encourages students to default on their loans now because they're only going to be punished for paying them back later if they want to return to school. Why should we penalize someone who has taken out student loans, paid them back or substantially paid them back, and now wants to go back and ask for another student loan to continue their studies or to resume their studies? I mean, certainly out there in the real world, that we ultimately want them to take their part in at some point, we would not prevent them, if they had good credit and had paid off their past loans, from going back to the bank and getting another loan. This is not a situation where the government is giving money away, Mr. Chair. This is a situation where the government is loaning it and expecting it to be paid back. So why would you not allow a student who has been diligent in paying back their loans to go back to the bank of the people, as it were, and borrow more?

What the current law does is technically allow students to do exactly that because it's based on the outstanding principal model of lifetime loan limits, but the ministry for some time now has been practising the more restrictive practice of modelling it on lifetime loan limits and so technically has been breaking its own law. So the purpose, as we see it, of this amendment is to bring the law in line with the ministry's current illegal practice. We think that's putting the cart before the horse. We think that's getting it backwards, and we think we're moving in the wrong direction.

On the issue of categories and deleting references to categories of students as the basis for establishing loan limits or as the basis of something which the Lieutenant Governor in Council can make regulations on, we're told that this is purportedly designed to provide additional flexibility for the minister to go above and beyond if the case allows it and grant in special cases higher awards, that sort of thing. It seems to us that there's no need to do this. So again we would ask why it's being proposed to be done. There's no need to remove the categories of students.

Under student loan limits part 1, section 2(4) this ministerial discretion exists. It exists now, so there's no reason to make the choice. It says:

In the case of a student enrolled in a masters, doctorate or other professional program, the annual loan limits set out in subsections (1) to (3) are subject to any increase the Minister makes on a case-by-case basis where, in the opinion of the Minister, there are extenuating circumstances that warrant higher annual loan limits.

It seems, really, as though the underlying reason for these proposed amendments that would delete references to categories of student are simply to provide the minister with more ministerial control without any specified guidelines. Ministerial discretion: this government likes to use it as though it was a royal prerogative.

Specific rules and regulations, Mr. Chairman, help establish accountability. We've made that point repeatedly during this session of the Legislature when we have been talking about agenda items on the Minister of Advanced Education's file. Specific rules and regulations, specific guidelines, specific how-to manuals help establish accountability and transparency, yet every time we bring it up, the minister responds that they're too restrictive, too proscriptive, that they tie his hands too much, and the implication is that they get in the way of progress.

Well, Mr. Chairman, we see things differently on this side of the House, as you well know, and we think that when progress, even if it moves a little more slowly, can be done in a way that the people in a democracy can track and view and witness and hold their government members accountable for, that's better progress. That's real progress. That's progress in the interests of the people.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll take my seat at that point.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. A problem we face every Wednesday in Public Accounts is that this government changes ministers as rapidly as the Pony Express changed horses. Therefore, at about the time when a minister is starting to potentially get a handle on their responsibilities, they are changed. Whether this makes it easier for the new minister to duck previous historical guilt and plead either ignorance or innocence remains to be seen.

I don't believe that the sole responsibility for loan approval in any one year or, worse, during a student's lifetime should be in the hands of a transient, supposedly omniscient minister. The image I see is that of a Roman emperor seated on his throne high above the amphitheatre deciding whether or not to grant the student a loan, thumbs-up, or sending him to the lions, thumbs-down. This is a place where a committee rather than an individual should have responsibility in the same manner as we need a citizens committee in the case of law enforcement.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Very briefly, just on the one aspect of it. I'm trying to get a handle on why the bill clarifies that a student has a maximum student loan amount for their entire lifetime. I understand that in the previous bill the wording was inexact and could imply that the maximum loan amount was not over a student's lifetime but at any one time. The Member for Calgary-Currie alluded to this. I don't quite understand this. I can understand if there's a person that is taking out the loan and runs a huge amount over and doesn't pay it back. My understanding of this is that if the student has reached their lifetime loan limit and pay off their debt and wait to take out more loans, they may not do that with this legislation. I don't understand why we would do that if their credit is good.

One of the things that we know about lifetime learning – and we know that people don't go into jobs now for 30, 35 years. They have to be retrained constantly. Many people have families, and it seems to me that if their credit rating is good and they've paid off loans in the past, why should that be held against them in the future? Maybe there's a reason for it. It's not evident to me, Mr. Chairman, why that would be. I hope that perhaps the minister would indicate if I'm wrong about this or, if I'm not, why they see the necessity to do this.

I really want to stress, as we talk about education, that people are going to have to keep going back more to the institutions. They're

going to have to be retrained a number of times. Many of these people will not be young people; they'll be people later on in life. It would be nice, if we need them in the economy, to at least give them that access to the loans. If they don't need the money, well, perhaps there's a way to come at it that way, but I'm sort of interested why we would penalize people who pay off their loan and then may need some help later on if their credit rating is good.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10:10

[The clauses of Bill 14 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report Bill 38 and Bill 14.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mrs. Mather: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 14. The committee reports the following bill with some amendments: Bill 38. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

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

Bill 41
Appropriation Act, 2005
(continued)

[Adjourned debate May 16: Mr. Ducharme]

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 41, the Appropriation Act, 2005, at second reading. This is an interesting budget from this government, I must say. It is a little different than the ones we've been used to since the beginning of the current regime in 1993.

I would start with a quotation from a columnist at one of the local newspapers in our city. He says: Alberta's new fiscal plan is not what you'd expect from a supposedly right-wing Conservative government that froths at the mouth over same-sex marriage and smoking bans; it is not a rootin' tootin', knee-jerkin', tax-cutting, dividend-giving budget; it is a spending budget; this year the Alberta

government expects to spend almost \$26 billion; that's \$3 billion more than the budget estimate from 2004 and a record for Alberta; drunken sailors must be on the Finance department payroll, or Liberals; welcome aboard. [interjection] Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford says tax-and-spend Conservatives. I find it odd that they're doing a lot of the things that the Liberals have been proposing for some time, and when they do it, they get called tax and spend.

[Mr. Mitzel in the chair]

If I can say something positive about the budget just for starters, it is beginning to address some spending priorities that have been woefully underfunded over the past 10 or so years. I think that without the excuse of the debt anymore the government is very hard-pressed not to do that given the enormous wealth that's flowing into the provincial coffers from oil and gas revenues.

Now, the minister has continued the unfortunate practice of understating, although not as much as her predecessor, to be sure, the projections for oil and gas prices and the impact on the budget. But the fact remains that given realistic energy projections, the government is still lowballing those, and the result is that we're continuing with the practice of large, unbudgeted surpluses. I think this is not a good way to deal with it. I know that certain programs, most notably the postsecondary endowment fund, depend on unbudgeted surpluses, but I think it would be far better and more prudent to accurately project revenues and then budget certain funds for that program and all the rest of the programs. I think that it is far more honest and straightforward, and the public knows clearly where they stand.

The government has again failed to keep its promise on property taxes. That promise was made when Dr. West was the finance minister, and his proposal at that time was to cap the total amount of revenue that the province received for property tax and allow it to decline over time relative to the rest of the provincial resources. That promise has not been kept. There's been all kinds of double-talk about, you know, capping mill rates and so on, but we all know that the property base has gone up. There's new property, and existing real property, of course, is worth more than it was. That trend is going to continue, so the province is going to continue to cash in. We believe that that area of property taxes should be vacated for municipal governments in this province.

Again, the government has failed to eliminate health care premiums. It's taken a positive step in the sense of eliminating them for seniors. But we don't understand why that's the kind of taxation that the government seems to be committed to, given that it's the same amount for families regardless of their income unless they meet the low income cut-off. It's flatter than a flat tax, Mr. Speaker. Rich or poor, you pay the same amount, and that's not fair taxation. Of course, we've said repeatedly that this has got nothing to do with health care; it flows directly into general revenues. So it shouldn't even be called health care premiums, in our view.

Now, there has been more spending on education, but as we learned today, the government is not interested in doing a comprehensive plan for postsecondary education, so we don't really know where that spending is going to go. We certainly don't know what the government is going to do with respect to its tuition policy. The one year so-called freeze is less than adequate and may force students to face a double increase next year. When the Premier talks about an entrepreneurial tuition policy, Mr. Speaker, I get very, very concerned indeed.

Infrastructure. There is additional infrastructure spending, but of course, as we repeatedly pointed out in the election, the formula

disadvantages the city of Edmonton relative to other parts of the province. Certainly, an increase in municipal infrastructure is welcome. Nevertheless, it comes at the expense of infrastructure for hospitals and schools, both of whose capital budgets are actually reduced in this budget, and that is a great concern, especially given the state of many of our inner-city schools. We think that the government should invest in those schools rather than forcing school boards to close them.

10:20

There are some issues that I want to raise relative to priorities. I notice, Mr. Speaker, that other provincial governments are in the process of wrapping up negotiations with the federal government over child care. Those provinces are going to receive significant amounts of money. Where is Alberta on this? Alberta is dragging its feet. Time is running out on this government in Ottawa, and the chance for the province to make a deal with this government is running out. As bad as this federal government is, I can only imagine the lack of generosity of a Harper-led Conservative government should the country be unfortunate enough to elect them as a federal government.

AISH has been increased, but people are still receiving less than they did in 1993 on an inflation basis.

The government is still spending, in one of the most glaring of misplaced priorities, \$45 million a year to subsidize the horse-racing industry. The government comes up with all kinds of reasons for this: you know, all the people that work in the industry that wouldn't otherwise have jobs and so on. Well, you could say that about a dozen other industries, Mr. Speaker. You could say that about the fast-food industry. You could talk about that in terms of the industry of cleaning homes. You could talk about it when it comes to agricultural workers in general. There are all kinds of areas where people receive poor pay. I don't think that much of this money finds its way down to the people that work as grooms and so on. This is a direct subsidy to wealthy agricultural producers that produce racing horses. It's a subsidy for an industry that stands in sharp contrast to the government's avowed aim of eliminating subsidies to business, and it really needs to go.

The government, Mr. Speaker, continues to get huge revenues from gambling, and very few of those revenues are returned, in fact, to addiction and helping people who have a problem with gambling. A small percentage of problem gamblers have been shown to produce a very significant percentage of that revenue, and the government, not to put too fine a point on it, is directly benefiting from the addictions of people in our society who may be losing jobs or their family as a result of their addiction and not doing much about it.

It's good to see that the government is increasing spending for police. The NDP made this an issue in the election, and we campaigned for 500 additional police officers. The government has come up with funding for 200 but all in rural areas served by the RCMP. I want to stress again that we believe that municipal police forces need support; they need direction to deal with the issues. The number of murders that have taken place in Edmonton, the gang fighting that's going on that we read about almost every day in the newspaper are unacceptable. The Edmonton police, the Calgary police, and other municipal police services need more support, and we need direction from the government with respect to community policing.

I think about the shooting that took place at a house in Edmonton. Apparently, the police had been back and back and back. That's a textbook definition of what's wrong with traditional policing. I heard Doug McNally, the former chief of police, on this subject

many times. He talked about the fact that 80 per cent of the calls for service went to about 10 per cent of the places, and they were repeat calls and repeat calls. They'd come in, and they'd arrest, and they'd prosecute. Maybe they'd convict and maybe they wouldn't, but they'd keep going back to the same place instead of solving the problem and asking, "What's the problem, and how can we make this problem go away once and for all?" so that they don't have to keep going back to that location.

Community policing is the correct approach, in my view. We need stronger leadership from this government with respect to promoting community policing as a way to solve problems rather than just reacting to them over and over again.

Mr. Speaker, we haven't had an increase in arts spending in this province for years and years, and I think that this is probably one of the most glaring deficiencies of this budget. There needs to be a greater commitment to the arts. I think we've seen in centres around the province that the business community has gotten involved in a big way with the arts. Municipal councils have gotten involved in a big way with the arts. The one that's not on board is the provincial government. They need to pay more attention to arts spending. Arts is more than just a cultural activity; it's one of the most effective economic development tools and job creation tools that is available to a community. This provincial government needs to do quite a bit more in that respect.

I just want to talk a little bit about some ideas that the NDP opposition are proposing that we would like to see the government deal with. One would be a revolving green fund. The idea here is that by an initial investment of, say, a billion dollars different individuals, homeowners, or municipalities, hospitals, school boards, postsecondary institutions, and so on would be able to borrow from the fund and invest in energy-saving technology and bring down their costs. The drop in their costs, the reduction in their costs, could be used to fund the repayment of the loan. When the loan is fully repaid, the fund is whole again and can be used for more projects, and any ongoing savings that accrue to the institution or the homeowner or the business just come off their bottom line. So it's a good idea, one that requires an initial investment but not large-scale, ongoing expenditures by the government.

Bringing down the cost of health care is an important priority for all, Mr. Speaker. Instead of experimenting with privatization, which has been proven to drive up costs, it might make more sense to set up a pharmaceutical savings agency, as has been done in New Zealand, and use the negotiating power of the entire health care system in this province to negotiate arrangements through bulk purchasing of pharmaceuticals and, of course, use generic drugs wherever that can be accommodated. This approach has made New Zealand alone among the major industrialized countries to have declining expenditures on pharmaceuticals, and I recommend it very much to the government.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with pleasure and interest that I rise tonight to speak to the appropriations bill in second reading. It's an opportunity to touch on a number of points, I guess, in one session, that you couldn't do as we went through the estimates department by department.

I want to start it off by reminding you of an old bumper sticker from the mid '80s that said: "Please, God, let there be another oil boom, and I promise not to bleep it all away again." There was another word in there for "bleep," but I think *Hansard* would prefer bleep, so I'll use bleep. My colleague from Edmonton-Glenora in

his past life as a clergyman might have said something along the lines of: God answers prayer; it's just not that God always gives you the answer that you want. God may have answered the prayer on that bumper sticker. We have a boom. We have another oil boom. But it seems that we haven't learned the lesson that we thought we had back in 1985. We're bleeping it all away again, and there's plenty of evidence of that right in here.

We have, I think, half a dozen, or close to, multibillion dollar ministries: Advanced Education, \$1.582 billion; Education, \$2.726 billion; Health and Wellness, \$8.973 billion; Infrastructure and Transportation, \$3.463 billion; Seniors and Community Supports, \$1.582 billion; and then under Gaming, of course, we have lottery fund payments of \$1.2 billion. In total we have spending of \$26 billion, \$3 billion more than last year.

10:30

I want to be fair about this, and I want to give the government the benefit of the doubt in terms of saying: lookit, there certainly is plenty to spend the taxpayers' money on in this province. There's plenty that has been neglected over the last dozen years of this government's blinders-on, single-minded obsession with paying off the debt, with paying down the mortgage to zero while the pipes were leaking and the roof was leaking and the handle on the toilet was broken so that you had to jiggle it to get the stupid thing to flush, and so on and so forth.

I guess that if a house were a province, those would mostly be infrastructure items. In an ordinary house you'd call it renovation. Here we call it the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transportation. That explains their budget for expense and equipment/inventory purchases of \$3.463 billion and another \$699 million on capital investment. Infrastructure and Transportation is not a bad place to start, I guess, in looking at this budget as sort of representative of some of the things that are problematic here.

I quote from the business plan for Infrastructure and Transportation: "Much of Alberta's infrastructure is aging, resulting in maintenance and rehabilitation needs for the provincial highway network, water/wastewater management and facility infrastructure managed or supported by this Ministry," and so on and so forth. You know, when you read that, the first thing that comes to mind is: yeah, and I wonder why that is.

I'll refer to another quote in here: "Working with municipalities and stakeholders to improve traffic safety and build a modern infrastructure in support of Alberta's social, environmental and economic goals is part of Making Alberta the Best Place to Live, Work and Visit." Now, parenthetically, I find that a strange pillar: "Making Alberta the Best Place to Live, Work and Visit." I mean, what happened to play? Aren't you ever allowed to play in Alberta? You can visit, but you can't have any fun.

You know, why that caught my eye is because the first time I came to Alberta was as a visitor crossing the border from Saskatchewan, and the first thing I noticed was how good the roads are here, were here in 1985, compared to Saskatchewan and Manitoba and northern Ontario. You know what? We're still driving on 1985 roads. Yes, the Trans-Canada has been twinned all the way, and it wasn't in 1985; I'll grant you that. So there has been highway construction in this province, but the point is that we have not – we have not – kept up our infrastructure.

We have not kept the roof from leaking because we've been so darned obsessed with paying down the mortgage. We've been so darned obsessed with paying down the mortgage that our kids don't have schools to go to. We've been so darned obsessed with paying down the mortgage – and I'll clarify that for a skeptical Minister of Education – that our kids do not have schools to go to in the

neighbourhoods and the communities where they live: 28 communities in the city of Calgary do not have public elementary schools because this government wouldn't fund them. The minister needs to know that denial ain't only a river, Mr. Speaker.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

We're short of hospitals and health care facilities, we're short of long-term care facilities, and, far worse than that, as we learned from the Auditor General's report last week, we are short of the people to staff those long-term care facilities to make sure that the seniors, who this government boasted in the throne speech built this province, you know, actually have decent care in their twilight years, actually are entitled to more than one bath a week or even less than that if their caregiver happens to be out with the flu that week.

Mr. R. Miller: How many a week?

Mr. Taylor: One. One bath a week.

I wonder how many government members – this is a rhetorical question. They don't have to answer this because I don't really need that much personal detail. How many government members could get by on one bath a week? Well, if you stay the course that this government has been on, they'll find out soon enough.

You know, there's a great deal of money being spent in this budget, but the question is: is it being spent wisely? Some of it is being spent on a near-emergency basis to take care of the problems that have developed on this government's watch while they've been so darned obsessed with paying down the debt. When I look at this \$26 billion worth of spending – and no, I'm not going to say anything about tax-and-spend Conservatives because that would only prompt the leader of the third party to make some comment about Liberal finances. Then I'd have to retaliate that, well, New Democrats aren't really off the hook when it comes to taxing and spending either. Of course, they're proud of it.

An Hon. Member: Your horse is already out of the barn.

Mr. Taylor: Yeah, but I didn't get \$45 million for that race horse.

The question is whether this money is being spent wisely, and that goes to, I think, a fundamental problem here that is exhibited by the fact that we have here a government that will spend \$45 million on race horses but doesn't increase funding for the arts. In the context of a \$9 billion Department of Health and Wellness, in the context of a nearly \$3 billion Ministry of Education, in the context of an over \$3 billion Infrastructure and Transportation department, this is not big money. All the arts community in the province of Alberta wants is \$45 million, the same amount of money they're giving race horses.

The question is this. When you look at Bill 41, the Appropriation Act, 2005, where's the leadership? We need stronger leadership. The leader of the third party, if I'm quoting him correctly, said that we need stronger leadership in policing issues. Well, I'd go further than that, and I'd submit that we need stronger leadership, period. We need somebody on the government side of this House to show some leadership, to show some vision, to show some ability to plan beyond next Wednesday, even to show up, even to consider the possibility that we live in an era of unparalleled opportunity if you would just take it off autopilot and come up with a plan to invest the surpluses.

I'll cut the government this much slack. In an economy based on volatile commodity prices for a nonrenewable resource, I don't believe that you can always adequately project what your revenues

are going to be versus your expenses, and I don't believe that you can ever get to the point where you don't have some unbudgeted, unplanned surpluses. Commodity prices are like that. Sometimes they'll spike. Sometimes you will pull in a lot more money than you intended when you sat down and wrote the budget, although I'll grant you that this government routinely lowballs its estimates for resource revenue. But I'll cut them some wiggle room. I'll cut them some slack. I'll say that there can be some unbudgeted surpluses.

I don't have nearly as much of a problem with them lowballing their revenue estimates and, therefore, the surplus we'll end up with at the end of the fiscal year as I do with the fact that they don't have a plan for that money. They could take it and invest it: 35 per cent into the heritage savings trust fund each and every year. It's not enough to inflation-proof the heritage savings trust fund; you have to grow the thing. You have to grow it so that it produces the kind of income that sustains our prosperity after the oil and gas is gone or, in my opinion more likely, after the rest of the world loses interest in our oil and gas because they've passed it by for alternative energy sources.

Another 35 per cent year in and year out – not \$250 million producing \$11 million a year in investable income and a promise of \$5 billion; you know, I'm from Missouri on that one, so show me – into a postsecondary education endowment fund; another 25 per cent into a capital account, a predictable, sustainable fund for rebuilding the infrastructure we've neglected in this province; and a further 5 per cent into arts, culture, the humanities, the social sciences, an endowment fund for that, up to half a billion dollars.

10:40

You know, Mr. Speaker, that's the Liberal plan, and of course I'd be naive to expect the Conservatives to adopt a Liberal plan. Oh, wait a minute. No, they've stolen other of our ideas in the past, so there might be hope for this one yet. It is a plan. It is a vision, and it envisions a long-term future in which prosperity and quality of life and quality of the environment can be sustained and maintained in this province. It envisions life beyond next Tuesday or next Wednesday or next quarter or next election.

It's a plan, and that's what this province needs now more than ever because we have the wherewithal, we have the means to execute the plan for the good of all Albertans far into the future. In order to execute the plan, first we need the plan. They talk about the 20-year strategic plan. They talk it; they don't walk the talk. Not yet. Not in this budget. This is just throwing money at stuff, Mr. Speaker, and it's not good enough.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. My intention is to in some cases highlight, in other cases lowlight some of the portions of this budget. I know right off the bat that I'm going to get in trouble with the hon. member of the New Democratic Party for suggesting that in certain budgets the spending is not sufficient.

I'll begin with the Infrastructure and Transportation budget: \$9.2 billion over three years isn't enough. It doesn't bring us back to the pre-cut, 1994 level. It doesn't repair the public schools. It builds few new schools. It doesn't replace the hospitals that were closed in Calgary or in the rural areas. Fort McMurray is still \$1 billion short

even after the \$500 million and change announced last week. Forty-four per cent of roads are projected to be in poor to fair condition by 2008.

This budget doesn't begin to cover the 15,000 newly promised postsecondary seats, again for 2008. In public education schools continue to be closed on a 4 to 1 ratio as opposed to being opened. Temporary, portable, interim solutions have become permanent with this government.

When it comes to parks and protected areas, trails and recreational support infrastructure will not be restored to their pre-1994 cutback level. The needed number of conservation officers won't be hired, nor will conservation offices be opened. Public land continues to be sold rather than preserved.

In the case of the environment, by comparison to the Energy ministry the Environment ministry has a minuscule budget. It cannot protect or even enact it's Water for Life strategy. Oil and gas exploration, in particular methane, has been ratcheted up to a point where water conservation and quality are jeopardized. The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board does not have the staff to adequately and accurately approve new exploration, hold public hearings, or see that orphan wells are properly retired and maintained.

The ministries of seniors and Health and Wellness don't have sufficient staff to inspect all of their facilities on a yearly basis, as was pointed out by the Auditor General's report on long-term care facilities.

The Ministry of Finance continues to permit the annual raiding of the heritage trust fund rather than allowing it to accumulate, as is the case with Norway.

As has been previously pointed out, AISH recipients receive basically a minimal thumb rather than a hand up.

Since 1994 the government ministries have bloated from 17 to 24. In order to save money, we need to put some of the ministries on a crash diet, beginning with the elimination of the Ministry of Restructuring and Government Efficiency. This ministry could lead the way in efficiency and accountability as well as allowing millions to be transferred to other ministries by simply dissolving itself while reverting its responsibilities to Government Services rather than duplicating them.

I also believe money could be saved and efficiencies realized by doing away with the ministry of infrastructure and placing infrastructure responsibility within the other ministries . . .

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, but in accordance with Standing Order 61(3) the chair is required to put the question to the House on the appropriation bill on the Order Paper for second reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 41 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:46 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

