

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, March 23, 2006**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 06/03/23

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Let us keep ever mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work let us find strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions. First of all, it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly 25 employees of the personnel administration office who are here on a public service orientation tour. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, it's also my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 65 grade 6 students from the Gibbons school. They are accompanied by parents and teachers. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I'd like them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Eric Oddleifson, his wife, Collette, and son Evan. Collette is Evan's homeroom teacher. He says that he's a 90 per cent student. They also wrote a letter to the Premier, and I'll just read the last sentence. It says, "I urge you [Mr. Premier] to do your job and keep our water clean and keep us safe." Would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. I am pleased to introduce to you and members of the Assembly three guests seated in the public gallery. They are Reg Basken and his two grandchildren, Reg and Kimberley Barry. Reg, of course, is a long-time labour leader in this country. He was the president of the national Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, a former president of the AFL. He's active in many charitable organizations, such as the United Way and the Edmonton Community Foundation. Most importantly, he's president of the Alberta NDP. His grandchildren, Kimberley and Reg Barry, are visiting Edmonton on their school break from Prince George. I see they're standing. I'd ask that they receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

I'm also delighted today to introduce to you and members of the Assembly Grant McLean. Grant has served as a senior manager with the government of Alberta in the Department of the Solicitor

General and Public Security and was also a former aide-de-camp to the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. He is an officer in the Order of Military Merit and is a recent recipient of an Alberta centennial medal for his extensive work in our community. Grant is also the former mayor of Airdrie. He is seated in the public gallery. I'd ask that you give him the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

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

Endowment Funds

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Conservative government has borrowed heavily against Alberta's future by spending virtually all of the natural resource revenue it takes in each year. The Official Opposition has been leading the charge for a greater emphasis on savings. Even the Premier spoke last September of new endowment funds within a matter of months. My first question is to the Minister of Environment. Why has an environmental endowment fund, critically needed to address water and other issues, simply evaporated into thin air?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, quite to the contrary. One thing about this government is that any new idea, such as the hon. member has mentioned, the environmental endowment – I want to say to members here: do we support the environment, ladies and gentlemen? It is very obvious to me that an environmental endowment is a new idea, a new idea that needs to be fed, that needs to be nurtured so that we will make it a reality, and that's exactly what this government is doing.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to see the line in the budget that addresses that one.

My next question is to the Minister of Advanced Education. Why has this government chosen to completely neglect last year's flagship legislation by not committing one single penny to the access to the future fund?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you. This government last year indicated in a stellar way through Bill 1 and through the throne speech that we were going to put \$5 billion into endowments for the future: half a billion dollars into the Alberta heritage medical research fund, half a billion dollars into the Alberta ingenuity fund, a billion dollars into the heritage scholarship fund, and \$3 billion into the access to the future fund. That access to the future fund has already generated significant interest in Albertans and others, contributing back to postsecondary education and advanced education in this province. Mr. Speaker, \$750 million has been put into that fund, which will contribute \$45 million this year to match those contributions; \$250 million has been put into the heritage scholarship fund; \$200 million has been put into the ingenuity fund. So we've made a huge step forward on that. Yes, of course, I'm pressing for more and pressing for more earlier. Our Premier has indicated that within three years that access to the future fund would be fully funded. One year has gone past. We've got two more years to get that done, and I think we're on track to do it.

Dr. Taft: My third question, Mr. Speaker, is to the Minister of

Finance. What has happened to a social sciences endowment fund, crucial to addressing children's needs?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we've made a commitment of some \$5 billion to endowments, and we do intend to fully fund those. It would be perhaps imprudent to discuss another endowment, as important as that endowment is. We have made a commitment to do that, but at this point we're making our commitment to the funds we have. The hon. Minister of Advanced Education mentioned a number of them: the medical research endowment, another \$200 million to that plus more coming.

Mr. Speaker, the opposition very conveniently ignores the fact that we have done a debt repayment of \$22.7 billion over this time period, saving \$1.5 billion in debt servicing. That's where part of the funds have gone. He conveniently forgets all of the initiatives that we've made in health, education, advanced education to move this province forward. Why don't we just tell the whole story?

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

Unbudgeted Surplus

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Spending of oil and gas revenues in this province continues to rise dramatically as this government becomes increasingly reliant on nonrenewable resource revenues. Since 2004 we've seen an increase in this spending from \$3.5 billion a year to \$5.3 billion a year. It's an addiction, and it's a trend that is clearly unsustainable. My question is to the Minister of Finance. In this time of unprecedented boom why is this government increasing nonrenewable resource revenue spending instead of investing the funds so that they become permanent?

1:40

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, again, I think the hon. member discounts and ignores completely the fact that we put \$1 billion in the heritage fund in the third quarter. We have another \$1 billion going in in this budget. That is a permanent increase to that fund. He also conveniently forgets that we just gave a 16 per cent increase to Advanced Education: I'm sure he would rather not have had that. A 7.7 per cent increase to Health: maybe we shouldn't have done that. A 5.1 per cent increase to Education: maybe we shouldn't have done that. And \$13.5 billion for capital projects: maybe we didn't need any of those. It's easy to sit on the other side of the House and come up with these types of questions but absolutely no solutions, no answers. Spend more, quit spending: the contradiction is quite amazing.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, we do have an answer, and it's our own surplus policy.

My question to the Treasurer: given that this government clearly lacks direction for the future of this province, why doesn't it do the right thing and adopt a sustainable policy, the Alberta Liberal policy for surplus investments?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I suppose that we could have done that this year. We'd have had no increase for health. We'd have had no increase for advanced education. We'd have had no increase for education. We'd have had no increase for children. We'd have had no increase for safer communities, for a better court system. We could have done that. What we've said instead is that we will save.

We will spend wisely. We no longer have a debt, the only province in Canada that can boast that, probably the only place in North America that can boast that. That's all conveniently forgotten in this discussion.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. My final question, to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation: given that this government is not endowing capital spending, how does the minister expect to fund repairs of potholes and roads and public buildings when the oil and gas run out?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we have a capital account of \$13.5 billion. That's dedicated to new postsecondary education facilities here, new health facilities across the province, new postsecondary, in fact, across the province. It's to better roads, including beginning of the twinning of highway 63. I want to point out to the hon. member that our capital plan is three times the size of any capital plan in any province in Canada today.

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

Income Support

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. AISH and PDD in the Seniors and Community Supports department were increased in yesterday's budget. [interjections] Good thing. Good thing. But in Alberta Works, under the human resources department, funds for people in transition and people not expected to work were cut. These are Albertans who will not benefit from health care premium changes. These are the poorest of the poor and those trying to break free of the welfare cycle. A question to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: with earnings supplements for the working poor cut 19 per cent and health benefit funding cut 16 per cent, is the minister telling our working poor to expect less?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, of course, it is unfortunate that anyone in Alberta, with such a hot economy and so many services, would go through some challenging times to meet basic needs, but the hon. member is not right to say that there was no increase. There was an increase in the budget for that specific area. We try our best to ensure that the best services that are available can be provided to our clientele.

You know, Mr. Speaker, when you go back a number of years, most of the dollars that were spent through the support programs were for single people and couples without children that were employable. In fact, the welfare caseload at one time was 97,000, with 5,400 staff working and a \$1.7 billion budget. At one time 80 per cent of those people on welfare were people that were employable and trainable and couples without children. Today, Mr. Speaker, the welfare caseload is down to 25,000, and half of those are expected to work, but half are not expected to work for various reasons.

We do not have a welfare office, Mr. Speaker, in Alberta anymore. We have 56 employment centres that assist people to make the transition from welfare to full employment eventually.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: with

your business plan saying train them to get off welfare, why is this ministry cutting funds to get welfare recipients off supports?

Mr. Cardinal: Well, that is not true, Mr. Speaker. In fact, at one time the workers in the department, the 5,400 staff spending \$1.7 billion, spent 80 per cent of their time providing support for young people, couples without children, single people that should be working. We do not have that in Alberta. At the 56 employments centres now when a person walks in for social assistance, they'll get career counselling, resumé writing, job placement, and the transitional supports that are necessary to get them back on their feet.

Mr. Backs: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: with less supports, fewer welfare recipients, are you bringing back the idea of free one-way bus tickets to send welfare recipients out of Alberta?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, only the welfare recipients that don't want to work do that. The others all want jobs and training.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright.

Corporate Taxes

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday's provincial budget delivered a massive tax cut, that's going cost taxpayers of Alberta \$370 million, for highly profitable corporations in an already overheated economy. This is just dumb economics. The CEOs of the major corporations' investment in the PC party is paying dividends in spades. Meanwhile, the budget figures show that average Alberta families will actually see their personal income taxes go up \$102 million next year. My question is to the Minister of Finance. How can the minister justify the completely unjustified and unnecessary 15 per cent cuts in taxes for the corporate sponsors of the PC party while taking more money out of the pockets of ordinary Albertans?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, again, you know, it's a bit distressing. We're all in this House. We all have access to budget documents. Many of us have been here for some time, and every hon. member in this House should know that the first tax reductions were made on the personal side. I produced a budget book, which was tabled and given to every member of this Assembly yesterday. If the hon. member would go to a section on tax in this, he would quickly understand that we have already saved average Albertans \$1.5 billion in taxes. In addition to that we increased the basic exemption and spousal or dependent exemption. Again, in addition we index that increase every year so it's not clawed back by inflation.

Mr. Speaker, no other province in Canada matches a spousal exemption – no other. The federal government doesn't do it. Have a look at the graph, and see what the NDP government in Saskatchewan's exemption is on basic and spousal, and come back and tell me that we've ignored the average Albertan.

Mr. Martin: You notice, Mr. Speaker, that she didn't talk about the question.

The question is this: why would you give the most profitable corporations in an overheated economy a gift of \$370 million? Explain that to the taxpayers of Alberta.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I don't think it's any secret that the opposition member who is speaking now is not interested in business of any kind.

I've had the opportunity today to meet with some of the business leaders in this province, and they do understand what drives this economy. They do understand that the Alberta businesses here today have to compete not only in Canada but in a global economy. They do understand that while we are competitive in Alberta, Canada is not competitive in the world, and we have to work hard to make sure that our federal government follows our lead and make sure that our businesses can continue to operate, continue to work in a global economy, continue to generate jobs so that the average Albertan has a place to work.

1:50

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, my question is simply this: how can the Minister of Finance justify having a corporate tax rate 20 per cent lower than the next lowest province while saddling an Alberta family of four making \$60,000 with an income tax bill 28 per cent higher than in the province of Ontario?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, all I can say is: hon. member, I would be happy to sit down with you and go over your figures because they are not exactly accurate.

Chronic Wasting Disease

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, chronic wasting disease is an issue in my constituency as that's where the first cull of CWD-infected deer was made a year ago. I understand that five more cases were discovered through the chronic wasting disease control program. My questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Can the minister tell us if these further cases mean we are getting ahead of the disease or it's becoming an epidemic?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta considers chronic wasting disease a serious environmental as well as economic threat. We have 400,000 wild deer in this province. We must continue to be very, very aggressive in making sure that our approach is to prevent chronic wasting disease from coming across the Saskatchewan/Alberta border and infecting those 400,000 deer. The program that the hon. member is talking about started in January, and it is part of our long-term effort. Seven thousand deer have been tested since 1996. Actually, contrary to the claims that were made in the House this week about whether we're doing the right things or not, I'd like to point out that by doing nothing, as was suggested, this local deer population would be decimated within 50 years – that's the local deer population – and it would go to the entire province. Our actions help to make sure that Alberta's deer are being protected.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, to the same minister: how did your department select these control measures?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, we use the best science available both in Canada and internationally, and our actions are based on recommendations of an expert international panel. That's a scientific panel, and it's guided by a national strategy of Canada. Reducing deer density is the key, and it is the recommended response for all future recommendations on the spread of chronic wasting disease. We need to do everything we can to keep more animals from becoming infected and to protect both the environmental and economic viability of rural Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. Given that the deer population is so critical and important to the constituents in my area, what is your department doing to ensure that these residents are informed, consulted, and engaged in these actions?

Mr. Coutts: Local consultation is very, very important, consultation not only with the residents, Mr. Speaker, but also with hunters and guides and outfitters. Two public meetings were held in Empress and Chauvin to present our action plans and to answer technical questions about the science of chronic wasting disease. We work closely with other government departments, like Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Health and Wellness, and Community Development as well as our partner in Saskatchewan, where the threat really comes from.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A true or false question for the Minister of Finance: is your ministry seeking a one-year delay in your own self-imposed review of automobile insurance reforms due to take place this fall?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, there is a discussion ongoing now as to whether we should have a little more experience before that complete review is taking place. So while I don't think it's definitive yet, certainly that discussion is occurring, and it will occur with the stakeholders. We will determine together whether it's prudent to move ahead if we have enough information.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Finance: how will Alberta drivers benefit by waiting one more year for the AIRB to confirm what they already know, that is that the government's bungled reforms have greatly benefited private insurance companies at their expense?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not what we're finding at all. In fact, there are a number of things we're finding that are very positive. One, the number of uninsured drivers has dropped dramatically – uninsured drivers. There is more fairness in the system today because people are not discriminated against by gender or age. The Automobile Insurance Rate Board – and the member full well knows this – has the authority to review rates throughout the year and make decisions as to whether to recommend a rate decrease. So they will not be waiting for any change. But I think it's prudent to have the right information when you make decisions to change. We've had a little over a year's experience with automobile insurance reform, and it is a very, very positive outcome to this point.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that the Alberta insurance rate board will not discuss the circumstances surrounding the recent hasty and completely unex-

pected departure of their executive director, will the minister please inform this House why he left?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I couldn't possibly do that because that is certainly in the purview of the Automobile Insurance Rate Board. I would suggest that the hon. member talk to them. I have not asked the question, didn't know the circumstances, and I'm not sure that it is really my affair.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Forest Sustainability

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday Global Forest Watch Canada released a report about the amount of intact versus fragmented forest in Canada, with particular attention paid to Alberta. Can the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development explain what it means by "fragmented forest"?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is an important question because the report indicates and shows and acknowledges that Canada has a vast forest, and it is probably the most intact in the world. Alberta has 60 per cent of its land base as part of that forest. The report that the hon. member is talking about defines an intact forest as 10,000 hectares with no sign of human activity whatsoever. So what that means is a tract of land the size of the city of, say, Lethbridge or Red Deer, where there would be no roads, no human activity, no farms, no ranches, absolutely nothing happening and everything being sterile. That's their definition in the report, not ours.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, please. The purpose of question period is not to ask for definitions of words; it's to deal with government policy. Perhaps you could move on to the second question.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is to the same minister. How is he, as a minister, dealing with this challenge in Alberta?

Mr. Coutts: Actually, that's exactly where I was heading, Mr. Speaker, because in order to understand our policy of sustainability, it was important to show what the report was standing up and talking about. Sustainable Resource Development manages the landscape from a different perspective than the report. Ours is that of balance. We balance the needs of forestry, oil and gas; we balance the needs of recreation; and we balance the needs that the wildlife need to survive in the forest. We do that over a very long period of time. So we recognize that the forest is a living thing and, in doing so, that the renewable resource that we see is a living thing. That's how and why we manage it sustainably for the future.

2:00

The Speaker: That was helpful.

The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary question is to the same minister. How do we address the needs of wildlife?

Mr. Coutts: Sure. We manage the landscape based on balance, as I said, for a variety of users, Mr. Speaker. We have official protected areas in the province, we have wildlife habitat, plus we have management plans that help us take the steps to account for the needs of wildlife. We also have a critical habitat review that takes place before applications go into sensitive areas, and forest management plans are required before companies can go in and do any forestry. We have set-asides. We have regulations in place to protect streams and other sensitive areas that will help our wildlife flourish in the province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Ambulance Funding

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Emergency room overcrowding has been a constant problem that has been brought to the minister's attention time after time, and the government has offered no solutions. In fact, insufficient funding by this government will prevent the Capital health region from increasing the number of acute-care beds to ease backlogs in the emergency room. On top of that, this government decided not to increase funding for the municipal ambulance program. My questions are to the minister of health. Given that there were no ambulances in Edmonton to respond to emergencies 93 times in February 2006, up from only eight times in all of 2004, can the minister explain the decision not to increase funding for ambulances?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, from a number of points of view the hon. member has cited some issues that I believe have been topical in the media but may not reflect the capacity that we're trying to build in regional health authorities. The regional health authorities have been gifted with an average across the province of about 6 per cent; in the case of the Edmonton capital region a 5.7 per cent increase, over \$100 million. In terms of the capacity that they wish to establish in terms of beds, it will not only be between the hospitals in downtown Edmonton but between the subacute region.

There's a lot of work being done, Mr. Speaker, in your own constituency. I believe some of the day surgeries and other procedures are being transferred to Barrhead, are being transferred to other areas. It's quite exciting to see the co-operation that hospitals are building in order to accommodate capacity when beds are short.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that much of the system's ability to take new patients into the ER or for surgeries depends on the ability to discharge people into long-term care, why has the minister only committed \$78 million to long-term care when even she admits that it needs \$250 million?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, in terms of the long-term care plan we recognized that both in the third quarter and in the monies that are in this budget there are dollars to move from a staffing ratio in 2004-05 that was at 3.1 to 3.6 hours of care per person per day. I think that under these circumstances you see us accelerating the type of care that's provided to people. You see a much stronger capacity that we've built with lifts, with medication supports, with administrative supports.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we still have work to do, and we continue to do that. We're preparing standards so that long-term care patients and people that are working with the care plans for long-term care

patients will be stronger. We're working on more information and better training. If you look at the budget this year of my colleague the Minister of Advanced Education, you will see many more people that are coming into training for positions that will someday help and support this.

Mr. Speaker, on every front we're trying to tackle the problems to make sure that we have adequate staffing and long-term care placements.

Ms Blakeman: Again to the same minister: how can Albertans believe that this government can reform the entire health system when they've proved they can't even manage the ambulance service?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're not even making any pretense of managing the ambulance service. It is not our job. We have provided . . .

Ms Blakeman: You're not funding it. You're not managing it.

The Speaker: The hon. minister has the floor.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, in over 25 years of local and provincial politics, to my best recollection the province of Alberta has never managed the ambulance system. What we have done in the last two years is provide at least \$55 million to all but two authorities that are receiving \$10 million for pilot projects to support health care management within the ambulance system. We have had members of municipal ambulance systems working on an advisory committee – and note that I say municipal employees, not provincial government employees – trying to define what, if any, should be the future of managing ambulance in a proper way. I think that over the last few months they've done a lot of consultation. They're looking at patient safety. They're looking at the impact on municipal authorities. I'm sincerely hopeful that at the conclusion of this you'll see a plan for ambulance delivery that will be both safe and that will accommodate the regions in the best way possible.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Income Support

(continued)

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. The announcement to raise income support rates for Albertans who cannot work is very good news, but why is there no increase for the 15,000 people who also get assistance through Alberta Works but are expected to work?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is a very good question. At least the member mentioned that those people that are not expected to work did get an increase in the budget. Talking about the 15,000 or so that are expected to work, our top priority – and I said this earlier in question period – through the 56 employment centres is to put these people back into the workforce as quickly as possible because that is where the clientele want to be. Through that, we provide employment exemptions, daycare support, school support, and other expenses, health care support, even relocation to a new community if they choose to do so. So that is

our plan. Anyone that's able to work, that's living in Alberta will eventually have to work.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To get a little more clarity, why aren't any of the rates tied to standard measures like the market-based measure to ensure that rates are at least in line with the cost of living?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, the market-basket measure and others like it are good research tools, as we all know, basically to explore low-income issues that trace Albertans. Of course, we use them for that purpose only. We don't use them to determine what assistance is required because we provide so many other valuable services like thousands of jobs in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary: is the 5 per cent increase going to be enough for those clients who cannot work or get enough money through other employment?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, of course, we'll continue monitoring that situation very closely as we move forward. I mentioned earlier that there are other supports provided for those people, and we'll continue doing that.

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

Continuing Care Assistance

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Almost a year after the Auditor General's scathing report and recommendations by the MLA task force this government has committed less than 30 per cent of the \$250 million estimated by the minister of health to improve continuing care. I'll steal a motion from my fellow member, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and say: do we not all in this House support our vulnerable seniors? My question is to the Minister of Finance. Can the minister explain how she failed to budget the resources necessary to fix continuing care when racehorses got a 40 per cent increase?

2:10

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I am really struggling to understand which budget documents my hon. colleagues across the way are using. I thought they were in the House when we presented the budget and the numbers yesterday. Now, I want the hon. member to just think again of the amount of increase to long-term care and the \$250 million that she quoted and the 30 per cent. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. member has the floor.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Actually, the next question is to the minister of health. I'll come back with that math answer. Given that \$63 million was granted to horse racing and only \$42 million put toward improving seniors' care, can the minister explain how many full-time personal care aides could have been hired with that money?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I'm not clear about whether it's the money that was relative to the horse racing, so I would have to say that I need more clarification in order to answer the question.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. That would have been the difference between 42 and 63.

The Speaker: The question, please.

Ms Pastoor: To the Minister of Gaming: how many task forces were required to determine that horse racing should receive a 40 per cent increase?

Mr. Graydon: Actually, if no one shows up at the racetrack and doesn't put any money in the slot machines, there will be a zero per cent increase.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Corporate Taxes

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday's budget showed once again that in Alberta friends of the government get richer, and everyone else gets scraps from the master's table. The \$370 million gift to corporate friends of this government is beyond comprehension for most Albertans especially because it's not a one-time gift; it's a gift in perpetuity, year after year after year. That these megaprofitable corporations will be laughing even harder to the bank while Albertans are stuck with health premiums and user fees is unconscionable. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Why is this government willing to give billionaire corporations six times the amount this government is willing to invest in early learning and child care?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I want to take the hon. members to page 134 in the fiscal outlook book. I'm sure that you have them in front of you. We'll have an opportunity to debate this because this is part of my department. If you go to the bottom of that page, it clearly says: "Effective April 1, 2006, we will reduce the general corporate income tax rate to 10 per cent, lowering taxes for Alberta businesses" [interjections] – can we listen once more? – "by \$265 million." That's not the \$400 million that I heard yesterday from the ND, and it's not the \$300 million or whatever it was that I heard earlier today. It's on page 134 in my book.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? If Alberta businesses continue to grow and thrive as they have been under our tax policy, creating more jobs and more jobs for Albertans, that number could change.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That \$370 million comes from the minister's own projection of revenues.

Why does this minister think that corporations like EnCana should be given \$8.5 million in giveaways while a low-income family of four deserves a meagre \$65 a month more? It doesn't even compensate for the erosion in the real value due to inflation of what they have been receiving since the last increase.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'll remind the hon. member again that all on the personal side, the basic exemption, both basic and spousal or adult dependant, is indexed every year so that there is no loss year to year. That was a decision that was made.

On the earlier part of his question I can only assume that the hon.

member is talking about a royalty situation. The oil and gas industry undisputably contributes in a huge way to this province both in revenue derived from royalties, from land sales, and maybe most importantly from economic activity. I don't understand at all a philosophy that has absolutely no use for, no respect for, and no understanding of business.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, my final question to the same minister: why does she think that paying back corporate donations to the PC Party through corporate tax cuts is more important than investing the \$250 million needed to immediately improve quality of life for seniors in long-term care?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, the first thing I would say, Mr. Speaker, is that I think members of other parties in this House are probably offended because the member infers that only our party receives any donations from the corporate community. Oh, would that be true, it would be wonderful, but in fact it's not.

Mr. Speaker, I like to have questions on this budget. I want to have questions on: did we provide enough dollars in health care? I think that's appropriate. Did we provide enough dollars in continuing care? That's appropriate. Did we provide enough dollars in education? That's appropriate. To make these rather specious comparisons is not productive, not helpful, and it completely clouds all of the discussions we're having here.

Home Building Contracts

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, as evidenced by yesterday's budget, Alberta's economy is firing on all cylinders. While this is a good thing, I have some 50 constituents who seem to be the victim of this hot economy. Despite signing a contract with a home builder, in some cases as long as a year ago, to build their dream home at a specific cost, these constituents are now being told that the builder will not honour the contract and is offering to refund their deposit. In the meantime, the costs of building a home have increased substantially. My questions are to the Minister of Government Services. What safeguards are in place to protect consumers in situations like this?

Mr. Lund: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's a very good point because certainly in Calgary right now there is a great demand for homes and, of course, a shortage of labour. As a matter of fact, a couple of weeks ago I met with two large home-building companies, and they're putting a cap on the number of homes that they will even contract because they don't want to run into this problem. I know it must be really traumatic for the 30-plus purchasers that signed contracts and now are not going to get their homes.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member mentioned that these were contracts that they signed, and really I think we can't overemphasize how important it is that people know what's in the contract, that they make sure that they're comfortable with the contract and make sure that it's all legal because there are issues peripheral to maybe what people are thinking about at the time you're signing the contract. So it's really important that people talk with people that have experience in that field.

Mr. Liepert: My first supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, is to the same minister. Can he tell the Assembly why the builder would not be required to at least pay interest on those refunded deposits?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, currently we don't have any legislation except for the Residential Tenancies Act that requires interest to be

paid on a deposit. Incidentally, that interest rate now is zero, so it's not a big help. It certainly is an area that we need to look at. But once again I've got to come back to the fact that that's just one of the items that should have been covered in the contract. As I say, it's peripheral to what people might be thinking about, but people that have had experience in contracts would identify that kind of a scenario that could happen.

Mr. Liepert: My final supplementary question to the same minister is: would he consider having his department intervene and at least have the developer sell the lots to the purchaser at the same price as what was agreed to in the contract?

2:20

Mr. Lund: That's an interesting situation, Mr. Speaker. I haven't seen the contract, but it's my understanding that the contractor never did purchase the land, that in fact the land is still registered under the name of the developer. So I'm not sure that there's any way that we can deal with that issue but, I guess, to emphasize again how important it is to have a good understanding of the contract and to have a good contract.

Just yesterday we had an awards program for the best champions in consumer affairs. One of the awards that we granted was to Alberta New Home Warranty, and it was for a book that they have put together on tips when buying a new condominium or buying a new single-dwelling home. I would urge people to get a copy of that in order to have a look at it.

Also, under the Real Estate Council they have a lot of good tips for people that are getting into contracts to purchase homes. Actually, of course, often in cases the home is the biggest purchase that a family will make.

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

Municipal Sustainability

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two-thirds of Albertans, those 2 million plus citizens living in and around the boom-town cities of Edmonton and Calgary, were ignored in yesterday's announcement with the exception of partial ring roads that will circumnavigate the line of ambulances parked in front of overcrowded hospitals, the decaying inner- and absent outer-city schools, the seniors crying out in understaffed, underregulated long-term care homes, and the hundreds of thousands of low-income individuals dependent on FCSS support. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. How much more do the citizens of Edmonton and Calgary pay out through a variety of taxes – provincial income, property, gas, and health care – than they receive back from the province for service funding?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, you probably won't like the answer, but I want to remind the hon. member – and I'll stick to Calgary because that's where he's from; we can bring the others into it as well – that the city of Calgary does receive \$95 million from its share of the provincial fuel tax. It does receive \$177 million a year from the Alberta municipal infrastructure program. But in total, sir, the contribution to the city of Calgary in all of those categories that you named is \$4 billion from the province, so I will not put in the amount that they contribute because it's considerably less.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. My second question is to the

Minister of Municipal Affairs. Given that about this time last year you speculated about providing municipalities tax relief through the return of the education portion of property tax, when will your speculation turn into government action?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased that the member brings that question forward because it gives me an opportunity to discuss what I've been in fact discussing with the mayor of Calgary, the mayor of Edmonton – I introduced them in the House just recently – the president of the AUMA, and the president of the AAMD and C, who are working together on the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability to deal with that very issue.

I have repeatedly said in this House – and I repeat it with the members of my council – that the responsibility of that council is to have a look at the roles and responsibilities of cities, of the province, and to determine what are the reasonable costs associated with those roles. Once we've done that, once we've established what those roles are, then it makes sense to begin to look at the revenue side and determine whether the revenue, in fact, matches the roles and responsibilities. I expect that we should have that complete within the next six to eight months.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I appreciate the definitive timeline. That is appreciated.

My third question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that despite our multibillion dollar annual surpluses Albertans are currently – currently – paying out of pocket billions of dollars in health care premiums and insurance fees to receive delayed basic care, how much more will we have to pay out when your government's third-way private delivery costs are downloaded onto hard-working Albertans?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, there's no intent to download costs on hard-working Albertans in the third way. In fact, the whole premise of the policy framework is to build a strong publicly funded system, a system where you can get public health care at the time you need it, as much as possible, without any identification or contradiction as to your ability to pay because you will always have that capacity to access a strong public health system in Alberta without paying for it.

Mr. Speaker, the question does not relate to the health care policy framework. It does not relate to what Albertans have been looking for in policies. It does not relate to any kind of identification this government has made for any future costs in health care. Yes, the health care premiums are still part of a portion of public funding towards health care, but the larger bulk of health care funding still comes from the general revenue fund of the province of Alberta. The vast majority of \$735 million comes from the province of Alberta's revenues, and what we're struggling with is trying to make sure that it's sustainable and that people have access where and when they need it.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of six to participate.

Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan 100th Anniversary

The Speaker: Today I would like to advise you that I have conveyed on your behalf and on behalf of the staff of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta sincere congratulations to Speaker P. Myron

Kowalsky and the members and staff of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan on the 100th anniversary of the opening of the First Session of their first Legislature.

Our celebrations began on March 15; Saskatchewan's will begin on March 29. We, of course, share with Saskatchewan more than just a common border. In fact, we share the same humble beginnings. With the establishment of the Legislative Assembly of the North-West Territories in 1888, together we began the quest for responsible government and autonomy within the dominion of Canada. Attaining such provincial status was a struggle, but successfully we built two strong and independent provinces.

So as we look back over the last 100 years, on your behalf we convey best wishes to the people of Saskatchewan and their institution of democracy.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's once again my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of high school students from Ponoka, Alberta. They are from St. Augustine school. They're a group of 29 grade 10 students studying government in their social studies class. They're accompanied by their teachers, Mr. Darren Josephson and Mrs. Elaine Ernst. They're seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Members' Statements**

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

Crystal Meth Strategies

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Over the last couple of weeks I've shared with the Legislature several youth groups that we as a province have consulted with on many different issues. One challenge that these groups of youth have identified and tried to address is the problem of illegal drugs and methamphetamine in particular. As chair of the Youth Secretariat I think it's important that we work together to solve this problem.

In order that we do this, the government has taken a number of steps to protect the children and the youth of this province. For example, Mr. Speaker, Bill 2, the Drug-endangered Children Act, will help to protect children exposed to drug manufacturing and the trafficking of illegal drugs. Recent health regulation changes have helped to ensure that some of the medications used in making meth are now listed as schedule 2 drugs and, therefore, are sold from behind the pharmacist's counter.

In addressing the challenge of meth, the province has also developed an Alberta drug strategy under AADAC together with the Crystal Meth Task Force and other government departments and partners in our communities. AADAC will develop a co-ordinated response to meth within our province. Again, youth are being consulted on this issue and are helping to develop solutions to the problem. Further, as we speak, youth are working with aboriginal youth in four different areas of our province to obtain their perspectives with the growing problem.

AADAC also opened a number of retreat beds for those youth

aged 12 to 17. New services provided also include a special treatment procedure to help address methamphetamine use.

Through these initiatives I hope we can curb the use of meth by our children and young people. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

2:30 X-Treme Women's Hockey Challenge

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand today in recognition of the 2006 Battle of the Border X-Treme Women's Hockey Challenge. Last night the four-game challenge between the Calgary Oval X-Treme and the U.S. Selects team kicked off in front of a sold-out crowd in the Three Hills Centennial Arena. The game was very hard fought and exciting, and the U.S. Selects, sad to say, scored a goal in the dying seconds of the final minute of play to defeat the Oval X-Tremes 3 to 2.

EnCana, the event sponsor, generously matched the proceeds of the game and donated them to the big winners of the evening, the Three Hills Arena Completion Society and Kneehill minor hockey.

The Battle of the Border was more than just another hockey game to our community. The young women from the two teams in the tournament as well as Olympic gold medalist Hayley Wickenheiser participated in school visits and a local mentorship lunch and signed countless autographs for young women in our community. One lucky young lady, 12-year-old Dominique Lambert, won the local X-Treme Queen contest and had an opportunity to join the Oval X-Treme team in their dressing room prior to the game and sit next to Hayley Wickenheiser during the game.

The teams involved in the Battle of the Border and Hayley's Olympic gold medal winning Canadian women's hockey team have done a wonderful job of raising the profile of women's hockey and women's sports in general. Sports and physical activity are very important to the well-being of young women. They contribute to higher levels of confidence and self-esteem. Sport is where one can learn about teamwork, goal setting, and the pursuit of excellence. Sport prepares you for life.

The ladies of the Oval X-Treme team and the U.S. Selects team as well as Hayley Wickenheiser and her Team Canada teammates are an inspiration to young women and set a wonderful example. These women's hockey heroes truly are worthy role models.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Tribute to Fort McMurray

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Fort McMurray is a good place to live. Too often our media portrays Fort McMurray as a place that is out of control. It's not. From what you read and hear, it is darkened with environmental degradation and is a wild west town, beset by violence and drugs. It's not. I'm not saying that there are not problems that should be addressed in infrastructure funding and in improving the quality of life in Fort McMurray, but it is a good place to live.

Most people in the world would love to have many of the problems Fort McMurray has. The northern lights actually shine on Fort McMurray. The majestic Clearwater and Athabasca rivers meet at Fort McMurray. The city enjoys some of the most historic and scenic river valleys in Alberta.

Where else in Alberta can you land a float plane downtown? I twice lived in the old Syncrude Towers, and float planes flew past my window. It was cool. Where else can you walk out your back door in many subdivisions and into virgin pine and aspen forest?

Snowmobile enthusiasts can leave their yard and go on trails that will stretch for hundreds of miles. Some of the best trophy fishing lakes in the world are a hop, skip, and jump away. Hunting opportunities are some of the best on the continent. And it's pretty neat to drive up the ice road to Fort Chipewyan and to see the museum and church in the oldest community, arguably, in Alberta, to say nothing of driving through the wonders of nearby Wood Buffalo national park and crossing Alberta and Saskatchewan's largest lake, Lake Athabasca.

There is a multicultural and multi-Canadian base to Fort McMurray that is cosmopolitan and gives it also an international flair. If you want to learn about Newfoundland, go to Fort McMurray. There's more: the theatre at Keyano College and the Fort McMurray Oil Barons for great hockey.

There's lots of work and business. There's much to work on in growing Fort McMurray, Mr. Speaker, but a family can do very well financially and grow a great life in our beautiful Alberta city of Fort McMurray.

In the future I would like to see in our media a much more balanced view of what McMurray has to offer. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 21 we recognized the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This is a day to remember and reflect on the fact that racism is still part of our society. On March 21, 1960, police opened fire and killed 60 people at a peaceful demonstration in South Africa. This serves as a reminder of the destructive nature of racism, and we must raise awareness and involve all Canadians in the movement against racism.

Yesterday I was pleased to see grade 6 students from St. Clement Catholic school in my riding doing an excellent exhibition and conference about the elimination of racial discrimination. It was a very inspiring moment for me. We can learn a lesson from our children as individuals and make the same effort to support acceptance and diversity. First of all, speak out against racism. In this case, silence is not golden. Silence too can lead to greater discrimination, so you have the right as well as the duty to speak out. When you have the chance, stand up and protect our society's great diversity and respect for differences.

Mr. Speaker, racism is the belief that one ethnic group, race, or religion is superior to others and that they are not worthy of respect or recognition. As a result, individuals become the target of racist acts based on the colour of their skin and their cultural background. Your support should not stop at home. Even at work you can explore ways to promote positive race relations by vocally objecting to racist jokes and insults. Racism must be stopped. Together we can accomplish this goal.

Thank you.

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

Advanced Education Tuition Fees

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday we heard the government's budget for the upcoming year. Great care was taken to continue giving gifts to friends in big oil and tax cuts to those who need them the least. For postsecondary students there was very little real good news. In particular, there was no sign of permanent relief

from ever-increasing tuition fees. Despite the minister's talk about increasing the affordability and accessibility for our postsecondary students, yesterday's budget illustrated the difference between how much this government values investing in our students and, therefore, in our future versus squandering public revenues in perpetuity and giveaways for their corporate friends.

For yet another year students face a tuition increase. The government will pay for the increase in the next fiscal year, which amounts to nothing more than a stay of execution. Students need a real solution to ever-growing tuition costs. I think it behooves us to ask: who needs relief more? Last year, for example, EnCana had net earnings of \$3.4 billion. Meanwhile, a recent survey of undergraduates found that in their prime, summertime earning months nearly two-thirds of students earned less than \$2,500 per month. Yet this government hikes tuition for students and cuts taxes for the already wealthy.

Last week a letter from the university presidents to the minister was made public. They were calling for the status quo in tuition increases. I urge the minister to ignore those demands and to make students a priority. I urge him to listen to the recommendation made by student groups, those most familiar with the burden of escalating tuition, and implement an immediate freeze and deliver a long-term plan which includes a significant rollback to ensure that all of Alberta's bright, young minds can afford to fully participate in postsecondary education. Now, Mr. Speaker, that would be a real investment in our future.

Thank you.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition signed by 142 Albertans who are asking the government of Alberta to abandon plans to implement the third way, to defeat legislation allowing expansion of private, for-profit hospitals, not to contravene the Canada Health Act, et cetera.

Thank you.

2:40

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present a petition from 56 Albertans who are urging the government of Alberta to "consider increasing funding in order that all Alberta Works income support benefit levels may be increased."

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition that I would like to present to the Legislative Assembly, and it reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to call a public inquiry into Enron's role in the development of electricity deregulation in Alberta and their market conduct in the Power Pool of Alberta.

Thank you.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday, April 3, I

will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 10, 11, 12, and 13.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday, April 3, I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 20, 21, and 22.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

Bill 24

Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2006

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to introduce Bill 24, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2006.

As announced in yesterday's release of Budget 2006, Bill 24 amends the existing act to raise the limit on the use of nonrenewable resource revenue for budget purposes to \$5.3 billion from \$4.75 billion. As per the legislation any amount over the \$5.3 billion will continue to be allocated to the sustainability fund.

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Bill 25

Securities Amendment Act, 2006

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 25, being the Securities Amendment Act, 2006.

Bill 25 is a bill that will include among other things the protection for secondary market investors in the province of Alberta, including people with RRSPs, pensions, and other personal investments. Under this legislation they would have a legal right to sue public companies that issue false or misleading information. Ontario has enacted similar legislation. The legislation is important because nearly 90 per cent of all equity trading in Alberta takes place in the secondary market. The bill also identifies a number of provisions within the existing act that need to be amended.

I move first reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. I move that Bill 25 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

Bill 27

Vegetable Sales (Alberta) Act Repeal Act

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 27, the Vegetable Sales (Alberta) Act Repeal Act.

Before we get too many calls from excited children, this act isn't repealing the sales of vegetables in Alberta. They will still be on your dinner plates, I assure you. I'm sure that this bill will bring about some very fiery and passionate debate, and I look forward to that.

This bill will repeal the unnecessary and unused Vegetables Sales (Alberta) Act and the two associated regulations: the vegetable sales regulation and the grades, packages, and fees regulation. Growers

and packers are no longer using Alberta grades. They're using the federal grades or more subjective qualities such as appearance, size, and product consistency, allowing them to market produce more easily outside the province. That's why we've introduced this bill: to continue our commitment to eliminating unnecessary and unused acts and regulations.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 27 read a first time]

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

Bill 28

Local Authorities Election Amendment Act, 2006

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Local Authorities Election Amendment Act, 2006.

This bill will result in a more secure and transparent election process, which in turn promotes integrity and public confidence in Alberta's municipal electoral system and gives local jurisdictions the flexibility to tailor election procedures to address their citizens' requirements.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 28 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move that Bill 28 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Stony Plain, am I calling on you today?

Bill 211

Traffic Safety (Mandatory Motorcycle Training) Amendment Act, 2006

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and request leave to introduce Bill 211, the Traffic Safety (Mandatory Motorcycle Training) Amendment Act, 2006, for first reading.

Mr. Speaker, the purpose of this bill is to reduce the occurrences of collisions and fatalities involving motorcycles on Alberta's roads. This bill will hopefully cut down the number of collisions involving motorcycles by requiring that anybody wishing to obtain their class 6 licence, the motorcycle endorsement, present proof of having taken part in a certified motorcycle training course.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 211 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings. The first is from Martha Cheney, who questions: if it's a private system, what quality control processes will be in place, and also what recourse is available to deter receiving poor service?

The second tabling is from Marlene Lecky Perron, who makes a

point that she doesn't believe Albertans want a system where ability to pay would determine the rate at which you're served.

The next one is from John Stasiuk and family, making the point that it is possible to make good improvements in the current system; from Shawna Welz, who makes the point that she wrote to the Premier and the minister and just received condescending letters saying that she didn't understand; from Bob and Kathy Borreson, making the point that they've had first-hand experience with a family being denied private health insurance in the 1950s prior to medicare; from Don Mayne, making the point about the foolishness of hiring a company which has been convicted of wrongdoing to provide guidance to the Alberta government; from Bill Lundquist, making a point feeling that the Premier really doesn't care about the poor, the hard-working, or the seniors; from David Flower, making a point about a \$1.5 million contract on whether private health insurance should be an option in our province going to a subcompany of a private U.S. company; and from Jean Andrews and Rene Thibault, making a point asking to please stop destroying the medical system, which has provided universal and accessible health care.

Thank you.

2:50

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling the requisite number of copies of six of the letters that the Official Opposition received from concerned citizens regarding the provincial government's plan for the future of daycare. The ones I am tabling today are from Shannon O'Neill, Kasimo A. Kalyegira,* Meerag Swamy, Larry – and I couldn't read the last name; it's illegible – Anupa Ashav,* and Heather Harsch.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table six letters and appropriate copies regarding the provincial government's plan for the future of daycare. The letters I am tabling today are from Thy Nguyen, Rae-Lynn Wiltshire, Jeff Crawford, Tong Zheng, Tara Paterok, and Shana Dion.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to table six letters and appropriate copies regarding the provincial government's plan for the future of daycare from Douglas McLachlan, Stephanie Wolfe, Laurie Moulton, Mark Hall, Antsar Mustfa, Patricia McEwen.

Thank you.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Twelve further letters regarding the provincial government's involvement with the national daycare program, and these letters are from Heather Horn, Idabell Parcasio, Lisa Komaransky, C. Elliott, Heather Eliasson, Kerry Powell, Bernard Fraser,* Jason McCallum,* Angela Bourne,* Chris Evans,* Suzanne Evans,* and Veshaya Shayans.*

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

*This spelling could not be verified at the time of publication.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table two documents on behalf of the leader of the NDP opposition. The first is a letter from Alvin Finkel. Mr. Finkel objects to the dismissive and robotic response received from the minister of health when he raised serious concerns about health privatization. He provides evidence of how the public system will suffer if a parallel private system is put into place.

I'm also tabling a synopsis of a legal dispute between Grant McLean and the government of Alberta. Mr. McLean was a senior manager with the government of Alberta, a former mayor of the city of Airdrie, and in 2005 was awarded the Alberta centennial medal. Mr. McLean is taking his former employer, the government of Alberta, to court for alleged negligent misrepresentation in a matter relating to his pension.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table the requisite number of copies of the 2004-2005 Alberta Economic Development Authority activity report entitled Sustaining Economic Performance and Prosperity.

Speaker's Ruling Tabling Documents

The Speaker: Hon. members, I want to raise a point this afternoon with respect to tablings. There's a difficult situation that has developed and is starting to develop, and I use by example sessional paper 197/2006, which was tabled in the House by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Invariably members stand up and say: "I'm tabling here a letter with respect to the provincial government plan for the future of daycare," or something of the like, and a document is tabled which references the national child care program. In looking at some of these tablings, as the chair does from time to time, there's absolutely nothing in the letter that has to do with respect to the province of Alberta. But more importantly – more importantly – than that there is no signature on the letter, there is no identification who the letter might be from, and the letter that's tabled is absolutely unreadable. You can see it as well as I can.

Now, if this is what we're doing in tablings, then I'm going to ask that the House leaders have a discussion and deal with this subject once and for all because if it's simply a matter of a member going out and xeroxing 150 blank pieces of paper and then standing up and tabling them, our *Hansard* people are invariably spending a waste of time trying to identify who it is.

When we come back on April 3, I'm going to give you some other examples where, in fact, the names mentioned in the House do not correspond with the documents tabled. This is not the honourable way to do things.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would ask under Standing Order 7(5) whether the Government House Leader could share with us the projected government business for the week of April 3 to 6, 2006.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to

provide the projected government business for the week of April 3 to 6, 2006. On Monday, April 3, 2006, most of the day is spent on private members' business with Government Bills and Orders starting at 9 p.m. in Committee of the Whole, Bill 16; second reading, bills 15, 20, 23, 26; and as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday, April 4, 2006, in the afternoon there will be Committee of Supply, estimates of the Legislative Assembly, day 1 of 24, Seniors and Community Supports, and as per the Order Paper. That evening commencing at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders Committee of Supply, day 2 of 24, Energy, and as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, April 5, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders Committee of Supply, day 3 of 24, with Infrastructure and Transportation, and as per the Order Paper. That evening at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders Committee of Supply, day 4 of 24, Executive Council, and as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, April 6, 2006, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders Committee of Supply, day 5 of 24, Human Resources and Employment, and as per the Order Paper.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before moving to the next item in the Routine, might I just draw to every member's attention that on Monday next the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster will reach his half-century point in life.

head: **Orders of the Day**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

head: 3:00 **Royal Assent**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor will now attend upon the Assembly.

[Mrs. McClellan and the Sergeant-at-Arms left the Chamber to attend the Lieutenant Governor]

[The Mace was draped]

[The Sergeant-at-Arms knocked on the main doors of the Chamber three times. The Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms opened the doors, and the Sergeant-at-Arms entered]

The Sergeant-at-Arms: All rise, please. Mr. Speaker, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor awaits.

The Speaker: Sergeant-at-Arms, admit His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, Norman L. Kwong, CM, AOE, and Mrs. McClellan entered the Chamber. His Honour took his place upon the throne]

His Honour: Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated.

The Speaker: May it please His Honour, the Legislative Assembly has at its present sittings passed certain bills to which and in the name of the Legislative Assembly I respectfully request Your Honour's assent.

The Clerk: Your Honour, the following are the titles to which Your Honour's assent is prayed.

- Bill 1 Alberta Cancer Prevention Legacy Act
- Bill 2 Drug-endangered Children Act
- Bill 3 Protection Against Family Violence Amendment Act, 2006
- Bill 4 Daylight Saving Time Amendment Act, 2006
- Bill 5 Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2006
- Bill 6 Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2006
- Bill 7 Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Amendment Act, 2006
- Bill 8 Trustee Amendment Act, 2006
- Bill 17 Libraries Amendment Act, 2006

[The Lieutenant Governor indicated his assent]

The Clerk: In Her Majesty's name His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor doth assent to these bills.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: All rise, please.

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, the Lieutenant Governor and Mrs. McClellan left the Chamber]

[The Mace was uncovered]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Government Motions**
 Provincial Fiscal Policies

16. Mrs. McClellan moved:
Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

[Adjourned debate March 22: Dr. Taft]

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of all Albertans and as Leader of the Official Opposition it's my duty and, indeed, my privilege to respond to the budget delivered in this Assembly yesterday. There are a few things to like in the budget. How could there not be, given the wealth of Alberta? Tuition relief for students, more funding for projects to reduce wait times in the public health care system, more support for Albertans using the AISH program, an increase in spending on primary care, the planned twinning of highway 63: those are all steps in the right direction, Mr. Speaker. But, after all, when you take a shotgun approach to budgeting, you're bound to hit the target once in a while. [interjections] I can tell it's going to be a fun afternoon, Mr. Speaker.

Overall, this budget shows that we have a directionless, fractured government drowning in cash yet, despite unprecedented opportunity, completely unable or perhaps unwilling to develop a long-term plan to ensure Alberta's prosperity.

Ordinary Albertans don't depend upon windfalls to balance their household budgets, Mr. Speaker, yet the government's addiction to nonrenewable resource revenue grows stronger every year, rising from 3 and a half billion dollars in 2004, already a very significant amount, to a projected \$5.3 billion by 2007. The problem with this is: if the price of oil and gas drops – and history shows that it will – or, perhaps more ominously, if new technologies render petroleum resources less valuable, how are we going to support the kind of spending that we have? Where is the money going to come from?

Mr. Speaker, I often reflect on the fate of the Red Deer River Valley downstream from Drumheller. In 1950 there were well over a hundred coal mines between Drumheller and what is now Dinosaur park. In 1960 there were about a dozen. In 1970 there was one. The coal was still there, but the resource had been rendered without value because of advances in technology. My concern for the future of this province is that that same kind of scenario will play out again.

A truly responsible, forward-thinking government would set aside as much of this nonrenewable revenue as possible to pay for future expenses, but instead we get tax cuts for corporations and subsidies for horse racing. Mr. Speaker, if we can't find the discipline, the discipline that this government once had to start saving for the future now, in the middle of this incredible boom, when is it ever going to happen?

In 10 or 15 years will Albertans once again be forced to tighten their belts not through any fault of their own but because the politicians of today – all of us – failed to insulate our economy from the whims of resource prices? As elected representatives of the people every member of this Assembly on both sides of the House has a responsibility to act as a steward of our province's collective wealth. We've been entrusted by our fellow citizens to manage that wealth in ways that serve the public good. Therefore, we in the Official Opposition are duty-bound to offer our criticisms of this budget.

This budget predicts a \$4.1 billion surplus. That's wonderful, no doubt. But the lion's share of that expected surplus will come from the estimated \$11 billion in nonrenewable natural resource revenues. Simply put, we are living beyond our means, yet the government's planned changes to the Fiscal Responsibility Act will increase, actually increase the limit on the use of nonrenewable resource revenue for budget purposes from \$4.75 billion to \$5.3 billion. We in the Alberta Liberal opposition strongly oppose this initiative.

3:10

The smartest people in this province, from economic think tanks to business leaders to savvy working Albertans, are all saying that we need to save much more of our natural resource revenues for the future. But, instead, this government is spending the money almost as fast as the resource is sucked out of the ground. Mr. Speaker, the Canada West Foundation published a study recently indicating that this government had spent 91 per cent of all natural resource revenues in the period from 1979 to 2004. Ninety-one per cent. We are spending it as fast as it comes in. That's no way to build a future.

Sure, this year the heritage fund gets another billion dollars, but that's less than the government spent – handed out, I might say – in rebate cheques last year. In any case this government continues to draw money from the heritage fund for general revenues. What's the sense in that? There's no real commitment from this government to growing that fund, a fund that has lost 50 per cent of its real value in the last 17 years.

In other areas the budget didn't address the \$6.9 billion in teachers' pension unfunded liability. The government is responsible for two-thirds of this liability, which clearly represents an unpaid debt.

On infrastructure and transportation, Mr. Speaker, once again this government has failed to provide adequate, sustainable, and predictable funding.

When it comes to Alberta's cities and towns, they need a wider array of fiscal tools to meet the needs of their communities, and they're not getting it. This government needs at the very least to live up to its commitment of two years ago to put a hard cap on the education portion of property tax at \$1.2 billion. That would mean this year, in fact, a rollback of over \$200 million.

When it comes to schools, the infrastructure situation, the condition of our school buildings is too often almost in a crisis mode. Just last week, every member of this Assembly knows, a school in Calgary had to be evacuated because of structural problems with the roof stemming from roof leaks that had not been attended to for years. Calgary has 40 neighbourhoods with no schools and over \$400 million in deferred maintenance, and there are up to 76 neighbourhoods needing schools in Edmonton.

One of the symbols to me of the failure of this government, Mr. Speaker, is that you can walk through neighbourhoods of Alberta from 1910 and 1920, through the dirty '30s, the war years of the '40s, through the '50s, through the baby boom of the '60s, and through the '70s and '80s, and every neighbourhood had a school. Our society could afford schools in the 1920s. They could afford them in the '50s. They could afford them in the '70s. Under this government you walk through neighbourhoods that have empty fields, and children even in cities are spending up to an hour each way on a bus, going to school. [interjections] I hear moaning, a phony sort of moaning from backbenchers of this government. I dare them to do that at a parent council meeting in any number of schools in this province.

How is it that at a time of such prosperity, when we have a booming population and so many children, this budget makes no mention of new school construction? The Minister of Education knows how many schools are needed. He has a three-year capital plan for every school board. Why won't this government provide stable, sufficient, and predictable funding for proper schools for our children? The budget line for infrastructure renewal for schools, \$81 million, isn't enough to take care of the Calgary board of education's capital needs of almost \$400 million never mind Calgary Catholic schools or Edmonton public or Edmonton separate or all the rest of the province.

The increases in operating grants for education will barely cover inflation, and to my great dismay, in a province as wealthy as Alberta and a government swimming in cash, there's not one cent to fund hot lunch programs. This government simply seems unprepared to admit that kids in Alberta are going to school hungry, and that is a great moral failure of this Conservative government.

I also can't help pointing out, Mr. Speaker, that there's no money for junior kindergarten or full-day kindergarten, investments in early education that pay off over the long term, pay off over and over in lower justice costs, lower health costs, higher productivity, and higher tax revenues.

As far as postsecondary education goes, Mr. Speaker, the tuition rebate is continued for 2006-07, as previously announced, which comes after years of rapid increases, the fastest in the country from 1990 to the present. While the respite in tuition increases is welcomed – I support that – we're still awaiting and students across this province are still awaiting the tuition fee policy that was promised in the 2005 Speech from the Throne over a year ago, a policy that Alberta families desperately need to determine whether or not they can send their kids to college or university and a policy that many young adults themselves need to know if they can plan their lives around an education or not.

There is also no additional investment in the access to the future fund, one of the real surprises of this budget, with just \$750 million total after two years of a three-year commitment to a fund that is supposed to reach \$3 billion. As a result, there will only be \$45 million annually generated from that fund to spend on system improvements, not nearly enough. When fully funded, whenever that will actually be, it will provide \$135 million, a step in the right direction but not the kind of planning we need. Frankly, this policy pales in comparison to the Alberta Liberal plan, which, assuming a

\$10 billion surplus, would already have produced a 3 and a half billion dollar postsecondary endowment fund, which would continue to grow and support Alberta's postsecondary institutions until they became truly world class.

While the operating grants to postsecondary education appear substantial, they're not as great as this government is claiming. The grants to postsecondary education are appearing to be higher because the government is temporarily paying \$87 million to offset the costs of tuition increases. I welcome the savings to students, of course. But let's not kid ourselves about the actual funding our colleges and universities are receiving, just enough to cover inflation.

The health budget has increased to \$10.3 billion, a great amount of money by anyone's measure and a 7.7 per cent increase over last year. But, Mr. Speaker, I put a warning out to this government: if they want to keep any kind of control on this, do not proceed with the provisions in the third way that open up our health system to market forces. If we think we have trouble controlling health costs now, you wait until the marketplace is driving demand and prices.

Giving the Alberta Cancer Board \$25 million from the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund to expand cancer screening programs is a welcome move. Cancer screening can help reduce further costs and, of course, can be an important factor in saving lives.

We are disappointed in the increases for long-term care, only \$42 million, significantly less than the \$250 million that was recommended by the long-term care review committee and by the health minister herself at one point.

Spending on primary health care is up, which is a step in the right direction. We support a team-based approach to providing care in the community because we have seen, as have so many Albertans, that such an approach can create substantial savings in the public system. Let these innovations continue to work.

3:20

The one tax cut that we would have enthusiastically supported was not in this budget, and that is eliminating health care premiums. Eliminating health care premiums would be a tax benefit to every single person in Alberta. It would benefit the working poor. It would benefit small businesses, who so often have to now cover that cost in order to hold onto employees. It would benefit big public-sector employers like colleges and universities and, indeed, many provincial agencies because they pay those benefits. It would benefit everybody, and yet it's not here in this budget. It should be, Mr. Speaker.

We were also surprised – and I think it's worth noting – that funding for aboriginal health strategies appears to have been cut from \$2.2 million to \$1.7 million, in the overall scheme of things not a huge percentage of money, but Alberta's aboriginal population is substantially more reliant upon health services and experiences higher rates of health problems across a whole range of diseases. By cutting the budget for aboriginal health strategies, I'm concerned – we're all concerned – that this government is setting itself up for higher costs and more difficulties and, frankly, more human suffering in the aboriginal community of the future.

Another area, Mr. Speaker, where in the overall scheme of things a relatively small amount of money could have made a revolutionary difference is in the arts. The Alberta Foundation for the Arts did receive a 16 per cent increase in funding, which sounds terrific until you realize that it's only the second increase in funding in more than 15 years. The Alberta Foundation for the Arts receives funding through Community Development and then distributes those funds to Alberta arts groups and individuals. While any increase is nice, funding for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts has been insufficient for years, and it results in a lack of support for all kinds of important

groups, groups that add to our quality of life, groups that employ inordinate numbers of Albertans, and groups, in fact, that if they were fully supported would turn this province into a genuine magnet for business, for economic activity, for filmmaking, for tourism, and, indeed, for all kinds of creative industries.

This province has consistently neglected the arts sector and ignored its incredible potential to diversify Alberta's economy. Alberta's cultural and artistic community has once again been let down. The people of Alberta are missing an opportunity to invest in a vibrant, sustainable, revenue-generating sector of the economy that adds so much to our quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, this may be a surplus budget, but it shows a huge deficit of imagination. There's no comprehensive plan for the future here, no sense of direction, no vision of a better tomorrow. It is, indeed, a budget to nowhere. Blessed with unprecedented windfalls, all this government can do is throw a few dollars here, cut a few dollars there, count on unbudgeted surpluses to put out any political fires that happen to break out, and hope that's good enough. Well, it is not good enough. It's not good enough for the Alberta Liberal opposition, and it's not good enough for the people of this province. This is no way to manage Alberta, especially not an Alberta with such incredible potential.

If we had a government with the discipline and imagination to spend where it's needed and save the rest, we could guarantee our prosperity for decades to come. We could build a province of permanent prosperity. Instead, we have a government thrown into disarray by its own good fortune. As one minister has already admitted, it's a lot easier to just say no than it is to manage massive surpluses. The austerity budgets of the 1990s proved that this government is pretty good at saying no, at least was, but faced with the far greater challenge of shepherding Alberta's good fortune to build enduring prosperity, this government has failed utterly. This is a budget that sees numbers but not people, that sees a balance sheet and not the larger meaning behind all the facts and figures.

Albertans deserve better. Albertans need better. Albertans need a government that understands the meaning of windfalls and the importance of long-term planning. We cannot afford government short-sightedness any longer.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [some applause] Thank you. Thank you. I hope you're still doing that at the end.

This is a budget that puts profitable corporations, thoroughbreds, and spin doctors ahead of people. Mr. Speaker, let's start with the taxes first. The numbers don't lie. According to the revenue projections in the fiscal plan, page 44, the government will take an extra \$102 million out of the pockets of average Alberta families in the form of personal income taxes next year. Meanwhile, the government's corporate income tax is going down by about \$370 million thanks to a 15 per cent reduction in the general corporate tax rate. Reducing the corporate tax rate from 11.5 per cent to 10 per cent, a 15 per cent cut at a time of record high corporate profits, is frankly just a giveaway, a giveaway pure and simple.

Now, let's just look at a few examples of record corporate profits: EnCana Corporation, \$7 billion in profits over the past two years; Husky's yearly profit, double that of the year before; Talisman's profit, up 340 per cent in the most recent quarter. The profit parade goes on and on and on.

Meanwhile, this government seems to be allergic to giving a break to hard-working, average Alberta families. The best the Conservative government could come up with was a hundred dollar increase

in the basic personal exemption. At the 10 per cent flat tax rate that's a savings of 10 whole bucks next year. Mr. Speaker, these days that's barely enough to buy yourself a good cup of coffee. I think the budget should have come up with a warning label telling Albertans not to spend their 10 buck tax saving all in one place.

About five years ago, Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government brought in a flat income tax of 10 per cent. As the years roll by, the unfairness of the flat tax to middle-income earners grows. The government's own budget figures show that a two-income Alberta family with two children making \$60,000 per year will pay 28 per cent more in personal income tax than a family with the same income in Ontario. The Alberta family would also pay three times as much in health care premiums as the same family in Ontario. The government's figures show that a two-income family making a hundred thousand dollars per year will pay 14 per cent more in personal income tax than a family with the same income in Ontario. That's on page 142 of the fiscal plan.

Don't give me the bunk about needing to be competitive with other jurisdictions in terms of corporate taxes. With this completely unjustified and unnecessary corporate tax cut a large profitable corporation in Alberta will pay corporate income tax at a rate 40 per cent lower than the same corporation in Ontario and 20 per cent lower than the same corporation in B.C. The funny thing is, Mr. Speaker, that the B.C. Liberal government just cut its corporate tax rate by 1.5 points in its recent budget to try to compete with Alberta, and now they once again find themselves with a rate 20 per cent higher than Alberta's. Boy, trickle-down economics is really prevalent among these governments.

Meanwhile, the best the government could do on health care premiums was to raise the income threshold for premium subsidies by a few thousand dollars. Premium subsidies only benefit those with very low incomes living below the poverty line. Now, that's assuming, Mr. Speaker, that you can figure out the confusing array of paperwork needed to apply for a premium subsidy. It doesn't come automatically. You have to apply. Meanwhile, middle-income and even lower middle-income families keep getting soaked with \$1,056 in regressive health care premiums year after year after year.

3:30

While average Albertans do not get a break on health care premiums, Budget 2006 keeps wasting over \$100 million a year on the Alberta royalty tax credit. Can you imagine, Mr. Speaker, giving refundable tax credits to energy companies during a time that oil and gas prices reach ever higher and higher levels? The policy rationale for continuing the royalty tax credit, which is a corporate welfare leftover from the Don Getty era, is such a state secret that for years the government refused to provide the rationale to our current and past Auditors General, who have been asking for it since 1993. In its most recent annual report the government finally cracked under the pressure and told the Auditor General – and I wonder if they had a straight face when they said this – quote, the object of the Alberta royalty tax credit is simply to provide financial assistance to the oil and gas industry, unquote. Well, isn't that nice? A \$100 million gift: wouldn't we all like that? Forget about the grain farmers or the welfare moms. Those hard-pressed oil tycoons definitely need much help so that they can keep buying their yachts and fuelling their Hummers.

Mr. Speaker, this year's budget contains no new environmental initiatives of any kind to help us meet climate change targets. This budget contains no new measures to address the huge impacts on land, air, and water of oil sands, coal-bed methane, or other energy development projects. The budget contains no new measures to

transition the province to create a greener, cleaner future. The NDP opposition has proposed modest royalty adjustments to generate revenues for green funds that would assist municipalities, small businesses, and homeowners to undertake a range of green initiatives, everything from improving public transit and LRT to doing home retrofits, to fight climate change as well as to reduce utility bills.

Mr. Speaker, on health care, this is a government that claims to be concerned about rising costs, yet other than empty rhetoric the budget itself contains no specific measures for innovation within the public health care system nor any attempt to make it more sustainable. The budget does acknowledge that the most rapidly rising costs are prescription drug costs, which are going up at a rate of about 15 per cent a year, almost double the rate of increase in overall health spending.

While the government claims to be concerned about rising health costs, it rejects practical solutions for slowing down the growth in drug costs, such as the NDP opposition's proposed pharmaceutical savings agency. The NDP opposition's proposal is based on a successful New Zealand model that has slowed down the growth in drug costs to 3 per cent per year for the past 12 years. If the New Zealand model were to be implemented in Alberta, the health system could save \$75 million in one year, with a further saving of about \$50 million every year after compared to the status quo. But this is a government, frankly, Mr. Speaker, that wants to off-load health care costs, not control them. This is a government that wants to make health care more affordable only for itself and less affordable for citizens by shifting more costs onto patients.

Also, Mr. Speaker, a big loser in this budget is K to 12 education. The Minister of Education is showing that in addition to often dithering, he also seems to lack clout at the cabinet table. How else do you explain a budget containing no provision for expanding kindergarten and junior kindergarten for children at risk, as recommended by the Learning Commission over two and a half years ago? Since then three provincial budgets have been delivered, and there is still no such commitment. The Learning Commission estimated the cost of expanding kindergarten and junior kindergarten programs at \$63 million yearly, which sounds like a lot, but I would remind people that it's only one-sixth of the \$370 million being given away in the corporate tax cut.

The postsecondary sector fared only marginally better. Postsecondary students should be grateful, I suppose, that due to some crossing of wires between the Premier and his Advanced Education minister last fall the government's picking up the tab for tuition increases for a second year. But nobody, Mr. Speaker, should be fooled by this. This is a stay of execution, not a real tuition freeze. Tuition is still going up 6 to 8 per cent each year, with the government just paying the increase for a couple of academic years. The worst-case scenario is that the students could face a triple whammy tuition increase in the fall of 2007. Postsecondary education is the best investment a government can make in its own future well-being. The NDP opposition therefore urges the government to take a serious look at rolling back tuition, as requested by student groups such as the coalition of Alberta university students. I'm not expecting it, but hope springs eternal.

Nor is there much in this budget for this province's financially strapped municipalities. Instead of fulfilling its promise to relieve municipalities of the burden of providing ambulance service, funding is being frozen again at \$55 million for the third straight year, meaning the burden for providing this life-saving service will increase for more and more municipalities in the coming year.

Far from reducing its school property tax by 20 per cent in the coming year, as requested by the Alberta Urban Municipalities

Association, and leaving the tax room to municipalities, school property taxes are going up again next year by almost 2 per cent. That's the reality that's in the budget documents. The province's school property tax will be a full 22 per cent from the freeze promised in the 2001 budget, a promise broken every year since, including this year.

This budget contains only an extra \$42 million for improving continuing care standards for vulnerable seniors. That's about 11 per cent of the reduction in corporate taxes next year. The NDP opposition believes that seniors deserve better, Mr. Speaker, but it's pretty clear that this Conservative government does not. The Minister of Health and Wellness herself has said that in order to implement the recommendations of the Auditor General and her own government MLA task force, a \$250 million investment is required. Why invest only 8 cents on the dollar in this year's budget when there seems to be lots of money to throw around, especially on corporate tax cuts? I would remind people that these people are in very difficult situations. The horror stories keep coming, as I found out today of one in my own riding.

In short, Mr. Speaker, Budget 2006, I repeat, is a budget for spin doctors, thoroughbreds, and fat cats. Why is almost a 20 per cent increase in funding for the government's official propaganda arm, namely the Public Affairs Bureau, deemed more important than funding for developmentally disabled adults, which is going up only 2 per cent, only one-tenth as much. As the PDD Edmonton community board has pointed out, this budget will mean substantial service reductions for developmentally disabled adults. Again, the irony of it. This budget contains a 38 per cent increase in the horse-racing subsidy, from \$45 million this year to \$62 million next year. I was surprised that they would even have the gall to do this after all the publicity. The money going to the horse-racing industry could go a long way to avoiding cutbacks for the developmentally disabled or for improving seniors care or for the misery of carrying a 5 per cent decrease in monthly benefit levels for social assistance recipients not expected to work.

Mr. Speaker, the government is also going to step up its efforts to fleece Albertans with more casinos, more slots, and more ponies. Meanwhile, user fees go up and services are cut. I would remind about gambling. The government has become as addicted as anybody: \$1.3 billion. I can remember when it was \$50 million. Now the government is addicted on gambling the same as some other unfortunate people.

Frankly, Mr. Speaker, this is a budget out of sync with the needs and priorities of Albertans. Budget 2006 is notable not only for its lack of compassion but for its lack of vision for the Alberta future. Surely, in this rich province we could have done better.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if there are questions.

There being none, I will call on the next speaker, the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the Lougheed years spending was running at higher and higher levels, just like it is now. Year after year the government coffers grew, and year after year the spending went higher and higher. Everyone demanded and received something. We lived through those good times, and we thought they would never end. But the vacant houses, bad economy, and increasing fiscal costs across Alberta in the Getty years proved that the boom times will be followed by bust times. We know of seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of drought. The lesson of

those years was that spending led to deficits, and deficits led to drastic cuts. From looking at this budget, I am left to wonder if we have learned anything from the past. Our fiscal house is one that needs to be in order, and we need to wonder how far the spending can continue before we've gone too far and can't return.

It is a good thing that this government is putting funds back into the heritage savings trust fund. It would be even better if we actually planned for the savings and made sure that the fund was matured properly. I question the need in boom times for this government to count on the trust fund's dividends as part of the general revenue.

It is good to see that more Albertans will be saved from having to pay the health care premiums, but, even more, the government should eliminate them. If we will not eliminate them now in a time of plenty, when will we?

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

While this budget offers some consideration for the future, it is obviously a stay-the-spending-course budget, which does little to set a course to guide the province. I am very convinced, as we begin our second century, that we have not learned the lessons of the past. We have not come to grips with the needs of future Albertans and the struggles of current ones.

Help for families and individuals should be our highest priority. Albertans have seen a great deal of benefit from our booming economy, but they also pay the price in more expensive housing, fees, and taxes as their earnings go up. The government has failed in this budget to adequately address this. If they were simply to increase the basic tax exemption to \$20,000 in Alberta, it would return approximately \$500 back to the average Albertan, giving people a few dollars in their pockets, change at the end of the year. It would really make a difference to hard-working Albertans. Those who work to earn their money earn the right to spend it. Let's leave more money in the pockets of those who have earned it.

We have given funding to postsecondary education, yet we did not give any additional funding to secondary and elementary schools. How do we teach our youth and meet our commitments to the generations to come if there is no infrastructure in place? This is what happens when we fail to plan: we've planned to fail.

Market value assessment is inflationary and adds to the problems. This government was in power to see the real estate bubbles of the past burst. We need to have a program where production value and purchase price enter into the formula and have a higher weighting on the assessment to the economy. We've currently given I believe a 7.9 per cent reduction in the mill rate, but because of inflation and the market assessment we have an overall increase of 1.7 per cent in taxes being collected. We could have done better.

A long time ago businesses were promised a cut from 11.5 per cent to get down to 8 per cent. The steps that have been made in this budget are good ones, but now we have to start to fulfill the promise. The government needs to continue to draw investment into this province.

This government boasts about being debt free while many municipal governments are still laden with debt. In Budget 2006 dollars are dedicated to municipalities for new spending but not for alleviating their debt load. Enabling municipalities to become debt free would reduce the pressure on property taxes. It would allow them to give their citizens a tax break.

We've also got the unfunded teachers' liability that we still haven't addressed. Perhaps an even greater concern for Albertans is the Canada pension plan, which is dismally underfunded, and we should be looking at that.

Rural Alberta needs continued support. In a time when urban centres are growing, our rural areas are being left to die on the vine. Why are we giving almost the same amount to horse racing as we are to rural development? When did horse racing become a needed business for this province? I would suggest that the province has no business being involved in business.

Rural Albertans are no different than the people in Calgary and Edmonton in their need for better schools, better facilities, and better access. The increasing pressure on the cities is being exacerbated by rural area people that are going to the cities for their needs because of the diminishing services of many rural centres. There are many students that are also moving to the cities and parents actually busing them there because of the lack of curriculum in rural schools.

Farmers and ranchers know that weather can be their greatest enemy or ally in providing for their livelihood. The 20 per cent decrease in agricultural insurance premiums is a move in the right direction, but it does not do enough to sustain agriculture, which is the backbone of our rural economy. We need to remove the taxes from agriproducts that they use to produce their crops and raise their livestock.

This government has grown at an unprecedented rate. We started at 17 ministries in 1992, and we have since grown to 24. This government should begin the process of downsizing and controlling their cabinet size. I hope that they will continue to amalgamate ministries as we observe the resignation of leaders in their candidate run.

As I have said in the past, efficiency would truly be increased if we were to eliminate the new Ministry of Restructuring and Government Efficiency. We've been told that the ministers are efficient and that they can restructure. The bureaucratic bloating continues to rise to an alarming level in this province. There are 27,500 people in provincial employment, not the 22,500 mentioned last week. We have just added 800 more this year. In the feedlot we call this chronic bloating, and we know that they'll eventually die.

Alexander Tyler talks about the death of democracy, and he says that it's from tax-and-spend governments. I hope we can learn the lesson before we're in that dilemma. We need to review and cut the size of government. Otherwise, we'll once again be needing to make drastic cuts later on the backs of the citizens. This government should serve Alberta with a lean, more productive, and efficient government.

We would encourage the government to replace its legislation that required that all surplus must go to pay down the debt to legislation that would require all surplus to be split between the heritage trust fund and a tax refund to Albertans.

The government should now, after the biggest budget ever, seriously examine the cap on spending, preferably taking spending back down \$3 billion or \$4 billion and leveling off this massive growth. It is important if not critical to have a formula or a plan in place. Sound financial managers advise a savings plan, a disciplined plan where one saves 10 per cent. We have not saved in the last 20 years, and we don't have the discipline, but if we would install it now, we have a great opportunity when we're at the peak of our earning years.

Health care reform is big on the agenda of this government. If this third-way policy is to be successful, then more should be done to assure Albertans that politics will play less of a role in the delivery of their health care. The first reform should be to level the playing field for funding to all regions and allow funding to follow the services, services which their appointed boards want to provide for their regions. The government's third-way initiatives may control rising health care costs, but it will be a minimum savings if it is simply tied to inflation and population. Our rising population needs

more long-term thinking. We need to look at being innovative, as they are down in Taber, where they're actually rewarded for reducing the number of patient visits to their doctors' offices and not on a fee per visit only. The doctors want to make Alberta healthy, and there are programs out there that are exciting and innovative if we'll just grab onto them.

If we look at the infrastructure spending, there seems to be no idea of the consequence of increasing the spending so dramatically. The government is setting prices that are escalating for themselves and everyone else who needs homes, schools, hospitals, and roads built. Inflation comes from demand outstripping supply. We are creating a building problem which may just implode. In Calgary today the effect of these rising costs has inflated the average home to \$400,000, pricing some out of the market. We need to project what our infrastructure demands are. The government alone can fix this by slowing down the building parade until someone can come up with a plan rather than accelerating production beyond supply.

3:50

In conclusion, I guess I would like to compare us to winning the lottery. We've been very blessed, but the winning can be the beginning of our downfall. Too much money has often led to corruption, mismanagement, and flamboyant lifestyles. Can we sustain the huge influx of money without redistributing it and not cause inflation and possibly run into a brick wall in a few years?

The gap between our potential and our achievement grows with our added revenue. We are the envy of other provinces and even the world. It is my hope that we can strive to reach our ever-growing potential and not rest on our past achievements. We have seen both good examples and excellent ones here in the province. We need to take two steps back and remember that tax cuts and refunds are progressive and great for the economy. Working Albertans deserve a refund on their tax from the surplus income.

It is not good enough to say that we are the best in the world. We need to rise to our full potential. We need to recognize hard-working, innovative, and efficient Albertans. We need a formula that will restrain government growth, invest in our future and infrastructure and the endowment funds, and truly put Alberta ahead of the race by reducing taxes and leaving as many dollars as possible in the pockets of the people, to be used at their discretion.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for anyone.

Mr. VanderBurg: The member opposite talked about the horse-racing industry and made an inference that we support this industry more than we support other industries. I wondered if the member opposite knows about the arrangement that the horse-racing industry has so many slots tied to a race track and then gets a percentage of the take of those slots to fund horse racing. If nobody played the machines at the facilities, at the horse-racing tracks, the subsidy would be zero. I wondered if the member knew that.

Mr. Hinman: I understand that the subsidy would be zero, but the fact of the matter is that people do go there, and we're encouraging that betting. I don't believe that it's in our best interest, just as smoking is not in our best interest in the province, and we could focus the money in better areas. If, in fact, we were to put in incentives where farmers would be able to recoup as people came and bought Alberta-made products or other areas, we could do incentives to enhance that industry, but I don't see the need to enhance the business of horse racing.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to follow up on my colleague's question as it related to horse racing and, really, the gambling industry. I'm wondering if the hon. member's inference is that under his party they would remove all gambling in the province and add tax to food as opposed to using gambling dollars to do some of the good work that we do in the province.

Mr. Hinman: I thank the minister of agriculture for asking that question. I believe in free enterprise, and it's interesting to me that, going back to the '90s, the government took the idea that because our dollars were leaving the province, we needed to bring this vice in here in order to keep it here. I don't believe it's to the benefit of society to have it here, and it's been very sad to me to see the heritage trust fund get turned into the gaming and revenue ministry. Rural Albertans and most Albertans are left now to make application to lottery funds instead of the heritage trust fund. I don't see the reference in trying to promote gambling and thinking that it's a wonderful opportunity and that the government should be backing it and expanding it in all areas. It just isn't beneficial.

The Deputy Speaker: I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a question for the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, and it is certainly around the increase, the substantial increase, the 40 per cent increase in the subsidy to the horse-racing industry. In light of the fact that it is now \$63 million, if one looks at this subsidy since it was first initiated, it's growing in leaps and bounds every fiscal year, and it's well in excess of \$250 million at this point. I notice that there is a significant demand for irrigation infrastructure assistance. Would the hon. member feel that the money would be much more appropriately used if it was used to improve our irrigation systems rather than just as a direct subsidy to some of the elite people in this province through the horse-racing industry?

Mr. Hinman: I thank the hon. member for the excellent question. I'll quote the Premier: "For every upside there's a downside." For every dollar spent, there can be a negative side. What they're wanting to do is focus this money on the horse races. I understand that that's their desire and that they think that's beneficial, but I think there are many areas in the province where we could truly reach our full potential rather than just the achievements we have. Irrigation is an excellent one. We see the increase in production there has been in southern Alberta, which is now our breadbasket, where the government has subsidized and put in dams, realizing and wanting to capitalize on our blue gold. It's an excellent opportunity, and we need to continue doing that. Then we should be spending money on more studies, and it would be of far better use to put that money into increased water storage capacity and perhaps buried lines instead of open lines, where we lose our valuable water to evaporation.

There are many areas where if we were to have a great and extended debate, that would be of much better benefit to Albertans and taxpayers as a whole and make us more independent. If we focus that money, whether it's on education, whether it's on farming and agriculture, whether it's on health care, there are a lot of priorities that I think would take precedence.

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

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

Bill 26
Mandatory Testing and Disclosure Act

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

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure at this time to move Bill 26, Mandatory Testing and Disclosure Act, for second reading, and I would ask that we at this time adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

Bill 18
Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves,
Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands
Amendment Act, 2006

Mr. Stevens: I have more to say on this matter, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to stand on behalf of the hon. Minister of Community Development to move for third reading Bill 18, Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Amendment Act, 2006.

I wish to provide some summary of what this bill will do, Mr. Speaker. Bill 18 clarifies a number of provisions in the existing act. It updates enforcement, offence, and penalty provisions. It updates definitions, improves wording and clarity. It deletes obsolete provisions. It substantially increases the maximum fines for serious violations. It also repeals the Advisory Committee on Wilderness Areas and Ecological Reserves, whose work now is performed in a process that involves local communities and stakeholders. Bill 18 also repeals the provision for controlled buffer zones. No buffer zones were ever formally proposed or established. As long as an activity does not encroach on the protected area, we maintain the integrity of its protection.

Bill 18 redefines aircraft to include powerless flight. Restrictions that apply to aircraft also apply to hang-gliders and paragliders. No one would be prosecuted for landing in one of these protected areas in a genuine emergency, Mr. Speaker.

While Bill 18 aims for more consistency among all protected areas covered by this legislation, it also recognizes the unique needs of each type of protected area: that grazing is essential to maintaining the ecological integrity of our heritage rangelands, for management purposes off-highway vehicles are used only by the province or disposition holders, for recreational purposes two trails provide access to areas where off-highway vehicles are permitted.

That, Mr. Speaker, is a summary of what this bill is all about, and I would ask for support from the hon. members.

4:00

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Bonko: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I have read some of Bill 18, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Amendment Act, and I'll tell you that there are some

positives within the bill itself, but the other part that's disappointing is some of the specifics that they peeled out of it. Unfortunately, the bill makes a number of changes to the administration of specific types of parks, wilderness areas, and the reserves, but it gives less protection. The general trend is to reduce the level of protection in wilderness areas. It really never had any protection to begin with, it seems.

It allows in some of these areas – parks, reserve lands – that oil and gas exploration does take precedence because of mineral rights. So then where is the actual protection for these lands? This is just paying lip service for the general interest groups that are wanting to seek some more protected rangeland areas, some natural areas, and, on the other hand, to allow off-road drilling or exploration. It doesn't work.

The other part of the bill terminates the advisory committee on wilderness areas. Well, now we have less public participation. I'm not sure why we specifically had that as I thought that we would at least encourage a more democratic process, more participation from stakeholder groups and nongovernment agencies. In this group we had six public members and we had six government members who were providing advice to the minister to establish some of the specific areas and some of the boundaries and some of the legislation. But now we've said in this particular amendment that we're going to strike them from the act itself. So we're going to have less people to monitor this, and that's unfortunate.

We removed the buffer zones. The minister just talked about the specifics on that. I mean, I think that buffer zones are needed because you do have those who continue to push the boundaries, and if you don't have the buffer zones there, then you're going to continue to have the encroachment.

We do however support the requirement that it talked about for public consultation, and we do support the fact that in this bill we're talking about higher fines for violations. Those are some good pieces in the bill, but again I'd have a hard time supporting this particular bill based on the other specifics that I mentioned: the reduction of the public participation and the removal of the buffer zones and less protection.

South of the border they've actually had some specific areas designated as roadless areas. I think that that's a unique concept. Perhaps this government could follow suit before it's too late, before every available square inch of this province has in some way, shape, or form had a hole or been desecrated. It's no longer going to be pristine or, at least, protected. The roadless concept designates specific areas of the particular state where they're removing all footprints of man. They are not allowing any, as it says, vehicles. Period. So it's a roadless area, not for exploration, not for seismic. Nothing. They're going to allow nothing. It doesn't say that the public can't access it. It's saying that there will be roadless areas. I think that that would be a novel idea. It would be a great start here if we decided to at least put some land aside. Even Wood Buffalo now is no longer sacred. They're having roads going into that area. I mean, at what point are we going to allow the footprints to not be so dominant here?

This particular piece, like I said about the roadless areas, would allow for some hiking, perhaps some trails for horses, but that would be about it. There would be no actual ability for a vehicle to go in. I'm not saying that the public is not allowed. They could certainly get in by hiking, have access for tenting or for just recreational use.

The other concern is that people are always concerned about off-road vehicles. We have a lot of destroyed land within the province, as far as I'm concerned, that isn't much good for anything after you've had, you know, the oil and gas or coal-bed methane, taking

some of the specifics. It's not good for rangeland. You can't use it for agriculture.

Why not designate some specifics and call them natural areas for off-road vehicles, or ATVs, whatever you want to call them, allow them to have, you know, their 30 square miles? That would give them more than enough land to be able to use their ATVs or their snowmobiles, their off-road vehicles, on land that's already basically been destroyed in some way, shape, or form. It would allow them to continue to have their fun, their recreational use. I'm not saying that they shouldn't be able to have it. Designate some areas, but don't go into the mountains, the streams, and some of the protected park areas. Set some roads and some lands aside for them to have specific use. You could have it in the middle of the province, the lower part of the province, the upper range of the province, but set some roads aside. I talked to the Alberta Fish and Game Association during the last conference down in Red Deer, and that would be something that the members would support and could support with regard to these areas.

Those are some specifics, Mr. Speaker, that I have raised on this one with regard to the wilderness, ecological, heritage, and natural areas. But as the bill reads, with pulling out the advisory and with removing the specifics for the protectiveness, I can't support it at this point in time.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, when we're talking about Bill 18 here, there are still in my mind unanswered questions in regard to this legislation even at third reading. However, I awaited this bill. When it was introduced in the Legislative Assembly, I delivered some copies to a few constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar. They had originally contacted our office regarding this legislation. They, too, are the owners of all-terrain vehicles, and they enjoy getting out and operating these vehicles in uninhabited areas. I certainly would endorse the idea suggested by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, where there are designated places across the province for individuals who enjoy this sort of activity, designated areas where they can go and cruise around. They can go up and down hills. They can cross creeks and rivers. They can even take their camping gear and go five or 10 kilometres off the beaten path, so to speak, with their ATVs and camp. I see absolutely nothing the matter with that in designated areas.

I certainly hope that whenever this bill, Bill 18, was drafted, individuals who enjoy this activity were not left out. I certainly hope that they were consulted by the government. I see the hon. Member for West Yellowhead over there. We only have to look at the town of Edson, which, I'm told, has the largest ATV store in North America. Now, that's what I've been told; I stand to be corrected. There are a large number of citizens out there who buy such vehicles for many reasons. I just wonder what they think of this legislation and if they have been consulted, either the people that ride these machines or the people that sell them and maintain them.

Now, there are four categories of park and protected lands described in this act, Mr. Speaker. Wilderness areas preserve and protect natural heritage, where visitors are provided with opportunities for outdoor recreation. Two of Alberta's three wilderness areas are White Goat and Ghost River, and no developments of any kind are permitted. Travel is by foot in these areas. Wilderness areas provide limited opportunities for nature-based recreation, such as backcountry hiking, wildlife viewing, and mountain climbing. Hunting, fishing, and the use of horses are not permitted in the wilderness areas.

4:10

In the ecological reserves – and I'm looking specifically at the legislation here. This is where section 8 is to be amended. These reserves preserve and protect natural heritage in an undisturbed state for scientific research and education. Ecological reserves contain representative rare and fragile landscapes, plants, animals, and other geological features. The primary intent of this class of reserves is strict preservation of natural ecosystems, habitats and features, and associated biodiversity. Public access to these ecological reserves is, again, by foot only. Public roads and other facilities do not normally exist and, as I understand it, will not be developed. Most ecological reserves are open to the public for low-impact activities such as photography and wildlife viewing.

Now, this legislation is going to prohibit – one is not allowed to take into or use in an ecological reserve

- (i) a motor boat or off-highway vehicle,
- (ii) a motor vehicle designed primarily for travel on highways other than on a road (excluding, however, its right of way or undeveloped road allowance),
- (iii) a cycle except on a road or prescribed route, or
- (iv) without the Minister's permission or except as prescribed, a horse or pack animal.

When this decision was made, were individuals who enjoy getting out on their all-terrain vehicles consulted? Was there any consideration made for improving their access to outdoor Alberta so that they, too, in their way can enjoy their hobby? We have to consider, Mr. Speaker, all Albertans whenever we are debating this legislation and before we debate it, when the legislation is drafted. Now, there's a time and a place for everything, and I don't think that we can forget or exclude the owners of all-terrain vehicles, and we can't in this Legislative Assembly not support their enjoyment of our outdoor areas. Certainly, I hope that they have been consulted and they're in agreement with this bill because it's going to be now or never, as far as I'm concerned, with this.

With those remarks I will cede the floor to another hon. colleague. However, with a great deal of sympathy for this bill, I have to reject it in its present form. My questions have not been answered, in my view and my opinion.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, the premise of the bill is basically that it's housekeeping. Certainly, some of it is amendments to remove obsolete provisions and to try to improve the clarity of the legislation and update regulation powers. I mean, some of the bill is that.

You know, there's an old saying that the devil is in the details. Often when we deal with bills in this House, the devil is in the lack of details. That's a problem that we face often, Mr. Speaker. I look at section 9, subsection 5(b), which concerns me. It repeats the original section detailing what may be done to or for an ecological reserve and rewrites the section. It's particularly disconcerting as it states that the minister may allow – may allow – programs or measures to be carried out with respect to “environmental research and reclamation,” whereas the original section states “for environmental research that does not involve any physical disturbance of the wilderness area, ecological reserve or heritage rangeland.” I think the sticking word here is “reclamation,” Mr. Speaker. Of course, one comes and asks the question: is this an attempt to sidestep our environmental duty and allow development of oil and gas in ecological reserves? If not, why mention the word “reclamation”?

That is, as we know, an activity usually associated with either mining or oil and gas drilling. If that's not the intent, I wish that they would at least make that clear in the bill. So again I'd come back to the point that the devil is in the lack of details.

The only other section that I have some concerns about, Mr. Speaker, is 10(2)(c). Again, it states that this specifies that a person is not guilty of an offence if they are destroying or damaging plant life or animal life in a wilderness area, ecological reserve, natural area, or heritage rangeland "in the course of carrying out any activity allowed by a disposition or permission in a natural area or heritage rangeland." What does this mean? Maybe it's not the case, but we don't know when we're dealing with these bills: does this give permission to the oil and gas industry to tear apart our wildlife preserves so they can conduct reclamation efforts in them?

I mean, most of the bill makes sense because of the housekeeping, but when they throw in these broad terms and use the word "reclamation," we just don't know what direction the bill is going in. As I said, then it becomes difficult to know whether you should support it or not. On the surface it looks like they're protecting wilderness areas, and then they throw in terms like "reclamation" and make it unclear. Mr. Speaker, I wish that we had clearer intentions. I don't think the minister is here to give us those clear intentions about what this means.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing no one interested, are you ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a third time]

head:

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 26
Mandatory Testing and Disclosure Act
(continued)

[Adjourned debate: Mr. Stevens]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Calgary-North Hill I'd like to put some of the principles of Bill 26 on the Order Paper today. Bill 26 is an updated version of the Blood Samples Act that was introduced as a private member's bill by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. The Blood Samples Act received royal assent in May 2004 but has not been proclaimed. The act provides a means for certain people, such as police and firefighters, to apply for court orders to compel someone to be tested for communicable diseases when the police officer or the firefighter has been exposed to a bodily substance from a person if there has been reasonable and probable grounds for suspecting that the person has a communicable disease. The information from testing may be disclosed to the applicant's physician to help determine what treatment, if any, the police officer or the firefighter should have.

At the time that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs was leading the charge on this law, the only similar legislation in Canada was in Ontario. Feedback on Ontario's experience has warned us that a modified approach is required. Its legislation is not proving to be effective and concerns have been raised in relation to

the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Since the Blood Samples Act was introduced, the Uniform Law Conference of Canada has developed models, mandatory testing, and disclosing legislation that address Charter rights concerns.

4:20

Health and Wellness has consulted a wide range of stakeholders in Alberta who have also raised questions about the scope of the act. Stakeholder groups were created that included representatives of police, firefighters, and paramedic professions, the Alberta Medical Association, the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the regional health authorities, medical officers of health, the Alberta Advisory Committee on AIDS, and the Alberta Community Council on HIV.

The proposed amendments fall into four broad categories. The first category of the amendments will expand the scope of the act. Current provisions identify police, fire, and peace officers as professions that may make an application under the act. Health and Wellness is recommending expansion to include paramedics and individuals who voluntarily provide emergency services and to provide authority for additional professions or groups to be added by the regulations if the need arises. Currently the only type of sample that may be required by an order is a blood sample. The recommendation is to expand this to bodily substances in recognition of advances being made in new types of diagnostic tests. Changing the name of the act from Blood Samples Act to Mandatory Testing and Disclosure Act will reflect the expanding scope of the act.

The second category of the amendments will change authority to order testing from medical officers of health to the court. This is an important amendment because it serves the interest of the applicant and provides protection for the individual who is providing the sample, referred to in the legislation as the "source individual." It is generally recognized among stakeholders that the experience of court proceedings was required. Medical officers of health did not view themselves as well positioned to apply the reasonable and probable grounds test that must be met before a testing order can be issued. Under the proposed amendments a court issues the order, and the medical officer of health will have the responsibility for carrying out the testing order. Provisions are made for the medical officer of health to request assistance from a peace officer in carrying out the order as required. Contents and requirements of the test order have also been clarified in the amendments.

The third category of the recommended amendments deals with procurement safeguards. Key procurement safeguards have been introduced to ensure that the source individuals giving the samples have been notified of the application, of the right to respond to the application, and of the right to appeal an order. The current act did not fully address the source individual's rights. These amendments are required to address the issue relating to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Procurement that is required from a minor or a dependent adult are clarified in the amendments.

The fourth and final group of recommended amendments deals with information disclosure and privacy protection. In order to protect privacy and provide the least intrusive way to acquire information on the source individual's health status, provisions are made for the chief medical officer to check the communicable diseases database for test results. The amendment provides clarification regarding information disclosure for the purpose of the act. Certain disclosures will be allowed, still keeping the privacy interest of the source individual in mind. An example would be between health professions in the case of professional consultants and in the case of minors, the parents or guardians.

In conclusion, these recommendations will strengthen and broaden the scope of the legislation, will clarify and define roles and

responsibilities, and will also reduce the risk of Charter challenges. The amendments are the result of a strong consultative process that the minister believes has improved the legislation. I ask for the support of the House and move second reading of Bill 26.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 20
Freedom of Information and
Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, 2006

[Adjourned debate March 14: Mr. Agnihotri]

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

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to take this opportunity to say a few words about Bill 20. Overall there are some very good parts of Bill 20, and there is some stuff that we are quite concerned about. I'll get to the good parts first.

There's increased protection for information regarding individuals. I think that in this day and age when we're under a lot of pressure to give out information to foreign powers, particularly the United States, it is a real positive step that we will allow judges to make that decision and not civil servants. Now, we're all sympathetic, of course, to the United States and all the problems they've been through in the post 9/11 era, but I think that, first, we really have to safeguard our privacy from foreign eyes, whether it's the United States or any other country. So we're very supportive of the first part of this bill.

There's another part where we'll be increasing fines for violation of the FOIP Act. This, too, is another positive. There's not much point in having a law that doesn't have any teeth. I think that the size of the fines will tell Albertans and anyone who wants to violate the FOIP Act that we mean business when it comes to protecting personal privacy. So, again, the first two parts of this bill we're quite supportive of, and we would be happy to support the bill if it ended right there.

Unfortunately, there are other parts of the bill that increase the level of secrecy surrounding government documents. I wish the rest of this bill was as positive as the first part. A lot of it solidifies this government's reputation as the most secretive government in Canada. It appears that the government wants to defend its 2005 code of silence award from the Canadian Association of Journalists.

Now, we have in this bill a provision to exempt ministerial briefing notes for five years. I expect that in Committee of the Whole we'll hear some rationale behind this, but right now I really don't know what it would be. There's some talk that it would protect internal documents that are sometimes used to prepare for upcoming legislation. I don't know why we need five years to protect this information. So I look forward to hearing more about the rationale for this part of the bill, but right now I think it's very, very weak.

We also have a 15-year protection for the findings and reports of the chief financial auditor. That will be kept under wraps for 15 years. Fifteen years is the kind of gap we expect for state secrets and stuff that we want to keep hidden from public eyes for a very long time. Again, I'm not quite sure why we need a 15-year provision here as well.

I understand that in Committee of the Whole the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung will be introducing some amendments to change this bill. I certainly hope that the government members will give them a good, hard listen.

A large part of this, again, we're supportive of. It's a good bill on that part, but I don't know if we really need any increase in the level of secrecy that surrounds this government at this time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

4:30

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think I will go on the same tack as the previous speaker. The first part of it is good. I think it's necessary. In the 21st century, frankly, information is treated like a commodity and a precious one at that. Mr. Speaker, following 9/11, the U.S. government concluded that the best tool it had at its disposal to fight terror was seemingly innocuous bits of information on everyday things. Of course, when collected and analyzed, it is assumed that these data streams of everyday life will establish clear distinctions and patterns related to crime. In its attempts to maximize the data collected and analyzed, the USA PATRIOT Act has given to American courts and law enforcement officials greater access to all sorts of data about individuals, including, potentially, Canadian citizens.

Now, the B.C. Privacy Commissioner concluded after serious study that more stringent measures need to be put in place to ensure that Canadian citizens' personal information remains just that, personal and Canadian. Alberta's own office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner has concurred and just recently released a report about security risks associated with foreign access to Albertans' personal information. The finding stated that "it is important that the Government make a strong and unequivocal assertion of the value it places on the privacy and security of the personal information of Albertans." That, Mr. Speaker, is on page 33 of that report.

Mr. Speaker, the proposed amendments may in part be seen to address these concerns by specifying that only courts or bodies having jurisdiction in Alberta may have access to FOIPable documents, thereby seeming to exclude American courts or companies. While we applaud the apparent commitment to protecting our citizens' personal and private information, there are, however, as mentioned by the previous speaker, several objectionable sections of these amendments that deserve serious consideration. The NDP, I think, and perhaps others have had much experience with delayed and stymied requests for information, where it has taken upwards of five months to get access to requested documents rather than the 30-day requirement.

Considering the already great difficulty with which FOIP requests can be successfully made, Mr. Speaker, we wonder how these amendments propose to address access issues in favour of the public. That's supposed to be what it's for: in favour of the public.

First of all, if we could ask for clarification regarding the proposed inclusion under non-FOIPable material of published works available in public libraries. Frankly, why is this an issue? This material is already available in the public domain, and self-published works if available to libraries are catalogued and may be taken out. If they are readily available in the public domain, why should they be excluded from FOIP access if someone should choose to pay and collect them in that manner?

Mr. Speaker, secondly and importantly, the five-year FOIP exclusion of ministerial briefing materials is proposed based on the argument that public access to such documents may impair the government's ability to prepare for a session. Frankly, it's outrageous. Legislative debates based on such notes are public, and to bar access to them is to invite accusations of secrecy. I mean, maybe it's because we have had one-party rule for so long that we think we

have to be more secretive. For a government, whether they recognize it or not, already plagued by a lack of accountability and transparency, we are shocked that such amendments are proposed. Very shocked . . .

Mr. MacDonald: And appalled?

Mr. Martin: . . . and appalled too. Yes. Thank you, hon. member.

The very spirit of democracy rests on the fact that the government is formed by and for its citizens. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, its documents, preparatory notes, and discussions must be made public and available to the public, particularly considering that such ministerial briefings are not and should not be considered as revealing the substance of deliberations of the Executive Council. That exemption is already there under section 22 of the original act.

I mean, this is the same as any ministerial comments and debates in the Legislature, Mr. Speaker. To say that somehow this is part of the Executive Council debate is nonsense. This government is going further than anybody in this. Again, it's just the nature of being more secretive. We don't want anything out to the public. Lord knows, we wouldn't want the public to know what's going on, you know, in a democracy. No, we wouldn't want that to happen.

Then – and a previous speaker talked about it – along these offensive lines, the 15-year exclusion of documents belonging to the chief internal auditor of Alberta is equally offensive, Mr. Speaker. Fifteen years: I almost think that sometimes we could bring the Kremlin back in terms of what we do here in this province.

Furthermore, section 7 of the proposed amendments allows for the unlimited suspension – the unlimited suspension – of a FOIP request while the Information and Privacy Commissioner considers whether it should be filed or not. Now, there may be a reason to stop the clock, so to speak, Mr. Speaker, on a 30-day limit for processing FOIP requests while such consideration takes place, but that the proposed amendment does not limit the time that such consideration can take is unacceptable.

A blanket, in other words unlimited, suspension of FOIP requests is not the way to solve consideration and deliberation issues. A FOIP request: six months? A year? Two years? Three years? It gives this government the right to do that, so it's just a way to get around freedom of information and privacy. They run roadblocks all the time. When we have FOIP requests, there are roadblocks all the way along, Mr. Speaker, and to give a blanket suspension is, frankly, offensive and ridiculous.

Mr. Speaker, the last item to mention today in this second reading is, again, the seeming protection. A citizen's basic right to protection of privacy is admirable on this front. Too often this has been neglected, compromised, or outright denied. I'm thinking here, for example, of the security of our privatized registries being compromised and this being known about for years before it was revealed to the public in the papers. Now, I would remind this government that in Alberta we celebrated 100 years of democracy. We've got to reinvent democracy. To close up these loopholes so that people can't get the information is, frankly, wrong. I would think that all hon. members, that are elected to serve the people of Alberta, would understand this. I would hope that – we don't have a Senate; there was never serious, sober thought there anyhow – before we pass this bill, we deal with the FOIP requests. We can all agree. Before we pass this bill, let's put some thought to this because this is offensive in a democratic society.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to consider Bill 20, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, 2006, because it is very important. I believe this bill aims at achieving eight objectives.

Four of the amendments are aimed at further restricting the information that may be available through a FOIP request. Of those four, two may be viewed as positive steps because they will restrict the ability of foreign authorities to access private information through warrants or subpoenas. The other two, though, numbers 4 and 5, may be viewed as an attempt by the government to further increase its secretive nature. Of course, this is something I cannot support.

One of the objectives is to increase the power of the Minister of Government Services by allowing him or her to make regulations regarding the FOIP Act. This is number 9(b). The stated purpose of this objective is so that the minister may designate new public bodies, making them accessible through FOIP requests in the interim while the schedule of public bodies is updated. I see this as a positive one.

One of the objectives is also to put a halt on the 30-day timeline when a public body requests that the commissioner allow that body to disregard a freedom of information and protection of privacy request. This is number 7. This to me is totally unacceptable. This would result in a blanket suspension of FOIP requests and a disregard of people's desire to learn more, perhaps very important information that they require.

4:40

One of the objectives is to increase the penalties for unauthorized disclosure of private information by individuals and corporations. This is number 8. I really support this objective because there must be real consequences for these offences.

Another objective is to allow a public body to be deleted from the schedule of public bodies by the minister as well as the Lieutenant Governor in Council. This is number 9(a). I don't really understand this. I don't see a need for it, and without further clarity I have to oppose it.

Although there are some positive changes that are being proposed here, overall the impact of the bill, I think, would be overwhelmingly negative. The positives are the proposed changes regarding library information and foreign court orders to ensure that Albertans' information is not susceptible to foreign authorities. These changes are in response to concerns first raised by the province of British Columbia regarding the impact of the USA PATRIOT Act. The proposed changes regarding more severe penalties for offences related to the act are also positive. Having these changes will ensure that individuals and corporations that hold personal information know that violating Alberta's laws regarding disclosing personal information will have serious consequences, and I strongly support this.

However, on the negative, the proposed changes regarding information held by the chief internal auditor and ministerial briefings, obviously, are going to have a negative impact. This government is well known to be among the most secretive in Canada. I see this as another attempt to restrict public access to information that the government wants to be secret but that Albertans should be able to access. These changes will seriously demonstrate, I think, a detrimental impact on the entire political process, Mr. Speaker, severing an important tool for maintaining government accountability.

As I considered the background of FOIP, I noted that reviews of the FOIP Act took place in 1999 and also in 2002. The 2002 review resulted in a report including the recommendations of an all-party

Legislative Assembly committee. In that report there were a total of 62 recommendations. None of the proposed changes in Bill 20 are supported by that 2002 review. Another report was issued by the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in February 2006. This report only deals with the threat of foreign authorities accessing Albertans' private information and, therefore, only relates to the positive changes proposed in this bill. Specifically, this 2006 report relates to the amendments in this bill that deal with library information and foreign court orders.

If the purpose, again, of the changes to section 6 is merely to allow the government to effectively prepare for a sitting of Legislative Assembly, I have to ask: why the five-year timeline? I really do not understand that. The minister has commented that ministerial briefings should be exempt from FOIP access to allow the government to properly prepare for a sitting of the Legislative Assembly. Does the minister not realize that the opposition, too, must prepare? As the opposition our role requires that we be able to hold the government accountable. This bill would seriously limit that ability for us.

The new restrictions relating to the chief internal auditor are also very troubling. Now it seems that these CIA investigations into government activities would be hidden from the public for 15 years. How will this possibly result in accountable government?

I believe that there are some serious negative impacts that this bill could have. Some of these changes would diminish the entire political process by removing government accountability. Parts of this bill really trouble me. We live in an open, democratic society where the government is accountable to the people. Many of the proposed amendments in this bill amount to government censorship. This government serves the people of Alberta and is accountable to Albertans. Sections of this bill attempt to sever any accountability that exists. Therefore, I must oppose this bill because it will further limit access to information under Alberta's already restrictive FOIP.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 29(2)(a) does anyone wish to rise?

Seeing none, the hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to just make a few comments on this very important bill after having listened to some of the comments made by the hon. members. Of course, this is second reading, so it's just the principle of the bill. Certainly, we'll be in a position to answer all of their questions when we get into committee.

Just very briefly, some of the comments I heard: taking a public body off the list. Currently, we don't have the ability to do that, Mr. Speaker. All we're doing here is allowing a mechanism so that we can do it. Otherwise, it sits there. You could be amalgamating two. Now you've got three instead of just one. That's a very simple way of explaining that particular one.

Other things, Mr. Speaker, like stopping the clock. What's happening today is that the clock keeps running, the commissioner makes a decision, and if the decision is that the information that is in question needs to be released, then it can be a problem for the departments to get it out. So then we ask for a 30-day extension. Hopefully, when this is passed, we won't have that problem of having to ask for that extension. Quite frankly, there are times when the department simply cannot get all the information, especially if they have to go to a third party. That's the whole idea there, and I don't see any way that that could be construed as a mechanism to delay the release of information. That's not the intent, that's not the way it would work, and I think that that would be wrong.

As far as the briefing books, Mr. Speaker, there is some information in those briefing books that members can get. They just have to know what it is that they want and ask for it, but in just asking for the book as it is, that's what we're saying no to. So that's what that one is all about.

I'm sure that there'll be more detail when we get into committee, so I would adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Chair: I'll call the committee to order.

**Bill 21
Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act**

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

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There are some comments I'd like to make about Bill 21, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, the AISH Act, in committee. This bill is a continuation of the renewal of the AISH program. I'm proud to say that it will assist the program to better meet the unique needs of Albertans. As was mentioned during the second reading, this new legislation will make the AISH program more flexible and responsible to the needs of the 34,000 clients.

I'd like to remind the members of the Assembly about some of the major improvements this legislation will introduce. The income reporting process will be much more flexible, allowing clients to report according to their individual situations. This will reduce paperwork, administrative errors, and the occurrence of overpayments or underpayments. In addition, the act will help ensure that clients have the opportunity to appeal an overpayment before a debt is assessed and collection action is taken, and if they feel that it is necessary because they haven't received due process, they'll continue to be able to take the matter to court. This legislation will also allow the program to take into account special or exceptional circumstances and, if appropriate, exempt the client from repaying the amount that they were overpaid.

4:50

Bill 21 will also improve the co-ordination of programs and services for Albertans with disabilities by consolidating legislative provisions related to the AISH program under one ministry and updating the language in a 27-year-old act that was originally based on welfare legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this legislation also improves the quality of life for people with disabilities who are ineligible for the AISH program. Occasionally there are cases where individuals with severe disabilities are ineligible for AISH because of their income, which is above the cut-off, but they are unable to meet their basic living needs because of the high medical costs associated with their disability. Bill 21 will allow us to provide health benefits on a limited basis to those people with disabilities who because of their income do not receive an AISH living allowance. This change will make the AISH program more responsive to the needs of Albertans with severe disabilities and ensure that they are receiving the health benefits they need, tailored to their individual situations.

Another way that this legislation enables the AISH program to be responsive is that it allows the program to pay a third party directly for goods or services if that is for the benefit of the client and the client also gives consent. At the request of the client this would allow AISH to directly pay for things like rent or for continuing care accommodation charges.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to take a moment to address a few of the concerns that were raised during second reading of the bill. As mentioned earlier, this legislation is focused on ensuring that the renewed AISH program is flexible and responsive to the needs of the clients, and that's exactly what moving provisions of the legislation to regulation is going to help us achieve. These amendments will allow the program to adapt and ensure that the services AISH provides are in tune with client needs now and in the future.

Mr. Chairman, details about the duties of a financial administrator will also be in the regulations while the authority of the administrator resides within the legislation. Speaking of financial administrators, also new in this act is the provision that the financial administrators will now be appointed with consent of the client, ensuring that they have access to this service when they need it.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to address another concern I've heard during second reading, about the training of the AISH program staff. Now, staff training is not legislated or specifically referenced in Bill 21. The AISH program is currently working with disability groups and the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities to develop disability awareness training for staff. A joint stakeholder and AISH program advisory committee is being established to oversee the development of a training plan, a plan that I understand will be implemented later on this calendar year. This, of course, is in response to a recommendation of the MLA AISH Review Committee which suggested that the program partner with organizations knowledgeable in disability issues to provide that ongoing training for AISH staff.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to also take a minute to address concerns raised about the monthly living allowance. Last year the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports announced that the AISH living allowance would increase from \$850 to \$950 per month, and of course, as we know, next month the allowance will increase to \$1,000 per month. [interjections] Yes, it is positive news. This increase is in addition to the personal income support benefits and health benefits that the AISH clients receive.

In closing, I'd like to clarify some information raised during second reading as well. First, there is concern that clients need to cancel other benefit programs to be considered for AISH. Mr. Chairman, AISH tops up other income and ensures that clients will have at least \$950 or, in a couple of weeks, \$1,000 to live on each month. In addition, the issue raised by the Member for Calgary-Varsity about Canada pension plan benefits was changed several months ago. I think it was last May.

Another point. Secondly, 96 per cent of AISH clients receive their living allowance through direct deposit, and only about 4 per cent receive theirs through the mail. They don't have to go pick up their living allowance from some central location, as somebody had suggested.

With respect to transportation, many cities across the province are moving to assist AISH clients with either free or reduced bus passes. Edmonton and Calgary are moving to half-price monthly passes, and Grande Prairie is leading the way with public transportation at no cost to AISH clients, a good move for Grande Prairie. They are to be commended for that move. This reduced cost of bus passes is not a formal benefit of the AISH program. It's not part of the legislation.

Finally, I'd like to address the concern about the absence of a definition of institution in the act. Now, that term is not referenced in the act. The definition isn't included. If the term does appear, it would be defined in regulation as it might pertain to eligibility criteria.

Mr. Chair, in conclusion, thanks for the opportunity to speak again to Bill 21, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act. I encourage all members to support this act. Thank you.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to rise and participate in debate on Bill 21, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, which basically repeals or replaces the old act, takes its place. I would say that concerns around AISH or recipients of AISH are probably the second most frequent issue that is discussed in my constituency office in Edmonton-McClung. A few days ago I mentioned that family maintenance enforcement was my number one issue, based on traffic and based on volume and the amount of work that my constituency staff spends time on, and this is probably a close second.

AISH programs or support for people on AISH is almost to 34,000 people or more in this province. I know that the hon. sponsor of the bill, from Strathcona, mentioned that 34,000-plus people receive AISH supports, and I feel that this may be actually even bigger, that this number may be a little higher. I would be interested in receiving information on, you know, what stats the province keeps and the latest figures and how we update those figures and so on and how periodically we do this.

In April of 2005, which is almost a year ago, we approved in this Legislature the increase from \$850 per month to \$950 per month. While we agreed that this was useful and beneficial and timely, it was also agreed that this is only a first step and that we needed to do more. I know that on April 1 this year, 2006, it's increasing again, from \$950 to \$1,000, but it begs the question: is this fair? Is it adequate? Is it enough?

"Approximately 85 per cent of AISH clients" – and I am quoting the hon. sponsor – "either have no other source of income than their monthly living allowance or their income does not change more than about 10 per cent." For that reason, I don't oppose this bill trying to offer flexibility for their reporting. Instead of requiring them to report once a month, reducing the frequency may be useful, especially for people who have limited mobility or who cannot really go to their AISH worker or to the government office to file their income.

I would maybe take it a step further and in the future look at ways to allow people to file online. If there's a way for them to go on a website, a secure website, possibly with a pass code that is issued to them, they can file their monthly or quarterly or semiannual reports, do it online. It's cheaper for them because they don't have to take a cab or hop on a bus and visit a social worker or an AISH worker. If they don't have to, then fine. They can do it from the comfort of their homes, and it would probably be a step forward. I think it's worth considering.

5:00

There is a section in this bill that talks about making sure that the AISH clients have the opportunity to appeal if there's an overpayment that's assessed. I have to first say that overpayments for the most part are not caused by the claimant or by the recipient. They're usually a clerical error, or something happens at AISH headquarters and people receive more money than they should have. Then when it's discovered, and there's a decision to reclaim this money, it's

usually not due to the fault of the recipient. So I would urge consideration, and I would urge empathy and leniency in the way that we handle these files because these guys are suffering as it is, and to add another layer of burden on their shoulders would not be warranted.

There is talk about the appeal panel, and I'm interested in receiving information on the composition of the appeal panels and who serves on those. I understand that the act is worded in such a way that it allows flexibility for the government and for the minister in charge to decide these things in regulation. I know that we've mentioned time and time again that we don't like this direction because regulations are done behind closed doors and are not debated. We would much rather see it debated here in this House, on this floor, and all members participating. If it has to be done every 18 months or two years, fine. Let it be done every two years.

Regardless, I would like to get some assurances on the composition of these appeal panels and what seems to be restricting the ability of those recipients, if they need to contest a decision by that appeal panel, to resort to legal action and reducing access to the courts, which would otherwise right a wrong.

Another thing that was mentioned by my hon. colleague from Lethbridge-East is the issue of indexing those benefits to some sort of a measurable line. You know, every year MLAs, cabinet ministers, civil servants receive increases in their salaries and their compensation based on a variety of things. Sometimes it's tied to inflation, sometimes it's tied to the market-basket measures, or sometimes there is something called the average weekly earnings index. Maybe they, too, should be linked to some sort of a review or an evaluation that is done annually to be able to ascertain that their \$1,000 a month or their \$1,050 or \$1,100 a month or whatever it is is reflecting the increases in the cost of living.

We all know that recipients of AISH are struggling with general expenses, usually rent, food and medicine, utilities, and so on. We have to reflect that things get costly, that prices go up, and that their benefits are not tied into anything that reflects that increase, so as a matter of fact their money is probably shrinking in that definition.

My hon. colleague from Lethbridge-East also talked about sensitivity training for some AISH workers, and I support this because you have two sides. Sometimes you have clients who are difficult to deal with. Again, it's not due to their attitudes, or they don't really intend to be difficult. It's because of the hardship that they're facing and because of their circumstances. Sometimes they feel left out, and they feel that society has abandoned them. Maybe they feel that there's an injustice in the way they're dealing with their circumstances. So sensitivity training might be useful.

On the other side, you get the AISH worker himself or herself who is suffering from a bit of stress. They're overworked. There's a lot of demand on their time. They may have fatigue. You know, they burn out dealing with difficult files. Some of them actually start their day feeling energetic and empathetic for the clients that they're seeing, and by the end of the day they're really dragging their feet. So we have to empower them, too, and offer them the tools for them to be able to cope with the demands on them.

We've heard stories, invariably, in all our constituency offices that there is this AISH worker who doesn't seem to care. He or she might be less empathetic, and they don't sincerely look at the file and evaluate all the circumstances. So it's a question of accountability as well. Maybe there should be peer reviews. Maybe there should be an appeals mechanism or a complaint structure for people to bring issues up to the supervisor level or the director level. Some of those instances are easily addressed when the person changes his or her AISH worker. It's as simple as that. You start fresh, you go

to a different worker, and you take it from there. Sometimes it's not as simple as that.

I mentioned the regulations, you know, and how it's done in the minister's office or within a small circle of people and it's not debated. If I'm going to narrow it down to the two issues that I don't want to see in regulations, they would be surrounding the collection or retrieval of overpayments, which is one. You don't want to be extrapunitive or extra heavy-handed in your collection effort. The other angle, which is quite the opposite, is in the underpayments. If a client is underpaid – and we all remember that the class-action lawsuit was basically complaining about the six months. The government was telling the clients: okay; if we underpaid you, you're only allowed to claim it back within six months. I totally and heartily disagree with this.

Are we making it nine months in regulations? Are we making it a year? In my opinion all money that was owed or underpaid to that particular recipient must be paid in full. Whether we do it in a lump sum and give them a huge chunk of money or whether we phase it over a period of time, let's say a year or 18 months, and we pay it back, it has to be paid back. It was money that was owed to them, and they're entitled to it.

I would also add an observation that usually AISH recipients should not be looked at alone, or separate from their general circumstances. You have to evaluate families and the family situation as a whole. You should look at issues around disability. You should look at issues around malnutrition, family violence, addictions to drugs, addictions to gambling, and so on. Look at the whole picture, and in my opinion it might warrant more support to a certain individual or a certain claimant because for him or her it might need more attention. So for them, \$1,000 a month may not be the answer. I definitely think we can do more.

Also, in this bill the definition of what is fair for these people. What's the definition of the poverty line? Are we saying that \$12,000 a year is adequate for a person who might be looking at, as I mentioned, rent, utilities, food and medicine, transportation like bus passes or cab rides, all that stuff?

One recommendation I was also hoping to make to the hon. sponsor of the bill is the issue around how the AISH recipients cash their cheques. One idea that I debated with some of the AISH recipients who come into the office is that they say: we would like the government to be able to allow us to tell all the banks and all the different places like the Money Marts, for example, and so on to not charge us fees. They would like to present their cheque to a Money Mart or to a bank and say: here it is; it's a government-issue cheque. Then the government would pick up the 50-cent or \$1 transaction fee.

Some AISH recipients also like the idea of a debit card – and I know that the government is studying this proposal – with a secret PIN number. They would take it to a teller or an automatic teller machine, an ATM, and cash parts of their cheque at a time. They don't have to cash the entire thing. Some people can't manage their finances as adequately or as efficiently, so for them to be able to maybe take \$50 or \$100 at a time and leave the rest would be very useful. Cashing the cheques or issuing them a debit card – or maybe a choice of either. They could be presented with a choice and they pick.

I will also urge that we look at AISH as a top-up or as a minimum. We should use it as a top-up or a minimum, not as a ceiling or as a maximum. I'm referencing clawbacks because, really, for people who are able to work and whose circumstances change from one month to the next, clawbacks are a big hurdle. Sometimes it's a disincentive for them to go out and work because they get \$400 sitting at home, or \$200 of it is clawed back if they go out and work.

5:10

These are ideas that I'm hoping will receive some attention from the government. The idea that maybe we should cover a percentage of their utilities regardless of where they live and possibly with consideration for, you know, the place where they live, an apartment versus a bungalow versus a condo: all these things. Especially now that everybody is complaining about deregulation and how utility rates are going through the roof, these guys are having difficulty making ends meet. Possibly covering a portion of the rent from a separate fund because by far rent, to have a roof over their head, is going to be, you know, 45, 50, 60 per cent of their monthly expense.

In committee I know that we should try to address the sort of clause by clause structure of the bill. I noticed that section 1 is talking about definitions again being left to the regulations, and I covered that.

Section 3 is talking about the benefits and which benefits would be available to those AISH recipients and the eligibility requirements for benefits. I don't think it's a lot of change or totally different from what we had before, so I'm not going to dwell much on it.

Section 6 is talking about third parties and financial administrators. My question is: is it acceptable to have a director pay a third party for goods and services provided to a client? Two faces to this coin. The first one is that when we help a client who cannot really manage their finances adequately on their own or has difficulty budgeting, it would be useful if a provider agrees to, you know, divide up or take care of their expenses such as food expenses; for example, if there's an agreement with a local grocery store that might help them budget or agreements with places like ATCO or EPCOR or companies like this who would, you know, split up the payments so that it's more manageable for these guys.

There's also the possibility that the client might enter into this agreement. He or she agrees to being serviced in such a way, but then they want to back out. They want to cancel that agreement. Will there be a provision in the regulations or wherever that would actually allow them to change their mind, basically? It's probably useful in situations where, you know, the person is living on his or her own and doesn't have somebody to look after them, and they might be afflicted with some degree of mental illness. It's probably useful. But we have to allow them the flexibility to change their mind later.

Section 7, as I mentioned, is talking about the requirement to repay. I know that I urged consideration and empathy when, you know, we're asking these guys to pay back, again most of the time through no fault of their own. They didn't ask for more money, and they probably spent it all. So if we're limiting underpayments to six months, why are we not limiting overpayments to a certain level? Why are we not maybe instituting a statute of limitations like we do with criminals, saying that anything older than two years is forgiven? Maybe this is something to be considered.

Section 10, dealing with appeals. I mentioned that, you know, removing the courts from it is something that I might not find palatable. Here it's talking about having to make the appeal within 30 days from when the person was notified of the decision.

Complaints are heard by the citizens' appeal panel. Again, I'm emphasizing that I need to receive assurances on the composition of that. An appeal panel may confirm, reverse, or change a director's decision. This is a right that we're taking away from these guys, and I think it's not fair to them because they're still citizens like everybody else. If other citizens under other circumstances are entitled to seek legal action, so should these guys be.

I keep mentioning in this House that this government not only adds layers of secrecy and customarily hides the truth; it's becoming increasingly uncomfortable with criticism and is now hiding from the courts or legal action by legislating itself above the law and denying access to the courts for AISH recipients.

Section 11, dealing with offences, outlines the consequences for an individual, a financial administrator, and a third party who knowingly provide false information or omit information. I have mixed feelings on this, but I think I'm leaning towards supporting it because privacy is paramount, and it's the privacy of individuals that I care about. If somebody is making a misrepresentation or bending the truth or, you know, hiding something from a file or removing something, it warrants intervention, and we should not be lenient in situations like this.

With that, I appreciate your patience, Mr. Chair, and your indulgence, and I would encourage further discussion. Thank you, sir.

The Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that we rise and report progress on Bill 21.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 21.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? It's carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that we call it 5:30 and adjourn the Assembly pursuant to the spring recess adjournment motion, which passed this last Monday. That was Government Motion 12.

[Motion carried; pursuant to Government Motion 12 the Assembly adjourned at 5:18 p.m.]

