

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Monday, May 15, 2006

8:00 p.m.

Date: 06/05/15

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

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

Water Supply Inventory

511. Dr. Swann moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to immediately commission and regularly update an inventory of all ground and surface, including glacial, water supplies in order to responsibly manage and sustain this resource in the public interest.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 511, ground and surface water mapping. The motion advocates a complete inventory of surface and groundwater resources in Alberta. An inventory of water resources should be the first step, in fact, in managing our water resources in the province.

Arguably, water is the most limiting natural resource in Alberta. It is intimately linked to social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Sustainable water management, Mr. Speaker, is an essential role for government. Alberta holds only 2 per cent of Canada's fresh water, so we are in a vulnerable position, particularly as we are having such exponential growth both in our industrial sector and in our population. Saskatchewan and Manitoba have a hundred times as many lakes as Alberta. I was surprised to learn that from the Water for Life literature that's available: a hundred times as many lakes as Alberta. I also learned this past while that a third of our groundwater is used for oil and gas development, and in conjunction with all industrial development 53 per cent of all of our groundwater is used for industrial purposes.

Climate change is obviously a key issue for us in the next few decades. With the prospect of a three-degree increase by 2050, with reduced precipitation at certain times of the year, with increased evapotranspiration, and with the loss of glaciers we're looking at some very serious potential problems over the next few decades in Alberta. I was very pleased to see that the government has committed \$33 million in this next three years to groundwater mapping. It's a tremendous statement and commitment to this important issue. Six hundred thousand people in Alberta depend on groundwater, and their livelihoods day to day as well as their health and their safety depend on our understanding groundwater and managing it better.

Motion 511 comes out of the well-documented need to have a solid understanding of our water resource if we're really going to manage it correctly and before making decisions about how we will allocate it and license it. A reliable, accurate, comprehensive, and current inventory is long overdue in this province as we try to examine what and how to sustain our quality of life into the future. I'm unclear at this time whether \$33 million is enough, not enough, or too much for this tremendous task of mapping the groundwater in the province. I'd be very interested to know how we established that as a figure for what we need for the coming few years as a priority to establish our groundwater reserves and our groundwater quality. We must address these water issues now. We know that we've already overallocated the Bow, the South Saskatchewan River basin.

We cannot go any further without knowing precisely what it is we're dealing with as an inventory.

There has been recent high-profile coverage of water issues in Alberta, including a report in the scientific journals by Dr. David Schindler and his colleague identifying that by mid-century we could have significant ecological change, increasing droughts, and very significant impacts on our productivity from an economic point of view and the capacity of our agricultural community to sustain itself.

So with those comments, Mr. Speaker, I would encourage all hon. members to reinforce the direction that the government is already taking, to applaud the government for the initiatives that it's already taken, and to ensure that we have the right investment in Water for Life, more generally, and specifically for groundwater mapping. I would just add that the current serious concerns in the Horseshoe Canyon formation of southern and eastern Alberta must be the priority for the groundwater mapping. As part of this motion I would hope that the communication is clear that a very timely assessment of groundwater is in order.

I hope all members will support this motion to move as quickly as possible and return to the issue with a report, I would argue, six-monthly to give us a sense of just how we're doing in terms of the mapping and what else we could be doing to ensure that we are managing our water sustainably.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased this evening to rise in this Assembly to join the debate on Motion 511, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View. The natural resources of this province have always been of vital interest to Albertans. Hydrocarbons, forests, soil, and animals are all important commercial items, but they're also very necessary for our survival. Mr. Speaker, over the years Alberta's growing population and ever-expanding economy have placed a great deal of stress on these resources. The task of monitoring and managing these resources has become pivotal in sustaining our way of life now and for future generations of Albertans. As such, the government is committed to ensuring that Alberta's natural resources are responsibly maintained to benefit the citizens of our province for years to come.

Mr. Speaker, water is a resource of particular concern in that it extends far beyond serving to sustain our economy through agricultural and industrial needs. More than anything water is essential in sustaining humanity. Water is life. This notion is certainly not lost on the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, and I admire the member for directing his concern over the long-term sustainability of Alberta's provincial water supplies to the Assembly.

However, to alleviate this concern, one must look no further than the province's Water for Life strategy, which lies at the core of this government's mandate to effectively manage all aspects of Alberta's water resources. This strategy demonstrates how Alberta is among the nation's leaders in water management initiatives and represents the government's commitment to effectively manage the quality and quantity of our provincial water supplies to make certain that this resource is indeed protected for future generations.

As all members of this Assembly are aware, the intent of a motion is to raise an issue and urge the government to adopt a particular strategy in an attempt to solve it. Having said that, the very fact that this particular motion has been brought before this House implies that the government currently does not have a strategy to sustain our water resources in the future. As I alluded to earlier, this is defi-

ninitely not the case. In addition, I feel that through the wording of Motion 511 the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View is suggesting that the government has been irresponsible in the way it has managed and continues to manage our provincial water resources.

In response to that suggestion, Mr. Speaker, I would argue that the hon. member has been misguided as the government's Water for Life strategy represents a framework with which all water quality and quantity issues, including inventory, are already being addressed. The government without a doubt recognizes the challenges at hand and fully understands what is at stake in terms of the long-term sustainability of our water resources. I for one am very pleased to debate this motion because it will provide my colleagues with the opportunity to highlight all that the government has done and will continue to do to ensure that our citizens enjoy healthy, reliable, and abundant water supplies well into the future. This evening we will hear categorical evidence to reinforce that the government does in fact manage Alberta's water supplies in a very responsible manner.

8:10

Mr. Speaker, motions are important in this House because they help to bring attention to issues affecting Albertans and recommend that the government take action, although in terms of our water this is already being done. As we will see, the claims of Motion 511 are unsubstantiated and lack substance to support the suggestion that the government's current water management strategy is ineffective.

I fully support any initiative that aims to effectively manage and protect our natural resources for all Albertans, Mr. Speaker. That is why I would like to wholeheartedly endorse the government's Water for Life strategy as the means to secure Alberta's water resources rather than what is intended by Motion 511.

I strongly urge all of my colleagues to join me in withholding their support for Motion 511 as I feel that such an initiative is very unnecessary in light of the water strategy the government currently has in place and all that the government has done to remain accountable to Albertans in this regard.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise this evening with great pleasure to speak in favour of Motion 511. I think that the timeliness of such a motion spreads across party lines and ideologies and different intentions and puts us all together in the same boat, so to speak, in regard to the impending water crisis that Alberta could be facing in the very near future.

Now, none of us can pretend to be able to see the future accurately, but we have to act on contingencies that are placed before us. We are facing clear signs that we are in the midst of a water shortage or a downturn in precipitation not just in Alberta but in the prairie provinces. Combined with climate change, a warming trend throughout this hemisphere and, indeed, around the world, again, makes a water shortage even worse. Now, when climate does change, it destabilizes, so we can't be certain as to what will happen, but certainly it is our responsibility to build systems into conservation of water in this province of Alberta and, first of all, to know better how much water we do in fact have flowing through the province and what it's being used for.

As my hon. colleague mentioned previously, we are in a country with a tremendous amount of the world's fresh water resources, but conversely here in this province we're amongst the very driest parts of the country. We only have maybe 1 or 2 per cent of the potable water that's available across the country. So water is a very

geographically based commodity, and certainly the closer that it is to its consumption, the more efficient the system is.

So this is why it's imperative, Mr. Speaker, that we do in fact invest and reinvest in the inventory of both ground and surface water supplies across this province. I know that this provincial government has undertaken to do something like this, but I guess what this motion might do is reinforce that initiative and perhaps increase in scope the Water for Life strategy. Indeed, the wording of this motion is to "regularly update an inventory of all ground and surface, including glacial, water supplies" and to invest properly in the ongoing maintenance of that inventory. I think this is absolutely essential because although, as I say, I do speak in favour of the Water for Life strategy in its conception, in reality I am starting to see some key problems, not the least of which is the fact that we don't have information from this initiative yet. So I would like for us to remind ourselves: what exactly is the Water for Life strategy doing, and are we going to see all of the information as it becomes available to this government?

There are a number of challenges that we have to face in regard to water here in this province over the next 30 years and questions, I guess, that I would like to bring up that we need to work through here in this Legislature as well as through the public on a more local level. I think water is a great unifying force for political change and action as it is for the public's participation. Of course, as we see with the CBM issue through central Alberta and irrigation in southern Alberta, water brings people together to the political process like no other topic that I know of. This is a motivating force. I consider that to be a positive force, in fact, and we can harness that to increase the level of participation and interaction that we have with the public and with government in general.

One of the issues that I would like to bring forward is talking about charges that we put on to water systems, and I think it's imperative that we look carefully at the regulatory role of this House. First of all, we are looking to make an inventory of where the water is, but then we need to make a weight of how we use water in our society and what value we place on it. I think that some economic incentives are absolutely important for us to help conserve water. Of course, as we know, we can have charges or we can have incentives for conservation, both of those things working in concert. So I think it is important for us to revisit the charging for water idea.

Of course, the first imperative is to value how we charge for domestic consumption, how we charge for agricultural consumption, and then how we charge for industrial consumption. Okay? The very first principle that is basic to all human beings, as we hear people so emphatically suggesting here, is that every single human being has the right to access to water for their own personal domestic use at a very reasonable price. We have to ensure that it is affordable for all people and that clean, sanitary fresh water is available to every Albertan at a very reasonable price.

The second priority is for agriculture because agriculture sustains us both economically and in terms of our nutritional requirements. Again, another pricing system has to be placed on the agricultural sector. We cannot have the agricultural sector competing directly with an industrial sector like the oil and gas sector because, of course, the oil and gas sector can afford to pay for water at a much higher rate just because of the nature of the industry that they're engaged in. But we have to recognize what's an essential part of water use, and that is agriculture. So, again, we need a specialized tier for that.

Then, finally, charging for industrial use. It's absolutely essential that we set a price structure for the industrial use of water in this province now. Lots and lots of the oil and gas systems that we have in place use a tremendous amount of water, but also these energy

systems do defer towards conservation and efficiency. When you go to a heavy oil facility or to the oil sands projects, certainly the engineers would love to use less water if that task has been placed upon them. Again, it's a regulatory body. It's imperative that we place those regulations into the industrial sector now so that everyone can play on a level playing field, know what to expect, and to realize the efficiencies that we set forth for them. We must challenge them in regard to water conservation, and we have to factor in the cost of using fresh water with these industrial processes.

8:20

When we take a look at the oil sands and we have billions of dollars of new expansion, many new plants on the horizon, which is great – it's great for the economy and whatnot – there has to be a more complete inventory of all of the inputs that go into making that barrel of oil. Cost factor that in so that the barrels of water that go into the production of that barrel of oil are also factored in and that we are in fact making sure that we're (a) regulating it and (b) charging an appropriate price for that because otherwise you don't know what you've got until it's gone, as they say. I should expect that suddenly when water becomes in short supply, it doesn't just sort of trickle down, so to speak, to use a bad metaphor, but rather, once you get past that certain point, you end up with catastrophic shortages of water.

Certainly, in my own experiences living in southeast Africa, it's not a question of suddenly everybody's a little bit short, but rather everybody has no water at all, and we don't want to be in that situation. We don't want to be draining our rivers like the Athabasca to that degree. We want to be regulating it and moderating it with long-term conservation in mind.

When we're talking about Motion 511, we have to be concerned about pollution back into the groundwater systems. As I said, up in the north with the tailing ponds, this has to be factored into an overall inventory of our water supplies because this is a net output of water that is not being recycled back into the system, and in fact it's not even being processed at all. I don't think that there has been any appreciable process by which these tailing ponds have been reclaimed, and it's becoming a disaster on a very large scale. The oil companies know that they have to do something, but they need a nudge from us, from this body, to ensure that that water is recycled, that it's not contaminating the groundwater, and that, in fact, we are being responsible stewards of the whole system.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to participate in debate on Motion 511. I'm definitely standing in support of this motion, ground and surface water mapping, as sponsored by my hon. colleague from Calgary-Mountain View. Obviously, it is abundantly clear that the MLA for Calgary-Mountain View, both inside this House and outside, and to that effect our entire Liberal caucus care about the environment: our soil, vegetation and plantation, air, and, indeed, water. The hon. Minister of Environment also appears to have his heart in the right place, and by that I mean the correct place. I'm not talking about his affiliation with the political right.

I'm not going to repeat most of the arguments that were made by the members before me, although I must note my disagreement with the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, who said that it was redundant. I would argue that if it is in fact redundant, it basically emphasizes something that we already know and it urges us to take some action. I argue that there is nothing to be lost if this House passes this motion or accepts this motion.

Now, it was mentioned that the province has just committed to promptly act on 32 of the 44 recommendations contained in the final report of the advisory committee on coal-bed methane developments. Of course, one would have hoped that they acted on all 44 of them, but at least it's a start. One-third of that entire report talks about water, and this is definitely important to note, and it's also worthy of appreciation because water is, in fact, the utmost resource, as I said before in this House. It is the ultimate commodity.

You remember when First Nations tribes a while back fought over horses or buffalo. They fought over grazing land, and in fact they did fight over control of their water resources. You probably agree, too, Mr. Speaker, that devastating wars are likely to be waged over what little water is left. The resource is dwindling, be it because of global warming and the effect it has on our habitat or be it waste by consumers or the increased demand or, equally, industrial or commercial use. Nations and, indeed, pacts of nations will go after other nations or alliances to raid or control their water streams. Water is that significant, even more so than oil or any other resource. The argument that was made that we have to charge more for a barrel of water than we do for a barrel of oil is a valid one.

Again, it is positive that this province has yielded to pressure from the many concerned citizens and from us in the opposition and that it is taking action. The question here is: how long before all the recommendations are implemented fully? Further to that, what will the continuous and ongoing monitoring process look like? We can pass recommendations all we want, but if you don't monitor their implementation and enforcement, nothing is gained and the exercise becomes useless.

Now, although I have a science background, I am not a scientist in the area of water or the environment, but I can tell you that I am worried about Alberta's future just like the majority of Albertans. We have to look at the big picture. We have to look at our lakes, rivers, groundwater, wetlands, et cetera. The discussion is not limited here to drinking water, for example, although it is a big, significant component of that picture. The government's own Water for Life document says that water supports people, prosperity, and preservation. This is a strong recognition of the importance of water. It then talks about how this resource is "renewable, but finite," and by finite I mean that the amount of water that we lose is lost forever, permanently. The water that is not recycled or that doesn't come back to the system is gone forever, and that's where we have to be very careful, Mr. Speaker.

This motion before us advocates for a complete and thorough inventory of both ground and surface water in Alberta. That is like taking a snapshot, or a picture, of where we are today so that we can plan for the immediate, intermediate, and distant future. This inventory or reading would then form the basis for a comprehensive water management plan for this province. This is exactly like what we have done as Alberta Liberals with our provincial land-use strategy. To sustain a resource, you have to quantify how much of it you have, how you're using it and for which purposes, and how you plan to manage it. This is definitely what we're trying to accomplish here today with this Motion 511.

Mr. Speaker, I must tell you that time and time again I find it a little frustrating that members of the government caucus sometimes agree with us in principle but choose not to vote for the ideas that we present, and they quote reasons and excuses, however weak, to reject opposition ideas or amendments. But today I'm a little optimistic that they will rise above their petty partisanship and will join me in supporting this important idea. What we're proposing here makes sense, and it is the right thing to do, and if the government has already adopted some of it, then why not go the extra mile to adopt something that is positive and that makes sense? Let's get to the

point and start doing this for our benefit and that of our children and grandchildren.

Mr. Speaker, if I expand a bit beyond this inventory idea – and, really, if it were up to me, I would look at the whole gamut of things like studying drinking water quality, for example. Many communities have commented or complained about the level of pesticides, herbicides, pharmaceuticals, industrial and commercial pollutants, and possibly also microbial and viral pathogens. E coli comes to mind, for example.

We also have to think outside the box, although this government finds it hard to do sometimes. Here's an example. We use chlorine to disinfect drinking water across the board. Right? Lloydminster, on the one hand, wants to use an ultraviolet light system to purify its water. Two problems. One, the UV system is expensive, more than \$100,000, and, two, reducing the amount of chlorine may mean that Lloydminster doesn't comply with the provincial standards. So they're in a catch-22 situation. They have a technology that's at their disposal that they can use to purify and clean their water without resorting to chlorine, which has its own problems, but then now they risk not being able to meet provincial standards.

Now, is this an idea that Alberta and Saskatchewan can co-operate on and run as a pilot study? I think so. In the summer of 2005, if I remember correctly, Lloydminster had an E coli scare, and many residents today are still wary of their water supply. They drink it, but that's the only source of water in Lloydminster, and ultraviolet could have actually helped with that.

Again, to think outside the box, take Edson for example, Mr. Speaker. It is growing fairly quickly, mainly as tourism grows. It's also outgrowing its water supply. They draw their water from a system of old wells, but the demand is fast surpassing what's available. New hotels and resorts are being built, more people are moving into the area to work at those hotels and resorts, and you have to also factor in the number of guests and visitors, which is climbing.

8:30

The town of Edson approached this Progressive Conservative government to drill a new well, but they were told instead to reopen old wells. Now, I think that's probably some bureaucrat in some office decreeing that they can't and telling them to go open old wells. I don't think that decision was based on any science or any research. Those old wells are not going to provide the amount of water that Edson needs. Nobody cares. They were told to open the old ones, and that was it. Further to that, there is also the fact that some of Edson's water shortage problems are caused by truckers taking water out of town to the oil rigs, water that should have stayed in their local system. Now it's being taken out.

We can probably extrapolate from these two examples, Mr. Speaker, to any number of locations and situations across Alberta, but today is not the day. We are here to discuss a motion that basically asks for an honest, comprehensive, and periodically updated water image, water inventory picture. We need to know where we have the water, how much of it, its state or quality. We need to also plan effectively.

Taking the picture today and then doing the periodic evaluations as we go would allow us to also determine the trends or the patterns that would help us forecast and plan. If we notice that our water is okay in a certain area but is suffering in another area, then we can study the reasons why this discrepancy exists. It really offers us that forecasting security that we can know what we're doing and what effect our actions have on our environment.

I'm going to repeat the title of that motion, Mr. Speaker: be it

resolved that the Legislative Assembly . . . [Mr. Elsalhy's speaking time expired]

Thank you. I appreciate the time.

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

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to join the debate on Motion 511. Water is an important resource in this province and one that this government works hard to protect and conserve. I find the wording of this particular motion to be somewhat offensive. To say that we need an inventory of all ground and surface water "in order to responsibly manage and sustain" Alberta water resources neglects to take into account the fact that this government already manages this resource responsibly. It also neglects to note that the government is currently working towards an inventory of Alberta's water sources and supplies, that the government is already collecting data.

Mr. Speaker, to imply that the government is not responsibly managing water for Albertans is completely false. I have four words for the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View: Water for Life strategy. As the hon. Minister of Environment informed the member opposite during May 3rd's question period, Alberta's Water for Life strategy is the most progressive water strategy in North America. The strategy is in place to examine the issues surrounding water quality and water quantity while being conscious of the long-term challenges the province faces. It is, as the name states, a strategy to ensure that this province's water remains sustainable.

In developing the strategy itself, Albertans and stakeholders were consulted, resulting in three main goals for the strategy. These include a safe, secure drinking water supply, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy. To ensure that the Water for Life strategy is successful, not only were Albertans given a voice in the creation of the strategy itself, but it's also being implemented by partners in communities, municipalities, industry, and agriculture as well as government.

There are three main types of partnerships involved in implementing Water for Life. The provincial water advisory council, the watershed planning and advisory council, and the watershed stewardship groups all work to manage Alberta's water. The provincial water advisory council is the main group responsible for implementing Water for Life. Ultimately, the council helps to ensure that the outcomes are achieved across the province and provides the government with policy advice. The purpose of the various watershed planning and advisory councils is to provide a system for public and stakeholder involvement in the overall management of Alberta's water within our individual watersheds. They work to help plan, create best practices, and report on the watershed which they manage.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the watershed stewardship groups allow Albertans the opportunity to act as stewards of their own local water sources. These volunteers most effectively take the initiative to protect their own water sources. This would lead one to believe that these everyday, hard-working Albertans are working in the best interests of all Albertans to responsibly manage these local water sources in the public interest despite what the mover of the motion may believe. Thus, the Water for Life strategy works to address the concerns of Albertans in terms of the use of Alberta's water and, of course, to manage Alberta's water supplies in the best possible manner.

Mr. Speaker, I myself sat on the South Saskatchewan basin advisory council for the Water for Life strategy. This was a great opportunity to take part in the building of the strategy. I experienced first-hand the consultation that was done with Albertans regarding

management of our water resources. From this experience I honestly believe that through the Water for Life strategy this government is responsibly managing Alberta's water and ensuring that this resource is being sustained in the public interest.

To imply that the province is mishandling water supplies is totally unjust and completely misleading to all Albertans. Mr. Speaker, the Water for Life strategy is already addressing the sustainability of Alberta's water resources, and as the Environment minister noted for the member opposite during question period on May 3, mapping or data collection is already taking place as part of the Water for Life strategy.

It is for these reasons that I cannot support Motion 511. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise this evening to join the debate on Motion 511. I'd like to thank the hon. member for bringing this motion forward as it allows an excellent opportunity to highlight the many steps the government is already taking on this very matter.

No one disputes the fact that water is an extremely important resource to this province. In fact, the Alberta government has made water management a high-priority issue as evidenced by the comprehensive Water for Life strategy. Creating an inventory of the water supplies across the province is a huge task, however. This undertaking is extremely complex and will take a great deal of time and resources. Fortunately, Alberta Environment is already working diligently to ensure that this task will continue to proceed in a professional and thorough manner.

One important step in this process involves the creation of the Alberta Water Information Centre. The Alberta Water Information Centre, initiated in '03-04, is a multiyear project designed to provide Albertans with self-serve access to information about the status of Alberta's water resources, including quality, quantity, licence commitments, and actual use of surface water and groundwater.

The first phase of this project focused on building a data warehouse infrastructure and establishing a process to ensure surface water quality data from Alberta Environment's operational system. Work was also undertaken to develop a series of standard surface water quality information products, such as tables, graphs, et cetera, to meet the common request received from Albertans. The first rollout of the Alberta Water Information Centre was made available to the public in February of '05.

The next area of focus for the Alberta Water Information Centre will be to integrate information on water licences and licence use, the development of the ad hoc reporting capabilities, and taking steps to incorporate additional sources of data at the AWIC.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, one major goal of the Alberta Water Information Centre is to develop additional data and products on surface water quantity and quality. This will be one important source of information available to Albertans pertaining to the water quality in our province and its quantity. This initiative is but one aspect of the government's comprehensive Water for Life strategy, devoted to creating and maintaining an inventory of our province's water supplies.

This is a colossal undertaking, Mr. Speaker, both in terms of scope and logistics. First of all, there's a great amount of water in our province. In addition, water levels are constantly fluctuating. Thus, maintaining an accurate inventory becomes very difficult, yet it is attainable. It just needs a comprehensive strategy.

Alberta Environment has been reviewing the various provincial

ground and surface water monitoring networks, programs, and the databases. The department continues to compile information and data to help us better understand and record our water supplies. Keeping track, Mr. Speaker, of the water supplies in our province and ensuring future sustainability of this important resource remains a long-term goal of this government.

8:40

Mr. Speaker, Motion 511 is redundant. It is urging the government to do something it is already doing. Moreover, Alberta is considered to be a national leader in this regard. It may be a good idea, but the government is already acting on this initiative. To be honest, the next thing you know, the opposition will be calling for the government to eliminate the debt or to establish a taxation regime where Albertans pay the lowest taxes in Canada or to create the best climate for business in our economy. Maybe a motion will come forward this fall from the opposition calling on the government to prepare for this province's centennial. Fortunately for Albertans the government doesn't need to be urged to act on this matter; we're there. To support this, as the Member for Calgary-Mountain View has asked, would imply that nothing is being done by the government, and that is not fair, it's not accurate, and it's not reasonable. For this reason, I will not be supporting this redundant motion, and I encourage all my colleagues to do the same.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure that I stand and join the debate over Motion 511, and I'm very pleased to be able to do so and to add my thoughts and the things that I have come across in speaking and listening as we travel through Alberta.

I must start out by saying that I'm very disappointed that this current government seems to think that this is unnecessary. It seems to me that it goes back to the story of when you came across a person walking down the street and you were to ask them, "Where did you get those shoes?" and immediately he takes the defensive: "I didn't steal these. I bought these, and they're my own." It seems that they're very touchy on this subject, and therefore I deduce that they realize themselves that they can and should do more. In this perhaps we could just change the wording a little bit, if they find it offensive – and I don't think that it is; perhaps it's a little bit gruff – to say that we continue to speed up and do all we can to gather the inventory because we all know that that inventory is being taken, that we need to speed up, especially in areas where new development is being used, such as in the coal-bed methane, and to perhaps look at water supplies in order to more responsibly manage. We can always do better.

As an irrigator in southern Alberta we're always looking at innovation and how to move on. I very much get the feeling from the government members that they're on autopilot: "Everything has been achieved. We've got a plan. We have nothing left to do, and we don't need to talk about it." I find that disappointing because there are many innovative and great ideas out there that we can and should be discussing as we want to use our most valuable resource wisely and for the benefit of all current Albertans but, most importantly, future Albertans.

It's interesting to me to realize the numbers and the different numbers that we get from one side to the other side. What I would urge the government to do is to perhaps publish a simple report that has ordinary accounting, that says how much is being used in the north for the bitumen extraction, how much is being used in well

water and being put down. We have many numbers out there. Perhaps they could get those numbers and publish them in a way that works.

I think that we need to split the use of the water. There have been many good ideas talked about, you know, on the different uses of water, whether it's for human consumption, whether it's for industrial, whether it's for agriculture, but perhaps we need to split the consumption or the use of water into one that is returned to the system versus that which is taken and eliminated from the system, leaving us with no water now, and also an inventory of that water that is being contaminated and can't go back into the system. I think that would be of great benefit to Albertans.

We've talked about the inventory. Perhaps Albertans need to be updated and to realize: are there still some environmental assessments going on? Are we looking at off-river storage? Are we looking at more dams? We don't have the retention in the mountains anymore, and the glaciers are shrinking, and thereby when it rains and the water is running down at its full stream in June – and we experienced terrible flooding last year – we're losing an enormous amount. We need to look at storage. We need to look at ways to capture it because we've injured nature in many of those areas, and it no longer has the capacity to hold that water. So we need to be innovative and see where we can look at retaining that water, using it and letting it flow downstream throughout the year on a steady, slow basis.

As a long-time scouter I was always very concerned with the importance of wise use of our resource, and that's what we want to do. There has been mention, you know: is it worth six barrels of water to extract a single barrel of oil? Is that true? What's the data on that? Let's see the different plants and how they're doing that. I think every Albertan would say: "No, it isn't. We can live without our oil, but we can't live without our water. It would drastically change our lifestyle." But we'll lose our lifestyle if we don't have water, Mr. Speaker.

It's critical that we don't be partisan about our water and what we're looking at. We should have good ideas coming forward and everybody spending the time on it. What are the things that they've heard or learned or seen? We've had, I guess, somewhat of a lecture about this Water for Life strategy and talking about municipalities and being able to protect their water. There are many things, including agriculture, that aren't always friendly to that water: the problems with runoff that happens when we get these outbursts of weather, and the change of weather pattern. There's always, it seems, something new. I can't remember where I was at, but they were showing the 25-year flood line. What's important in the AOPA Act is, you know, to stay outside the 25-year flood line. Now we're having that twice in 10 years. Is that still relevant? We need to re-evaluate.

In 1912 the river bottom at Edmonton was flooded, and there was \$700,000 damage. That's when they decided to turn that into a park area. It's been the biggest and best in Canada. I love the river bottom here in Edmonton. The government has taken that action to protect it. Are we looking at those things and realizing that the climate isn't the same as 100 years ago or 25 years ago? We need to learn that if it happens now, let's act now and not say: "Oh, that was one in a hundred. Gosh, that's one in a hundred, twice in 10 years." Those aren't good enough answers. We don't want to be on autopilot. We don't want to cover our eyes. We don't want to plug our ears. We should have an open, honest discussion. Let's do all we can for current and future Albertans.

I'm very much appreciative of the Member for Calgary-Mountain View in bringing this motion forward. There's nothing more important to Albertans than our water. Our Environment minister

has referred to it as blue gold many times. It's exciting. The opportunity is there for us. Are we going to maximize it, or are we going to sit back and say: oh, we're doing the best that's being done anywhere? No, we have greater potential. Let's be innovative, and let's do it.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Any others? Hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, did you want to speak?

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and debate the motion before us tonight, Motion 511. I want to respond to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright because I was struck by the bald-faced arrogance of his statements and struck again, not having worked all that many Monday nights this session, by how the members of the government seem to take the opportunity to debate an opposition motion as an opportunity to essentially abuse the opposition at will. I think it's shameful. I really do.

You know, the Water for Life strategy, Mr. Speaker, is a great policy, and I'm impressed with the work done by the previous Environment minister and those involved in crafting the Water for Life strategy. In my opinion it's one of the best policies this government has ever come up with. But, you know, right now it's barely worth the paper it's printed on because the Water for Life strategy is almost totally dependent on volunteers, on watershed groups, acting in isolation, making decisions in isolation. There is no communication to speak of, no co-ordination to speak of. There is inadequate funding: \$33 million over three years. To do what? I don't know.

For the last five years, while the oil and gas industry has been busily punching holes in the ground searching for coal-bed methane, there has been no baseline water testing. None in the last five years. Now the government is starting to talk. After unrelenting pressure this session from my colleague from Calgary-Mountain View and other members of the opposition now the government is starting to talk about doing baseline testing, five years late.

8:50

You know, we've got here a great policy that's underfunded, underenforced. Because it exists on a piece of paper somewhere, this government seems to think that it can arrogantly sally forth and talk about how wonderful it is and how behind the times the opposition supposedly is. The opposition is not behind the times, Mr. Speaker. The opposition is saying to the government: it's time to put your money and your management skills, if you have any, where your mouth is and where your policy is and start doing the work, the heavy lifting, that a government is supposed to do when a government brings in policy. But no: this government would rather sit back on its laurels, pat itself on the back, feel smug and arrogant and complacent and isolated from the people it's supposed to be serving. This government has been in power so long that it has utterly forgotten that it works for the people, not the other way around. It's about time they climbed down off their high horses, if they can find the route down anymore, and got to work and did the job Albertans elected them to do. I'll tell you, Albertans are getting increasingly fed up with this government not doing its job and are looking for an excuse to vote them out of office.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View to close debate.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the discussion and the comments from all members. Again, I would like to reinforce that this is a motion that supports in good measure what the government is already doing in terms of investing \$33 million over three years into the Water for Life strategy. This is long overdue, and I commend it for making this kind of commitment. I would like to see the same commitment to the Alberta Environment department overall so that it could do its job in this province. But this is a good first step, and I want to support it with this motion.

This motion does nothing if it doesn't concur with the priority that groundwater has. Along with other comments that have been made, it's not clear to Albertans that groundwater has been a priority for this government. It is not clear that this government has taken seriously the risks to groundwater for 600,000 rural Albertans. It is not clear that they have done due diligence and looked at the science that's needed to manage our groundwater, both the quality and the quantity, in a more sustainable fashion.

We have a long way to go to build public trust in the government's capacity and willingness to take care of our water resource, both groundwater and surface water. I would strongly encourage the members to move quickly on the groundwater inventory, to again look at the way the Water for Life strategy is working, based fundamentally on volunteers. We cannot expect volunteers to manage our surface water with any reasonable, sustainable, and good-quality assurance without adequate funding, technical support, and opportunities to plan for the whole watershed, not one piece of the river at a time.

The other issue that has been alluded to by the hon. members for both Medicine Hat and Battle River-Wainwright is the need to shift from supply management to demand management, especially in Medicine Hat. The greatest threat exists for drought and impacts there. We have to find ways to reduce demand. There is no way that we can increase supply. We need to look at demand-side management: conservation, water collection, storage. We have a tremendous lot to do there. I have no idea whether \$33 million will be anywhere near what is needed to seriously take on the commitments that are needed both in terms of the surface and the groundwater.

It's clear to me that there are hundreds of people in the Horseshoe Canyon formation of southeastern Alberta that are extremely anxious about their groundwater, whether they'll be able to use it and for how long and to what extent it's been damaged by coal-bed methane. It's extremely urgent that that be the priority for the groundwater mapping, to allay increasing anxiety that this more shallow coal-bed fracturing is or is not damaging their aquifers.

I would encourage all members to support the motion. It reinforces some of the good work that is being done, but it highlights the need for a high priority on planning and measurement, science-based management principles as opposed to ad hoc decision-making. It fosters, I think, a very strong ethic of water conservation and demand-side management that needs to be much more explicit than under the present jurisdictions of government.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 511 lost]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just before we get on with the moving at second of the appropriation bill, I wonder if I could seek unanimous consent of the House to reduce any division bells that might occur throughout this evening going forward from 10 minutes down to five minutes. I understand that some people

were in touch with my office, and that would be an appropriate request to make. I would ask for that unanimous consent first, and then I'll proceed with the rest.

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

Bill 42
Appropriation Act, 2006

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move the Appropriation Act, 2006, Bill 42 as it is otherwise known, on behalf of our hon. Minister of Finance.

I'll just briefly comment that this bill recaps what we have been debating in this House for several weeks now, which in other words is termed the estimates of each ministry. We have gone department by department now for a long time, and at this stage we're simply seeking the consolidation, if you will, of all of that information into the Appropriation Act.

I would hope that with that brief intro and comment we could move through the Appropriation Act debate in the spirit with which it's intended. I'll move second reading now.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Bill 42, the Appropriation Act, 2006, if I could, I'd like to go through some issues with different aspects of different budgets and comment on it accordingly. One of the interesting comments of the Minister of Education when he gave his budget has made my phones ring recently. I've been busy. He called it – and a lot of the superintendents and teachers that have called the last 10 days are referring to the words – “preliminary budget.” That's really had some interesting connotation. Then, as one person who phoned today from Fort Saskatchewan said: “Your remarks, Mr. Flaherty, are inadequate. It's not a hold-the-line budget. It should be called a not-enough budget.” Because it's my area of interest, I'll just start off with the Education budget and try and get some clarification and put some notes on the record as to my feelings about some of the things.

First of all, let me just touch on the area of special education. You know, Mr. Speaker, I think we have to recognize the wonderful volunteer and support groups that we have in this area, in this province of Alberta. There's one operating in Edmonton which is a very profound group. In fact, I believe, if I'm not mistaken, it's called the parent advisory council out of the academy at King Edward. Now, this is a very good group of about I'd say 60 to 70 parents. They've been wonderful to us in the St. Albert constituency because we use a lot of them for workshops and to refer parents who are having difficulty with their kids. They've helped us immeasurably with some of the very difficult problems that parents face with children that have disabilities.

9:00

Now, let me just talk about a letter that the chairman of this group wrote to the Minister of Education. She said:

... I highlighted that the current funding formula does not address or does not provide additional funding for children with mild to moderate learning challenges. It has been pointed out to me that my statement on this matter might have been interpreted incorrectly. I

certainly apologize for any misinterpretation. I wish to take this opportunity to clarify our concern. Specifically, we are concerned that your Department . . .

That's the Minister of Education's department.

. . . does not provide additional funding beyond that which is provided within the base funding to address the increased cost of educating children with mild to moderate special needs.

Mrs. Burke goes on to say in this fine letter to the minister:

Our parent community is respectfully requesting that your department provide us with an explanation or rationale as to why districts are not provided with additional funding (beyond that which is provided through the base funding) for children with mild to moderate learning challenges. As you might appreciate, we find the lack of financial compensation to districts to be profoundly troubling and inconsistent with the fine Standards for Special Education . . .

which you came out with in June 2004. She's saying that was a wonderful document

created by your department to engender excellence in the provision of education for children with special needs. We need to understand with clarity the reason for this policy on the part of your department; our view is that it is a major and serious oversight in the manner in which funding is provided to districts.

So I think we're saying that in the particular budget of the Minister of Education, that seems to be very much lacking in the area of special education with the matter that I just referred to.

Now, it's interesting, Mr. Speaker, that just today, because of this idea of what he referred to as a preliminary budget rather than the one that we thought was the real budget, I received a very interesting call from the parents of the Catholic school district which is in Elk Island. It's called St. Luke elementary school. They're spending 2.5 hours a day on the bus for a trip that takes about 12 minutes if parents drive their children directly to school.

The concern of the parents' group in that school district is that there are no bathrooms on the bus, and children are not allowed to eat on the bus. This distance is about the same as kids going to Red Deer for school. There's a significant loss of children's time. So little value is placed on the children's time that it doesn't make sense economically to have more buses. Could you imagine an employer that asks workers to travel 2.5 hours a day on the bus without pay every workday?

Now, it's interesting to me that when we met with the Calgary public school board in Calgary, their board was telling us about the issues that they had in transportation. My point, Mr. Speaker, is that in this budget there doesn't seem to be anything that talks about evaluating the bus systems across Alberta and making reforms. I think that we need to look at the whole busing situation in this province and work some guidelines and make sure that children are not having these long periods of time and stressful times on bus transportation. I think that it's a serious problem. I can recall, when I was in the Lethbridge regional office, a Dr. Ed Bardock doing a provincial study evaluating what was happening in the province and making some major changes. Maybe we should be addressing that matter in this particular budget.

Now, let me also just talk quickly if I can about the whole question of infrastructure. We seem to have a lack of a plan that schools can review to see if their school's infrastructure needs are being addressed. I'm encouraged. I believe that the new associate minister of infrastructure, hopefully, is coming out with something on this, I suspect around the end of June, so maybe there's hope for us to make sure that schools get some feedback as to where they're going with the whole business of capital projects and infrastructure needs.

Again, just before we leave education, the question of the unfunded liability issue seems to be there. I'll be spending the weekend in Calgary at the ATA convention, and hopefully I'm going to get some information as to where they're going on that.

The class size initiative across the province seems to be causing some problems. The phone calls to me indicate that, for example, in Edmonton public they're suggesting to me that they are going to be \$4 million short in their budget to meet the class size initiative that they thought they were going to have right across the board, from K to 12. They're expecting that there will be cuts and that this will have implications for teachers in their system. There is a great deal of concern there. Stay tuned. I think we're going to hear more about that in the coming weeks.

Seniors. Let me just touch on the whole business of seniors. I commend the government on getting to the question of standards. I think that's a step in the right direction, and I compliment them. Where I have some concern is: why is it going to take so long to implement these across the province? That concerns me greatly. I have a 97-year-old father-in-law in Aspen House in Morinville, and I'm thankful, and I want to say that I'm very pleased at the care he's getting. It's wonderful. He's a wonderful fellow. He's even thinking of looking for a new bride on the weekend or very soon. That's encouraging. He said he'll have to buy a new car if that takes place. So he's being well looked after. But I see that as a pinnacle to aim for, and I'm hoping that these standards can do some wonderful things for seniors in this province, who I believe we owe a great deal to because of the amount of effort they've made in developing our heritage and the contribution they've made. The other thing that bothers me. I wish that we had some independent policing of that whole thing of the standards to report to this House as to what is happening.

Child care. Let me just touch on child care. It's interesting. I do a lot of following of B.C. politics. I think they're making a mistake by following this government in some of their new directions, but Campbell sometimes is not the wisest man in the world. I'm happy to see that the child's advocate in B.C. now will report to an all-party council of the Legislature, and that is to me a very enlightened move. I think that it has some wonderful implications for keeping their child welfare in B.C. up to snuff, and we should take a look at that in Alberta to see if it has any possibilities for us in the way we operate our child welfare services across Alberta.

The question again of AISH. That is to me a matter of concern because in the review I listened carefully – I just want to tell you a story, Mr. Speaker. When I happened to be with the minister of social services and health, Mr. Ray Speaker, I can recall a person with MS who had three kids that we helped. I was aware of this person from being involved in a church group. In fact, he married this beautiful lady that I had a crush on. This is a true story. Unfortunately, she got very ill and committed suicide. He had MS, and because of the AISH program and with his pension from Crane he was able to continue on with a housekeeper until he died at 57. One of his sons – I won't name him – is an outstanding lawyer in the Edmonton region and has a wonderful family.

I think what I'm saying to you is that the AISH program – and I commend the government – is wonderful, but I think that you have to build a good cost-of-living index into it and make sure that it's reviewed on an annual basis.

I think I'm allowed, Mr. Speaker – and I'll ask your guidance on this – to comment on Bill 40. Is that on the table today? Am I allowed to just say a few words about it?

9:10

The Acting Speaker: I think that we will be dealing with Bill 40 a little later on today.

Mr. Flaherty: Okay. So I'm not allowed to say anything. I had some wonderful remarks from a beautiful student that I met in St.

Albert the other night. She was a good friend of the president of the university.

Mr. Speaker, I'm searching to see if I've covered all the issues that I wanted to talk about. I think I have. Thank you for your patience, and thank you for allowing me to speak to Bill 42.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to participate in this debate on the appropriation bill. I promise to be brief. I'm building on some of the comments that were introduced on the record by my hon. colleague from St. Albert. Most of them also centre around education and learning. It is sort of an opportune moment for me to put them on the record, and I would appreciate any feedback or response from cabinet and from the hon. minister.

Last fall I started a petition on school fees, Mr. Speaker. What triggered my taking this action was that a constituent of mine from Edmonton-McClung actually called the office and later visited the office crying. She was complaining that she can no longer find affordable the fees that are charged by the school to which her children go. She was finding that expense to be unbearable. She was factoring in costs of, you know, instructional supplies, the fees that are charged for field trips, for example, locker rentals, and so on, and then you add bus fare. With three children she was definitely finding it very difficult.

So what we did was work with her, approach Parliamentary Counsel and approved the language of that particular petition. We tried to make sure that it was actually balanced in that it called on the government to fully and adequately fund the school boards so that they, in turn, can fully and adequately fund their individual schools so that they in turn do not have to resort to charging parents school fees. Now, it is noteworthy to mention that some of the discussions I had with parents indicated that they don't want to pay any fees. They actually want to still participate in the education process. They really quite enjoy being a part of that experience with their children, but they complained about the level of the fees charged, not the actual concept of charging fees for certain things.

So we had the petition. The petition went out to all the parent councils in the province. We received quite a few responses from all over the province, but we made the observation that most of those responses came from rural Alberta, not from the urban centres. That was an eye-opener for us because we thought that people in the cities tend to pay more, but that was not evident in the responses we received.

Further to our petition on school fees, the Edmonton public school board has just recently released their own survey on fundraising. I found it very interesting to read, Mr. Speaker, because they commented on, you know, the expectation now that parents have to fund raise. It is not the case where they actually fund raise for the options or the extras. They actually do in fact fund raise now for essentials or basics. The expectation that they have to participate in fundraising activities is growing, and the level of dissatisfaction with that is also growing. Parents are saying, you know: we're fund raised to death, basically; we have contributed time and time again. And that expectation is rising because they're paying for more and more every day.

Now, I hope that other surveys have been conducted or are going to be conducted in other parts of this province. This is one that I found myself, which was from the Edmonton public school board. I would be interested to see if maybe there's going to be a central survey commissioned by the hon. minister or, in fact, if he can instruct people at the Public Affairs Bureau to maybe commission a survey of that nature. Again, my argument is that the Public Affairs

Bureau should be there to ask people's opinion, to survey public opinion, not to tell people, you know, how to think and what to believe. We would find a survey of this nature very useful. It would offer guidance and direction to the hon. minister and to cabinet based on what people think is necessary and what people think is appropriate in terms of fundraising.

The other issue that I wanted to put on the record today, Mr. Speaker, actually has to deal with the issue of school boundaries. I have not spoken to the minister yet, but I was planning to, and today is a good opportunity to highlight this. There are concerns with the way school boundaries are set in terms of, you know, who can join which school and who cannot. I have three cases in Edmonton-McClung of students who live just a couple of hundred feet away from the particular junior high school that they want to join, but they didn't make the cut. The school has space. It is not an issue of space. They do have space in the regular program and also in the academic achievement program, but they didn't make the lottery because there's a random draw. They feel that it doesn't make sense for them to be asked to take a bus to another school where their friends are not going and that would waste at least 45 minutes in the morning and 45 minutes in the afternoon for them to come back when they could actually walk to the school that they picked and the school where all their friends are going. So the issue of school boundaries I think has to be visited.

Also, I was actually extremely disappointed to find out that there are no waiting lists anymore. We have situations where people actually misrepresent the truth. They give a false address to be able to make the lottery when, in fact, they don't live at that address. They use somebody else's address, a neighbour or a friend, and they don't live at that house and exclude people who are legitimately within the boundaries. Now, with a school that has space, there is no waiting list. I think that maybe in next year's budget it would be wise for the hon. minister to investigate this thing because if a school has space and people are asked to be bused to a different school to even out the attendance, to even out the enrolment, I think it's sort of a fake intervention. We're doing something to make it look better than it is when, in fact, the people who are affected by it are those students in junior high and high school.

That would be a valid expense in next year's budget, to study this school boundaries issue and also, again, to re-emphasize the issue of fundraising in schools because it is a big issue. I don't think it should go unnoticed, and some action has to be taken.

I sincerely appreciate this opportunity. I could go on and on about other things, you know, like health, for example, and seniors, which are dear and near to me, but I choose not to, to allow more members to speak tonight, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you again.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to speak to Bill 42, the Appropriation Act, 2006. This House has spent considerable time over the last six or seven weeks, as it should, on estimates for each department individually, and there have been fairly interesting observations made by hon. members on the department budgets from Community Development to Education to Health to Seniors, Children's Services, and so forth. It is true that this bill now is a final piece of legislation which is there to seek the approval of this House for the overall spending estimates and the budget for next year. This House, of course, takes this business of spending public dollars, taxpayers' dollars, on a variety of programs that this government offers very seriously. So any time spent on debates either on the estimates of individual departments or on the appropriation bill is time exceedingly well spent.

9:20

We know that this budget has proposed some overdue increases in spending in some areas, areas which have suffered over the years because of systematic cutbacks, restructuring, or whatever have you. There's a lot of catch-up being done. Infrastructure certainly is one such area.

In fact, I'll be seeing a representative from a large high school in my constituency the day after tomorrow who is seeking to meet with me to express their concern about the 50-year-old heating infrastructure that this big school has. There have been constant complaints. Experts and specialists have been brought in to assess the problems with the heating system. Particularly since we are a cold climate, it's seven, eight months of the year. The problems arise from uneven heating in this school, in various parts of the school. There are over 3,000 students going to this school, and the heating equipment for the school is from the 1950s. Repeated assessments of the performance of the heating plant have suggested that the aging of these structures is creating health hazards and problems for students, not only discomfort but, as a matter of fact, has put their health at risk. This is a high school.

This particular instance in my constituency is merely illustrative of the very large problem of an infrastructure crisis that has developed in this province over the years. Whether it's schools, whether it's hospitals, whether it's seniors' residences, whether it's roads and bridges and whatever have you, there are huge problems arising from the aging of structures and equipment that need to be fixed.

So while on the one hand there's some attention in this budget towards addressing problems related to this very, very profound problem of the infrastructure budget, at the same time there are tax cuts being offered to, it seems to me, the very business entities that perhaps do not need tax cuts at this stage.

An interesting figure, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the corporations and their profits in this country. Corporate profits are very high. There's a period of very high corporate profits in Canada as a whole, and for this last year that just passed, there's quite a startling figure: 70 per cent of all the corporate profits are made by corporations from Alberta. So the Alberta corporate sector is the beneficiary of 70 per cent of all the profits made by corporations in Canada – quite a figure to reflect on – and the very corporations who are beneficiaries of this huge share of national profits made by corporations, 70 per cent, are the corporations which will be receiving a big handout, a big tax cut in this budget, according to our estimates close to \$375 million a year in the next coming years, and I think this figure is going to increase as the size of these corporations and the size of their operations grow.

There's absolutely no justification to our seniors who wait before the quality of care that they receive can be improved. There is no justification at all for school boards to have to wait before they can get the infrastructure in their aging schools fixed or have their class sizes reduced while at the same time squandering the stable, predictable revenues, not just for one year, not once in a while but on an annual basis, on corporate tax cuts when, in fact, corporations don't need this kind of help given the economic situation in the country and particularly in this province.

When you take a longer term view, over the next 10-year period, by 2016, this province will have lost close to \$5 billion in these tax cuts. It's a cumulative revenue giveaway and loss, revenues that could be invested in our schools, in our hospitals, for our seniors, for our children, for improving the infrastructure, for protecting our environment, for doing just so many things that need to be done that are waiting to be addressed while this budget gives away huge amounts of money.

Ambulance funding is another one. Year after year after year the

AUMA, Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, has drawn attention to the fact that there's a \$12 million funding imbalance, a deficit if you wish, in the budget for ambulances. Twelve million dollars. Yet this year's allocation for the purpose remains at the same level that it was two or three years ago, at \$55 million. Again, another area where we could have used the funds that were lost through tax cuts to corporations that didn't need the tax cut and addressed the deficits.

One other example comes to mind here. This year, Mr. Speaker, both in the throne speech and later on in the budget speech there was an emphasis on dedicating funds to cancer research and cancer prevention. At the same time as these commitments are being made by this government both to increase resources for cancer research and thereby for cancer prevention, AADAC's tobacco reduction strategy budget is reduced by \$300,000. We know that there are very direct connections between the use of tobacco and cancer, yet we find that AADAC's tobacco reduction strategy budget suffers a cut. So there are facts in this budget that are difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, a commitment is being made to prevent cancer. On the other hand, in fact, monetary or budgetary commitments are being rolled back where they will have the most effect; for example, our tobacco-reduction strategy.

Mr. Speaker, today I and my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood met with an arts and culture group from Edmonton. A delegation of five or six people came to see us drawing attention to the relative neglect and serious neglect over the years on the part of this government in budgeting for promoting arts and cultural activities in this province. The Alberta Foundation for the Arts, we know what happened to its budget. You know, its budget went up by 10 per cent after years of staying at the same stagnant level while the horse-racing industry's budget went up by 40 per cent. Tens of millions of dollars are being thrown at the horse-racing industry while peanuts are being offered as increases for the arts and culture field.

The concern that the members of the delegation shared with our caucus this morning was: why is it that there is no appreciation in the government quarters with respect to the important role that art and cultural activities play in enriching our lives and our communities, both contributing enormously to the quality of the lives of our citizens in small communities, rural communities, or large urban centres and, at the same time, making a huge impact in terms of economic returns and economic activity, especially at the local level, yet they receive very poor attention in this budget from this government? So the question that they are asking is: what is it? What does the cultural and arts community need to do in order to send a clear message to this government when it's preparing its budget to pay attention to this extremely important set of activities, the economic and cultural and social sector – arts and culture, that is – where there's a huge potential for growth both in economic terms and in terms of the cultural vibrancy of our communities and the colour and the texture that they add to our daily lives? A very large number of Albertans, as a matter of fact, work in this field, yet it's an area that suffers from neglect in the budget year after year after year.

9:30

Mr. Speaker, I can go on to draw attention to many of these anomalies or contradictions of the budget. The budget decisions are made in such a way that the government seems to be speaking out of both sides of its mouth. It wants to prevent cancer, yet it withdraws money from programs that will in fact lead us to achieve that goal. So the question is: why is it that one finds these kinds of loopholes, problems with the budget?

Another area, Mr. Speaker, that I'd like to take a moment to draw attention to is the area of climate change. We know climate change and its impact. It's now visible. We simply cannot deny that the climate is changing. The connection between the change and the agents of the change is also clear. It is human activity that has the highest impact on or is the greatest contributor to that change. Yet when you look at the budget, the climate change program budget has increased by a miserly 1 per cent. You know what the inflation rate is this year? At least 2.7 per cent to 3 per cent. So the actual dollars available and budgeted for climate change programs have gone down in value. Why is this? We are worrying about impending water shortages across the province, the threat of drought that might arise, our rivers going down, the volume of water that is flowing through them, and the impact of that.

I will close, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

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

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to stand and speak briefly to the appropriation bill, Bill 42. Clearly, the budgetary commitments of the government reflect its priorities and its values, and I would hope that all Albertans would have access to a sense of where the province is going and where the priorities are as reflected in our budgetary commitments through various ministries. Obviously, again, the people of Alberta expect that this resource that is given to Alberta in trust will be used for the purposes of improving health, safety, quality of life, and sustainability of our environment and our economy.

I mention economy last deliberately, Mr. Speaker, because it should serve the people and the environment, not the reverse. Unfortunately, this government has lost its balance in where the priorities should be, and all serves the economy in this province. We have failed to see the importance of the economy serving people and the environment.

There are two people in the Legislature tonight, the Musekamps, who have been here every day for the last few weeks trying to understand why this province fails to place its priority on farm workers and the value that they have to our province. Not only are they the breadbasket of this province, but farmers have been the very lifeblood and historic roots and tradition of this province. These folks are committed to persisting with the various departments in this government to see that farm workers get adequate protection for health and safety and basic human rights, that farm workers fall under the same protection of Alberta labour and the Workers' Compensation Board and other acts that protect workers' health and safety. Fundamentally, they are being denied these. Children and adults are working on farms. They're dying at a much higher rate than in other provinces that have included farm workers under health and safety and workers' compensation. So many of these injuries go unprotected and unfunded, and people are forced into bankruptcy in some cases and forced to take other jobs.

Part of our appropriation bill should really address what the priorities of government are. Why aren't we spending money to assist in a more meaningful way than simply education in the rural areas? Why are we not funding appropriate bodies to assist with the inclusion of farm workers in our labour code, in our workers' compensation? These people are absolutely marginalized and not getting the benefits and rights of all other Albertans. That's one area that I think we can highlight tonight in this general look at where we're spending our money in Alberta and how it's serving the people of Alberta, especially our farmers and the workers on farms. Over 20 deaths last year, Mr. Speaker, of which three were children,

and these are entirely preventable if we have the appropriate measures in place and certainly some of the financial support for people who do go through injuries.

I want to switch now to the environment, which I'm most closely associated with: \$130 million a year, Mr. Speaker, .5 per cent of the budget, one-third of what we used to spend in protecting our environment. Albertans have said repeatedly to this government that environment is the third most important element in their government services, after health and education. We are still giving a measly .5 per cent to Environment, which is fundamentally responsible for advocating for and protecting the environment and ensuring that it's in a position to support people and the economy. We are neglecting it woefully. It is not stewardship to give this critical ministry .5 per cent of the budget to establish standards, to monitor standards, to analyze the data, to enforce standards, and in fact to clean up some of the contaminated sites that industry walks away from.

Another element of our budget that is sorely lacking is a cleanup fund by industry. This Environment minister has suggested that we Albertans should pay for a cleanup fund, not industry, that we should set up a cleanup fund out of royalties, so essentially asking Albertans to pay twice, once when those responsible companies clean up and get the tax break for cleaning up and then calculate their royalties, and then a second time the public loses money on those companies that default. We are left then to clean up, as he would suggest, through public funds like the royalty, which is due Albertans as a result of the exploitation of our resource.

Again, in relation to our management of contaminated sites there's a serious gap in credibility here when the Environment minister calls for us to spend public funds in cleaning up industry's problems, at the same time calling on industry as the polluter, that they should pay. There's a mismatch between what is said and what is actually happening on the ground, especially with respect to downstream oil and gas and refineries and other industrial sites.

Indeed, we have not been cleaning up sites to equivalent land use, which the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act requires. We are now legitimizing the process of risk management on these sites, which means that we cover over the contamination, put in monitoring of groundwater wells, and if there is migration of contamination off the site into these wells, we say: oh, we've got a problem, and we'll clean it up now. This legacy will be left to our children. For several hundred years, then, we'll be managing these sites and monitoring the groundwater to see if these contaminated sites ever do spill into our groundwater.

This is not stewardship. We need to invest in full monitoring and enforcement of our standards. We have a very conscientious Environment staff, that are totally underfunded and unable to do the job they've been asked to do. It's time we addressed this, Mr. Speaker. I think Albertans know only a small amount about the negligence of our environment today.

9:40

On a more fundamental level in our finances, Mr. Speaker, if we're interested in the environment, we would do two fundamental things: we would stop giving incentives for industries that pollute, and we would start giving incentives for clean, renewable sources of energy. Those two fundamentals would go a tremendous amount to serving the interests of the environment and to serving sustainable development in this province. Stop giving financial incentives to activities that damage the environment and begin investing in those activities like renewable energy and energy conservation that will help to sustain the planet and reduce our impact in terms of climate change and greenhouse gases.

Clearly, we as citizens have a role, a serious role and responsibil-

ity in changing our ways, reducing our environmental footprint. We need to invest in making the healthy environmental choice the easier choice for people. The climate action fund, which has again received almost no increase this year, was a mechanism for getting people to buy energy-efficient appliances, energy-efficient furnaces, and to retrofit their homes and should be extending into vehicles and public transit. That would be progressive budgetary investment in our future. It would show young people that we have hope, that we have a vision, that we have plans to sustain our environment along with our economy and our communities.

I've talked at length in this Legislature about the concerns about coal-bed methane and the neglect that has happened over five years. We must restore confidence in this department. We must invest, then, in an independent public committee to examine some of the problems with wells and with groundwater, particularly in areas of the Horseshoe Canyon. That's an area that the Alberta Environment department and other departments need to share in. It's going to be expensive. We've done considerable damage there, from what I can assess, and we need to have objective scientific information to decide: where is there real damage from the oil and gas industry, and where is it natural causes that have contributed to groundwater problems? I do not want to impute fault without knowing the science, and we do not know the science today in terms of our groundwater. It's urgent both from the point of view of public trust in our government and in terms of public trust for our industries that we do proper assessment, and we need to invest there.

Industrial development has been massive in this province in the last few years, a fivefold increase in oil wells in the last decade yet no increase, substantially, in Alberta Environment. Alberta Environment, again, is one-third the size it was in the early '90s, and they are expected to do a huge amount of work in terms of the monitoring of these sites, follow-up of complaints in terms of water or in terms of air quality or in terms of soil contamination. We simply don't have the resources to do this.

Why is environment not a priority in this government? Why can we not commit the appropriate investment there? It's viewed too often as an expense rather than an investment. We have a legacy to leave to our children, and we have to invest more fully in the environment. All of us will benefit.

Those are my comments, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to raise these issues, farm safety and environment, all linked to human health and environmental sustainability and our ability to sustain our economy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Stevens: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn debate on Bill 42.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 40 **Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006**

[Adjourned debate May 10: Mr. Herard]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Herard: Thank you for taking your time. I was a little tardy in getting here.

Okay. I just wanted to add a few comments, having moved second reading the last time. I just wanted to make a few comments with respect to developments since moving second reading. I've

now had the opportunity to meet with CAUS and have spoken to ACTISEC and have written to both of my opposition critics. With respect to CAUS and ACTISEC I've made a commitment that if they give the regulation-making process an honest and fair shake and find that it just doesn't do the job for them, then they can come to SPC to make their suggestions for improvements. They wanted me to say that publicly, so I just did.

With respect to my esteemed critics I've now invited them in writing to participate in the regulation-making process so that they can shape the regulations through the consultation process. I don't know if that's going to make a whole lot of difference. I was hearing my hon. critic from Calgary-Currie. He was warming up a little earlier. I'm not sure that it's going to make a lot of difference, but I just wanted to put that on the record.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to continue second reading debate on Bill 40, Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006. I want to start by very briefly referring back to *Hansard*, to a few exchanges that we have had over the course of this session in question period.

On February 27 I asked the then Advanced Education minister about whether there was a fair tuition policy coming for all postsecondary students in Alberta. He answered: "Mr. Speaker, legislation is not the only way to create a priority. In fact, if you don't need more laws, you ought not to make more laws." That was February 27.

On March 16 I asked the then Minister of Advanced Education: "With the minister's spring deadline for a new affordability policy fast approaching, why are stakeholders still waiting for a draft policy that contains some actual specific details?" His answer was quite simple: "Because it's not done yet, Mr. Speaker."

On April 4 the then Advanced Education minister said:

I've always found it prudent that when you ask knowledgeable people to form a committee and to examine all the possible options that might be available and to make recommendations about which ones are most appropriate for students in our province, to make sure that affordability is key, that every Albertan has the opportunity to access an education and can afford that education, one ought not to make presumptions about the conclusions until they've actually got the recommendations.

Those exchanges indicated that the process of A Learning Alberta was continuing, albeit sometimes it seemed at a glacial pace. The impression that the then minister gave this House was that the process was giving the whole question of affordability of postsecondary education a full and thorough consideration, and – to paraphrase the old wine commercial: we will sell no wine before its time – we would not rush this thing through. Now, it gets a bit difficult at this point, Mr. Speaker, because it has been 16 months. One might say, at least if one is making a Canadian wine, that that's long enough to let it age. Those are the bad wines, the bad Canadian wines. The great Canadian wines take somewhat longer.

On the other hand, though, we have gone through a process that . . . [interjection] No heckling there from the previous minister.

We have gone through a process that has taken its time and I gather from what the current minister has had to say is very, very close to delivering on a recommendation for a new tuition and affordability policy. Suddenly, with mere days left until this Legislature rises for the balance of the spring and the summer and, according to the Premier, the fall – there will be no fall session – and next winter and who knows what beyond that, we're rushing through a piece of enabling legislation supposedly to make this thing work.

9:50

If I can just quote the current Minister of Advanced Education, his indication was that this needs to be done. I quote from *Hansard* again, from last Wednesday. “We need to make these amendments immediately so that government can make true on its promise of a new tuition fee policy in place and working for students by the fall of 2007.” Well, that’s not entirely accurate, Mr. Speaker. There are better ways to go about it.

With that in mind, I would like to move an amendment to Bill 40, the Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006. I have the requisite number of copies here. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 40, the Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006, be amended by deleting all the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 40, the Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006, be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that tuition fee policies for public postsecondary institutions must remain in the statute itself, rather than cabinet regulations, to ensure that any future changes are subject to full public debate in the Assembly.

I will now pass the amendment to the page for appropriate distribution. I look for your guidance, Mr. Speaker, as to whether I should pause until this has been distributed or whether I can continue my argument. Okay, I will continue then. Thank you very much for that.

Bill 40 is a very, very, very simple piece of legislation. I think my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona said today in our joint news conference with CAUS and ACTISEC that it’s barely 60 words long. But it’s amazing: if a picture is worth a thousand words, I guess 60 words are worth a lesson in how to subvert democracy, quite frankly. Look, there is only one purpose to this bill, and that is to take tuition policy, which is enshrined in legislation as we speak, and move it out of legislation and move it under regulations. Now, why would the government want to do that? I think that’s the fundamental question. Well, the minister says that this is what’s needed for flexibility, for continuous improvement, so that this thing can be tweaked as we go. You know, if you don’t get it right, well, you can easily make it better.

I can kind of understand the minister saying that, seeing as how this government has gotten tuition wrong so many times in the past 15 years. This government has had three tuition fee policies since the beginning of the 1990s, and while they all continued to off-load costs onto students, none of them has worked, none of them has lasted. In the ’80s until 1991 tuition was capped at 12 per cent of net operating expenditures. Then till 1995 it was capped at 20 per cent. Then till 2003 it was capped at 30 per cent of net operating expenses. Then in 2003 in the Post-secondary Learning Act the cap became more of a guideline, sort of like EPA ratings on gas mileage: your mileage may vary, kind of thing. Really, it set a couple of different classes. Those institutions that were below the 30 per cent had one set of rules applying to them, and those that were above had a different set of rules, and that is what’s enshrined in legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I’ll be the first to admit that section 61(2)(b) of the Post-secondary Learning Act is a complex and rather convoluted piece of legislation. But we don’t accomplish anything in the interests of the students of Alberta, their parents, their loved ones, anyone who may be helping them pay the freight for their education, or, in fact, the people of Alberta by taking this out of legislation and moving it under regulations. We do accomplish something if we look at a bad piece of legislation and say that we’re going to amend that bad piece of legislation, that we’re going to make it better, but it’s still going to be in legislation.

Now, the minister has dropped a number of hints, pretty broad hints, as to what this new tuition policy is going to look like. We

already know, if he stays true to the hints that he’s dropped, that he’s looking at a tuition policy once he sets the new baseline, whatever that will be, whether that’s 2004-2005 levels, 1999-2000 levels, or anything in between. Once he determines that baseline, then tuitions will increase on an annual basis by the cost of living, by the consumer price index.

A tuition fee policy like that is, you know, elegant in its simplicity, so simple, in fact, that I have to wonder why you wouldn’t want to enshrine it in legislation, unless, of course, your intention was not to leave that tuition fee policy in place for very long at all, unless your intention was perhaps to come back the year after next or perhaps the year after that and say: “Let’s move to full deregulation. Let’s let the institutions charge what the market will bear. Let’s move to a situation where the student pays the full cost of his or her postsecondary education.”

Now, models like that exist, except that where they exist and where they work, the high-cost model of postsecondary education is married to a high-aid model. Those two parts of the equation need to be in place. You can do it at a place like Princeton University, which has an endowment fund that produces an annual income of \$400 million a year for one university. You can create a lot of scholarships and a lot of bursaries out of that. You can pretty much ensure that if your son or daughter has the academic qualifications to go to Princeton, it isn’t going to cost your son or daughter a thing, quite apart from whether your son or daughter or whether you can afford to pay the tuition fees and the other fees at Princeton University, because the bursaries and the scholarships are in place.

You know, it takes a mighty big endowment fund to produce \$400 million worth of income. We have an endowment fund that has only \$750 million in it and may some day be topped up to \$3 billion, but that’s the cap, and \$3 billion is not going to produce \$400 million. We’re not in any way ready for a high-cost, high-aid model of tuition, not in any way at all.

The minister seems intent on having all the stakeholders trust him, and having been told loudly and clearly by just about all those stakeholders that, in fact, they don’t—and there’s plenty of historical precedents why stakeholders should not trust this government as far as it can throw this government when it comes to their ability to manage or look after postsecondary education and the colleges and universities of this province and properly fund them and properly manage a tuition policy—his response to that is: “Well, come on in to the stakeholder process. You know, we’ll consult. Oh, by the way,” he likes to point out, “we can’t do anything by order in council without first consulting with the stakeholders and proving that we have consulted with the stakeholders.”

All right, let’s examine that. On one hand, if you do consult with the stakeholders and you prove that you’ve consulted with the stakeholders, all you’ve proven is that you’ve actually talked to them. You certainly haven’t proven that you’ve taken their advice. You know, I could invite the minister out for a steak dinner and then renege on the steak dinner, and then six months later I could come to the minister or his colleague from Lesser Slave Lake—perhaps I could involve her in it—and I could say: “Now, I remember I promised you that steak dinner. Do you still want it?” If the minister said, “Yes, I do,” I’d say, “That’s great, but I have no intention of buying it for you.” I’ve consulted him, and if I document the conversation, I can prove it. It doesn’t mean I have to take his advice. So that’s a problem right there.

10:00

Further, though, this government claims that they always consult on regulatory changes, and just over one month ago, on April 5,

2006, they made substantial changes to the student financial assistance regulation, and neither of the major student stakeholders groups, CAUS or ACTISEC, was consulted at the time, nor were any of the stakeholders that we can find consulted about Bill 40 as it was coming down. Oh, there were some exchanges in question period that indicated that some legislation was coming sometime, eventually, but nothing to indicate that there was going to be a piece of legislation designed to take tuition out of legislation and move it under regulations.

You know, I don't trust this government. Well, I don't trust this government on very much, quite frankly, but I certainly don't trust this government given its rather dismal record on tuition or very much at all about how they've managed postsecondary education over the course of the last – what has it been now? – 13, 14 years. So it's not enough for the minister to ask for my trust or my colleagues' trust or the students' trust or college and university administrators' trust or faculties' trust or support staff trust or parents' trust or employers' trust, and it's certainly not enough to be invited into the consultation process as stakeholders when what we're giving up – and by we I mean we the people of Alberta – is the chance to have this debated on the floor of the Legislature if this bill passes. This is where it belongs, and this is where law should be made, and this is where policy should be made, and this is where policy that doesn't work should be amended or changed, right here on the floor of the Legislature, where every one of 3 million Albertans has access to their 83 MLAs who can contribute to the debate.

That is why we say that the tuition fee policies for public postsecondary institutions must remain in the statute itself rather than cabinet regulations, to ensure that any future changes are subject to full public debate in the Assembly. Mr. Speaker, that is the only way to guarantee – I'm not even sure it guarantees. That's the only way to offer any sort of protection against this government pulling the wool over the public's eyes and doing what they want. I can't imagine why they would want to move tuition policy out of legislation under regulation unless they're cooking up something, unless they have something that they want to do to tuition policy that they know students and parents and the public are not going to like, but they intend to do it anyway.

With that, I will wrap up my contribution to second reading debate and let others join the fray. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Herard: On the amendment. I don't think the member opposite will be surprised that I won't be supporting his motion and certainly ask all my colleagues to do the same. The member talks about: well, you just made changes to student loan regulations, or something like that, without consulting. Typically, I think, what would happen in a case like that is that, you know, people would be called and told: "We're going to do some housekeeping here and some housekeeping there. What do you think of it?" "Go ahead and do it. Big deal." But this is substantive, you know. This change is going to in fact make it so much easier and better for our Alberta students.

I don't know why the member would prefer to guarantee himself a role in the Legislature that essentially stands there and debates but makes no substantial difference to the outcome, because that's just the way the system works, rather than having an opportunity to make a difference in actually shaping policy through a consultation process that he would participate in, and by golly, if he didn't like it, you'd sure know about it. So I don't know why he won't give it an opportunity. He won't try it. I think all that matters is that people or opposition members be able to stand up and represent their special interests rather than try and balance things on a committee that's trying to do the right thing for all Albertans.

I would urge everyone to vote against the motion.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to support this amendment. As everybody here knows, we are strongly opposed to Bill 40 as it currently stands. I think, frankly, that this government and the representations from this minister are completely wrong. What we are seeing in Bill 40 is a continuation of a culture of secrecy and entitlement and control. [interjections]

I challenge the minister who is heckling me now. If he's so confident in what he's going to propose, bring it out now. Do what your predecessors did in the first years of the PC government. They would bring forth the regulations before a bill was passed, and they would consult people on the regulations and say: "These are the regulations that will follow our bill. What do you think?" I challenge the minister to do that. In fact, I challenge the minister, if he thinks his system is so great and is so wonderful, why not build it into legislation, which has been the practice for decades now, instead of pulling it out? One more thing being pulled out from under the purview of the Legislature, from under the purview of the elected representatives of the citizens of Alberta.

It is, as I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, part of a much broader trend that we were talking about earlier today in regard to FOIP. We're seeing cabinet documents pulled out from public purview. Time and time again, we are now seeing bills come forward which simply defer or refer everything to regulation. So this is an antidemocratic trend. It's a trend to avoid accountability. It's a trend that reinforces the secret, behind-closed-doors approach of this government.

I would like to see a tuition policy, Mr. Speaker – and it would be the kind of policy brought forward if this amendment was accepted – that was up front and that was in legislation and that was based, as this minister has said, on consultation but consultation that leads to legislation, a policy that would provide certainty to students and to their families and to funders paying the freight rather than a bill that will expose students and all their supporters to unknown changes year by year as ministers change and fashions change and experiments are tried at the expense of students. What I'd like to see is a tuition policy that supported merit, period. If you had the qualifications, if you had the merit, then you would get the education on the understanding that that education is an investment, and it will produce benefits not just for the individual but for all of society.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think that this amendment as proposed by the Member for Calgary-Currie is well worth while. I know, even as I speak, that this government will vote it down because this is a government of secrecy. Sometimes I almost imagine, and I won't invite a point of order because the hour is late, but sometimes it almost seems to me that this government would like to do all of its business behind closed doors and perhaps reduce the Legislature to nothing more than a ceremonial centre, a ceremonial moment.

Dr. Swann: Four weeks.

10:10

Dr. Taft: Four weeks. Oh, I'm sure they wouldn't even like four weeks.

Anyways, Mr. Speaker, this bill is symptomatic of a tired, secretive government. It's bad legislation. It's unfortunate that it's being supported by a minister who could have brought a fresh start to this. It has no legitimacy from the stakeholders. We've seen that today. The students don't like it. The opposition doesn't like it. I can't imagine that the families of students like it. It's yet another sad day for democracy under a government that wants to reduce the Legislature to little more than a vacuum.

I oppose the bill as it stands. I support the amendment as it is proposed, and I would urge all proper-thinking members of this Assembly to stand with us. Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak on Bill 40, Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006, and the amendment that is before us that has been proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. The amendment proposes that the bill not be read a second time to allow more time for full, public debate on this bill outside this House and, hopefully, later on right here on the floor of this Assembly. I find the amendment most reasonable in light of what I have heard from the most important stakeholders in postsecondary education with respect to the tuition fee policy, the students themselves.

As the Member for Calgary-Currie mentioned, we met with the leaders of the three universities this morning – Lethbridge, the University of Calgary, the University of Alberta – the leadership of CAUS, or Council of Alberta University Students, and the ACTISEC, the Alberta colleges and technical institutes' executive leaders, among others. The TV room was packed with students from all over the province, and they were all of one mind with respect to this bill, that this bill at this point must not proceed forward. They want this bill pulled, and there are reasons for it.

They find – and I agree with them entirely – that the existing statute on postsecondary learning that this proposed bill proposes to amend entrenches one fundamental principle, and that is the role of this House, the role of the Legislature in determining the parameters of the policy with respect to tuition fees. That's what the existing law does. It recognizes, in fact entrenches, the role of the Legislature in the determination of tuition policy. That, to my mind, is one of the most fundamental, core principles of democratic decision-making: elected representatives through open, public debate which can be witnessed by citizens who elect us and send us here to make decisions and have the opportunity to watch and witness. It is that principle now entrenched in law which this bill attempts to reverse and kill.

That's the most unacceptable part of this bill to me, that it, in fact, asks the Legislature to sign off its authority to have a say in making that policy and give it to the minister and the council of ministers, Executive Council. It's a strange spectacle that we are seeing here. First, during the elections we all do our very best to get elected to be members of this House, and then some of us begin to proceed to neglect and ignore the role of this House. I'm not going to be an accomplice in supporting a piece of legislation which reduces the ability of this House to have a substantive say in one of the most substantive policies, important policies, that we have the opportunity to establish.

Consultations must happen before a piece of legislation of this sort is brought forward. What's the point of consultations after having already received the authority to exercise your will, which is what the minister seeks to do regardless of what he hears? If he chooses, he can ignore the consultations and move forward, and that's what I find so obnoxious about this bill. I don't think this is a bill that deserves the support.

I'm so very pleased that the students have expressed more than disappointment about this bill, in fact outrage about the fact that they see this bill violating the democratic norms of decision-making that fall within the purview of an elected Assembly such as this. Students are not only now calling for a different tuition fee policy; they also insist on an appropriate democratic process through which that policy should be arrived at. So there are two issues here, a new

policy and the process through which that policy ought to be established, and students are in total agreement among themselves and with us that that process must include the ability of the Assembly to debate that policy and vote on it.

Mr. Speaker, this amendment that's before the House now will allow the minister to have an opportunity to go back and engage all stakeholders in serious consultation and then come back to the Legislature with whatever legislation he proposes to bring forward to address the policy. As I think has been argued earlier by one of the speakers, we have legislation in place, the Post-secondary Learning Act, which allows the minister to introduce new tuition policy without asking for a vote on new legislation. The very fact that this legislation is brought before the House is in fact to annul the basic element that is there in the Post-secondary Learning Act which says that this Legislature must have its say. . . . [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has the floor.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

. . . on the determination of the piece of legislation dealing with the policy. The minister has acted I think in a unilateral fashion, and unilateralism is sort of a fashion these days. I hope that he has not tried to seek guidance from a source not far from here. Unilateral legislative action doesn't deserve the support of this House. I think appropriate consultation prior to bringing legislation to this House is important. What the minister is trying to do is sort of get this piece of legislation through, annul the principle entrenched in law as is, and then have his *fait accompli*. You know, everything is done. Now you can come and talk to me. He's very courteous and nice about it. He says: you can come and give me some advice. Well, if he wants that advice – I'd like that suggestion – please ask me for that advice before you bring this piece of legislation here, not afterwards because then I lose my opportunity to speak in public to the issues that I'm concerned with.

10:20

Any decisions made behind closed doors in secret are not showing respect either for democratic decision-making or for this House. As I was trying to make the point earlier, we all try to get into this House, work very hard during the election, and then all of a sudden turn around and begin to be indifferent towards what the role of this House is. That shows to me disrespect, a lack of respect for what this House is about and what it's supposed to be doing.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think the amendment before us gives all of us an opportunity to engage in serious, genuine consultation with each other. I'll be very happy to sit down with the minister, and I'll bring some other people to do the same, provided we have a real opportunity to make an input that will be translated by the ministry into a piece of legislation which he'll be, I'm sure, coming to persuade us is needed before he can proceed with this policy. Until then, I will support this motion and hope that other members will do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did want to rise and speak to the amendment. Members of the opposition would have us believe that the end of the world is near. It's not. This bill should be read precisely for what it is.

It may surprise you, Mr. Speaker. It may surprise members of the House. I don't particularly like this bill. I wish we didn't have this bill in the House. The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie through the

course of the spring session has been asking: "When is the tuition policy coming? How are you going to make sure that a new tuition policy will be in place as promised for the fall? How are you going to make sure that it's effective?" Now, having been the author of his own misfortune by the minister bringing forward a bill to say that this is how we're going to make sure that the policy is effective in the fall, he says: "The sky is falling. You're taking it all away from the legislative process, and you're robbing us of our democratic right to discuss tuition policy." Well, you can't have it both ways.

The fact of the matter is that under the Post-secondary Learning Act there is a formula with respect to tuition policy. Now, I would have argued and would argue that that piece of legislation could remain in existence and that we could work with postsecondaries with respect to a new policy and perhaps amend the legislation in a year. Ideally, we would be coming forward in the fall with legislation to bring a tuition policy into play. But I can't fault the minister for bringing forward a mechanism this spring, not knowing whether he'll have a fall session to bring forward a tuition policy, not wanting to wait for a year or two to embed in legislation a new tuition policy, a mechanism which allows us to meet the commitment which the Premier and the government made to students in this province, that a new tuition policy would be in place by the fall of 2006, effective for the 2007 school year.

The Member for Calgary-Currie all year has been saying: "Bring forward a policy. You've got to hurry up. You've got to get the policy in place. You'll run out of time for the policy." Wiser heads said: "Let's do this properly. Let's take time to consult. Let's think about it. Let's consult with people. Let's bring forward an appropriate policy. Let's recognize that it's not all about tuition. It's about affordability. But, yes, we promised a new tuition policy, and a new tuition policy will be put in place." If advice suggests that in order to ensure that that happens, that there needs to be a way of embedding that in regulation and that wasn't afforded in the current Post-secondary Learning Act, then I would have to support the minister's efforts to allow proceeding with the new tuition policy by regulation at least as an interim step.

It's not the end of the world, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, tuition policy and the debate of tuition policy in this province is an important issue for students. It's an important issue for parents, and it's an important issue for all Albertans because all of us want to make sure that finances are not a barrier to students getting an education. All of us want to make sure that education is affordable and seen to be affordable. All of us want to make sure that all Albertans have the opportunity to get the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to participate in a knowledge economy. I think that's a given.

What we're talking about here is a very modest piece of legislation which allows the minister to proceed to bring the tuition policy in, to put it in place, as promised, by the fall of 2007, a promise which the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie and others on the opposition benches have been requesting, have been demanding, have been insisting, and have been arguing was necessary to do and necessary to do now. This minister has found a mechanism to do it now.

Perhaps it could have been done collaboratively, sitting down with institutions and saying, "We know what the law is, but you know that the policy is going to be different than the law, and the policy will be embedded next year." That might have been a way of doing it. This is legally the better way of doing it, as is being proposed by the minister. He has chosen to proceed in this manner.

Mr. Speaker, I think that the students of this province having been part of the consultation process over the last year, the academics of this province having been part of the consultation process over the

last year, the institutions in this province having been part of the consultation process over the last year, and even the opposition members having been part of the consultation process over the last year should recognize that coming to the conclusion of that process and bringing forward a tuition policy, as has been promised, is best done now, is best done in this manner. When the session comes again and more discussion has been had around the effectiveness of that tuition policy, we can then bring it back and put it back in the legislation if that's desired.

But this bill, this 60-word bill, as the opposition has referred to it, this Bill 40 is not the end of the world. You can't even see the end of the world from there. This is really just about putting in place a mechanism so that the tuition policy that's been promised, the tuition policy that's been demanded by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie can be put in place in time for the 2007 school year so that the institutions in this province, when they do their budgeting in the fall, as they start to do and plan for the next year, will know what the policy is and will know that it has the force of law, that students will know that they can rely on it because it has the force of law, and that parents can rely on it because it has the force of law.

Would it be better to have it in the act? Personally, yes, I agree. It should be in the act, but it's not going to be in the act this spring. There's a likelihood that it might not be able to be in the act in the fall, and therefore affording the minister the opportunity to give it the force of law and give some surety to students, some sense of security in knowing and understanding what the playing field is going to be like, is very important.

So I would encourage people to vote against the amendment and allow this modest amendment to go ahead. It's not going to do all the dastardly things that have been suggested. It's merely going to allow the fulfillment of a promise made by our Premier that Albertans will have the most affordable tuition policy and will go a long way towards ensuring that education is affordable to students and their families.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to be able to get up and speak for a few moments on this amendment to Bill 40. I do appreciate it because I wasn't allowed to get up and speak on Bill 42 due to shortage of time.

First, I guess I'd like to address the hon. past minister talking about that he's been forced into this because they've made a promise to bring this forward. They've had two and a half years to come up with a bill and an act on what their tuition is. Now, because they said that they'd have it before we break for the summer, they have to bring this forward. It's almost laughable to use that as the excuse and say, "We have to do it because it's legal, and it's better to be legal."

Is this just? I say: no, it isn't just. It's not just for those students that are looking for concrete legislation, to know what's going to be there. This is purely getting thrown arbitrarily into the field at the whim of the minister. Yes, he says that he'll make the consultations, and I believe that he will absolutely do that, but the fact is that he can then make an arbitrary decision and say: well, due to fiscal problems this is the way it's going to come down.

We've heard this, Mr. Speaker, for 13 years in health care, that we've got this idea, we've got this plan, that we're going to bring forth this bill, the third-way bill, 13 years of a new way. They haven't. We've listened to this for two and a half years. One has to wonder which is going to have the longest tale by the time we're done. I just don't know.

They've brought in two bills to say that they would just pay the tuition increase. Why couldn't they do that again? They act like they're in this panic. I just for the life of me can't see the panic. They create the crisis, and then they expect Albertans, students to lap it up and say: well, there is nothing left that they can do. I called that poor planning where I conducted business before I came here. [interjection] Pardon me?

Mr. Elsalhy: Just trust me.

Mr. Hinman: Yes. It is very much going back to that saying: well, just trust me. That's fine to say: just trust me. It's always nice. History has shown that people always wanted to choose a benevolent king, but when a king passes, the chance that benevolence is passed on is very remote. It's usually a tyrant.

10:30

It's alarming to me that they want to put more power into the ministry's office. I am very in favour of this amendment to Bill 40. We know that it's going to get struck down, but I just want it on the record that this is the place to make legislation. This is the purpose of it. Democracy was never meant to be quick and efficient. They certainly can't say that they were quick and efficient on coming up with a policy in two and a half years and saying: "This is the best we have. Now we'll throw it to the minister because he's got the ability to do this, and he's a fair and kind person." As the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has said, "Trust me." That isn't what democracy is about, "Trust me." It's about the ability to bring a bill forward, to have the debate, and to vote on it.

I appreciate being able to debate this, and I very much would like to see this amendment passed. Thank you.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on the amendment lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 10:32 p.m.]

[Five minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For the motion:

Elsalhy	Pannu	Taft
Flaherty	Swann	Taylor
Hinman		

Against the motion:

Abbott	Griffiths	Pham
Ady	Hancock	Rogers
Brown	Herard	Snelgrove
Calahasen	Lukaszuk	Stelmach
Cao	Lund	Stevens
Cenaiko	Melchin	Strang
Doerksen	Mitzel	VanderBurg
Ducharme	Oberle	Webber
Fritz	Ouellette	Zwozdesky
Goudreau		

Totals:	For – 7	Against – 28
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[Motion on amendment to second reading of Bill 40 lost]

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to participate in debate on Bill 40 that's before us, the Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006. I've listened with a lot of interest to all the arguments that were made on the bill and then on the amendment that was moved by my hon. colleague for Calgary-Currie, who is the Official Opposition critic for Advanced Education.

One question that came to mind, basically, is: if the argument from this side of the House is that the government is doing something that is antidemocratic, and the argument from the other side, from the government, talks about their needing to do something to offer some direction in terms of the postsecondary tuition policy, why did the hon. minister choose to introduce this legislation in the dying days of this sitting of the Legislature? Why wasn't this Bill 4 or Bill 10 or Bill 14 or Bill 24? Why did it have to be Bill 40, which was introduced just as this session was wrapping up? Could it be an ad hoc decision? Or maybe they decided that there might not be a fall sitting, and they wanted to appear to be taking some direction on a concern that many people have in this province.

10:40

Now, we've talked time and time again on this bill and on others that the direction now seems to be to put everything in regulations and remove the meat, if you will, from the legislation. So legislation is becoming a hollow creature, and everything is done behind closed doors and is left to the whim or the will of the minister at the time. There is no scrutiny. There is no debate. Again, as was mentioned – and I sort of agree – it basically amounts to a total disregard for the Legislature and for its role. Basically, it represents an unnecessary concentration of power in the hands of one person or in the hands of a small group of people, in this case the minister or his immediate and close circle of advisors.

Mr. Herard: It's called the government.

Mr. Elsalhy: Yes, I know.

The hon. minister is saying that this is the government, but I would challenge him to find me another government that does that by removing everything from the floor of the Legislature, where 83 of us were elected to debate ideas and policies, to an inner circle of people that, you know, tell him what they think should be the direction of his ministry, and then this direction is finalized, and it never sees any debate in this House. Where are those checks and balances? Where is the scrutiny? Where is the oversight? Where is the discipline, really?

In my view, this is yet another nail in democracy's coffin. We know that with FOIP and with this government's record of secrecy and now with this example of how things are moved into regulation, away from public scrutiny and public examination, again it offers no consistency because this minister might choose to do something today, and then the next minister might choose to do something totally different the next day. It allows for this flip-flopping, or the 180-degree change of opinion, that happens when ministers change. We all know that ministers come and go, and sometimes changes in cabinet are not forecasted. Sometimes they happen surprisingly quickly.

Now, the issue of consultation with the stakeholders. Any consultation has to be serious, has to be thorough, has to be inclusive. You know, when we're talking about postsecondary education, you definitely have to involve the students. You have to involve their parents. You have to involve the instructors of those postsecondary institutions, the faculty, the administrators. So it has to be widespread. It has to be all-encompassing, and it has to be done across the province.

I noted the minister saying in this House that the students are going to be happy with his plan. I view this as the carrot, basically. He's offering them a carrot to keep them quiet: "Wait. Trust me. I'm going to do something that you're going to like, but to get there, you have to allow me all this enormous power to do things without any scrutiny in this Assembly." Now, I would be interested to find out from the minister or from his staff what the student leaders told him. You know, the student leaders at the U of A, the ones at the U of C, the ones at the U of Lethbridge. What did they tell him? If he would be willing to table those communications here in this House.

Again, I also take issue with the words "enabling legislation." What is this legislation enabling, and who is it enabling? It is enabling the minister, basically, to fiddle with or tinker with the tuition policy at his discretion or behind closed cabinet doors without any chance for public debate. So it's enabling for him, but it is not enabling for the students, and it's not enabling for this Legislature certainly. He also said that the students are going . . .

Bill 42
Appropriation Act, 2006
(continued)

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

[Motion carried; Bill 42 read a second time]

Bill 40
Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006
(continued)

[Debate adjourned May 15: Mr. Elsalhy speaking]

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I can go on and talk about the history of the tuition policy in this province. I can actually go back as far as the 1980s, when tuition was capped at 12 per cent. Then we moved on to the early part of the '90s, you know, with the infamous revolution. Tuition was capped at 20 per cent of net operating costs. Then you move into the latter part of the '90s and the earlier part of this new century, and you have tuition capped at 30 per cent. Although students were outraged at this hike, they took some solace, some relief in that at least this cap was legislated. They felt that although it was exaggerated and to some of them it was outrageous and not affordable, they felt that, okay, at least there is a legislative body that reviews it and that approves it. They took some relief and some solace in knowing that it was legislated by the house of representatives, the house of the people.

Now, in 2003 this cap was removed, and it was replaced by a tuition freeze. Again, it was an act of kindness or an act of benevolence from the minister because they chose to freeze the tuition rather than capping it. Now they're suggesting that they are going to remove this. I think and I argue that it actually basically opens the door to deregulation of postsecondary education. Advanced education will turn into a commodity, and market forces will now dictate who gets to go to college or university and who cannot afford to.

Mr. Speaker, I can go on and on about why we find this bill very offensive and why we are definitely not going to support it, but before I do this, I want to move an amendment. Seeing that the amendment introduced by my hon. colleague from Calgary-Currie

was defeated, I am moving an amendment that basically deletes all the words after "that" and substitutes the following: "Bill 40, Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2006, be not now read a second time but that it be read a second time this day six months hence."

Thank you.

Speaker's Ruling
Amendments at Second Reading

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, the amendment that has just been moved is a hoist amendment, which is different than the previous amendment that we dealt with, which was a reasoned amendment. So just be aware that this is a hoist amendment being brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

On the amendment, hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, you are wanting to finish your comments?

Debate Continued

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this amendment. It's not good for democracy to see a government that is comfortable in justifying taking the decision-making away from the elected representatives of the people and concentrating it, as I said, in the hands of one person, be it the minister in charge. It doesn't speak well for democracy, and it doesn't speak well for accountability and transparency.

In 2004 the Alberta Liberals campaigned for affordable postsecondary education. We came out on the side of students in a way that advocates sustainability and affordability. The PC government rapidly copied some of our policies and introduced their flagship bill in the first sitting of the 26th Legislature. They called it Bill 1, the Access to the Future Act. We voted in support of the Access to the Future Act. It created an endowment fund that allowed for money to be put aside to support postsecondary education. In other words, the government heard the plea of the students and either wanted to seriously look at ways to help them or at least wanted to give the impression or the appearance that they did. Now, a year later in this Second Session of the 26th Legislature and in this year's budget not a whole lot of money was added to this endowment fund. One would argue: how serious were you last year, and how serious are you this year?

10:50

Why is this discussion important? The discussion is important because it has tremendous impact on students and their families. When we change tuition policy, you have to consult the widest base in this province. You should not consult only with one or two people and then do things behind closed doors. How are we going to change the advanced education climate if this bill passes? I argue that it's going to change it for the worse, and I am talking from the angle of access and affordability.

Mr. Speaker, this government has had many attempts to target or to address tuition policy, as I mentioned, since the '80s, and every time the decision was changed, and it was changed quickly. So what proof does the minister have to convince us that his policy, that he's going to release later this year, is going to stick and is going to be here next year and the year after? We have no proof. You know, it's another sign of not taking this House seriously and not taking the electorate seriously. It's a sign of arrogance because they're introducing a tuition plan that will go up faster than any other place in the country. They should not ram through legislative changes that take away any future legislative oversight.

Remember that in the 2004 campaign, Mr. Speaker, there were many people who voted and had their lawn signs that said: I love

Alberta Education. I remind the hon. members from both sides of the House that in 2004 members from all three opposition parties received 15,000 more votes than the 62 government members. So that was basically people telling them that directions have to be revisited and that decisions have to be reconsidered. I think the wise thing to do for this government is to try to come back to the Legislature more often than not. Obviously, the trend that is evident is that they are trying to stay away from the Legislature and trying to take things away from this elected body, to do things as they please and without any scrutiny, as I mentioned.

I think the minister, when he told the students to be patient and that they were going to be happy with his plan – it actually basically amounts to blackmail, using the prospect of a new policy to convince students, families, and us . . .

Mr. Zwozdesky: Excuse me. Did you say “blackmail?”

Mr. Elsalhy: Yes.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Then I’ll have to raise a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Zwozdesky: I think that it is highly inappropriate under 23(h), (i), and (j) to use the word “blackmail.” I think you’ll find it in *Beauchesne* also as being unparliamentary. I would just ask the hon. member, who normally presents some reasoned arguments, to just retract “blackmail,” to perhaps substitute a different word, and we can carry on.

Mr. Elsalhy: Mr. Speaker, I would be happy to retract that word.

Debate Continued

Mr. Elsalhy: I’ll just continue by saying that I would disagree with the hon. minister, who promised the students something that they might find favourable by saying that they would be happy but asked them instead to wait to see what he proposes. Six or seven months after the fact they would have no recourse. They would have no way of affecting any decision that the minister arrived at, and by then it would be too late.

Now, this brings me to the point about user-pay policy. We’ve seen it with power deregulation, we’ve seen it with some attempts to privatize health care, and now we’re seeing it with some attempts to deregulate postsecondary education. Only those who are rich or can afford it will get it; the ones that don’t, then don’t.

I also have to mention student debt because student debt in this province is higher than in most other jurisdictions in Canada. The average student is graduating with a load of shackling debt to the lenders. We’ve received communication from people, particularly in professional programs, that say that it’s not acceptable the way they graduate now. Some of them are married, some of them have families, and the amount of debt that they accumulate is outrageous. It’s totally unjustified.

Mr. Speaker, I think this amendment basically offers the hon. minister and his cabinet an avenue to consult some more and take it upon themselves to ask all the stakeholders what they think about any proposed changes. If, in fact, it was deemed necessary six months from now to do things in regulation to address some of the

concerns from the former minister, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, then fine. Six months from now we will arrive at that decision. But till then, I think the students deserve and the parents deserve and this Legislature deserves more time to consult, more time to consider things before we jam things through. By then it will be too late, and we will have no recourse.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: On the amendment the hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Herard: I’ll be brief, mercifully brief. Of course, I won’t be supporting the amendment, but I think it has to be said for the record that this sort of an amendment is essentially just wasting the Legislature’s time. They stand there and tell us that we’re usurping their right, yet they use a particular mechanism in legislation that, in fact, you cannot bring back legislation six months from now. It’s only happened once in the history of Canada, in the House of Commons, and it was a mistake. So I just want to make sure that the record, at least, stated that what is happening here is just a delaying tactic.

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

Mr. Taylor: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let’s put another record on the turntable, then, shall we? We can have a whole symphony if you want. This is not a delaying tactic. I recognize that the government members opposite are anxious to go home for the night. It’s almost 11 o’clock. They’re getting hungry. They’re getting tired. They’re getting thirsty. They’re getting cranky. I realize that it’s been a beautiful spring. The golf courses are greening up beautifully, and they’re anxious to get out on the courses. They’d like to be gone from this House within the next few days. I recognize what the minister is saying about the impossibility of bringing back this precise piece of legislation six months hence. That is precisely our intention. This is a fundamentally flawed piece of legislation, and we don’t want it brought back.

What we want to offer this government is the opportunity to call a fall sitting of the Legislature. You could even start it earlier, you know. Most of the harvesting can be done in time to get us back in here before November. But come on back in, leadership convention or not, leadership campaign or not. I’m sure your whip will excuse those of your members who are running for the leadership of your party if they can’t be here every single day during the fall sitting of the Legislature. Still, I invite you to come on back, come on down, as Bob Barker would say, and let’s debate a real amendment to the Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act six months hence. Let’s bring in a bill – what will it be up to? – 44 or 45 by that point, something like that. Let’s bring in a Bill 44 that does it right.

You see, the minister has made the case – and he’s been supported somewhat half-heartedly, somewhat feebly by his predecessor in that argument – that he has to bring forward this enabling legislation to satisfy my incessant demand and that of my colleague from the third party that they bring in a tuition policy. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault for demanding this, and then when they comply with me because I have so much power – they hang on my every word, Mr. Speaker. They always have, you know. I mean, the responsibility that comes with being me is just so awesome, isn’t it? [interjections] Yeah. Yeah.

You know, now that they bring in this absolutely flawed piece of legislation and I get up in the House and say, “You know what? You’ve got it wrong,” I’m accused of the sky falling. Well, the sky is not falling although I suspect that your popularity ratings are over there on that side of the House. But here’s the deal. Here’s the deal.

An Hon. Member: Seventy-two per cent.

Mr. Taylor: Yeah. Seventy-two per cent say: "Here's your hat. What's your hurry?" But we'll debate that another time. I see you've got your website up, hon. member, finally. So you're competitive now.

11:00

You know, it's not our fault on this side of the House that the so-called, quote, unquote, wiser minds took this long to craft a good tuition policy. So don't try to blame that on us. If it turns out that the work has been well done, perhaps it was worth the wait, and I would extend that argument to the amending formula for the Post-secondary Learning Act to deal with tuition policy. To do the work right, it's worth the wait. Okay?

The legislative schedule is not at our discretion, Mr. Speaker. It's at the government's, entirely at the government's. You know, we're quite prepared to continue sitting another week if it's that important that legislation enabling a tuition policy be brought forward, till the policy is ready, till you can bring forward an amendment that amends tuition policy within legislation. We'll come back after the May long weekend. We can do that. If the policy isn't ready then, then we'll come back in the fall. That's okay too. The government refuses to introduce the new policy in legislation this spring, so it can finalize the tuition policy and release it to the institutions to guide their planning process, allowing the old legislation to remain in place, until it can be changed in the spring of '07. The previous minister, the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, admitted as much not half an hour ago.

You know, if the government wants to pretend or allege that it couldn't prevent institutions from ignoring the new informal policy because they're independent and they could use the existing legislation to impose greater increases or something like that, I'd refer them back to the former minister of learning, the current minister's predecessor's predecessor, who is known to have sent a letter to the institutions before the 2004 election telling them to keep their tuition increases below 4 per cent, and all institutions, Mr. Speaker, complied with that letter. The proposal to leave the legislation and direct the institutions to follow the new policy, notwithstanding the leftover legislation, is, in my view and in our view on this side of the House, more respectful of institutional autonomy and good legislative process than is this pre-election interference. You know, it also ensures that critical public policy issues remain subject to legislative debate and approval.

So, Mr. Speaker, in short, there's a right way and a wrong way to

go about this. This is absolutely the wrong way. That is why my colleague from Edmonton-McClung has proposed this hoist amendment, and that is why I'm delighted to support it. Thank you.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on the amendment lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 11:03 p.m.]

[Five minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For the motion:

Elsalhy	Pannu	Taylor
Flaherty	Swann	

Against the motion:

Abbott	Griffiths	Pham
Ady	Herard	Rodney
Brown	Johnston	Rogers
Calahasen	Lukaszuk	Snelgrove
Cao	Lund	Stelmach
Cenaiko	Melchin	Stevens
Doerksen	Mitzel	Strang
Ducharme	Oberle	Webber
Fritz	Ouellette	Zwozdesky
Goudreau		

Totals:	For – 5	Against – 28
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[Motion on amendment to second reading of Bill 40 lost]

11:10

[Motion carried; Bill 40 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to all members who contributed to this exciting and electrifying debate today. On that note, I would move that we stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 11:11 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]