

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Monday, March 19, 2007

1:00 p.m.

Date: 07/03/19

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask for renewed strength in the awareness of our duty and privilege as Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. We ask for the protection of this Assembly and also the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Hon. members, we'll be led today in the singing of our national anthem by Colleen Vogel, and we'd ask all to participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it's my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly six members of the Council of Alberta University Students, or CAUS, and the organization's executive director. CAUS represents more than 70,000 university students throughout the province. These students are in Edmonton today to attend the CAUS annual conference, which provides them with an opportunity to meet with government and other organizations to discuss the future of Alberta's postsecondary system. I encourage my fellow MLAs to participate in this important conference. It's a great opportunity to learn more about the challenges that they face.

I would invite each of the CAUS representatives to stand as I call your name, and I ask my colleagues to hold their applause until everyone has been introduced. With us today are David Cournoyer, CAUS chair and University of Alberta Students' Union vice-president external; Charlotte Kingston, CAUS vice-president and University of Lethbridge Students' Union vice-president academic; Samantha Power, University of Alberta Students' Union president; Joanne Luu, University of Lethbridge Students' Union vice-president administration; Emily Wyatt, University of Calgary Students' Union president; Julie Labonté, University of Calgary Students' Union vice-president external; and Duncan Wojtaszek, the executive director of CAUS. Please join me and all members of the House in the traditional warm welcome.

Ms Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly nine social workers employed by Children's Services. March 18 to 24 is National Social Work Week, and Children's Services is very privileged to have these skilled and compassionate professionals

helping our children, our youth, and families. Social workers choose their profession because they care about the people they help, and their work is vital to the success of our communities and our province. Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity of meeting with these individuals earlier today, and I believe Children's Services can count itself lucky to have these committed people working for Albertans.

I'd like to ask the following people who work tirelessly for the health and well-being of Albertans to rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly: Danuta Potworowski, Cassidy Solikoski, Loïselle Arcand, Janet Dormer, Shirley Bourque, Mona Gunderson, Kim Weaver, Nicole Lightning, Shelley Sommerville. Also visiting today with the social workers is Rhonda Coubrough from our Red Deer regional office. Please join me in welcoming these very special guests.

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

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to welcome 48 bright young minds from Jackson Heights school in my constituency to the Legislature today. We all know that our students are our most precious resource, and we're delighted to have you here. They are accompanied today by their teachers, Pam Schenk and Deb Colvin-MacDormand, and by parent, and in one case grandparent, helpers and volunteers James Norris, Larry Thomas, Terri Fuller, Jagdish Nischal, and Heather Slager. I would ask them all to please rise and receive the thunderous applause of this Assembly.

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on behalf of my neighbouring MLA the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 23 students from Rimbeley elementary school. They're accompanied today by their teacher, Mr. Jim Moore, and by parent helpers Mrs. Holly Trenson, Mrs. Shantelle Boatright, Miss Abby Mann, and Mrs. Lauren Morton. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of the Legislative Assembly 57 visitors from St. Gabriel school. They come from three different classes, and they are accompanied today by Mrs. Svetlana Sech, Ms Lauren Podlubny, and Ms Christine Uy. The teacher's assistants that are accompanying the group today are Mrs. Louise Dupuis, Mrs. Michelle Gascoigne, and Mrs. Fran Kraychy. They are all in the public gallery. I would now ask them to please rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Legislative Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Tyler Bedford. Tyler was born and raised in Alberta, having grown up in Taber. He graduated from Red Deer College last spring and is currently completing his bachelor of arts in sociology at the University of Alberta. He's also a talented musician and sings with the local band The Bright Red. Tyler is a valuable addition to my constituency

team as a part-time assistant in Highlands-Norwood. I would now ask that he rise and receive the warm, traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very delighted to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Noah Weckel. Noah Weckel is six years old and has been a resident of Edmonton for the past four years. Noah already aspires to join us here at the Legislature and has done so since he first saw this building. He has a very keen interest in the environment, especially the conservation of our forests. Hopefully, someday he can join us and speak to the Assembly on this issue. Noah is joined here today by his great-uncle Reg Basken and his great-aunt Dorothy McRae. I would now ask that all three rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: 1:10

Members' Statements

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

Immigrants of Distinction Awards

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise this afternoon to recognize the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society's 11th annual immigrants of distinction awards, which I was privileged to attend this past Friday along with the Honourable Lieutenant Governor; the hon. Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry; and several other MLAs from both sides of the House. Mr. Speaker, it was indeed a memorable evening in which we saw individuals who came to Alberta from far and abroad with visions of hope and prosperity recognized for their exceptional personal achievements.

I want to congratulate all of the award nominees and recipients. These individuals achieved personal success in the categories of arts and culture, business, community services, distinguished professional, and organizational diversity. *I also want to congratulate the five outstanding students who received scholarships for their commendable personal merits and academic accomplishments.*

These immigrants are individuals who came to our province armed with determination, a strong work ethic, and aspirations of creating a better life for themselves and their families. We can surely appreciate the difficulties immigrants face when they enter a foreign society and are challenged to adapt to a new environment.

The Calgary Immigrant Aid Society has provided important, culturally appropriate services for immigrants and refugees for over 30 years. I applaud the valuable services that this organization provides to immigrants who come to Alberta to create a new life and enjoy the freedoms and the opportunities that our great province affords us all.

*Thank you, Mr. Speaker.**

Millwoods Cultural and Recreational Facility Association

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, volunteers and visionings are an integral part of our success as a province, a city, and a community. One such incredible success story is the Millwoods Cultural and Recreational Facility Association, known as MCARFA.

Last Friday I was honoured to attend MCARFA's 30th anniversary, held in the beautiful banquet facility at the equally beautiful and wonderful Mill Woods golf course, a facility and golf course, I might add, that were built by and as a result of some enormously dedicated and visionary volunteers who were instrumental in helping

to form MCARFA three decades ago. They were also responsible for having built the twin arenas in the Mill Woods Recreation Centre, the 440 track at the campus site, the blade and board and bike park, also at the campus site, and the trails, picnic sites, and pavilion at Jackie Parker park. The government of Alberta was recognized as a key partner and funder of these projects, and at least equal recognition was extended also to another integral partner, that being the city of Edmonton.

MCARFA volunteer presidents John Janzen, Max Bahnsen, Val Pohl, Joan Kirillo, George Bawden, Bob Strynadka, John Bracegirdle, and Larry Billings were also saluted and thanked. Additional MCARFA volunteers who were truly at the heart of MCARFA success were thanked and recognized for outstanding services, including 19-year volunteer and treasurer Jim Stokoe, Shaffeeq Ali, Larry Kozak, Stu Orr, and others. I'd also like to thank head pro Darrell McDonald and his staff: Dave Robert, Mike Ellis, Derek Homan, and Wayne Parks.

Current projects under way by MCARFA include, in partnership with the Mill Woods Lions Club and the Woodvale Community League, the Lions spray park and the ropes and rock adventures playground at Jackie Parker park.

Congratulations, MCARFA, and thank you for helping to create and maintain such a high quality of life for our Mill Woods residents and visitors. You are truly amazing, and I am honoured and proud to be among your elected representatives.

National Social Work Week

Mr. Shariff: Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to rise today and recognize that March 18 to 24 is National Social Work Week. National Social Work Week was established by the Canadian Association of Social Workers to recognize the contribution these professionals make across the country.

Nothing is more true than the theme chosen this year, Social Workers Making a Difference in Children's Lives, because everywhere a child may need help, a social worker is there. In schools they provide services to children who are having difficulties learning. They work with teachers to address special mental, physical, or behavioural needs of children. In hospitals social workers help children deal with illnesses. They work with the children's families to address issues that can arise from sudden or chronic illness. In our communities they are there to enhance the health and well-being of children, providing services in the areas of mental health, family enhancement, and crisis intervention.

Mr. Speaker, I gave you a very small example of the contributions that social workers make to the betterment of the lives of Albertans. The government of Alberta is very privileged to have these skilled and dedicated professionals delivering programs and services to our children and families. I commend the men and women who take on the profession of social work. I hope that this week we all take the time to celebrate the important contributions social workers make to our lives.

Thank you.

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

Violence against Women

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Violence has plagued human civilization since the dawn of time. It has caused infinite pain. It has hampered our progress, and it has scarred our souls. Even today, in this supposedly civilized time, the nightly news is filled with scenes of violence committed by one neighbour against another.

*[Mr. Amery was unable to complete his presentation, and the text in italics is the remainder of his member's statement]

Especially troubling are the stories of violence against women. I think that violence against women troubles us so deeply because women are seen as caregivers, as mothers, as the foundation of family life. When a woman is assaulted, it is an attack not only on an individual but also on the community, on the collective values we hold dear.

Sadly, no community is free of the spectre of violence against women. This madness is a real and undeniable problem. It's a problem without a single solution. There is no magic wand that will make it all go away overnight, but we are not helpless. This is not an insurmountable problem. With education, with respect for women, and with the conviction that violence is never the answer, we can dramatically reduce violence against women.

Colleagues, preventing violence against women must be given the priority treatment it deserves. But it's not enough to condemn. We must act. We must focus on tackling the causes, not only the effects, by backing our words and commitments with public funds. We must do everything in our power to make women less vulnerable, to make them feel safe on the streets.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

MD of Northern Lights/Peace River Partnership

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Friday last, when I was invited to my constituency, I was asked to attend a joint meeting of MD No. 22 and the town of Peace River. I'm very pleased to inform the House that it was a very happy meeting in that the municipal district of Northern Lights and the town of Peace River signed a memorandum of understanding that sets the stage for a long-term partnership between the municipalities. The memorandum sets up joint development areas both in the MD and in the area soon to be annexed to the town, which will see development benefit both municipalities. Other opportunities for partnering are included, but of critical importance to both municipalities is the joint treatment and distribution of potable water.

Reeve Dueck of the MD was quoted as saying, "Everyone at the table understood the value and necessity of developing this long-term partnership, and it is a partnership in the truest sense of the word." Mayor Mann was quoted as saying: "We see the Municipal District and the Town as equal partners in the future development of this region. Through this Memorandum both municipalities share the risks and rewards associated with economic growth."

Mr. Speaker, I wish to offer my congratulations to Reeve Robert Dueck, councillors Joyce Vos, Ed Kamieniecki, Les Short, Darlene Frith, Ed Dollevoet, Al Dumas, CAO Theresa McKelvie, and from the town Mayor Lorne Mann, councillors Don Good, Iris Callioux, Tom Day, Geoff Milligan, Gordon Troup, Neil Martin, and CAO Kelly Bunn. Congratulations to both municipalities for acting in the best interest of their respective municipalities, for turning away from adversity and towards progress, and for setting a new standard for co-operation.

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to acknowledge the efforts of Municipal Affairs and Housing, who provided mediation services delivered by Barb McNeil and Andrew Fulton.

Congratulations to all involved, Mr. Speaker.

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

Service Dogs

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to highlight four qualities we find in our canine friends. The first is their extended senses. They smell things we do not smell, respond to sounds below

our auditory thresholds and to moods we're barely in touch with ourselves. The second is dogs' capacity to bond, what humans call loyalty. As animals that think and act collectively, they are capable of accepting one of another species as their alpha leader. We use the expression "dog fight" to describe a free-for-all, but dogs are not that way. The only time they turn on each other is when their social structure breaks down.

Third, dogs exhibit amazing diversity. I'm not just referring to size, shape, and colour but the range of skills by which they serve us: guiding, guarding, pulling carts and sleds, and assisting a gamut of physical and mental disabilities. Their extended senses and bonding enable them to do this.

Fourth, dogs occupy a unique place at the border of the human and animal kingdoms. Those of you who know the stars may know that Sirius, the dog star, is the brightest star in the sky. Find Sirius, and if you see anything brighter, you know it's a planet, not a star. That's where dogs are in the firmament of our world. There's a reminder to humans here that if we abdicate our leadership and let the canine become alpha in our society, chaos breaks out, but if we hold our role responsibly as their masters and nurture them, we cannot ask for better companions. Albert Payson Terhune, author of *Lad of Sunnybank* and other beloved dog stories, wrote that if man served his God as dogs do their masters, the kingdom of heaven would have come by now.

I commend these qualities to my fellow members and ask that they support the Western Guide and Assistance Dog Society and all service dogs.

head: 1:20

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 21 Securities Amendment Act, 2007

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 21, the Securities Amendment Act, 2007.

This legislation includes amendments to enhance the securities passport system and further harmonize and streamline Alberta securities laws with other Canadian jurisdictions. We have also included some enforcement and housekeeping amendments. Through this legislation Alberta is doing its part to improve investor protection and enhance the competitiveness of Canada's capital markets.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 21 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Bill 25 Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2007

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 25, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2007. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission it's my pleasure to table AADAC's 2005-2006 annual report. The commission continues to provide leadership in delivering services that assist Albertans in achieving freedom from the harmful effects of alcohol, other drugs, and gambling. This report summarizes the activities and achievements of the commission in '05-06.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table one of the many letters that I've been getting from Albertans who are opposed to the proposed Dodds-Round Hill coal gasification project. This letter is from Joseph Voegtlin, who is concerned that the project will endanger the important flyway for migratory birds, disturb a number of cemeteries, and could virtually destroy an otherwise stable community.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a document I referred to last week in which the CEO of Horse Racing Alberta refers to an agreement committing to a government buyout of a project.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table copies of an e-mail from Mark von Schellwitz, who is the vice-president, western Canada, for the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association. In the e-mail he says that the

AGLC recognizes the severe labour shortage our industry is experiencing and as a result effective immediately AGLC will consider allowing minors to work in non-licensed areas of Class A (minors prohibited) establishments on a case by case basis.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter concerning the Traffic Safety (Seizure of Vehicles in Prostitution Related Offences) Amendment Act, 2003. This is a letter from a constituent of mine, Sharron Nelson, who is advocating that the proceeds from vehicles that are auctioned off be put back into actions to help the sex-trade workers themselves with their recovery and healing process rather than going into provincial revenue.

Thank you.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. The first is from Nicole Burns writing to

bring attention and support for quality, licensed and monitored childcare programs for all children aged 0-12. All children should have the right to attend these childcare programs regardless of their age or their family's income level.

My second tabling is from Elaine Lefebvre writing to express "concern that there are not stronger penalties in Alberta for animal cruelty and abuse, particularly towards our companion animals."

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to table a number of individual letters and the required number of copies calling on this Assembly to support that the accused killer of Joshua John Hunt be tried and sentenced as an adult due to the nature of his crime, his past criminal history, and that he is close to the age of 18 years.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a letter that I wrote to the hon. Minister of Energy. This letter is dated February 5, 2007, and it's outlining many concerns over the already high cost of the transmission line that is being proposed between Genesee and Langdon.

My second tabling this afternoon is information from the Save My CWB website. It's a website that's set up to hear all sides of the argument regarding the debate around the future of the Canadian Wheat Board.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the requisite number of copies of last Thursday's *Calgary Herald* For Neighbours article written by Alex Frazer-Harrison. Alex recounts the struggle led by Marilyn Marks to improve grandparent accessibility to their grandchildren.

The Speaker: Hon. members, when we sat last, there was a question from the Leader of the Official Opposition directed to the Premier, and the Premier had indicated that today he would provide a supplemental answer. Normally I would deal with this at the conclusion of the question period, but I sort of anticipate that this may lead to a further question today, and perhaps if we dealt with it now, that might in fact save some time. So we won't start the question period till we conclude this segment.

So, Premier, if you would like to supplement your answer, and under our rules the Leader of the Official Opposition then has an opportunity to ask an additional question, an additional response. The clock for the question period won't start until we deal with this matter first.

Racing Entertainment Centre Project

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your decision. There was a question raised last Thursday by the hon. Leader of the Opposition with respect to a deal that the government has made with the horse-racing association. To the best of my knowledge and after conferring with the minister responsible, checking back well into 2004, there is no knowledge of any deal, any kind of buyouts with the horse-racing association. So there is no deal, period.*

The Speaker: Leader of the Official Opposition, if you wish.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the clarity of that answer. I am wondering if the Premier could tell us if there are any deals between his government and the MD of Rocky View on this project or between his government and the developers of the project?

*See p. 157, right col., para. 12

Mr. Stelmach: No. Over the weekend the reeve of the MD of Rocky View made it very clear that there are no deals with the government of Alberta, and that's my knowledge. In terms of this cabinet, this Executive Council, there are no deals with the MD of Rocky View.

The Speaker: Okay. Now we will start the question period, and the clock will start when the "n" in Leader of the Official Opposition is stated. Proceed.

head: 1:30

Oral Question Period

Racing Entertainment Centre Project

Dr. Taft: Well, we'll see where the deals land between this cabinet or previous cabinets, this government and other governments. This government did have full knowledge of the plans for the water transfer from the Red Deer River to Balzac last summer. In fact, the former Deputy Premier stated right here that there was "good interaction between a variety of ministries in this government," concerning the Balzac project, and on August 31 she stated that "a lot of work" had been done on the project, again right here in the Assembly. My question, then, to the Premier: what members of his government have been involved with the meetings with the developers on the Balzac project?

Mr. Stelmach: Since assuming the position of Premier, none – absolutely none – of the members of Executive Council have met with any developers.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I saw a replay of a famous prime ministerial debate just this weekend in which one person stood up and said, "I had no choice," and the other said, "Yes, you did have a choice." My question is to the Premier. Whether it's your current cabinet or not, you are responsible for the deals of this government. You are. I need you to answer for your whole government.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'll look forward to the debate any time, anywhere. It doesn't matter the time of day. Any time.

Dr. Taft: You know, Mr. Speaker, the people of the Red Deer basin want some answers. They want answers on the water transfer for Balzac, and we're clearly not going to get them from the Premier, so let's try somebody else.

In this Assembly last August the government made clear that a variety of ministries were involved in the development at Balzac. We already know that Agriculture is in for millions, so let's get the truth on some others. To the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation: what resources has his department committed to the project at Balzac?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, as far as I know, we've committed absolutely no resources to the project.

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

Ryley Landfill Project

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Balzac water transfer is a crucial test for this government's leadership on environmental

issues, and we can see how they're doing so far. Environmental issues don't respect municipal or county lines, and the impacts extend far beyond those. Building a truly sustainable Alberta requires tough choices that put political considerations aside. My question today is to the Minister of Environment. Given the minister's detailed knowledge of and support for the Balzac project, did this government review the memorandum of understanding between the MD and the developers before it was signed, or are they strictly hands off even when provincial water is at stake?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've answered this question in a number of forms before in the House. The process for applications and approvals of water licences is very straightforward. There currently is an application that is under consideration. To date no decisions have been made.

Dr. Taft: Again a total dodge.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's own backyard, figuratively speaking at least, is also the site of some pretty contentious projects with massive implications for the quality of life and environmental sustainability across a wide region. The area around Ryley is the site of a massive landfill project that may someday take in waste from around the continent, yet we have very limited support for regional planning. My question is to the Premier. What steps will the Premier take to ensure that the full array of regional issues is considered before further decisions on this massive project are made?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the Beaver regional waste management commission went through some of the most extensive public hearings ever in the province of Alberta with respect to the development. I can't even recall the hundreds of hours of evidence that were presented to various authorities, both to the public health authority, the appeal authorities. All evidence points out that this is the most natural bathtub there is in terms of protection of water. You know, there is waste generated. We have to put it someplace. Apparently, according to the experts, this is the best.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The commission that owns and operates the dump is hoping to win the right to bring in 500,000 tonnes of trash shipped by rail from Vancouver every year. If successful, they predict that their revenues, of course, will soar, but there are residents concerned about the long-term impacts of this. Again to the Premier: given this government's generous financial support for the Balzac project, can the Premier tell this Assembly if any provincial funds have been provided to support the development of the Ryley landfill project, and if so, how much?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this person has got up a number of times in this House and made allegations without support. You now have an opportunity to put on the table the millions of dollars that went to the Balzac support by the government. Present it now, or don't mention it in any preambles. There has got to be some decency in this House. There's immunity in this House, and he behaves like he doesn't know the rules.

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

Computer Use Policy in Agriculture Department

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The annual report of the Auditor General of Alberta released last September found many weaknesses in the department of agriculture, food and rural development's computer security practices. These weaknesses include no password policy, no controls over unauthorized software, no acceptable use policy. My first question is to the Minister of Agriculture and Food. Given that the Auditor General pointed out that there was no acceptable use policy for computer use in the department, what has the government done to address these weaknesses since the report was issued in September?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, the Auditor General did bring up several issues for us to look at, and we're proceeding with those probably as we speak. As far as the computer issue I am not involved in that, but my computer works off the ag department. I have no problem with my password and getting in there, and I'm not a computer genius, so I guess the thing's not too bad.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, the minister should be more involved. The website Save My CWB has a vicious, vulgar, and threatening e-mail posted. The website claims this e-mail came from the department of agriculture. The e-mail accuses farmers sympathetic to the Wheat Board of being total communists and relying on the taxpayer to prop up their farms. My question is again to the minister: given that this government has spent millions of taxpayers' dollars to try and discredit and dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board, is this e-mail posting what the Alberta government really thinks about farmers who continue to support and have faith in the Canadian Wheat Board?

Mr. Groeneveld: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. I would like to speak to the millions of dollars. I'm not aware of the millions of dollars. I am aware that \$1.08 million has been spent over four years, and only a very small portion of that has gone into the advertising aspect.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister should be more aware. My next question is to the minister. Given that this posting, which contains vulgar and threatening language, reflects very poorly on the people of this fine province, will the minister personally on behalf of the government post an apology on the Save My CWB website?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will post no apology for my position on the Canadian Wheat Board nor this government's position on the Canadian Wheat Board. I think it's solid. It's what Albertans are telling us what they want, and we will stick with doing it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Employment of Children

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Alberta NDP received a copy

of an e-mail which said that the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission was going to approve the employment of children as young as 12 years old in kitchens of licensed premises, in other words in bars. The Alberta Federation of Labour president was quoted as saying that this is proof that the government has officially lost its mind. All the ministers that were involved indicated that they were unaware of it, so my question is to the Premier. Why is such a significant policy with such a significant potential negative effect being approved by the . . .

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a matter for the record. For 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds any change in allowing work in bars would have to come through the Department of Employment, Immigration and Industry. The minister responsible heard about the policy direction, and when I heard about it on Friday, I put an end to it. I can assure you that after Friday, after hearing it, it's not only 12-year-olds but any minors who are forbidden to work at any bar anywhere in the province of Alberta. Period.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, the e-mail says, and I quote: the AGLC recognizes that there's a severe labour shortage in our industry and "as a result effective immediately AGLC will consider allowing minors to work in non-licensed areas of Class A . . . establishments" except those that feature nude entertainment. Thank goodness for that. Why didn't his ministers know that this had been approved?

Mr. Stelmach: In my previous answer I talked about the process. It's not simply some 12-year-old walking into a bar. But after that, whatever the age, for any minor: no work in any bar. That means that maybe the hon. member may have to deal with shorter working hours in a lounge, whatever it is. But there won't be any minors working in any bar in this province of Alberta.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, it's pretty clear that this would have been approved without the minister even knowing about it, notwithstanding what the Premier has just told us. My question to the Premier is: will he go one step further and eliminate the use of child labour in this province altogether?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, back to the earlier point. I mentioned that there was a process in place for 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds. That policy had to work through the process. It had to get through to the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry, and it would not have gone through at that point. However, all I'm saying is that after hearing about it: all minors – period – no work in the province of Alberta in any bars.

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

Affordability of Postsecondary Education

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Everyone recognizes the value of having a postsecondary education and what a tremendous asset it is in our knowledge-based economy and our knowledge-based society. Earlier today I had a very informative meeting with three representatives from CAUS, the Council of Alberta University Students, who are with us still in the gallery as I speak and who raised several important points that pertain to university students and to those who hope to be university students. My questions are to the Minister of Advanced Education and

Technology. With essential living costs and all other costs on the rise, what are you doing to reduce or at least address financial barriers that university students, and others for that matter, are facing as they pursue . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Making postsecondary education affordable is a priority for this government – affordability, accessibility. In November of 2006 we released the affordability framework, which had a great deal of consultation not only with students but with other stakeholders in the system. We've rolled back tuition to 2004, and we've limited increases to the Alberta consumer price index, which I think was something that was supported in large measure by all stakeholders. That's about 3.3 per cent this year. Without those changes, students would have faced tuition fees anywhere from 6 to 11 per cent this year. An undergraduate student would save over \$3,800 over the four years.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. When will your ministry return so-called tuition fees principles back to legislation, an action that will surely lessen the load of any possible tuition fee increases in the future?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's not necessarily true that it would lessen the load of any possible increases in the future because the process would be very similar. What we're saying is that putting it into the regulation enabled us to do exactly what I just talked about in my previous answer, and it enabled us to do it very quickly. I can commit to the students of this province and I can commit to the stakeholders of this province that we have no intention of making any changes without very extensive consultation with them and with members of government and members of the opposition.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: from an infrastructure point of view how do you intend to provide a better balance for undergraduate facility improvements and expansions and so on in comparison with graduate facilities, research, and advanced research facilities?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, a very good question and, I know, one that is on the minds of the student population. We had a meeting this morning with CAUS, and I've met with a number of the stakeholders in the industry or in the system about the Campus Alberta approach. Really, narrowing down into what the roles, responsibilities, and mandates are of each institution within that Campus Alberta approach and managing the growth pressures to build a stronger Alberta and a stronger Campus Alberta for all students and all stakeholders, we will come up with a collaborative, co-operative approach to making sure that we have a balance to our capital in all of those institutions.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

PDD Funding

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports has reallocated \$11.3 million from the PDD

budget to assist agencies with staff retention. Those dollars flow through the PDD community boards. Although it is very, very welcome and certainly will be appreciated, it still remains only one-time funding, and there are questions around that allocation. To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. These dollars come from within the PDD budget. They are not new dollars. Will the minister explain what area or programs can afford to be cut and where those dollars have been taken from?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, it is correct, actually, that the reallocation of the \$11.3 million is not new money. This is within the Department of Seniors and Community Supports. As in all budgets there are estimates. As you get closer to the year-end, you realize that not all of the estimates have been spent as budgeted for, and recognizing the priority of this need, we wanted to ensure that we could address it, that we would get all the available dollars back into those agencies providing tremendous service for those with disabilities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the same minister: given that the minister has allocated these dollars specifically for staff retention, how can you explain the recent cuts to the Good Samaritan Society's options for community living day program, that provides recreation and volunteer opportunities, cuts which impact approximately 40 staff and 60 Albertans with disabilities?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, the PDD boards – there are six of them, working with all the service providers in each of their local areas – are constantly assessing the needs of those with disabilities that they're servicing, and there are continually changes from one service provider to another. That's not a new phenomenon, but it is additional dollars provided to the PDD boards to allocate to their service providers for staff retention kinds of wage issues.

Ms Pastoor: Losing staff is really quite devastating to this particular group. Does the minister realize that a one-time funding commitment is not enough? These dollars must be stable, and they must be sustainable. Can the minister assure me that this conversation is going on with Treasury and that it will be reflected in the April 19 budget?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, sustainability of providing services to those in great need, like those with disabilities, is essential. When we're looking at how do we provide this funding, even this, and looking forward, how can we ensure and provide those assurances to those with disabilities that services will be there when they need them? Those things related to the budget: they'll be related in due course on April 19.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Oil and Gas Activity in the Eastern Slopes

Mr. Coumts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Oil and gas seismic activity in the eastern slopes in southwest Alberta has the potential to threaten the water supply from springs and wells for farm and ranch operations and the growing community of Nanton, Alberta. Recently both communities put significant public pressure on the oil companies, forcing them to consult further with the people on those effects. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource

Development. Given the sensitivity of the effects on native grass and the precious water, can the minister advise what protection is available to landowners and residents of the growing communities of Nanton and district?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to assure the members of this Assembly and the residents of the Nanton area that this government and Sustainable Resource Development take the issue of water quality and aquifers very seriously. For this reason there's been a policy in place since 1964, updated in 2000, that prohibits any type of drilling or surface activity, including seismic, in a protected area around the town of Nanton. So that protection is in place.

In addition, more generally for the Willow Creek area I'm happy to report that the MD there has been in discussions with Compton Petroleum. Their seismic program has ceased, pending public meetings.

Thank you.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's good news.

My first supplemental is to the Minister of Energy. The Pekisko, the Porcupine Hills, and the Livingstone Landowners groups have asked to put a moratorium on all drilling in the eastern slopes. Will the Minister of Energy look at implementing that moratorium?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, the government of Alberta does recognize that there are many challenges that face this region and, of course, as you know, all regions across the province of Alberta with respect to development, including the development in this particular area, population growth, and recreational and housing demands across the province. I'd like to make it clear that we are recognized internationally for our ability to explore for and develop our resources in an environmentally responsible manner. No resource exploration takes place in this province with disregard to the environment.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what can be done to implement the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board provision IL 93, as it has become known, that allows for the better planning of oil and gas activity south of highway 1, north of highway 3, and west of highway 2 into the high elevations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, thank you. The information letter that's being discussed, of course, outlines our expectations as a government for oil and gas development, planning, public consultation, and environmental impact assessments. The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board is currently working with the landowner groups and other stakeholders to update this particular letter.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Access to the Future Fund

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two years ago the government announced the access to the future fund, a projected \$3 billion pool of cash to support innovation and excellence in postsecondary education. It is a fine idea even if it is just a watered-down rip-off of Alberta Liberal policy. However, since the fund was established, the program has been mired in confusion. We know from government reports that grants totalling \$71.8 million have met eligibility criteria, but we have no way of knowing how much has been matched because we hear nothing from the ministry about the fund. To the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology my first question is simply this: in the spirit of openness and transparency, what is going on with the access to the future fund?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would say in the spirit of openness and transparency that the hon. member might mention that the \$71.8 million number he got, he got from our department due to a written request that he gave us, which I'm more than happy to bring forward to the House.

Yes, we've matched a number of donations that were put in play prior to the access to the future fund terms of reference being put out there. We now have the council, which has developed the framework and the formula where each institution in this province can share in that access to the future fund and the amount of dollars that are coming off it every year. The generosity of Albertans, as has been said in this House many times, has been overwhelming, and we're very, very appreciative.

Mr. Tougas: Well, Mr. Speaker, across the province there's growing frustration with the administration of the fund. The government only began the process of matching the \$37 million donation by the Mactaggart family for the University of Alberta after Cécile Mactaggart shamed the government into action, and even then it is not using the access to the future fund money to do so. During a visit I paid to a postsecondary institution, a high-ranking administrator told me that the bureaucracy surrounding the fund is ridiculous. Is the minister of advanced education worried that donations may start to dry up if the government doesn't get its act together?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would love to know who the person was in that institution who felt that it was so bureaucratic. [interjections] They may be interested in the answer, seeing as they asked the question.

In spite of that, I don't believe that the council has made it onerous on any of the institutions as to how they would match over an ongoing basis. They all are aware of the formula that we're using, they're all aware of the amount of dollars that they have available to match donations, and they are all aware of where those donations are coming from and going to.

Mr. Tougas: Mr. Speaker, some postsecondary institutions in Alberta are training students on equipment that is not only older than the students but in some cases even older than the instructors. Donations of state-of-the-art equipment worth millions of dollars are not eligible for access to the future matching funds. Will the minister commit here and now to changing the regulations regarding the access to the future fund to allow for matching funds over and above the necessary stable base funding for unique donations of equipment?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're open to any of those types of ideas as well as looking at every donation on an individual basis with the institutions, but I must point out, too, that the whole idea is to provide access. That means access for seats for students. The ongoing operating costs of those seats is of concern not only to the government but also to the students. We want to ensure that those spots are available for the long term. We are working on a capital plan with the institutions to replace equipment, to replace buildings, to replace spaces, for deferred maintenance, to do all of those things with them on the capital side.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans want their name to be attached to helping students get their education, their postsecondary education. We want to help them do that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

CNRL Bonnyville Upgrader Project Delay

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has experienced extraordinary growth in the last few years. Much of this growth is from the unprecedented development and investment in the oil sands industry. However, Canadian Natural Resources Limited recently announced that its plans to build an upgrader to serve its in situ projects in the Bonnyville-Cold Lake area have been put on hold. My question is to the Minister of Energy. Mr. Minister, was CNRL's decision due to changes in provincial and/or federal government policies?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. Certainly, relative to the member's question this government does have a plan to manage growth pressure and to build a stronger Alberta, and we will be doing that. CNRL and other major players with respect to the hydrocarbon industry in this province are part of that growth and part of that strength. We have not done anything with respect to changing CNRL's plans. As you know, businesses will continue to assess their position in the marketplace, and CNRL's position here is quite simply that. This is a delay in a project. This project is not cancelled.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what impact does a delay like this have on the province's value-added strategy?

Mr. Knight: Well, Mr. Speaker, our value-added strategy is alive and well and in place. We will continue to work with the assumption in mind that we are going to provide for Albertans continued opportunities in value-added. But in this particular case, this oil that was going to be upgraded or is going to be upgraded at some point in time by CNRL is partly oil that's being shipped out of the province now, partly new oil. It's very difficult to say at this point in time whether or not this has an impact on our ongoing plan.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: is the minister concerned that other oil sands operators may also delay their projects?

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, most certainly it's a concern for our government and all Albertans, I think. When we look at the development that the province is faced with, the economic ramifications of any of these major projects delaying, moving, being extended, of course there is some concern, but I do believe that as we move forward with these and other projects, Albertans and the industry players in the province will find that this is indeed globally the best place to invest.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like the tobacco industry, those with financial interests in increasing carbon emissions in the province, including this government, have misrepresented and cast doubt on the science and the cause of climate change. To understand why, follow the money. With overwhelming public pressure and evidence this government now appears to have accepted some aspects of the science relating to carbon emissions as the culprit, but conflicting messages continue. To the Environment minister: has this government accepted the science that carbon emissions are the major cause of climate change?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I think the government has been very clear in the introduction of Bill 3 that we take the issue of climate change very seriously. It is widely agreed upon by the scientific community that mankind has had a significant impact on climate change. The world has always changed, will always change, but I think it's fair to say that this government accepts that at least part of that change is the result of human involvement.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government over the past decade has spent millions of public dollars denying and misinforming the public about the cause and consequences of climate change and delaying responsible actions. Experts have indicated that the cost of carbon-neutral development in the tar sands, for example, is only \$3 to \$5 a barrel. To the environment minister: will the minister fully commit to real reductions rather than false intensity targets for carbon emissions in the province?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, let's be very clear. Bill 3 talks about very real reductions, talks about a 12 per cent reduction on a facility-by-facility basis. What it doesn't do, and what this government is not prepared to do, is restrict the development and restrict the ability of the industry to grow.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The overall emissions in Alberta are predicted to go up to 70 per cent higher than 1990 levels as a result of this approach to climate change reduction. Industry itself has said that intensity targets are not helpful to guide good business planning. Again to the Environment minister: when are we going to see absolute limits and timelines to emissions rather than these intensity targets?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, our plan is a plan that recognizes that the technology that needs to be in place in order for those hard caps to be implemented is not fully developed yet. The reason why we have introduced this legislation is to facilitate the development of that

technology and to facilitate the introduction of that new technology on a project-by-project basis.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

User Fees in Provincial Parks

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. This government seems ready to nickel and dime working Albertans again with higher park fees at the same time that they record another multibillion dollar surplus. Last week the Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture said that he wouldn't introduce day fees for parks but then admitted that he's waiting to hear from the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. My question is to the Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture. Why would everyday Albertans be asked to swallow higher park fees when our provincial coffers are overflowing and the public actually owns these parks in the first place?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, certainly, the question is a very, very important one and one that is critical to each and every individual that uses our parks. If the member would have listened last week, I thought I was very, very clear that we are certainly not contemplating any fees whatsoever for day use or use to access our trails within our parks.

Mr. Eggen: The 2004 Alberta recreation survey showed that 90 per cent of Albertans think that parks would improve their quality of life and bring their families together, but 42 per cent said that they might not do so if the cost of camping was too high. We saw what happened in Elk Island national park. When expensive day fees were introduced, people stopped visiting. I'd like to ask the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development then: why might you be considering higher park fees when your own survey shows that doing so will in fact keep working families away from the parks?

Dr. Morton: We may have to invest in some hearing aids, Mr. Speaker, for the other side there. I think the minister of parks made it quite clear that he is not contemplating any increase in user fees for provincial parks. But I would say that I thought, generally, that the opposition parties were interested in the land-use framework, which Premier Stelmach is continuing and has given me responsibility for. We're into new times. New times call for new thinking, fresh thinking, and new solutions. When it comes to land use, that's the approach I will take.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My constituents would then be paying twice for parks: once through their taxes and again through private operators at provincial campgrounds. Thirty per cent of Albertans have told the government that private operation of public campgrounds is a reason not to visit; 42 per cent say that the cost is too high already. So I'd ask the same minister: will the minister please commit to scrapping park fees and, as part of the land-use framework, bring parks back into the public fold?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, I think that question is more appropriate to submit to me rather than the minister of sustainable resources.

Certainly, there are existing costs in individual parks. We've got individuals that use firewood, for instance. We've got individuals that use sewers. We've got individuals that might use power. For those that camp overnight and that will use those services and incur those costs, we would expect them to cover those particular costs. There are no fees for anyone to use our day facilities or group areas as well as our trails within the parks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Waste-water Discharge into Bow River

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's Environmental Appeal Board recently gave the town of Strathmore the green light to temporarily allow Strathmore to release its treated waste water into the Bow River. Residents of the Siksika Nation who are downstream of the treated waste-water release are concerned that the release will contaminate their drinking water supplies. So my question is to the Minister of Environment. Why is the town of Strathmore being permitted to dump its waste water into the Bow River if the Environment Appeal Board has yet to issue its final decision on the appeal?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to point out a couple things that are included in the preamble to the question. First of all, this issue deals with treated waste water from the town of Strathmore, and secondly, the Environmental Appeal Board is considering whether or not the decision of Alberta Environment should be upheld or turned down. For that reason it's difficult for me to get into the specifics on this case but comment more in general terms.

In that regard, Mr. Speaker, I must point out that there were conditions that were put on this application that would apply to any application. Those conditions apply, including the time that the . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is again to the Minister of Environment. How can the Siksika Nation residents be sure that the town of Strathmore will safely manage the treated waste water that's being put into the Bow River?

Thank you.

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I was explaining that the conditions that were applied are in place and will stay in place even during the stay that the appeal board put in place. Until they deal with this from a temporary perspective, Alberta Environment will work with the town of Strathmore and ensure that there is ongoing monitoring of both the discharge and the river to ensure that the terms of that discharge are upheld.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the same minister. How can the government be sure that this waste-water disposal in general doesn't impact the water supplies of other downstream communities throughout Alberta?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has some of the highest water and waste-water standards in the country, and the reason is included in the question: because practically everyone in Alberta lives downstream from someone else. If we don't have adequate

protection to ensure that the discharge from one municipality doesn't adversely affect their downstream neighbours, we will have a great cause for concern.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Private/Public Partnerships

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In his report on P3 financing the Auditor General highlighted a number of concerns. The long-term debt commitments made under such agreements are only of value if we are guaranteed not to pay any more than planned. Last week in the House the Premier pointed to the southeast Edmonton ring road as a prime example of what P3 financing could do. Surprisingly enough, I couldn't agree more. In the 2005-06 annual report for the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transportation, page 103, we see that the P3-financed southeast ring road was \$34.6 million overbudget for that year. Could the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation please explain why these cost overruns occurred?

2:10

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I have to admit that I didn't read the '05-06 Auditor General's report on that portion of the ring road, so I will have to get back to the hon. member with that answer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the government announced last month that the northeast Calgary ring road would finally be built, again through a P3 initiative. As a Calgary MLA I know as well as anyone that the ring road is needed. Nevertheless, given the cost overruns mentioned just now in the Edmonton project, \$34.6 million, what can the minister offer to assure Albertans that they'll not be paying far more money than budgeted for a road they won't even own now?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I really have a hard time. I think this hon. member is speaking through both sides. I don't think he even wants a ring road in Calgary, to tell you the truth. He's just trying to stir up a little trouble here. But I will say that the actual ring road in Calgary will be done two years ahead of schedule than if we would have done it the conventional way, and we are going to have savings of hundreds of millions of dollars on that road.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Yes. I thank the minister for getting on the record in *Hansard* on the hundreds of millions of dollars that will be saved for my Calgarians, who desperately need that ring road.

What evidence, what cost does this government need before it will cease and desist with this P3 financing?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, we will never cease and desist with this P3 financing because we need different alternatives to be able to handle the pressures that we have in this province, to handle the growth pressures because of our booming economy and the prosperity that we have in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Electricity Line between Edmonton and Calgary

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Energy and Utilities Board postponed its hearings for a month regarding a permit

to construct and license and operate a 500-kilowatt line between Edmonton and Calgary. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Can the minister advise the members of this Assembly about the cause for this delay?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Most certainly I can advise on the cause of the delay. Number one, as the member has pointed out, this particular matter is currently in front of the EUB, and there has been a stay, a delay in the hearings because they're taking into consideration the needs identification document that was previously approved with respect to the issue. So while they prepare their legal counsel to address the needs identification document in these hearings, there's been a delay of approximately one month.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. My constituents and I are concerned that this transmission project may not go ahead to meet the electricity needs of all of southern Alberta. Is there a potential that this project may not go ahead?

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, this government has a plan to provide safe and secure communities for Albertans. Certainly, a robust and secure transmission grid, the backbone of the electrical system in the province of Alberta, is absolutely necessary to provide the safe and reliable communities that we have in our plan. I would suggest that significant generation has come online recently in the province of Alberta, and we certainly need new transmission to accommodate that.

Mrs. Ady: My final supplemental is to the same minister. I have also heard from landowners concerning the development of this infrastructure on their land. Can the minister advise me how their concerns are being taken into account?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As these hearings continue, the EUB will continue to hear evidence from interveners, from communities, and also from the applicants of this particular project. I think that the EUB has done a very good job with respect to looking at this situation. They have adjusted the hearing times and adjusted the hearing dates, and currently what you see in front of you is another responsible move by the EUB to address the situation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Employment of Children

(continued)

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've heard government respond and express its dismay at children as young as 12 being employed in Alberta bars. However, the same government allows children down to age 12 to work in restaurants despite recommendations by the International Labour Organization that paid employment be restricted for children under 15. My question is to the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry. Can the minister please tell us why the government appears to be worried about children's safety and well-being in one instance but not in another?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, it's a very good question relative to the use of children in any labour situation. Simply put, there is a process for children to engage in the workplace provided several criteria are met. Thus far over 80 establishments, restaurants predominantly, have engaged children in circumstances where they can be greeters, where they can do some bussing of tables, where they are, in fact, in a situation where predominantly we have food service and where parents have signed consent. It's a fairly involved process of application so that they are permitted to have children.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While other provinces are struggling to keep children focused on academics until they finish high school, Alberta allows children to work when they are barely out of elementary school. Working at adult-type jobs has been associated with higher rates of dropout, low school performance, and poor attendance records. To the minister: will addressing Alberta's labour shortage sacrifice the academic success and well-being of Alberta's children?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, as a grandparent and a former parent one cannot generalize. It might well be of harm to some children if, in fact, they are working too much, if they are not academically inclined. That's something for the Minister of Education to comment on. What I can state is that there are very definite parameters around where and when children can work. It does involve significant parent monitoring of the capacity of that child to engage in any kind of labour.

I would suspect that the hon. member opposite that asked this question would be of the same mind I am. My children worked in delivering papers but, until they were 15 years of age, very little else.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you. The 2005 Alberta employment standards review apparently gathered community input about work standards in our province, including views about children 12 and up working in restaurants. Years have passed, and the responses to this survey are still hidden from the public's view. Will the minister do the right thing and commit to releasing the results of this survey so that we can judge for ourselves what Albertans think about this issue?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, relative to the employment standards review I would encourage the hon. member that we have more information to come out during the spring session. I'm not aware of what particular survey the hon. member is referencing, but I will consult with him later, determine what it is, and it might well be some of the information we'll provide.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Road Maintenance on Alexis Reserve

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you. The Alexis First Nation within Whitecourt-St. Anne has some serious safety and maintenance issues on the main road that leads into the band off highway 43. Mr. Speaker, you're well aware of this; this used to be in your constituency. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Is the minister aware of any programs that the Alexis First Nation can apply for that would help cover the costs of road repair and upgrading on the reserve?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, infrastructure on federal First Nations land falls under the responsibility of the federal government. Infrastructure funding and programs for First Nations communities, including Alexis First Nation, are the responsibility of the federal government. Highway 43 does pass through the northeastern section of the Alexis First Nations, and we maintain and operate that. We also maintain and operate highways 765 and 627 to the south of the reserve. But local roads are actually the responsibility of the federal government. We would hope that the Alexis would get together with them and make sure that their safety concerns are addressed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that answer, I will ask the minister of international and aboriginal affairs to comment. Is there a role for his department to assist the Alexis band and my constituents on this issue? It's hard to get the federal government to the table to take responsibility.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In spring, when there's breakup, road conditions are traditionally worse. I want to assure the hon. member that if there's any role we can play in partnering with neighbours, in partnering with the federal government to assist towards this important safety issue, it will be my pleasure to assist in any way I can.

2:20

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 94 questions and answers today. Just a reminder again that it's inappropriate in the question – well, it's inappropriate at any time – to mention the name of individuals such as occurred once today. That's a nice little reminder.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Horner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly a group of 32 grade 10 students from Bellerose composite high school in St. Albert. They are a group of very intelligent young people who are the future of our province. They are accompanied by teachers Mr. Marc Swerda, Ms Kelsey Meades, and Mr. Mark Puffer. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that written questions stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that motions for returns stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 202
Consumer Advocate Act**

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to move second reading of Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act.

The drive behind or motive for this bill can be summarized in one argument, that consumers in this province, particularly in this kind of overheated market we're experiencing, need some degree of added protection against unfair market practices. I also think that the debate that ensues should as well focus on this question: what can we do to protect, educate, and assist consumers?

Market dynamics and competition usually help maintain a certain level of fairness where the interests of business and those of consumers and their rights are balanced. However, at times some, driven by voraciousness or greed, take advantage of consumers. The examples are numerous. How many times did you, Mr. Speaker, hear from your constituents that they were ripped off? How many times did the Premier or the Government House Leader or the Minister of Justice or the minister responsible for Service Alberta hear from their constituents that they were lied to or deceived? How many times did people tell the hon. members of this Assembly that they were, quote, taken for a ride? We all receive these complaints, and we all do what we can to refer people in the right direction. But sometimes these Albertans do not really have anywhere to go. They have no recourse, and the crooks cackle all the way to their banks at our expense.

What is an unfair market practice? What is this bill trying to address? Take price-fixing, Mr. Speaker, price-gouging, collusion, false advertising, or fraud. Ask people if they're concerned about fairness in the marketplace, and see which answer you get.

This bill establishes an officer of the Legislature, a consumer advocate, a market watchdog, whose mandate will be to advocate on behalf of consumers and defend their interests and rights. Consumers need a voice, and they need protection. They need someone in their corner with more than a wet towel or a spit bucket, someone who can rush to their aid if they need assistance righting a wrong. What we have now is not strong enough, and the current boom is unique. Consumer tip sheets on the Service Alberta website just don't cut it anymore.

Instead, I am proposing an advocate who will work closely with this Assembly, with the provincial government and its various departments and agencies, with fair trading directors and Service Alberta investigators, and with consumer organizations. The mandate will include a review of all legislation pertaining to consumer protection with the purpose of suggesting to the Assembly how these laws can be strengthened, how we can seal any loopholes and toughen our stance on this increasingly alarming trend in our marketplace.

The consumer advocate will also, one, assess the role and effectiveness of our province's Utilities Consumer Advocate; two,

initiate, recommend, or undertake programs designed to promote the interests of Alberta consumers; three, operate a publicly accessible database of consumer complaints, the findings of the investigations, and details regarding any administrative orders that have been rendered, charges that have been laid, or fines which were levied, something like the Consumer Beware database in the province of Ontario; and, four, conduct consumer protection related research and submit an annual report to this Assembly, an annual market, health, and fairness assessment, a state of consumer protection, if you will. He or she will even provide us with statistics respecting things such as rent, utility costs, auto insurance rates, retail gasoline prices, et cetera, in this province as compared to other Canadian jurisdictions.

The advocate will have the power to investigate concerns or issues on his or her initiative but also on the recommendation or referral by or from the Legislature or any of its committees, a cabinet minister, or the Premier, for that matter. I trust that our consumer advocate will be kept really busy monitoring and investigating to ensure fairness and compliance.

Examples? There are numerous examples, Mr. Speaker, and the severity, gravity, and frequency all seem to be getting out of hand, escalating, and spreading. Take rent gouging. The Alberta Liberal caucus knows that landlords are for the most part responsible and fair. Some, however, go beyond what is a reasonable and justified rent increase to what can be easily classified as rent gouging or robbery. Someone has to be able to stop this practice. When rent increases over the period 1995 to 2004 have only averaged about 3.8 per cent annually and now people are being asked to fork over 35 or 40 per cent more for the same unit they have lived in for years and with no significant improvements or upgrades, then something is wrong. When rent goes up twice a year, as the law currently permits, or more often, which is a punishable offence, then tenants have a reason to complain and scream in despair and disgust.

Turning apartments into condos and kicking tenants out: that's another one. The hon. Member for Vermillion-Lloydminster, in an answer given in question period on March 15, 2007, indicated that tenants can take landlords to court if landlords breach the Residential Tenancies Act. Well, small claims court costs money: \$100 if the amount is less than \$7,500 or \$200 if the amount is between \$7,500 and \$25,000. Many low-income tenants can't even afford this fee or the time requirement for a claim to move through this process, between their looking for a new place to live and trying to make ends meet, perhaps even working two or three jobs just to survive.

Rent gouging is also not as clearly defined as an offence under the Residential Tenancies Act because there is no maximum or ceiling. So these court challenges are likely also going to ultimately fail. Furthermore, one day my constituency office phoned the residential tenancies dispute resolution service here in Edmonton to chat, and the folks there actually were really clear that their mandate does not cover dealing with outrageous rent increases.

Take auto insurance. Why are Alberta drivers paying some of the highest rates in Canada? Why are the auto insurance companies hesitant to tell us how much money they make in profit each year? Why doesn't our provincial government reintroduce some form of public auto insurance? Why isn't insurance gouging vigorously investigated and acted upon? Also, pardon the ignorant question, Mr. Speaker: why do people with bad driving records seem to get more of a rate cut than those with perfect driving histories? I think the answer is simple. It's that these people represent a smaller number of customers, so giving them a more favourable rate won't hurt the company's bottom line. But it's not fair to the hundreds of thousands of good drivers in this province.

Take people buying new homes. The builder agrees in writing to a certain price then comes around and claims prices for supplies and

labour went up, offers to refund the down payment or cancel the contract, knowing quite well that someone else will be more than happy to buy this very property at the increased price in this crazy housing market. Shouldn't companies stick to their contractual agreements? That is the question.

Take retail gasoline. Pump prices jump up so efficiently when the wholesale price for crude moves upward, but gas stations drag and stall before their prices are lowered, sometimes taking days after the wholesale price goes down. Motorists need an answer to this question. Also, why are we paying more here for gasoline than places in Ontario, for example? Isn't Alberta the gulf state of Canada? Is it simply supply and demand, or is there some inclination here to charge what you can get because no one will so much as raise a finger to question you? Don't tell me that it is because we don't refine here, because neither does Ontario. They sometimes even buy their products from Europe and still pay less.

2:30

Take electricity and natural gas prices after deregulation. Boy, was that a bad decision. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has statistics and calculations proving how much residential, commercial, and industrial consumers in Alberta were ripped off. Then you add another layer, Mr. Speaker. Take the people who do the marketing for natural gas and electricity. We have all heard horror stories there. These are just some examples, and I know that other colleagues can list a few more.

Again, members of this Assembly need only ask themselves if they're happy and satisfied with the status quo. They can choose not to support this idea if they truly believe that consumers don't need any extra protection and that it is not the government's responsibility to protect and assist them. If, however, you agree that something needs to be done – and I hope that most of you will – then let's send this message together, that Alberta consumers will now have a new ally and that unfair market practices will be dealt with swiftly and strongly. If you have other ideas or suggestions and would like to put them forward in Committee of the Whole, I am definitely open and willing to work with all of you.

I urge all hon. members to support Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act. Protecting consumers is a priority for me, Mr. Speaker, and for the entire Alberta Liberal caucus. It should be for all members of this esteemed Assembly as well. This is not a partisan issue; this is about people.

I thank you for this opportunity.

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

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments. As far as the speech goes, I've agreed with almost everything the member said. We have problems with rent, and we have problems with car insurance and others. When I look through it, I think it's in the enforcement, not that we need to create another position. That's what I think the problem is. Let's be honest. If we're going to deal with the rising rents and the gouging that's going on – and we know about it; I was on the committee, and I've heard a lot about it – there's only one way to do it. An advocate can't do much about it. It has to be rent guidelines brought in by the provincial government. If we're going to deal with car insurance, the places where it's the lowest is where they have public auto insurance. That's what we have to do.

It's policy changes that we have to do, and I honestly don't think that creating another position is really going to solve the problems that the member so ably talked about. It seems that in policy formation, with the Liberals it's either an endowment fund or another advocate laid out.

Mr. MacDonald: You're just jealous.

Mr. Martin: Yeah. That's it. I'm jealous. I'm really jealous, hon. member.

The point I'd make is that I don't think it's the fact that we don't have the laws now. When I look at a comparison between the two, what the hon. member is bringing in as a consumer advocate and what Service Alberta has, I look at the statutes to be covered: in Bill 202, the Fair Trading Act; Service Alberta, the Fair Trading Act. In the Consumer Advocate Act, Residential Tenancies Act; Service Alberta, Residential Tenancies Act. In the Consumer Advocate Act: Natural Gas Price Protection Act, Real Estate Act, utilities consumer act, other acts deemed necessary. Well, all of these acts are basically there.

Punitive capability. In Bill 202 that the member is bringing forward: make recommendations and comments on issues presented. No punitive capability. In other words, you have to have the stick along with the carrot, as far as I'm concerned. In Service Alberta they have warnings, but they can prosecute, so it's actually a little stronger. Can they accept complaints from the public? Yes in both cases.

The other point that I would make, though, is that probably the most valuable suggestion that comes from this bill is that it does recommend the establishment of a publicly accessible database of consumer complaints. I think that would be something that Service Alberta could do. I think that would be useful, to be able to have that sort of information here.

Again, I commend the member for bringing forward some important issues, but I don't think, unless we're willing to actually tackle these things in a serious way, that setting up another advocate will necessarily do anything different. I believe the laws are there in Service Alberta if we want to enforce them, and I think that that's where the problem lies. Probably what I would suggest is that Service Alberta take the positive thing that I mentioned and set up a publicly accessible database of consumer complaints.

Mr. Speaker, I guess I'm saying: very good intentions, and it's good that we're debating this. Things are needed here because there are problems, but I would say that it's more an enforcement of what we already have that we should be looking at.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, normally we'd try and get an exchange going. If there is no additional hon. member who will capture my attention, I will then recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm really pleased to rise and speak to Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act. I want to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung for introducing something new, which I think was badly needed because I'm hearing lots of complaints. Maybe for some people it's minor complaints from the region, but there are complaints about some agencies, some big companies.

The highlight of this bill is to create the position of a consumer advocate, an officer of the Legislative Assembly, establish his mandate as the consumer advocate or any mechanism. I know that the government has a sort of information centre to respond to thousands of complaints, but if we established a consumer advocate, it might help to reduce the burden in this department when there are lots of complaints.

This bill also highlights and establishes the duties and powers of the consumer advocate. Basically, the purpose of this bill is to improve upon Alberta's existing consumer protection legislation.

The creation of the consumer advocate represents the renewed focus on consumer rights in Alberta. The bill speaks to and magnifies the importance of strong consumer protection.

Really, I think it's a very good idea, a very good bill. If needed, we can always amend a few things for the betterment of Albertans because we are all elected to serve Albertans. Lots of people are concerned about this issue, and we should address this issue and take it very seriously.

Now I would like to talk a little bit about the impact of the establishment of an officer of the Leg. whose sole responsibility is representing the rights and interests of Alberta consumers, the strengthening of Alberta's current consumer protection legislation. Mr. Speaker, what we have right now, as I already mentioned, is Alberta government services, now under the Ministry of Service Alberta, that has a consumer information centre which handles, I think, more than a hundred thousand inquiries from Albertans annually. The centre provides information on topics including landlord/tenant disputes, Internet purchasing, and how to lodge a consumer complaint. According to the Alberta government website, "the Office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate (UCA) works to ensure Alberta consumers have the information, representation and protection they need in Alberta's restructured electricity and natural gas markets."

2:40

Mr. Speaker, my constituents call me many times with their problems. Suppose they are renting properties – an apartment or condominium or subsidized home – sometimes the landlord has increased the rent once a year or maybe two or three times a year. Sometimes they ask for minor repairs, and there is nobody to listen to them. Lots of people don't know where to go, and maybe, you know, they just pick up the phone sometimes. They call their MLA's office, and mostly the assistants are there. They call some departments, and the departments just receive the message. It takes lots of time, delays after delays.

If somebody owns a condominium, there are lots of restrictions. They have their own condo rules. Even though they have condominium management, they are restricted to obeying the rules there. Still, it is sometimes so complicated that it's hard for elected representatives to answer those questions. The only solution for elected representatives like all of us is to approach the different departments, and that's what they are doing. But there is delay. So to reduce the burden of delay, I think this is a good idea. I commend the hon. member for taking the initiative and, you know, introducing this bill, which was badly needed.

My personal experience, being that my background is as a real estate agent, is that lots of realtors have many problems, whether their clients are buying a house or selling properties, when they write those complicated forms. Even the realtors are fully aware of lots of concerns. Still, you know, they're not lawyers. So if there's even a small error in the forms, sometimes RECA, the real estate people, take action against the realtors. It makes it even more complicated. You know, they have to go to the board sometimes to face complaints there. Those forms are sometimes complicated.

Another thing I want to discuss is that on one side there's a real estate board, RECA, and they have their own act. There's the Fair Trading Act, whatever you call it. There's the federal Competition Act as well. I think most of us might have heard the name of a new company, ComFree. I'm not taking anybody's side, you know, just trying to draw the attention of this House a little bit to a story from both sides. So ComFree is like an advertising company. They are not a real estate company. Like, the real estate board has their own board, their own ethics. They abide by the rules, and all of the

realtors upgrade their education. They have to spend certain hours every two years or year, whatever. But this new company: their background is like just advertising, and when they advertise on the Internet, sometimes they mention the words "real estate" or sometimes they write "MLS," which belongs to the real estate board. What they sometimes advertise on the website is . . .

The Speaker: I'm sorry, hon. member, but I must now recognize another member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to joint the debate on Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act, brought forth by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung. The bill aims to establish a consumer advocate who would be an officer of the Assembly funded by the Alberta government. The proposed advocate would be mandated to review Alberta's consumer protection statutes; assess the role and effectiveness of the Utilities Consumer Advocate; publish a report with recommendations; represent the rights, interests, and viewpoints of consumers in Alberta; receive, review, and investigate consumer complaints regarding any act or omission on the part of the Utilities Consumer Advocate or the director of fair trading; and initiate, recommend, or undertake programs designed to promote the interests of Alberta consumers.

Mr. Speaker, the province of Alberta has been actively addressing consumer issues for many years. The government was an advocate for consumers even before the ministry of consumer affairs was created in 1973. Currently Alberta consumers are very ably represented by the consumer protection branch of the Department of Service Alberta. The department administers several pieces of legislation which help protect the rights of consumers, such as the Fair Trading Act and the personal information act. Additional pieces of related legislation: the Unconscionable Transactions Act, administered by the Department of Justice, and the Gas Utilities Act, administered by the Department of Energy.

Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta also has established the Information and Privacy Commissioner and Utilities Consumer Advocate. These offices work to protect consumers. The private sector is also very active in addressing consumer protection. There are many not-for-profit and industry groups which work to ensure that consumers receive fair and equitable treatment. Between the dedication of the federal and provincial governments and the private sector, there are a myriad of resources for consumers with grievances.

Mr. Speaker, of the many measures the Alberta government has set in place to protect consumers, I would like to specifically speak to the consumer protection branch. This branch's primary responsibility is to conduct investigations upon the receipt of a complaint from consumers, industry, or a competing business. When the consumer protection branch receives a complaint, it reviews the allegation to determine if there are grounds for an investigation. If it is determined that there are reasonable grounds to proceed, the case is assigned to an investigator for further study. Investigators have the authority to make any inquiries necessary to determine the facts surrounding a consumer complaint. Depending on the legislation that the complaint falls under, the investigator may also enter a business and demand that its employees produce and provide copies of relevant documentation.

When an investigation is concluded, the investigator makes recommendations of the appropriate actions to remedy the situation. If wrongdoing is found, the consumer protection branch may

reprimand the business, place restrictions on it, apply to the appropriate regulatory agency to have the business's licence cancelled or suspended, order the business to stop certain practices, order it to provide compensation – that's only for complaints falling under certain legislation – publish the investigation's findings, or refer the matter to the courts for prosecution. Furthermore, an investigator has the authority to apply directly to the courts for a judgment and to initiate civil proceedings.

2:50

Mr. Speaker, in addition to its investigative capacity the consumer protection branch also works to educate Albertans in the private sector by publishing various tipsheets, running an information service, and rewarding organizations which promote fairness in the marketplace with the Alberta consumer champion awards.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude with a brief overview of the 1999 Fair Trading Act. The Fair Trading Act outlines the obligations of businesses to consumers, defines fair and unfair practices for pricing, marketing, and collections, regulates credit, and mandates penalties and remedies for noncompliance.

Under section 6(1.1) of the act "it is an offence for a supplier to engage in an unfair practice." Some examples of unfair practice include exerting undue pressure or influence on a consumer, taking advantage of a consumer's inability to understand the nature of a transaction, using exaggeration, innuendo, or ambiguity to misrepresent a material fact, charging a price for goods or services that exceeds an estimate given to the consumer by more than 10 per cent without the consumer's consent, and including terms in a transaction that are harsh, oppressive, or one sided.

Section 6(4) of the Fair Trading Act also defines unfair practices with respect to marketing and advertising. Prohibited practices include doing or saying anything that might reasonably mislead a consumer, misrepresenting the quality, ingredients, or characteristics of goods and services, representing used or deteriorated goods as new, claiming that a specific part or repair is desirable if it is not, and falsely using an objective format such as an editorial to market goods or services.

Mr. Speaker, any person who violates the Fair Trading Act or its regulations is subject to imprisonment for up to two years. In addition to this, they may be the subject of a fine of up to \$100,000 or three times the amount they obtained as a result of illegal actions, whichever is greater. This is a significantly more aggressive penalty than can be found in any other Canadian jurisdiction.

As you can see from these two measures, the Alberta government is strongly committed to ensuring that Alberta consumers are adequately protected. Given the large number of measures in place to protect Alberta consumers from unfair practices, I urge Members of this Legislative Assembly to ask themselves if another piece of legislation, accompanied by another office, is required. Even though they are asking for one more officer, that officer will then have to be supported by a large supporting administrative staff.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, then Battle River-Wainwright and Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and speak to Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act. [some applause] Thank you. Thank you. Hold your applause.

I think this is a valuable piece of legislation. I intend to speak over the next few minutes very much in favour of it. It was

interesting to listen to my colleague from Calgary-Hays as he read through some prepared notes on what current consumer protection legislation in the province of Alberta purports to do. Mr. Speaker, as we all know, there is what we say, and then there is what we do. If what we say is not backed up by what we do, then what we say isn't worth the paper that it's printed on.

I don't think that what the Member for Calgary-Hays had to share with the House here will be a tremendous amount of comfort or encouragement to the close to 60 residents of the assisted-living units at Holy Cross Manor in Calgary-Currie who were informed quite out of the blue a few weeks ago that their rent is going up on average 40 per cent on June 1, when their leases come up for renewal. They've been in that facility for a year. In fact, a couple of them told me that when they considered signing the lease in the Holy Cross Manor, they went so far as to ask a year ago what kind of increases they might be facing when their lease came up for renewal, and they were assured that it wouldn't be anything significant.

Well, I don't care if you're on a fixed income or you just won the lottery or you just struck oil. A 40 per cent increase like that is a pretty significant increase to your costs. I don't think that the remarks of my colleague from Calgary-Hays about existing legislation to protect consumers in this province are going to be of much comfort either to all of the people my office has helped find new accommodation in Calgary-Currie, where the average house price is about \$635,000 now, as they have become victims of economic evictions since we were here last spring. It's been a very, very interesting about 10 months since May of last year in our office as we have dealt with case after case after case of tenants, renters who were suddenly faced with a doubling or near tripling of their rent.

Interestingly, just on Thursday I was speaking to a woman who runs some retail outlets, a couple of them, in various parts of Calgary, who has prided herself on paying her staff over the years at least \$2 or more above minimum wage, whatever it was at the time, encouraging them to stay, to work full time, to build relationships with the clientele, get to know the product, that sort of thing. "Makes for a better employee," she says. But it's getting tougher and tougher and tougher because even at a couple of dollars an hour above minimum wage, you know, that's not enough to afford to buy a house in Calgary now or in Edmonton or Fort McMurray or Grande Prairie or just about anywhere else in this province. In fact, in the big cities in this province you need a family income of \$80,000 now to carry a house based on the average house prices that we've seen this year.

But back to rental units. She told me about one long-serving employee, a single mother who's been working for her now for a number of years and been very responsibly going to work, paying the bills, raising the child, et cetera, et cetera, and is now in a panic because she just got notification that her rent is going up from about \$900 a month to \$2,500 a month. Mr. Speaker, I wish I could tell you that this is an isolated case, but I can't because it's happening all over my constituency and not just in my constituency. It's happening all over Calgary, all over Edmonton, at least in the core areas, where most renters live. These kinds of rent increases are going on all the time.

We've dug up some statistics, Mr. Speaker, about rent increases that show, for instance, that over the past 12 months the average increase for rented accommodation across the nation was 1.3 per cent, and in Alberta it was 3.9 per cent. I don't think many people would say that those numbers in and of themselves are problematic except to note that rents are going up three times as much in Alberta as they are in the other nine provinces and through the territories.

But within that 3.9 per cent we have figures for Calgary and Edmonton and Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie that show rents increasing much faster than that, and within those figures we have many, many cases, dozens, hundreds of cases of rents being doubled and tripled and going up 250 per cent in a particularly odious little twist on things because, you know, it takes six months to get rid of the tenant if you want to turn that rental unit into a condominium. The law in this province says that you must give the tenant six months' notice, but it only takes three months to put that individual's rent up by whatever you want.

You're allowed two rent increases a year in this province, and there's no upper limit to how high you can put it. So we've had a case, at least – well, we've had several cases that I'm aware of – in my constituency of usually new owners of the same tired, old building, where the suites have been affordable for years because, admittedly, not much money has been put into them, but at least they've been affordable suites. The renters have come home from work to find two notices on their door, one saying that they're to be out in six months to make way for condo conversion. We've had as many rental units converted to condominiums in the past year in Calgary, for instance, as in the previous 10 years combined. The figures, I think, are not that different for Edmonton, and I suspect that they'll be much the same by the end of this year. So they've got the one notice saying, "You're out in six months unless you want to buy your unit" and right beside it another memo from the management office saying, "And, by the way, in three months' time we're increasing your rent from, oh, \$595 to \$2,000 a month." That is a very effective way, Mr. Speaker, of getting somebody you want to get rid of out in half the time that the law requires.

3:00

I won't take up too much more of the House's time. [some applause] I won't be allowed to, I think. Save your applause, as I said before.

The point here is that the protection that we have for consumers and rent gouging of the sort that has gone on in this province over the last 12 months is a classic example of this. The consumer protection legislation that we have in this province is not being sufficiently enforced and may not even be, as it's worded, sufficiently enforceable.

While the Member for Calgary-Hays or any other of the members of the government side of the House can stand and fill their entire 10-minute allotment of debate time reading government legislation and reading government regulations to us, people are falling through the cracks in droves in this province. They are being hurt, and this government is not standing up for their protection. Our role as legislators in this province is to level the playing field and make sure everybody obeys the rules. If they don't, we put on the striped shirts and we card them. That's what we're supposed to do, but it's been a long time since we've done that. If nothing else, Bill 202 seeks to shine the spotlight on that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, then Battle River-Wainwright and Lethbridge-East. [some applause]

Mr. Dunford: Seems I have a fan. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, I wanted to make a few comments on Bill 202, but because we're dealing with the principle of the bill, I won't take too long. Also, I'm not in the habit of circulating *Hansard* to my constituents, so it wouldn't be necessary to have extensive rhetoric in there just to show that I might be doing something while I'm here.

The bill is one of these quiet bills. When you first look at it, you think: "Well, gee. I think we could probably support something like that. Why wouldn't we?" Then, of course, we start to look at it, and we start to think about it, and we start to think about where it came from. It's being put forward by a Liberal member. Now, what would that normally mean in the political realms that we're used to dealing with? It usually means duplication. It usually means additional cost. I think that that is what is proposed here if we were to accept this bill. So I for one, as a free-voting member of this Assembly, want to indicate to you that I'll be voting against this bill.

One of the other comments, though, that I want to make before I sit down: I have friends and acquaintances who are involved in the formal consumer advocacy situation that happens here in Alberta and through extension, really, in every province in this country. All of them are upstanding citizens. They're serious about what they do. They take concerns of consumers to heart. They lobby municipal governments. They lobby and actually boycott at times different retailers. They, of course, have come to me as a member of the Legislature and a member of government to bring my attention to what they feel is a wrong that's been done to a consumer.

Many of us, perhaps even all of us – I don't remember the vote – supported the Fair Trading Act when it came forward, so there is a fabric within this province for consumer advocacy that is already there. I think this Premier and this new government, that we're all involved in, have taken this steps further, of course, with the priority of openness and transparency.

It would seem, in my humble view, that all of the network is in place for consumers if they feel they've been wronged to have an avenue of approach. If it's to this government, then fine. If it's to a landlord, there are landlord/tenancy kinds of arrangements. I can't think of anything that could possibly happen to me as a consumer where I wouldn't have some outlet then to express that and if I am in the right to at least try to find some sort of restitution for it.

So I think that rather than vote for a bill such as this, let's, all members of this House, welcome the openness and transparency of this new government. Let's support consumer advocacy groups. Let them register as lobbyists – there is now a law that is going to require registries – and let's let people that are involved in these actual incidents and contracts, if that's what they are, actually pay, then, for the resolution of those and not keep burdening that poor taxpayer. I want to remind everybody that whether you're a liberal tax-and-spender or you're a fiscal conservative, the burden is on the taxpayer. We, if nothing else in this House, should be stewards of the taxpayer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to get this opportunity to rise and participate in the debate this afternoon on Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act. I would certainly like to express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung for bringing this important piece of legislation before the Assembly, and I would urge all hon. members to give it consideration. Please support this bill. I think it is necessary at this time.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I have been listening with interest to hon. members speak about this legislation. In fact, the previous speaker talked about the duplication and additional costs that this bill would place on the

taxpayer. Well, I don't think it would be much of an additional cost. I found that statement incredible from an hon. member who has participated in cabinet discussions for perhaps the last decade, when we've seen significant increases in spending from approximately \$14 billion to over \$28 billion now. Respect for the taxpayer certainly didn't seem to be evident whenever we saw the dramatic increase in that provincial budget over that time.

In fact, when the Utilities Consumer Advocate was created – now, there's a dog without teeth or a dog on a short leash. Whatever way you want to describe the Utilities Consumer Advocate, it certainly is an office that's not working. It was created, Mr. Speaker, by the previous government when they were very concerned about the public fallout from deregulation and they wanted somewhere to send consumers who were experiencing frustration. They needed somewhere to send them, so they set up this agency or this office, and interestingly enough they had the consumers pay for it themselves through the Balancing Pool and also through their monthly gas bills. I would have to say that with this money coming from the Balancing Pool, you would have to wonder just how independent the Utilities Consumer Advocate was and is. This would be why I would urge all hon. members to support this bill: because, of course, we're going to have an officer of the Legislative Assembly – that's the consumer advocate – and they will report directly to us, to all Albertans.

3:10

Now, we have to look at the new home warranty program. The economic activity caused by high oil and gas prices is dictating that there be a large number of new homes built all across the province. This new home warranty program is not working. Consumers are looking at this whenever they're purchasing a new house, and they're saying: oh, great, I've got a year. That new home warranty program is not protecting consumers. The cost of these houses is going up, and consumer protection, unfortunately, is going down. This is why I would urge all members to support Bill 202.

We've got record numbers of condominiums being constructed. I for one don't have confidence in the safety code system, the buildings inspection system that was implemented way back when Stockwell Day was minister of labour, prior to 1997. If we continue with the practices that are going on now in the residential construction industry, there are eventually going to be a lot of outraged and frustrated consumers. We're slapping up a lot of these condominiums and houses, and you cannot convince me that the building code is being adhered to and the inspection process is working. Guess who's going to pay for all this? Eventually it'll be the consumer, and that's why I would urge all members to support this.

Another reason would be the high cost of gasoline, the retail cost of gasoline. I said – I believe it was in the summer session – that I had confidence in the free-market system and how we retail gasoline. [interjection] I do not now. No, I can't say that I have any confidence in the system. In fact, I'm totally disgusted with the system. At the Chicago or the New York exchange or wherever you go, whichever exchange you use for crude oil, crude oil prices have softened since last summer, yet we still see these high retail prices in Edmonton. We have refineries on the east side of the city. A mile and a half away we have gasoline at 99 cents a litre. Gasoline in Olds is cheaper.

An Hon. Member: What do we pay for Coke?

Mr. MacDonald: I don't care what we pay for Coke and what we pay for Pepsi.

There are many people coming to my constituency office, and they're complaining about the price of gasoline. They have every right to complain because the price at the wellhead is not going up to reflect these prices at the pump. I'm sorry. We have a system that's gone wrong. It's not a competitive system. I thought at one point it was, but I have to admit that I was wrong. There is no way that because a refinery in Sarnia is having difficulty, the price in Edmonton should increase so dramatically. If we have a free-market system, hon. member, it's not working. The consumer advocate could certainly look into that.

Just down the street from our constituency office is the legacy of the last Conservative regime, and that's the cheque cashing place. That's the legacy. [interjection] Yes, hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, that's the legacy of the last Conservative regime: a cheque cashing place. These cheque cashing places have to be regulated. The amount that they charge in interest has to be reduced significantly. Now, I'm not going to blame this on the banks, the increase in the number of cheque cashing places, but it's a reflection on this government's previous social policies. The consumer advocate could certainly rein those cheque cashing places in.

Electricity, Mr. Speaker. Now, we all look at our bills. I spoke about the Utilities Consumer Advocate before. I'm sorry, but for instance, I visited the office, and it was like getting into Fort Knox. There was a little glass window there, that I'm sure was bulletproof, and you had to poke your head in this window, and the person on the other side would buzz to let you in. At least I got in to advocate on behalf of a constituent, and I'm grateful for that opportunity, but it tells me that there's something wrong with this system when this office needs this sort of security to protect themselves from consumers. I don't know what's going on there, but it certainly wasn't a sign of public confidence in the whole process. That's, again, why I think we should support the hon. member's bill.

We look at all these charges that are on power bills: the administration charge, the transmission charge, distribution charges. We've got fixed and variable charges; we've got other administrative charges. I'm not sure that those charges are even legal. That's something that we're going to have to examine a little bit further. The hon. Minister of Energy is assuring me that they're legal, but I don't think they are. You can't have taxation without representation, and those are taxes, hon. member. The courts determined that those are taxes. If the hon. Minister of Energy is confident in his position on whether these administration fees are really fees or taxes, then he can get up and participate in the debate. But if you look at the court case that was settled in New Brunswick this summer, I'm not so sure that this would stand up in a court of law.

If we were really interested in protecting consumers, after we make this bill a law, perhaps the new consumer advocate could initiate a legal investigation. Just exactly, these fees that we pay on our natural gas and electricity bills, are they fees, or are they taxes? If they're taxes, it's taxation without representation.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright, followed by Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to rise to discuss Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act. I'm not going to talk about all of the pieces of legislation that already exist in the province extensively. The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays reviewed the Fair Trading Act, the personal information act, the Unconscionable Transactions Act, the Gas Utilities Act, and all of the activities that the consumer protection branch can follow through in order to ensure that consumers are protected.

I'm going to take a different tack. Before that, I think that there are two members in this House right now that deserve praise. The first is the Member for Edmonton-McClung because obviously – and many of us have experience in our offices – this is an issue that needs to be addressed. Consumers are concerned about fair trading and some of the practices of businesses in Alberta, and every single member that rises in this House and presents an issue deserves congratulations, the respect of this House, and some recognition that they're bringing forward their constituents' issues.

The second member that I think deserves credit is the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, who in 1999 brought forward the Fair Trading Act. Mr. Speaker, the Fair Trading Act is more powerful and more well-structured than any other act of its kind in any other province in this country. When it was brought forward, it pulled bits of legislation from all through Alberta's legislation into one cohesive, comprehensive piece of legislation designed to protect consumers. That legislation also had some very tough provisions and penalties for people who contravene the act. Two years in prison, \$100,000 fine or three times the gains made from illegal actions is extremely punitive compared to many of the other jurisdictions in this country. It shows a clear sign that this province does have some very strict guidelines for protecting consumers.

I'd like to change the tack, maybe, from what's been discussed in this House before. As my hon. colleague from Lethbridge-West mentioned about defending the taxpayers in this province, when it comes to the taxpayers and spending taxpayers' dollars on anything, Mr. Speaker, I honestly believe in the philosophy of minimalism when it comes to government. You see, too often every government – and it doesn't really matter what type of government or what party they represent. Every single government has a tendency to take an issue that arises today and create a new piece of legislation to deal with it or some new regulations to deal with it or new penalties to deal with it without first reviewing hundreds of years of best practices and legislation and regulations to see if something has already been created to address the situation.

3:20

We have the consumer protection branch, which is a division of Service Alberta. We have the Fair Trading Act, the Personal Information Protection Act, the Unconscionable Transactions Act, the Gas Utilities Act, a whole lot of legislation and enforcement possibilities. I'm not asserting, Mr. Speaker, whether or not this legislation is adequate so far or if the consumer protection branch is equipped to do the job or whether or not they're doing an adequate job, but before we go ahead and create another office, another bureaucracy, another piece of legislation, something else that could just confuse the issue, first, I believe that we need a full review to make sure that the legislation that we have is adequate to deal with the needs. The offices that already exist: find out if they are doing a good job, and if they're not, why they're not doing a good job. That review is the most important thing to ensure that if we were going to set up the Consumer Advocate Act and create a legislative office to protect consumers, it's actually necessary and we're not duplicating something.

Mr. Speaker, I think that bringing this issue to this Legislature and the attention of the public and the media is an amazing thing. I think it's fantastic, and it's brought some very important debate here to the House that we haven't had in a long time. But I reiterate that I don't think we necessarily need to create another office. We may need to make sure that the consumer protection branch advertises more so that citizens in this province are aware of exactly what sort of level of protection they have. It may need more tools, more personnel to make sure that it can enforce the legislation properly, or it may need

to be reminded that it has some punitive abilities to protect consumers. That may be the solution to some of the issues that we've been discussing.

Mr. Speaker, I really believe that the member across from Edmonton-McClung deserves a commendation for bringing this forward. I've received calls from constituents in my office, and I'm sure that every other MLA has. These debates are important and critical. Though I won't be supporting the legislation because I think we need to have a call for a review of what we have that exists and how effective it is and maybe how to make it more effective, I think the member deserves credit for bringing this up.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the President of the Treasury Board.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I might also like to thank the hon. member across who has just complimented, certainly, my caucus member because I do support the idea of having a pure advocacy sort of person.

I've heard my colleague from Lethbridge-West talk about principles. Certainly, I believe that what is at stake here is the principle of fairness. People trust their governments. They really trust them to govern, to set legislation that will protect them. Is that the job of the government? Yes, I believe it is. At this point in time I think that I see an awful lot of attitudes of buyer beware, and trust me, buyers do not have a hope in Hades of actually being able to win against people who are immoral and unethical. Things that they do may be legal, but unethical and immoral behaviour: the buyer does not have a choice against that.

As far as the government members who have stood up and defended the particular process that we have at the moment, if it truly was working, we would not be receiving all of the complaints that we get in our office. I agree with the member across. I'm sure there isn't an MLA that sits in this House that does not have consumer advocate problems and questions that come across their desk.

One other thing: the Utilities Consumer Advocate. Of course, many, many of the problems that I have in my office pertain to the utility problems. The current person who serves as the head of the Utilities Consumer Advocate also works as a deputy minister of government services. I do have a problem with that because I believe that it represents the opportunity for a conflict of interest.

I'm going to use a couple of examples of things that are on my desk. I realize that we are speaking about principles, but I'd like to perhaps use these as examples of where the principles really aren't working. I had a constituent who got nothing but a runaround and, certainly, no accountability. I really believe that no matter what department and no matter what problem it is or how you can divide it down and say that it's some other department, it's some other elected body, the buck still stops at the desk of the minister that is responsible for that particular problem that fits under their ministry. The buck stops at the ministers' desks.

This particular constituent of mine had back problems for many years and went to a private clinic in Calgary. She paid \$150 up front and had been promised a two-hour assessment. She was given a 15-minute assessment and sent home, knowing full well that she had received a far better assessment even from her local chiropractor. Now, this is a private clinic. The health authorities have no contractual relationship, but they do refer people to the clinic. So now where was she going to go? She thought: well, let me go to the medical association. Well, the medical association said no because this was a private clinic. Then she thought: well, I'll go to the

chiropractic college because the person that did the assessment on me was a chiropractor. No. That person wasn't assessing for this particular clinic as a chiropractor. There was another dead end. Well, let's go to the city of Calgary and find out how they give out their licences. Well, pretty much they just give out their licences without really any judgment on the behaviour of the particular client or the business that they've given the licence to. So they just pretty much collect their money, and off they go.

I'm not even going to go off on a tangent about whether we should allow strip joints to be licensed. That's another whole issue. I'm going to save that for another day because I've got some good stuff.

Anyway, now we're down to the Better Business Bureau. We have gone down the whole line. The Better Business Bureau wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole, saying that medical issues are outside of their jurisdiction.

So where was this woman to go? Really, nowhere. No one was accountable. No one had the backbone to stand up and say: "You know what? Yeah, you're right." Now, this, in my mind, happens to fall under Health and Wellness, and in fairness, Health and Wellness did give my office a great deal of help with this. But this is just an example of how people fall through the cracks.

Another example that I have is the billing for utilities. Of course, that just goes on and on and on. What happens to a lot of seniors who are on fixed incomes is that they get bills, and they'll phone up. They will talk to the talking head that reacts to the talking screen, and they really have no authority nor ability to actually say, "Gee, I'm going to fix that for you," and if they do fix it, that person has to wait till the end of the month or whenever their next bill comes. If it's not fixed, they have to go right back to square one and say: it still isn't fixed. By using that system, instead of being able to correct it immediately and send out the corrected statement, sometimes people have to wait four and five and six months to get it straightened out.

In the meantime, this is creating tremendous stress, particularly for people on low incomes and, certainly, on fixed incomes. I cannot believe that in this day and age utility companies with their large resources and their huge computer banks cannot send that bill out instantly once the correction has been made, which usually is done by the person, the talking head that's working with the talking screen, so that someone at least can have redress within the week.

3:30

Some of the ones that are totally baffled by this sort of thing, of course, are immigrants. They've worked very, very hard, and they've saved, and they're not used to paying interest. They may have credit cards, but you can bet your bottom dollar that they're paid off monthly and they don't pay interest. In the meantime if a bill is incorrect, they are charged interest, and that really isn't fair.

I believe we're talking about the principle of fairness. I know the expression is that life is not fair, and I agree: life isn't fair. However, these unfair situations can be controlled. Therefore, they really are not fair to the people who are being penalized because the government doesn't have a proper advocate that is free and independent to be able to really help these people with some sort of authority to enforce, obviously, some legislation that we already have.

Many of our seniors that are caught in this, of course, have worked through depressions, they've raised families, and they've retained the values of hard work and saving. They believe, as this government does, that people should be responsible for themselves. I think that many, many people are more than willing to be responsible for themselves, but if you can't beat the system fairly, then you really don't have much of a chance.

Another thing that has been always on my mind is that big companies – utility companies, telephone companies, whatever – charge administration costs. Now, my question would be: if I am paying the administration cost, is that company writing those administration costs off as legitimate business expenses? If they are, why am I paying them? I think that's a question that should be asked. For instance, on my long-distance telephone I'm charged \$4.95 a month, and I don't even use long distance. So if they're writing it off as an administration expense against their taxes and I'm paying for it, then I want a rebate. Either that or I want some kind of tax relief from those administration costs, that truly are a normal business expense.

I think I will leave it at that, Mr. Speaker. There are a number of instances there. I could probably go on forever. But I really believe that the point is that if we're talking about principle, it must be fair.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, followed by Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an interesting discussion we have. Often we're going to have to accept the fact that you are the one that is responsible for contracts you enter into. If you don't think that it's within your responsibility to do the due diligence of contracts you have, unfortunately the person you're dealing with will probably get the better of you. Quite frankly, you cannot legislate goodness. As long as there has been commerce and as long as there have been two or three or four men or women doing business, sometimes bad things happen to good people, and all the legislation in the world won't help it.

Ms Pastoor: Doesn't make it right.

Mr. Snelgrove: No, it certainly doesn't make it right.

Unless we're going to hire somebody to walk hand in hand with everyone who might mistakenly buy a bad car or sign a rental deal they can't do or have to pay a utility bill they don't like, unfortunately we're going to have to do it.

You've been told already about all of the programs the provincial government has. I can assure you that the people that work not only in the Utilities Consumer Advocate but on Service Alberta's consumer protection hotlines work very hard and are an extremely good resource for the people of Alberta as they are in many ways very, very helpful in directing these people to a solution to their problems. But, obviously, you can't solve them all.

Let's look across the country at what the federal government is responsible for. We can talk about the price of gasoline or the other things we do, but the federal government is responsible for the Competition Act. I would have to say that on long weekends it's magical that the prices go up. But, you know, the federal government has looked into that continually, and they come back and say: well, that's what happens. So take that up with the federal government.

They're also responsible for consumer packaging and labelling, and I can tell you, as someone who has dealt with businesses from outside of the country, that one of the most expensive barriers to getting into Canada to sell is the restrictions on labelling products. Extremely onerous, extremely complicated, and extremely expensive, especially if you're selling lower priced consumer goods.

They also have an office of consumer affairs, which works primarily to educate people. They've got the Competition Bureau. They've got the Canadian Council of Better Business Bureaus, which if anyone wants to access and find out, "Should I be dealing with this person or not?" they'll probably be in there.

But purely on a point of saying, “Well, maybe they’ve got something there; maybe the opposition has come up with something, and us old redneck Conservatives just can’t see it,” let’s ask around. Let’s go ask the good Liberal government in British Columbia: do you have a consumer advocate? Well, British Columbia does not. It could be they don’t need one, or maybe they’re just Liberal.

Maybe the NDs have one in Saskatchewan. So we’ll go ask our good friends in Saskatchewan: “What about you guys? Do you see that you need to have a consumer advocate?” Well, Saskatchewan doesn’t have one. But, you know, Saskatchewan has been working pretty hard lately to try and catch up to us and stop the people coming here to live.

Let’s ask our good friends in Manitoba: have you got a consumer advocate? Nope. Well, what does Manitoba know? They’re just a hard-working bunch of prairie boys.

The good people of Ontario, the industrial heartland of Canada, the centre of the universe: they must have a consumer advocate. No.

Well, guess what? Let’s go to la belle province. They have everything, right? Well, they must; we pay for it. They’ve got everything. No, they don’t have one. Doggone it. I tell you what: when they find out that there’s a position they can fill with our money, they’ll have one, I can assure you, but at this point they don’t.

So let’s go to the good people in Nova Scotia, who do have an insurance consumer advocate. But they don’t have a consumer advocate in Nova Scotia either, and you would know that they are darn good people in Nova Scotia.

Prince Edward Island. Tiny little place like that; lots of people been looking for work. Well, I’m sure they would have a consumer advocate, wouldn’t they? No. They don’t have one.

We’re not done. Canada’s got another couple of hundred kilometres to go, and surely the good boys on the Rock will have one because you couldn’t possibly get bad screech there if you had a good consumer advocate. So let’s ask Newfoundland and Labrador. Well, they don’t have one either. I give up. If Newfoundland and Labrador don’t have one and nobody else seems to have one, I don’t want one either.

Mr. Chase: Well, without going into a whole series of ethnic accents, I would like to suggest that Alberta could lead the way with a consumer advocate position. We’ve heard from the Member for Calgary-Hays, who listed ad infinitum the number of departments that could potentially intervene but unfortunately don’t.

We heard the Member for Battle River-Wainwright give credit to our member for bringing up the idea of the legislation. He suggested the notion that we need some kind of a review. If our current processes, our current ministries aren’t solving the problem, then we should have a look at reviewing these various ministries. That’s exactly what a consumer advocate would do.

The consumer advocate, the way I see it, would be a point person, the buck-stops-here person, a traffic controller. This would be the person who would bring the ministries together to do the job that they currently aren’t doing sufficiently effectively to keep people from finding themselves out on the street because their rents have increased by various percentages. There’s one individual, an apartment owner in Calgary, who was going to raise his rent by 400 per cent, and there’s nothing, unfortunately, to keep him from doing so because we have no rules. We have no regulations. You can raise it to whatever you like, six months at a go.

3:40

Now, what we have here is a difference in fiscal philosophy. *Laissez-faire* translated from French means: let do, let it happen; in

other words, as it’s been expressed by our Premier, no brakes. The market dictates. Well, without getting wordy or attempting to wordsmith, I would suggest that the English equivalent right now in Alberta, what consumers are experiencing, is lazy – l-a-z-y – and unfair.

Where we differ is the fact that we don’t believe that all boats rise with the tide in our particular circumstance. We believe that there is a role for a social advocate to blow the whistle and say: rent increases of 41 per cent for fixed-income seniors are unfair. We need a whistle-blower to suggest that the 60 seniors from the sort of neighboring facility shouldn’t have to be transferred out to other facilities to have their needs met or become the unfair term “bed blockers” in acute care beds while their own homes are being looked after, while the fire regulations are being adjusted. We need an individual who will take on and co-ordinate these responsibilities.

Right now when people come into our constituency offices – and it’s not a Liberal office or an NDP office or a Conservative office – everyone hears concerns about the affordability of homes, energy, et cetera. Unfortunately, we don’t have a central individual or department that can make the changes. One of the jobs that I would assume this consumer advocate would have is suggesting the types of legislation that that individual would need in order to provide the enforcement that the MLA for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview is looking for.

We know that that enforcement is not occurring now. We know that we’re in a desperate, anomalous situation in Alberta, but there are no departments that are taking it on. We know that when we try and help out a senior, for example – is it a health problem, or is it a housing problem? – quite often there is no one who will then take that senior and lead them through the process. This is where I see the role of the consumer advocate being extremely important.

I would hope that rather than just simply dismissing the idea, all members of this Assembly would consider taking this proposal to the next level and suggesting the amendments that would do the job that they feel at this point this bill is not doing. In other words, instead of just saying, “Well, from Newfoundland to B.C. there’s no such thing as a consumer advocate,” I would like to think that for a change Alberta would be out in front and leading, saying that not only are we the richest province, but we’re the one that cares the most about our citizens, and we’re going to have an agent of the government that will have the independence to act on their behalf, who will say to that individual who raised the rent by 200 per cent or 400 per cent: “No, this isn’t what we’re going to allow you to do. We’re going to put the brakes on it right now.”

One of the sort of enlightened areas that other provinces have looked at, whether it’s B.C. or Manitoba or Saskatchewan, is public insurance. A consumer advocate is not as necessary in those provinces because they have public insurance and they have the controls that we in this province unfortunately don’t have. Now, the previous Finance minister suggested that insurance companies who were found to be gouging Albertans should voluntarily lower their insurance rates. Well, only about 6 per cent of them complied; therefore, she required them to do that. This is another job that a consumer advocate could perform.

They could set rates, of course, with government ministries in support and debate within the Legislature, and going beyond that rate of increase would be unacceptable. Whether it’s for insurance or whether it’s for rent, we need desperately to get beyond the idea that market forces are all we need. Just sit back, let it happen, ride the wave, so to speak, and everybody will be all right. Well, we’ve seen and we know in our constituencies that this not happening. Regardless of whether our constituency has elements of wealth, we know that there are individuals who are suffering in each of our areas.

This is why Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act, is absolutely necessary. Somebody has to take on the job that isn't being done now. That person could suggest, as the Liberal policy has suggested, that there are abnormal times such as we're experiencing now, when there should be some form of control on rent for an extremely limited amount of time. We don't want to discourage affordable housing from being built, but when a person is about to be thrown out onto the step, who's going to stand up for them? Which of these Service Alberta outfits is going to actually intervene?

We had an Affordable Housing Task Force tour the province, and we had members from all parties represented, for which I'm very appreciative, but we're not getting the report until sometime later, and we'll get whatever pieces of that report, I suppose, that will eventually be tabled. The point is that people are out and are being pushed out by these high rent prices right now. They can't hold on. The city of Calgary is already looking into a new homeless shelter. Because of the widening of 16th Avenue they're going to have to get rid of the Brick. If we had a consumer advocate who talked about fairness and affordability and orderly rent increases and orderly insurance costs instead of things spiralling continuously out of control and instead of allowing inflation to go so far up that eventually we go from boom to bust – this consumer advocate could be that champion. We need the individual to take on the responsibility that hasn't been taken on to date by the other ministries.

Please support my colleague in pushing this bill to the next level. Amend it to do what you believe it needs to do. Please don't just simply dismiss it. We need a social advocate.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm really pleased to have the opportunity to speak in favour of Bill 202, brought forward by my colleague, and that is the Consumer Advocate Act, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-McClung. I think what you see here is the quintessential ideological difference between the two major parties represented in this House. Here we have the government members, who say, "absolute minimal amount of legislation," and you have our side of the House, representing the Official Opposition, saying, "there is a role for government." Consumer protection is one of the roles we believe government should be fulfilling. Different story on the other side of the House.

Part of my experience in this House in the last 10 years has been noticing that legislation is absolutely useless if two things are missing. Those are two really integral parts of what should be outlined in the legislation, and then there should be adequate resourcing for it. By that I mean staff, budget, office space, vehicles, whatever is appropriate. Those two things that are so important for every piece of legislation and which we frequently do not see coming forward in legislation proposed by members of the government caucus are monitoring and enforcement.

3:50

Somehow these minimal schemes are put forward by government members who just don't seem to understand that it's one thing to say something, but if you don't double-check that it's actually happening, one, and two, if it's not happening, put some kind of enforcement mechanism in place to either make people have it happen or have some sort of repercussion if they don't – if you don't have those in place, why on earth would anybody bother following this? "Oh, well," I can hear them saying already, "voluntary compliance." Yeah. We've seen how effective voluntary compliance is. Oh, let me think. Climate change? Yeah, we sure got a lot of voluntary compliance on reducing emissions on that one. Now what do we

have? We have, indeed, this very government coming back and going: well, gee, I think maybe we might actually have to put a very second-rate emissions control on it because it's intensity emissions, not straight caps. But you see my point, Mr. Speaker.

Consumer protection legislation: they've listed off a ream of them. But guess what? Very little of that legislation is actually working. Why? Because there's (a) no monitoring happening and (b) no enforcement happening. So, yeah, you've got it on the books, but it doesn't work because those two elements are either not in the legislation or they're not actively resourced in order to be effective.

Let me give you an example. I have a number of condominiums in my riding, and increasingly, I'd argue, probably just about every MLA in here does have at least one condominium in their riding. So their boards are constituted as an entity either under the Societies Act or under part 9 of the corporations act. So they're supposed to have annual general meetings, which are open to all of the membership. They're supposed to have their financial statements open at least once a year for scrutiny by the members. They are supposed to have access to the minutes of the meetings. All of those things are, in fact, in the agency's or the entity's bylaws as approved by either the Societies Act or part 9 of the corporations act. So that's what they're supposed to do. The plan is clearly there.

What if they don't do it? Ah, well, there's the rub. I have actually helped some of my constituents all the way through this rather sorry little tale.

Mr. Taylor: You don't trust the private sector?

Ms Blakeman: No, I don't trust the private sector.

When I've followed this through, there is actually no backup available through what's in place by this government. So what we have is dozens of complaints that I've investigated about condominium members, a member of a condominium. They should be able to get access to the minutes of the condominium board, and they should be able to review the financial statements, they should be made aware of an annual general meeting, and they should be able to openly attend an annual general meeting. That's not happening.

This is not only occurring with condominium boards. I'm sure we've all got examples of other agencies in the charitable sector or the volunteer sector.

So if you follow this back, you actually come to one person buried deep in what would now be, I'm assuming, Service Alberta, who admits that, yes, they are responsible for that particular section of the Societies Act and part 9 of the corporations act, which is the filing of those documents and all of the rules that say that you've got to have access to the minutes, to the financial statements, and to the annual general meeting. You say: "Well, we can prove that there's noncompliance here. Now what?" "Well, sorry. I have no ability to monitor what's going on, and I have absolutely no power to enforce." You say, "Well, what's the point of actually having this legislation if, when it's not followed, there's no recourse to any kind of action to support what the government has put in place." "Well, gee, you could go to the civil court." Oh, please. How helpful. Or, rather, how incredibly unhelpful.

I mean, in most cases we're dealing with individual homeowners who are just trying to get access to an annual general meeting or read some financial statements, and you're telling them they're going to have to go to court and pay how much money just in order to get access to this? Why is this again? Oh, yes. Because the government didn't resource this appropriately and didn't empower through the legislation appropriately to actually give citizens some assistance here. As well, there would be an expectation that a volunteer agency or a charitable organization would have to resort to the courts to try

and get satisfaction on this. I mean, if I may so say, Mr. Speaker, that's truly beyond the pale, putting things back on the victim and blaming the victim and encumbering the victim with trying to find the resources to get themselves out of this when it either was in the legislation and was not empowered to enforce or was never in the legislation in the first place.

Another example I have of that is from a constituent that contacted me recently named Dan Onischuk. He's most exercised because he is being harassed by anonymous callers. How are they anonymous? Well, he goes back to the phone company, and the phone company says: oh, yes. They will give carte blanche use of anonymous phone calling for \$2 a month. They're charging others to achieve this anonymous phone caller ability, who can then continue to harass people, and the other clients of the phone company have no ability to make them stop.

So when the Minister of Service Alberta waves his hands about and says, "Well, it's their own darn problem if they can't read their contract," well, in this case there is no contract with the individual who has a residential phone line, and that's how they're receiving their phone services. There's nothing in their contract that says that they empower the phone company to now make additional revenue by charging others to achieve an anonymous status. That's not in a contract that's enforceable for a residential phone caller.

In my case my constituent has tried to go to the city police, who were unable to help him, to the RCMP, and finally I think a city bylaw officer was able to get him some satisfaction but not very much. I'm sure we're all irritated by having anonymous callers. I think there was supposed to be a no-call list put through by the federal government, and I don't care which version it was, but we've never seen satisfaction on that either.

So ultimately what we're looking at here is a government that needs to recognize that consumer protection legislation like is being proposed in Bill 202 is in fact needed, and with it needs to come the monitoring and enforcement provisions that will actually make it a useful, workable document, a contract if you will.

The last piece I want to bring up here is that if the government will not do this, cannot do this, who else is capable of doing it? No one. That's why the public looks to the government to enact consumer protection rules and regulations and to monitor and enforce them. The government is the only one that is capable of doing that, that has enough overriding authority to do it, and therefore, I would say, they have a responsibility to do it.

For the minister to say, "Oh, well, you know, we looked at all the other provinces and nobody else has one, so we won't have one," oh, please, Mr. Minister. I'm a little ashamed of you there. I mean, this is the very same government that prides itself on being a maverick government, on getting out there ahead of things with all kinds of brand new stuff that nobody has done. Except for when it comes to consumer protection. What an interesting choice to make: like to get out there in front and be on the front pages of the national paper except for where it comes to consumer protection.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege and pleasure to stand to Bill 202, Consumer Advocate Act. I, too, have had a number of concerns expressed to me as MLA in Calgary-Mountain View, especially about the rapid growth rate in the province, the inflation issues, the rent gouging. I'm sure that's coming from both students at university and postsecondary institutions, and it's coming from seniors. It's really difficult for them to know where to go for

help when their basic rights as a renter are being violated, and we see continued gouging, up to the tune of 300 per cent in one condo block that I visited.

Another big area that I've had complaints about and gone out to visit is seniors who are in private health care facilities and feel very strongly that they are being increasingly compromised in terms of their health as a result of having to spend so much of their income on rent, food, and accommodation, which has gone up very substantially over the last couple of years. This is actually compromising their ability to sleep at night in some cases and certainly to take care of themselves adequately. Those are two big areas that I've heard a lot of complaints about.

4:00

I myself have had experiences with transferring funds out of the country and feeling that there has to be a cheaper way of transferring money to some of the poorer countries in the world where there are, in fact, very high rates of interest, or user pay. I haven't seen any recourse to challenging the sometimes 15, 20 per cent of the total value of the money I was sending. That happens to be another area where I'm concerned that we need some consumer protection.

Quality of electronics: at times I've had problems with and had very poor response in the retail sector, repeated poor service. I suppose I could complain to the Better Business Bureau, but I've never felt that there was a real advocate for me as a consumer on some of these issues.

Home renovations: a similar issue where, because it's so difficult to get plumbers and electricians, there could be serious concerns about the safety of our homes. These folks are charging through the roof for some of the changes that are absolutely essential for health and safety in homes.

So the idea of a consumer advocate and a consumer protection package is eminently sensible and much needed in Alberta. Those are the key issues that I wanted to focus on, Mr. Speaker. I also know that in some of my constituents' minds is the whole area of electrical deregulation, the sense that we are paying way beyond what we should be and could be if we had maintained the electrical production under a public utility and what recourse people have. There's confusion, especially again in seniors who are being marketed to by different companies who are producing the electricity and wanting people to sign on for five or 10 years at a fixed rate, and they're not sure whether to go with the floating rate or whether to go with a company and their particular hard sell.

Without an advocate, without a support system for people who don't understand the electrical system, which many of us struggle with – it is very complicated. The billing process is difficult to understand. I have difficulty interpreting my own electrical bill. I know that seniors especially have talked to me on the street about how to deal with their feeling that the way deregulation has gone isn't necessarily fair and isn't serving the public interest.

Motor vehicle repairs and motor vehicle changes: again, many of us feel vulnerable because it's hard to assess what a mechanic may tell you from one day to the next. Getting two estimates doesn't necessarily solve the problem if they're not following ethical practice and leaving us as consumers in the dark.

I think it would send a strong message to all kinds of industries, all kinds of service organizations if we had an advocate in place, someone who took to task those who are not acting responsibly or ethically and made examples of them, frankly, and made it public, and if there was a penalty involved with a failure of ethical practice.

I am here to speak very much in support of the bill and ask my colleagues to do the same in the interests of the public of Alberta. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to make some comments with regard to consumer protection on the utility side, and just to correct some of the statements that the member opposite made just previous. You know, the Utilities Consumer Advocate and a broad representation across the province of board members have done a great job for Albertans on the utility consumer side. They have fielded thousands of calls over the last few years and helped many that had billing difficulties and problems getting hooked up, and the list goes on and on.

As well, the Utilities Consumer Advocate has created a website to make sure that people know where to get an electrical contract. You can click on different websites from there to find out prices from competitive companies. If this member is having a hard time reading his bill, there's even an opportunity there to teach you how to read your bill.

One of the things I was surprised at is the comments that the member was making with regard to utility contracts. You know, right in southern Alberta we've got a company called Enmax that's offering the EasyMax program. You hear about it on television, in newspapers. I don't know why you haven't heard about it, but I've signed up. My mom has signed up; it's such a good deal. It protects consumers from fluctuating rates in the future. It's a seven-cent contract that many of us could look at and advise our constituents about the options that are out there.

So the Utilities Consumer Advocate has done a great job on the utilities side. If the member's not aware of it, I encourage you to click on the website. Read the newspapers. In every newspaper I read, I read about the utility company's advertising rates, and you know I encourage you to encourage your constituents when they do have problems with utilities to call the UCA and contact them.

The member earlier talked about the deputy minister being the advocate. The deputy minister's not the advocate. There's a new assistant deputy minister that's acting right now – I think her name is Cathryn Landreth – and she works for the Department of Service Alberta. She's available to field questions, and there's a great team behind her to help those that want to find out more about their utility bill or if they have problems with utilities throughout Alberta.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise with some interest to speak toward Bill 202, Consumer Advocate Act. Certainly, in my experience as a member of the Legislature for Edmonton-Calder I've seen plenty of reasons to look to strengthen consumer advocacy in the province of Alberta. We have had plenty of opportunity to look at the range of problems that constituents face in regard to high rents, in regard to utility problems, in regard to a whole range of social service issues. Consumer advocacy is something that I do certainly want to see strengthened here in the province of Alberta. You know, there is just a whole range of issues that people find themselves without representation on, and as a result they can end up having to spend money in civil court or having to spend both time and effort to fight what becomes often much larger entities than themselves and up against very formidable opponents in regard to, say, utility bills or rent, landlord issues.

Consumer advocacy is, I think, something that has to evolve over time. Ultimately, I think it's a reflection of the democratic construction of our society and of people's interaction with the Legislature itself. So looking specifically at Bill 202 here, certainly, I would

like to commend the spirit of the bill. It does have quite a number of good points. However, I do have some specific criticisms that I would like to bring forward just on a practical level, just looking at different sections of the bill and where I saw some potential problems, I suppose.

The first area was on page 2, which is section 3(1)(a), which somehow entails reviewing consumer protection statutes. You know, I just want to recognize that this is already the mandate of government services, of course. The business plan of government services in fact says, "to develop and/or modernize consumer legislation." So there is that part of our existing mandate within government that would perhaps make this section somewhat redundant.

4:10

On page 3 of Bill 202 section 4(1)(b) outlines under duties and powers that the consumer advocate has to represent "to receive, review and investigate consumer complaints." Consumer complaints are in fact covered by the agency known as Service Alberta, and while certainly I do have my differences with some of the strength and perhaps the execution of Service Alberta, just in regard to the regulations and legislation surrounding Service Alberta, this Bill 202 is somewhat redundant.

[The Speaker in the chair]

The next section that I had some concern about was on page 8 of Bill 202, and this section outlines what will happen after an investigation takes place. The problem is that the most a consumer advocate as outlined here can do is issue a report to the appropriate department or ministry and have it followed up through a report in the Legislature, so I find this a bit wanting in regard to the enforcement value of this consumer advocate as described in Bill 202. Service Alberta, in fact, again, on the books less than in action but more at least in its legality, does have a range of punitive actions that it can engage once it has concluded an investigation. So, you know, just to build this legislation to somehow have it fit within existing legislation, Mr. Speaker, I found some difficulty with that part there.

Then one other section that I just wanted to point out is on page 3 of Bill 202, 4(1)(e), Mr. Speaker, and this is the section that calls for the establishment of "a publicly accessible database of consumer complaints." The establishment of this database would bring about openness and transparency for consumers and act as a stick-based encouragement for businesses to engage in ethical business practices. So I just wanted to point out that this, certainly, is the section that I like the most of Bill 202. This is something that is wanting, quite frankly, and I hope that each of us here in the Legislature looks to forward the spirit of this section, particularly in future legislation that might come before the House because this is something that I do in fact find wanting.

So those are some of the specific areas that I wanted just to point out here, and while, as I said, there certainly is a need for consumer advocacy as pointed out here by Bill 202, those are some specific problems that I might see in terms of meshing this private member's bill with existing legislation.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 202, the Consumer Advocate Act – I've been sitting intently this afternoon listening to some of the debate that's going on – and offer a few comments that might be able to assist Albertans in

determining the fact that there are a fair amount of accusations here this afternoon that say that nothing is being done and that there is nobody to go to and there is nobody to follow up.

I think it's really important for us to reiterate the fact that the Fair Trading Act in this province is a stand-alone piece of legislation that was fairly debated in this House for a considerable length of time, brought in by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake. I do remember having many conversations in my constituency office when this legislation was on the floor of the Legislature, particularly from businesses that felt that the legislation might have been a little restrictive. But, you know, through a whole series of consultations those problems were overcome, and probably the best legislation for consumer protection across this country now sits in Alberta.

This bill that is before us wants to make that legislation appear to be more transparent and bring things more to the floor of the Legislature through a legislative office. That would give the impression, Mr. Speaker, that there's absolutely no one to go to if you have a problem as a consumer, whatever that problem might be, if you feel that there's no place to go and you don't know where to get the information. Having an advocate in place would certainly raise the profile, but this debate in the House today gives the impression that there is no place to go.

Some members on the government side have been very, very careful in pointing out that there are places to go, particularly when we have discrepancies about utility bills and how the bills should or could be interpreted. The idea of contracts for procurement of electricity, how legalistic they were. Certainly, setting up a Utilities Consumer Advocate at that time was the right thing to do because of the numbers of complaints that were coming through. The government was proactive in bringing forward that consumer advocate, and the consumer advocate did the job that was required and continues to today.

When it comes to complaints of a normal nature, if someone feels that they have been done wrong by a contract or if they didn't have a contract and felt that the individual did not do the work that they said that they were going to do, et cetera, there are many avenues for coming forward and bringing their complaint to the Department of Service Alberta. They have people in the Calgary office, Edmonton office, and other small cities around the province to handle these complaints. They have investigative powers as well that have been brought out in the act, and they take their jobs very seriously.

I can remember a number of complaints that came through in my short tenure as minister. We'd forward them to the complaints department, and they immediately put investigations into place. Many of them dealt with companies that had a history of maybe not doing the proper thing by the people that they were providing the service to. The people that are doing the investigations know of the individuals because they do have a history, and they use the provisions within the act that are legally acceptable to do the penalties, and they leave it to the courts. Now, that's the strength of the legislation that we have in place.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung to close the debate.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me first start by thanking all the hon. members who participated in this debate this afternoon: the ones who supported Bill 202, and the ones who signalled that they weren't going to support Bill 202.

Bill 202 attempts to strengthen market oversight and to offer consumers more protection. The market usually looks after itself, Mr. Speaker, but it is ultimately this government's responsibility,

any government's responsibility, to deal with unscrupulous business practices. People elect governments and legislators to look after them and to protect and promote their interests. Consumers expect and request action whenever they are ripped off, lied to, or defrauded. Today this House can send the message that we as MLAs are on the consumer's side, that we care, and that we have taken action, even if only a first step, to ensure fairness in our marketplace.

4:20

In response to the President of the Treasury Board, who said that he won't have a consumer advocate because other provinces do not, Alberta should be the leader in consumer protection as it claims to be in free enterprise, but with the necessary recognition and the unwavering statement that people come before profit and that the integrity of our processes and compliance with our legislation are not matters we take lightly.

I also want to thank the many Albertans who shared their consumer-related concerns and issues with myself and my colleagues. I want to thank them for putting their trust and their faith in us. Hopefully, today this Assembly lives up to their expectations.

In response to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, the advocate will be more effective than what we have now. It offers the oversight that he said was lacking and guarantees that if government agencies or ministers choose not to act with respect to consumer complaints, this Assembly will find out, and we can discuss these deficiencies here.

In response to the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, I am not questioning the good work of our consumer protection branch employees, but I am offering an enhanced tool to deliver more protection to our consumers. We not only need to be acting in a stronger manner, we also need to be seen as acting more strongly and decisively. People need to know that there's someone on their side. This officer will not waste taxpayers' money. He or she will save Albertans a lot of money and grief.

As I close the debate, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of this esteemed Assembly from both sides of the House to support Bill 202 in passing second reading. Hopefully it makes it to committee, where some of those suggestions or concerns from some of the hon. members can be addressed. We are open to receiving amendments. We are open to working with both sides of the House.

I have to admit that I was a little disappointed that at least two of the government backbenchers who had privately told me they were going to support this bill have either absented themselves from this debate or otherwise stayed quiet. I was under the impression that private members' business is a free vote. It is in our case. It is always a free vote for the Alberta Liberal caucus. I'm hoping that they will now stand in support of Bill 202.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:23 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

| | | |
|-----------|------------|------------|
| Agnihotri | Elsalhy | Miller, R. |
| Blakeman | Lukaszyk | Pastoor |
| Brown | MacDonald | Swann |
| Chase | Mather | Taft |
| Eggen | Miller, B. | Taylor |

Against the motion:

| | | |
|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Boutilier | Griffiths | Mitzel |
| Calahasen | Groeneveld | Morton |
| Cao | Haley | Oberg |
| Coutts | Johnston | Pham |
| DeLong | Knight | Snelgrove |
| Ducharme | Liepert | Stevens |
| Dunford | Lindsay | Strang |
| Forsyth | Lougheed | VanderBurg |
| Fritz | Lund | Webber |
| Graydon | McFarland | |
| Totals: | For – 15 | Against – 29 |

[Motion for second reading of Bill 202 lost]

Bill 203 Service Dogs Act

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise in the Legislature today and open debate and move second reading of Bill 203, the Service Dogs Act.

This act will allow people with disabilities the right to be accompanied by an accredited service dog in all areas open to the general public, free from discrimination. As chair of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities I'm proud to sponsor a piece of legislation that ensures that a group of Albertans, those who rely on service dogs, have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of the province. Mr. Speaker, the mandate of the Premier's council is, first of all, to remove barriers that confront persons with disabilities and allow these people to pursue lives free of those obstacles that prevent full participation in society. Another mandate is to listen to the issues of the disability community and to communicate those issues back to the Alberta government. The result has been that the council has encouraged steps to be taken to improve the lives of persons with disabilities.

Since 1988 the council has advanced the cause of persons with disabilities in Alberta. One of the accomplishments of the council was the creation and release of an Alberta disability strategy. The strategy seeks for government to better co-ordinate and implement policies and programs that impact persons with disabilities. The strategy also strives to assure greater physical access for persons with disabilities, and as such the Service Dogs Act serves to advance the work of the council and the intent of the Alberta disability strategy by removing barriers and increasing access for Albertans with disabilities. This complements our government's goal to work to ensure that its policies reflect the varied needs of the disability community.

Why is there a need for a Service Dogs Act, and why are we pursuing this legislation now? Persons with disabilities who use a service dog could seek redress through the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act. However, this can leave people without a clear resolution to their concerns and the possibility of decisions being made without the benefit of a clear set of standards and expectations for the training and certification of service dogs.

I want to recognize the protections provided to blind individuals under the Blind Persons' Rights Act, the BPR. It was proclaimed in 1980, and the BPR is an important symbol to individuals with vision challenges as it provides them with the opportunity to fully participate in society. It was amended in 2004, and it is a model in

terms of outlining the certification and monitoring of guide dogs. The BPR has strict penalties for discrimination against a blind person who's accompanied by a guide dog.

It may be a good time right now to comment on one of the definitions in the legislation. In the definition of a service dog it says that a "service dog" means a dog trained as a guide for a disabled person." "Guide" in this case is not referring to a guide dog. In the 1983 Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act it stated that a hearing dog is one that is trained as a guide for a deaf person. "Guide" in the broad sense of the word, then, means to assist by helping a person reach a destination or navigate through some unfamiliar space. That's the intent of the term "guide" in this legislation. Bill 203 intends to be complementary to the Blind Persons' Rights Act by extending similar rights and protections to other persons with disabilities. There's no better time to debate Bill 203 and finally enshrine in law provisions to allow those Albertans needing service dogs full and unfettered access to society.

4:40

This is not the first time that this Assembly has considered legislation protecting persons who need service dogs. In 1983 the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act was passed. It provided persons dependent on hearing ear dogs similar rights to persons needing seeing eye dogs. However, that amendment has never been proclaimed, and as such it will be repealed with this act.

Private members have proposed legislation to protect all persons with disabilities dependent on service dogs at different times over the past 14 years. In the early '90s a private member's bill was sponsored called the Service Dogs Act. It proposed broadening the Blind Persons' Rights Act by including all persons with disabilities. About seven years ago I also sponsored similar private member's legislation seeking to amend the Blind Persons' Rights Act to include all persons with disabilities by turning the BPR into a service dogs act. Now, these different private members' bills received first reading but did not have a chance to proceed further.

Past service dog legislation centred on amendments to the Blind Persons' Rights Act. This was seen as one way of putting in place legal protections for individuals using service dogs and to meet the growing use of and requirements for those service dogs. In light of this demand a review of the BPR, the Blind Persons' Rights Act, was completed in 2001. The review found that the BPR should remain as stand-alone legislation providing protections to blind people and their guide dogs. It also recommended the development of new legislation to address the issue of assistive animals. Public feedback confirmed the view that the BPR should remain as stand-alone legislation. Bill 203 reflects this view. It moves towards addressing the issues raised by the review relating to service dogs.

Guide dogs and service dogs serve different but complementary purposes. Bill 203 respects this difference and serves to place these principles in law. Guide dogs and service dogs serve different needs. There are certification and accreditation issues specific to service dogs that have to be addressed through regulation, much like in the BPR, with its passing. I view the Service Dogs Act as a first step towards developing the regulations that will provide direction for the specifics of training, certifying, and using service dogs.

We need to ensure that our processes for addressing the certification of service dogs is clear. For example, one question will be: do we grandfather dogs that have been self-trained? We must also ensure that there are clear standards for the accreditation of schools for the training of service dogs. An organization called Assistance Dogs International sets training standards. It's a highly regarded organization that in the past we have looked to for help in setting standards in regulation.

Part of the process will include educating and communicating to Albertans about service dogs and the requirement of ID for both the owner and the dog. Bill 203 gives those Albertans with service dogs and those who may need service dogs in the future the protections that they need. There are issues to be addressed; for example, the need to establish a process to issue IDs to people who have service dogs. This is critical to minimize fraud and allow people with service dogs to go about their lives as freely as possible. These are workable issues. Solutions will be found to deal with certification, accreditation, and identification.

Alberta needs the Service Dogs Act to provide protection to persons with disabilities, and as a province we need to make sure that all aspects of the bill are delivered as expected by clearly stated regulations. Bill 203 will protect persons with disabilities requiring service dogs and continue to ensure that Alberta meets the unique needs of people with disabilities. We need legislation that works for persons with disabilities rather than no legislation going forward at all. I see working with the disability community to ensure that the Service Dogs Act delivers results. We'll need to keep open the lines of communication with the disability community to continue to develop responsive and responsible disability policy in this province.

I'm pleased, as I said earlier, to bring forward the Service Dogs Act. It's the best way, I think, to deal with the issue of service dogs at this time. We all know that there are many dogs out there being used these days, and there are no regulations or certification that is apparent for them except for some that have come from other organizations and have some measure of identification with them. We need to build that goodwill with the public. They need to know what service dogs are and what the rules and regulations are about them and their identification.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to see this legislation being brought forward by the Member for Strathcona. I'm aware of his history in trying to get similar legislation up previously, and I've worked with him before on this. I will have to apologize in advance to my constituent who has worked with me over so many years on this legislation because I can't remember her name. She has been very helpful in outlining the issues around guide dogs and service dogs to me, and I want to thank her as part of my debate. I apologize for not being able to remember her name.

I think this is legislation whose time has come. Actually, I'd argue that it's past due. We certainly understand as a society the value of guide dogs for assistance with those that have sight impairment. These service dogs will allow a whole range of Albertans to participate fully in the life of the province. I'm talking about dogs that can, for example, offer assistance around seizures. We know that there are a number of dogs that are now working with autistic children, to support them and also protect them, and for other people that have health issues.

That does give rise to a question that maybe the member can answer for me in further debate. The definition of disabled person seems like a very narrow definition. I'm hoping that it does in fact cover, for example, persons with epilepsy or with autism. I don't know that those would usually be classified as disabled, but, whatever, that definition needs to be able to include them. Certainly someone with epilepsy would not usually, for example, be getting benefits, as someone on AISH would, because they can generally, if they can control the seizures, you know, carry on a full working life and participate in the life of the community quite well.

But some have really violent seizures. I went to university with a fellow, and he had grand mals. Man, he was in serious trouble if he had one of those because he didn't, actually, sort of recover for quite a period of time. I'm talking like 48 hours. A dog that was with him that could sense the seizures coming and would be able to alert him to that so he could get himself in a safe place for what was coming would have been very helpful to him. So I am quite supportive of this.

Just a couple of issues I wanted to raise. One was around the definition to make sure that it was anticipated to cover people like those with epilepsy or autism, even migraines, I think, in some cases.

Secondly, I don't see the usual clauses in here that allow for the regulations to be developed in support of the legislation. I see where it's defining the minister who would be responsible, but I'm not seeing the usual clause that says: and then the minister can make regulations as he sees fit. I appreciate what the member here is saying, that regulations will be developed, but I don't see the clause in the bill that allows you to do that. So that's something we might want to look to in Committee of the Whole, to amend for that.

4:50

The other criteria that I think is missing here is a reference to training criteria. What will the criteria be as far as a trained dog? It basically talks about the application of the act, the discriminatory practices that are prohibited, issuing of identification tags, fines, and offences. Oh, I'm sorry, there it is, section 5: "The Minister may make regulations respecting qualifications." My mistake, Mr. Speaker. Then, the application to the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act is where redress should be sought.

I don't see any section in here that is specific to how you would establish the criteria for what training is acceptable and what isn't. If I could just add the caution that we learned from the Blind Persons' Rights Act, in which the blind dogs are talked about, because that was narrowly defined as being products of certain schools, and I think that's too narrow a definition. I think any regs would have to outline pretty clearly exactly the test that they would have to meet rather than being a product of a particular school.

I also note under the discriminatory practices section, which is section 3, that it's quite specific as to occupancy. It's basically specific to accommodation, to occupancy and term of occupancy. But, generally, under human rights or prohibition of discriminatory practices, it applies to employment, accommodation, and to access to government programs and services. Those are the, sort of, three benchmarks. I don't see the references to the other two here, so maybe there can be an explanation on what was anticipated a little further on in debate about that.

Having raised those few points, if I might recommend to the sponsor of the bill, the British system that has a very good identification system and also testing and issuance of licences for the identification. They have what they call a public dog. That dog has to go through a series of tests to show that it can move about in public areas and not be spooked or behave in an uncontrolled manner. They'll actually put them in a median in the middle of quite a busy road, and the dog just has to stay there no matter what happens to them, which is part of their test. The dog actually has a tag with a picture of the dog and the owner, and vice versa for the owner. If I might recommend that if you haven't already investigated that, in my opinion they have quite good standards in England. They're dog mad there, so I'm sure they've had much more experience with that.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this and in support of the bill, and I'm happy to support the member with Bill 203, the Service Dogs Act. I'm glad to see him trying it one more time. Let's hope that it passes this time.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have been given the opportunity to join the discussion on the Service Dogs Act, 2007. I fully support Bill 203 because it allows for a wider cross-section of citizens to be fully integrated within Alberta. Bill 203 would guarantee that people who use service dogs are legally and adequately protected from discrimination. This bill would clarify and strengthen the rights of those with physical disabilities who need service dogs to assist them.

Bill 203 calls on Albertans to move towards greater understanding of diversity within our province. It eliminates the current confusion regarding people who use service dogs and makes them feel more comfortable about carrying out their daily routine, such as going for coffee, grocery shopping, picking things up from the ground. And, yes, Mr. Speaker, I recently read about a dog that can even put his owner's ATM card in the ATM bank machine. A service dog can make all the difference in the world for someone with reduced mobility. Certain chores which are essential components to leading independent lives are not equally . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, but under our Standing Orders the time limit for consideration of this business today has now expired.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

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

Support for Alternative Energy Technologies

502. Mr. Lukaszuk moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to examine the feasibility of establishing an endowment fund and other incentives, including legislative and policy changes, to encourage the Alberta energy industry to research, implement, and commercialize alternative energy technologies.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Motion 502.

Mr. Speaker, the word "environment" has become a trendy one in recent Canadian politics. In parliaments from coast to coast this word is tossed about weapon-like, where political parties assault each other, attempting to establish themselves in the eye of the public as environmental champions.

The colour green has also gained some prominence and fashion status, with sightings of aspiring politicians clad in green scarves with Kyoto-named dogs in tow. In this Chamber, however, we are not immune to this green fever. Recently I recall members daring each other to park their vehicles and revert to walking. "Why this sudden green madness?" you may be asking yourself, Mr. Speaker. Well, because it appears that there are two camps of Canadians: believers and deniers, those who believe that our planet is in the midst of general atmospheric warming resulting from human activity and those who simply don't. Hence, Canadian airwaves, political conventions, and *Hansards* are filled with excitable rhetoric, which in itself contains enough hot air to raise our beloved planet's temperature.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Speaker, it is my humble hope to introduce Motion 502 and generate some constructive discussion which will not require us to take sides, point fingers, or don green scarves but, rather, will encourage us to examine Alberta's energy policy and determine how it can be improved. Alberta is blessed

with a superabundance of energy: coal, natural gas, conventional crude oil, tar sands, and, if you want to look at the renewable forms of energy, wood, biomass, hydropower, and of course a lot of wind and sunshine.

The confident predictions of scientists and economists of the '70s, Mr. Speaker, in which the last drop of oil would be squeezed out of the ground, have proven to be false. The inventory of available oil, for that matter, has risen to match the demand pretty well every year since then.

Our prosperity, and for that matter the prosperity of our continent, is based on the assorted energy resources. With 800 years of coal and more than 100 years worth of oil available, it's no wonder that we're the envy of the planet. You could ask why, given this vast amount of raw energy, we should really bother to think about sustainable energy. After all, we could just let things go as they are. Well, Mr. Speaker, this may not be an option that we will have. As you know, the Stone Age did not end simply because they ran out of stones. It ended because bronze was found. Similarly, I predict it will happen to our energy resources: the era of carbon fuels will end long before we hear that slurping sound in the ground indicating that we're running on empty.

We understand that carbon and the by-products that are produced when it's turned into energy cause serious health problems by polluting the atmosphere. Nitrous oxide, sulfur dioxide, and soot have all wreaked havoc on the health of people and the environment, where the concentration of those gases have accumulated. However, it isn't these gases that are receiving all the attention. It's carbon dioxide, which in itself is a harmless gas, that is now being blamed for creating the greenhouse effect, which, in turn, is causing the average temperature of our planet to rise. In general, a large portion of the carbon dioxide is generated from decaying organic matter, but over the last century the proportion of gases generated from industrial processes and transportation has increased dramatically.

Mr. Speaker, the purpose of my motion is not to judge whether or not science is correct but, rather, to seize on the opportunity to build on those significant successes which we have already achieved in twinning economic and environmental goals so that we can become and be seen to become world leaders in sustainable energy production and consumption. Alberta is ideally positioned to lead the world in the development of environmentally friendly energy production and sound energy consumption. We have attracted to our province global authorities on the subject matter, who, given supporting policies and adequate funding, are ready and willing to undertake this challenge. However, the first step must be ours. We must, through review of our current legislation and policy, identify any systemic barriers and correct them.

5:00

Also, Mr. Speaker, not unlike the development of any other industry sector, our leadership will require funding, which will be leveraged against private-sector dollars. This funding would be a sound investment in Alberta's future economy, assuring that this province will remain the preferred source of energy for North America.

So what possibilities are there? Let me start by speaking a little about oil sands because that's what's driving a large portion of our economy. At the same time, the method by which bitumen is extracted from sand is what produces the majority of greenhouse gases right now. With the production rate targeted at 4 million barrels per day by 2025, Mr. Speaker, from the present 1 million barrels per day, if production methodology remains the same, the consequences are obvious. Not only that, but the whole of the project output from the Mackenzie gas pipeline will be needed to

liberate oil from the sands, leaving the initial purpose of this project rather questionable.

While there have already been significant reductions in process energy used by using solvents to leech out oil from sand, most of the production still uses heat to produce bitumen. Natural gas, Mr. Speaker, is the energy source of choice right now, which, I would argue, could be compared to converting gold into lead. However, there is no reason, given appropriate direction, why clean hydro-energy harnessed from rivers within northern Alberta could not be used to displace a portion of the energy used by the oil sands.

Hydro systems have had a bad environmental image over the last three decades, with opponents raising complaints of loss of habitat of rare species, safety, and rotting vegetation from the initial flooding, which in itself produces copious amounts of greenhouse gases. Notwithstanding this, Mr. Speaker, there are several sites that have been technologically studied and found suitable for hydro development.

One of the most suitable is Smith Rapids in the remote northeast part of the province, which I understand was the subject of extensive studies in the early '80s and then, shall we say, shelved. The site can produce approximately 1,500 megawatts of sustainable green energy without the need for a large storage area because of the depth of the gorge through which the river flows and the large flow of the river. With the oil sands production at its doorstep, the replacement of finite energy, being gas, with clean hydroelectricity, an estimated reduction of some 120 tonnes of greenhouse gases annually, should be reason enough to review these reports and give them some consideration.

Again, Mr. Speaker, the first step must be ours. Smith Rapids is not the only potential hydro source in the province. Another development of similar magnitude was suggested for Peace River at Dunvegan. As well, Canadian Hydro is now seeking approval for a 100-megawatt runoff at the Peace River.

Mr. Speaker, another way to produce clean energy would be through the use of nuclear plants to generate both electricity and steam for purposes of synthetic oil production. If we are serious about the protection of our environment, we must at least consider all options. Wearing green scarves and pointing fingers will not suffice, although it may gain one a few votes. There has been a great deal of concern expressed about the danger of nuclear energy over the years, with some justification. The horrors of Chernobyl come to mind at the mere mention of the word, but hon. members ought to be aware that Germany, France, and the United Kingdom rely heavily on nuclear energy for their core electricity needs and have yet to report a serious accident.

Nuclear plants that are properly engineered and operated produce no greenhouse gases and should be given serious consideration. Ironically, in Europe those considered as environmentalists are the main proponents of such a source of energy, juxtaposed against Europe's dirty-coal electricity generation. Again, Mr. Speaker, we must lead this debate and determine whether nuclear energy is a suitable option for this province.

Alberta is already North America's leader in the production of biomass energy, with the assistance of Alberta's research institutes. Biomass encompasses all those systems which derive energy from decaying vegetation or animal matter. The most popular item on the market right now is ethanol production. However, with some assistance from this government and the expertise of Alberta research institutes, Alberta is now home to North America's first methane gas electricity production facility, where livestock waste is converted into energy. This facility, in our own Premier's riding, converts livestock manure into electricity. This manure would otherwise be spread on adjacent land, creating greenhouse gases, threatening our fresh water supply, and causing social discontent.

Mr. Speaker, the potential for such facilities in our province is limitless. The facilities could convert municipal sewage and other organic waste into electricity. However, again the production capacity is limited by systemic barriers. If we truly care about our environment and diversification of . . .

The Speaker: I'm now unfortunately going to have to move on, hon. member, and will call on the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. Other members who wish to participate, kindly advise.

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to stand up and discuss Motion 502. I'd like to speak in favour of this motion but have a few twists on where he talks about including other incentives and including legislative and policy changes. One of my concerns with an endowment fund when it's sponsored by the government is that it isn't always in the best interest, and we're picking and choosing winners and losers. But going on from there, the hon. member has brought up a lot of good things to discuss and good things that are happening, especially when we look around the world.

The first area that I'd like to talk about is, as he has referred to so passionately, the oil sands. It is the heart of our oil industry, perhaps, right now in terms of dollars being spent and invested, but we really do have a problem. He talked about turning gold to lead. I have to agree with the hon. member that to think that we're taking natural gas and water in order to extract the bitumen certainly seems a little bit old fashioned and out of tune with the times when we see the problems that we're having with greenhouses gases.

The area of nuclear energy. I recently had the opportunity to go to a nuclear energy conference. I've always been pro nuclear energy, but now I'm even more pro after going and listening and understanding the situations and realizing what's really going on. Here in Canada the discussion always seems to be around Long Island and Chernobyl and the disasters that were there. I would say that that's the equivalent of telling someone that we want to fly to Europe when all they know about is Amelia Earhart, and they say: "Oh, I'll never fly. That wasn't good." Yes, we've had a couple of accidents in the world, but both of those were due to great negligence and poor maintenance, and they've learned from that. It's a very safe system if it's run properly.

Here in Canada, with the CANDU 3 and CANDU 4 series close to coming online, it's a great opportunity where we could produce as much electricity as we needed in the province and use our natural resources to the best of our ability. A good Scout is taught to use his resources wisely, and Albertans very much believe in that. If we could produce heat from electricity, from the hydro, as the good member talked about, and from nuclear energy, we would free up a lot of gas that could be used for much better purposes and reduce the amount of particulates and other things that go into the air from burning the bitumen in order to extract it.

The other opportunity that it would give us and something that we could look at is that we could perhaps use the natural gas more to power our vehicles, to power farm equipment. The amount of energy that we're using could compress that natural gas and be used much more efficiently.

The point that I guess I'd like to urge, along with this motion, is the problem we have with entrepreneurs and progressive businessmen wanting to take the step forward. Often they're at a great disadvantage, especially when it comes to the U.S., in raising capital. I just want to go back a few years to when we were thinking ahead and trying to develop the next energy system. Alberta was very concerned that we were running out of oil, about what we were going to do. So the government realized that, well, we can't afford

to put our money in there, but what we will do is give some very good tax incentives for business to put their money in there.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

We really need to take a look and let businesses raise the capital and be able to have the tax credits, whether that's for wind power, hydropower, or nuclear power, for whatever the technology might be, biomass or whatever. If they have this ingenious idea and the ability to get this new power, we could give the incentive to the average Canadian, the average Albertan to put money in there, much like they do with flow-through shares to explore and try to discover new oil wells and gas wells.

5:10

What we really need to come up with as a government is seed money for ingenuity and good ideas. If we are to allow that for, like I say, nuclear energy or any of these other ones, all of a sudden there'd be a great interest because the capital could be raised. Right now the biggest problem that I see and the people I talk to see in all of these areas is raising the capital. So I am very pleased with this motion. I support it, and I hope that we can come forward as a government with legislation that would hurtle us ahead into the next century.

My other big concern is that if we don't do it quickly, we're going to miss it, much like we have with our highways and our infrastructure. Right now, because we failed to do anything, there's a shortage in the industry, and it's costing us an arm and a leg. If we don't act fast and get ourselves educated on nuclear energy, the rest of the world where they have a shortage are going to jump on it. What we're going to find in one year, maybe even three years, is that there's going to be a five- or a six- or a 10-year wait to hire a company to come in and build any nuclear facilities because they've all been booked around the world. So it's something that we need to talk about, that we need to educate ourselves about quickly, and that we need to move on because the decisions that we make today will definitely define the direction that we go in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very much in favour of this motion.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the Minister of Energy.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with interest that I listened to the exchange between the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs and the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. As we discuss this Motion 502, I'm curious if either hon. member has any advance knowledge of a nuclear waste disposal site in either one of their constituencies because certainly with atomic power you have considerable amounts of radioactive waste generated, and that is an enormous problem. Where do you store that on a permanent basis? That issue is yet to be resolved. I would urge both hon. members to exercise caution in their promotion of atomic energy as a source of heat or steam in the tar sands.

Now, when we talk about this motion, it's very similar, oddly enough, to one that was put forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View in 2005. It's very similar, certainly, for the member that is sponsoring this.

I'm just looking at the fiscal plan for 2005-2008, Mr. Speaker. This is the Alberta government's fiscal plan. In here they're talking about strengthening Alberta's innovative capacity. "Alberta has developed a research infrastructure that is helping the province to become a world leader in new technologies." Two years ago our budget apparently enhanced this position.

Research endowment funds. The government, I would remind all hon. members of this Assembly, "has two major research endowment funds, whose total assets are forecast to reach nearly \$1.9 billion by 2008." That's next year. "Over the three years, the two endowments are expected to support approximately \$250 million in medical, and science and engineering research in Alberta."

Now, the Alberta energy innovation strategy:

A five-year, \$200 million Innovative Energy Technologies program has been established to encourage the development of innovative technologies to enhance oil and gas recovery. The program is also designed to help find a technical solution to gas over bitumen issues.

That we really need to do because of past mistakes in the Department of Energy. Now we're finding out that these past mistakes are again costing us millions and millions and millions of dollars. Not only do we have problems with electricity deregulations, but this gas over bitumen is an issue where the bill is continuing to go up and up and up.

Also with this Alberta Energy innovation strategy, the program, as I understand it, is designed to help find a technical solution to other issues. Assistance started last year, I'd remind all hon. members, and will be provided to royalty adjustments of up to a maximum of 30 per cent of approved project costs. So that's another innovative energy technology that is supposed to cost us only \$200 million, but I suspect it'll be a lot more by the time this government is finished. It's another example of what happens whenever you operate without a plan: megabucks from the taxpayers to cover up those mistakes.

Now the energy and climate change research. I would remind again the hon. members of this House that over \$50 million in research funding is being provided over three years for oil sands upgrading, clean coal technology, water management resource, enhanced conventional recovery, alternative energy sources, and greenhouse gas emission reduction through carbon dioxide management. There are also other innovative programs. The innovation in service excellence program and emerging opportunities program will provide \$64 million over three years to support innovation and research in both the public and private sectors.

Now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs may not be satisfied with these programs. Certainly, if he's not – and he's calling for the establishment of an endowment fund here – I would like to ask the hon. member: what is the matter with these current programs? Are they not working? Is he not satisfied? Or do we need more?

You know, we look at the oil sands and, certainly, in the past to get it off the ground the government has been involved in this in a significant way. There are royalty holidays already in existence for oil sands projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It's surprising that they haven't been used more readily, but when I say that, I don't know for sure how they've been used because the information is top secret. It's not secret; it's top secret from the Department of Energy from the individuals, the citizens of Alberta, who own the resources. Certainly, if this government is going to be open and transparent, those top secret files on royalty giveaways with the oil sands projects have to be opened.

Now, we already talked about the atomic energy and where you can store that waste, Mr. Speaker, but earlier I talked about water management research. This is probably where the hon. member is going with this, and maybe it's out of concern for the evidence that there was no plan by this government when they were providing the information to the regulatory authorities with the latest round of approvals for oil sands projects.

The Radke report, responding to the rapid growth of oil sands developments, certainly indicates that there has been very little water

management research done. In fact, the research that has been done has essentially been ignored. If it has been completed, it has been ignored. This is a direct quote, Mr. Speaker, from issue 11 in the Radke report: "Alberta Environment has not been able to provide timely advice and direction to industry relative to water use." Again, three projects have been approved.

If this is where the hon. member is going with his motion, and if the acceptance of this motion and the establishment of an endowment fund would be used specifically to determine once and for all how much water we can license to be used in the lower Athabasca River system or how much water we can allow to be withdrawn from the North Saskatchewan River for the upgraders, then this reason alone would be enough to support this motion. It's incredible that this government would proceed with this sort of industrial development without knowing whether we've got the water to operate or not. I see the hon. Member for Stony Plain shaking his head over there, and he should know from his great deal of experience around Lake Wabamun and the coal-fired generators that use Lake Wabamun as a water source. He should know just how precious water is.

5:20

Now, I'm dismayed to read the Radke report and realize that little work has been done by the Department of Environment to advise and direct industry, upgraders, and other plants who are planning to locate in the industrial heartland about the availability of groundwater or withdrawals from the North Saskatchewan River. They go on to say in here that there needs to be a substantial increase in manpower to the Department of Environment and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development to focus on these issues. Certainly, if we were to create an endowment fund, the salaries of these individuals wouldn't be coming from the interest off that endowment fund, but it's very important that finally this government first realizes that they have no plan, never had a plan, and that they take this Radke report to heart and develop a sound plan now.

Perhaps this is where the proposal, Motion 502, comes from with the hon. member because certainly we have to look at the provincial government's planning system as it relates to high-growth areas and the inadequacies that are there.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to make some comments here this evening with respect to Motion 502. One thing I would like to indicate. The hon. member opposite indicated moments ago that there's no plan with respect to water use and upgraders and that we don't know how much water we'd need to take from the North Saskatchewan River with respect to doing that particular piece of business. Very interesting, and I'm sure the hon. member would know that the city of Edmonton is engaged in discussions currently with the heartland community to use waste water from the city of Edmonton, in fact, for upgraders. So that issue has a very good possibility of an outcome there.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the motion, of course, expanding our renewable energy resources is a very important item in the mandate letter that I received from the Premier, and I will assure the House that it will be a very key component in the comprehensive energy strategy that we develop. Renewable energy is now, certainly now, and will continue to be an important part of our portfolio of energy resources. We have a number of very well defined renewables that

are at play in the province now, and most certainly we'll continue to work with industry to develop more of those. You know, the one that I think tops the list is wind power. We've got some very aggressive wind power plans in the province of Alberta, and we certainly enjoy very good success with respect to that industry and, again, continuing to work with them to allow them to expand. They are now and will continue to play an important and, I think, ever-increasing role with respect to our resources.

Mr. Speaker, most certainly small hydro projects – it's been mentioned – in places like Dunvegan. There's an excellent opportunity there for Albertans to receive electrical energy from a run-of-the-river project on the Peace River at Dunvegan. There are opportunities not only for small hydro but, I would suggest, opportunities for some fairly large hydro still remaining in the province of Alberta. When you look in the northeast, the possibilities on the Slave River, I think, are areas that this government is certainly interested in pursuing.

Renewable energy now, Mr. Speaker, I believe, accounts for about 12 per cent of the total installed capacity in the province of Alberta, and we look at that as an important piece, and we're sure that it will continue. It's very important, I think, relative to some of the things that have been said, with respect to the fact that more needs to be done in research, and more emphasis needs to be put into the development of new technologies.

I think it's important to understand there are a number of initiatives in place that encourage research and encourage the implementation of new and effective technologies for the province of Alberta. For example, Mr. Speaker, there's a \$200 million energy innovation fund that was announced last fall, and it supports clean, leading-edge, and competitive energy projects, such as \$33 million to find new, commercially viable ways to reduce emissions from coal-fired electrical generators to near zero and \$29 million to help design and build a facility to convert municipal waste into electricity. That is happening right here in the city of Edmonton.

The fund, with additional money from other programs, will allow the government to commit \$239 million over the next five years to strengthen and support and expand Alberta's biofuel sector by encouraging manufacturers to bring more biofuel products to the marketplace and another \$200 million, Mr. Speaker, to leverage industry investment in pilot projects that improve environmentally responsible conventional oil, natural gas, and in situ oil sands recovery.

Technology and innovation targeted at recovering resources that might otherwise be stranded underground will help ensure that the energy sector continues to provide economic and social benefits for Albertans well into the future. Mr. Speaker, further increases in the recovery of reserves, even seemingly small ones, make a big difference. A 1 per cent increase means an additional 600 million barrels of conventional oil, 17 billion barrels of bitumen, or 2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. That's 1 per cent.

Let's not forget that even as we encourage innovation in alternative fuel, Alberta's traditional oil and gas sectors have and will continue to provide Canadians with a secure supply of energy and Albertans with substantial economic benefits. Mr. Speaker, I can't stress enough that the government of Alberta is doing, I think, a tremendous job with respect to support with these particular programs.

Alberta advanced education oversees ASRA. The Alberta Energy Research Institute, the Alberta Forestry Research Institute, the Alberta Agricultural Research Institute, and the Life Sciences Institute all work, Mr. Speaker, with funding opportunities from this provincial government and partnered with industry and institutions, towards technical solutions to some of the problems that we have with respect to alternative energy.

Mr. Speaker, I agree that the motion, as the member has indicated, is a good opportunity for us to bring debate to the floor of this Assembly with respect to the issue around alternative and renewable energy sources. We agree in the Department of Energy that it's one of the mandates that I have indicated has been set out for me with respect to going forward. The Premier of the province has indicated that it is an important piece of work for Albertans, and our integrated energy strategy will include renewables and alternate forms of energy as we move forward.

Thank you.

5:30

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to have an opportunity to speak to Motion 502, Support for Alternative Energy Technologies. I first wanted to commend the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs for what I thought was quite a balanced speech in regard to the immediacy and the need to engage in alternative energy technology here in the province of Alberta, although I do have some reservations about the scope and, perhaps, the lack of focus of the motion. Certainly, the motion being such as it is, I would consider supporting it.

You know, we're looking to speak about a number of energy issues here specifically in regard to the bills brought forward this legislative session and also to engage in a general debate that is taking place both inside and outside of this Legislature. You know, it's important for us to try to embrace in the broadest way what it is to generate energy and what is, in fact, a sustainable energy future not only for this province but, indeed, for humankind in general. So when we look at, I guess, the spirit of this motion, I'm encouraged certainly. There are a number of areas that I would like to elaborate on here this afternoon.

Of course, we have the Alberta Energy Research Institute, which has been passed by the government to develop innovation in the energy sector. Certainly, the Alberta Energy Research Institute has a mandate to develop green and sustainable energy technology as part of its priority areas, six different priority areas. My concern about this is only that it doesn't engage in sustainable and green energy technologies in the manner in which these ideas deserve to be developed. Of course, we are on a sort of collision course with a crisis not just in Alberta but across this country in regard to delivering sustainable energy systems, and these green or sustainable energy technologies deserve to have the funding that we might put forward to some of these other alternative technology energy programs that we see even just starting to be brought out here in the last few days.

Indeed, if we approached funding that this new CO₂ pipeline seems to warrant, then certainly we would be moving in leaps and bounds in regard to sustainable energy technologies, not just in the research and development of them but in the implementation of alternative and sustainable energy systems here in the province of Alberta. Of course, we don't need to just reinvent the wheel, Mr. Speaker, every time we have difficulty in these areas. There's a wealth of knowledge around the world that has in fact met these challenges head-on. It's simply a matter of adapting technology that's been used around the world to our own special conditions here in Alberta. You know, for every dollar that we invest in conservation, of course, the longer we have to be able to build a system that is sustainable over the long term. Between using the existing appropriate technologies – research and development, certainly, is important – and, above all, conservation, I believe that we are most

able to deal with and meet our renewable energy needs here in the province of Alberta.

You know, since I've begun with this area, I've been working hard with groups across the province to bring forward suggestions in regard to these things. I just wanted to remind the House that I did bring forward two private members' bills in this regard, that I would like to have considered in the spirit of this motion. The net metering Bill 219 from the fall would allow private individuals to generate their own power from alternative energy sources. We would reduce our overall reliance on fossil fuels based on power generation. We would allow for the commercialization and implementation of alternative energy sources. I believe, as well, that we would engage the public in looking actively for these alternative energy sources in their own backyard, so to speak, Mr. Speaker. So I think that in the spirit of this motion and in the spirit of public sentiment and practical solutions to our energy needs I'm certainly hoping that the net metering concept will move forward here in the next 12 months or so. I think that it would be a fine, fine thing, that I would be happy to have, not just for domestic consumers but for commercial consumers as well.

Another bill that I did bring forward last year, I believe, was Bill 211. This called for the establishment of a committee to look at ways to set up a revolving fund for the purposes of retrofitting houses and businesses to make them more energy efficient. Again, you know, this is not necessarily devising some magic bullet of some new technology but, rather, making an investment in appropriate technology to make buildings, both residential areas and commercial buildings, more efficient and to in fact conserve energy such as it is. I think this is very much in the spirit of this same motion from Edmonton-Castle Downs. Again, it's an idea whose time has come not just here in Alberta but across this country.

We believe, certainly in my personal experience, that we've not taken these matters seriously to the detriment of the province. You know, the perfect statistic that might illustrate that is the fact that we have in fact increased our carbon dioxide emissions here 39 per cent from 1990 to 2003. Indeed, these emissions continued to rise and grow geometrically over these past four years since 2003.

It's important for us to consider that emissions in terms of carbon dioxide have to be reduced absolutely. The development of alternative technology to achieve this goal, in fact, is the key to establishing absolute reductions because until you build the infrastructure that allows you to decrease your reliance on carbon dioxide, it's almost impossible to fight the increase in carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere. Perhaps the results are slow in the beginning, but once you've established that system, absolute reductions would be entirely possible.

The other issue which, of course, muddies this whole debate is the fact that while we might impose alternative energy delivery systems such as the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs was suggesting, until we in fact place a moratorium on new tar sands proposals, we will never be able to get a handle on our carbon dioxide emissions because those new plants coming on stream are increasing the carbon dioxide, again, geometrically into the atmosphere, and it becomes impossible to catch up, so to speak, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, the spirit of this motion, I think, is to be commended. But there are a number of things that have to be there in concert with the intention of this motion to actually bear fruit. So if I were to make some recommendations to this motion just to sharpen it up a little bit, I would suggest that it would say something like "undertake a long-term budgetary commitment from a nonrenewable resource income" instead of "endowment fund," as it says in this motion. You know, this speaks to a firm commitment that the Alberta New Democrats have to fund priority motions and issues in regard to

using actual line items in the budget instead of using the endowment fund system. Of course, the missing link here in terms of investing in renewable resource energy development is to in fact increase the revenues that we get from nonrenewable resources to fund this transition into a green economy for the province of Alberta.

The second part that I would amend here would be to say, “so that we may reduce absolute emissions of our GHG to meet our Kyoto obligations,” at the end of the motion. Again, that would, I believe, create a perhaps more balanced motion.

So if I were to amend this – certainly, I’m not withdrawing my support of this motion in spirit – I would say something like: be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to undertake a long-term budgetary commitment . . .

5:40

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s a pleasure to speak to Motion 502. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs has brought it forward at this time. Alberta is blessed with significant resource bounty. In the 2006-2007 fiscal year there is \$11.5 billion of nonrenewable resource revenue projected in the budget. There are 173 billion barrels of oil sands currently accessible and another 1.6 trillion barrels potentially available. This is in addition to the 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 40 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 37 billion tons of coal that currently remain. These raw resources translate into considerable wealth for Albertans. Alberta has the highest labour participation rates and the highest GDP per capita in Canada. Our prosperity will continue for many years to come, thanks in part to over \$100 billion of investment in future capital projects.

It is very clear that nonrenewable resources are a part of Alberta’s past, present, and future. There are centuries of potential in the oil sands, and we are increasing the recovery of conventional resources. The capacity of upgrading the oil sands is now expanding and will add value to bitumen. Alberta must also set its sights on new energy sources to ensure that it remains at the front of the pack in energy development. There has been much discussion in this province about wind, solar, and nuclear energy. Each has its merits and pitfalls, but I would rather take this opportunity to discuss the potential of biomass as an emerging energy source.

Biomass is a process that captures the methane from animal by-products and household waste and converts the gas into heat for electricity generation. The biomass process can capture the methane gas from animal by-products or household waste, taking these gases out of the atmosphere to generate electrical energy. The technology for biomass is available. One example, which I’ve mentioned before in this Assembly, is IMUS, the integrated manure utilization system, which the mover of this motion referred to earlier. IMUS takes manure from a feedlot near Vegreville and converts the methane into electricity and the solid product into biofertilizer. This is an exciting concept, and one can recognize the potential in managing agriculture waste in an environmentally sound manner. It is also important to note the work that the Alberta Energy Research Institute is conducting in the field of biomass. Through the Alberta energy research strategy AERI is encouraging the use of municipal solid waste as a source of synthetic gas for electricity production. This could greatly assist municipalities in managing landfills and would provide a new source of electricity for growing cities.

Using biomass to generate energy has the potential to create a bio industry for Alberta. This industry could sustain rural communities through electricity generation and the sale of biofertilizer. It also has

the potential to limit the nuisance of municipal dumps and feedlots, which could allow for more productive land use. Perhaps most importantly, bio industry looks to limit the emissions of methane, a greenhouse gas that is considerably more potent than carbon dioxide. Instead of methane seeping into the atmosphere, it can be turned into a usable fuel. This concept is something we should all be very keen on implementing.

Mr. Speaker, in a way we are already doing the work that Motion 502 encourages. I think all members of this Assembly recognize that a broad range of energy sources will ensure the sustainability of Alberta’s economy for many generations to come. I as chair of the Alberta Research Council know that the bio industry has great potential in this province. I am encouraged that the government set aside \$200 million into an energy innovation fund. This fund will advance the vision of a sustainable energy future for this province which includes bioenergy.

New technology and approaches require public and market acceptance. It is important for government and its research institutes to engage industry and the public in thinking about new energy sources. I think that if we continue on the path Alberta is on, we will find acceptable solutions to fill our energy needs.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs for bringing this motion forward. This debate is a good opportunity to remind Albertans of the potential of the wide range of energy sources that will sustain our prosperity for generations to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As a former teacher I believe in the importance of doing one’s research and homework. I had the good fortune to teach a young gentleman by the name of Steven Keating, who is the son of John Keating and has a more famous uncle, Brian Keating of the Calgary zoo. I had an opportunity on a number of occasions to talk to John about alternative energy sources. He provided me with a number of possibilities, the obvious ones being wind and solar. He also talked about the run of the river which doesn’t get in the way of the fish or impede any natural flow, but energy is produced as a result. That seemed, with the number of rivers that we have, a possibility that has yet to be considered.

The government’s going to have to change the direction they’re going. If they believe in alternative energy sources, then they’re certainly going to have to, first off, get rid of the cap on wind energy. Right now I believe it’s capped at something like 10 per cent, and that prevents it from being added to our grid with no negative effects that I’m aware of. There are certain communities in this province who have already experimented with solar. For example, the town of Okotoks was profiled on CBC last week for the advances that they’ve made not only in housing projects but in heating their community arenas and warehouses and so on. The town of Vulcan, I believe, has been experimenting with geothermal, which is another basically renewable form of energy that doesn’t result in emissions. Both solar and geothermal have been proven as nonrenewable energy sources used extensively in Europe. So the technology exists for us to take advantage of these various forms of energy.

I have also had, in terms of doing the research, an opportunity to talk to Dr. Maunsell of the University of Calgary, who is connected with the ISEEE project, ISEEE standing for Institute of Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy, I believe the third E is. He talked about the possibility, as part of the bitumen processing and separation, of taking out the O₂ from the CO₂, combining it with

hydrogen, and producing more water and, therefore, being less dependent on the Athabasca River because we know that any of the water that comes out of the Athabasca for use in separation of bitumen never makes its way back in. We also know what happens with the waste water in the form of tailing ponds and so on, so anything that can cut down that footprint would be very much appreciated.

Areas that I'm also familiar with – I had an opportunity to talk with a lady whose company is recognized for carbon credits. She provided a PowerPoint presentation for myself and our hon. shadow minister for Environment from Calgary-Mountain View. In it she gave examples of capturing the methane from manure, that other members have talked about, and using that energy to heat the pig barns or provide heat for chickens and so on and also on top of that getting credit for having done it. So you get sort of a double benefit. You can sell the emissions credit, and you can capture the methane. I know the city of Edmonton, for example, at its dump captures the methane and uses that energy positively rather than having it just disappear. Well, it doesn't disappear. It hangs in the air, unfortunately.

5:50

The various types of energy whereby some of the energy that is produced by heat is then recaptured and reused, that is already being used up in the Fort McMurray area, is obviously an advantage. The Member for Edmonton-Riverview in his alternative throne speech and in his response to the Speech from the Throne set 2012 as a date whereby a Liberal government would begin not only dealing with emissions intensities but actually capping emissions. In other words, a Liberal government would work with industry to sequester the CO₂ and use it, as has previously been indicated in discussions in the House, to inject and force out oil and gas. So it would be a win-win circumstance: get rid of it from being expended into the atmosphere and use it as a tool.

I do not share the enthusiasm for ethanol of the hon. mover of Motion 502. My understanding from the reports that I have read is that it takes as much energy to produce a barrel of ethanol as the ethanol provides, and while the emissions are reduced from lead forms of gas, the amount of chemicals that is necessary to be added in the form of fertilizers to encourage the various crops to grow, basically, negates the advantage achieved by ethanol. Ethanol quite often seems to be, particularly down in the States, more to do with winning votes than providing alternative energy sources.

As for nuclear energy that's a large concern of mine both because of the amount of energy that's expended and the emissions caused in the extraction and processing of uranium. Of course, as a grandfather who is focused more on the future with the birth of two

grandsons, I don't want to leave them a legacy of radioactivity, that has not been proven to me that it can be stored safely because we know that it will remain radioactive for thousands of years. We know we can sequester CO₂. It's being done throughout Europe. It's being done in Saskatchewan as it's transferred from North Dakota.

If this motion gets to the committee stage, I will enjoy the opportunity to pick and choose the parts of it that I consider to be worthwhile, most of which I consider to be worthwhile. But when we talk about ethanol, to me that's just for getting votes, not for fuel in cars. Also with my research – I see a group – thanks to the Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy I've had the opportunity to go to lectures talking about alternative energy in the form of fuel cells. There is a tremendous amount of advantage in fuel cells in terms of being able to activate them in remote areas. So the research is being done. It's being done here.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, there have been a number of people who have indicated to me that they would like to participate in this debate, but I notice that the clock is striking 5:55 p.m., and we have given a full hour of debate to this matter. So under Standing Order 8(4), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close debate, I would invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to close debate on Motion 502.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and with pleasure I shall do so. I'd like to thank the Minister of Energy for supporting this motion and all members of this House for supporting the motion, including the Member for Calgary-Varsity, whose comments perhaps were not as positive. I believe that, indeed, the time has come to discuss alternative energy sources in a positive manner in this province, and I encourage all members to vote in favour of this motion.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 502 carried]

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

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn and reconvene tomorrow at 1 in the afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 5:57 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1 p.m.]