

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 8, 2007**

1:00 p.m.

Date: 07/05/08

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members two officers of the Lord Strathcona's Horse. In 2006 Colonel John Roderick's exceptional service was recognized with his honorary appointment as Colonel of the Regiment, Lord Strathcona's Horse. Colonel Roderick, who resides in Kingston, Ontario, is joined today by Captain Chris Hunt, the regimental captain. Our visitors, Mr. Speaker, are in your gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly but also to accept on behalf of all of the Lord Strathcona's Horse the thanks of all the members of this House for their loyal and faithful service to the province and our nation.

head:

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House 38 special visitors from the Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert constituency. The visitors today are from the Sturgeon Heights school, a group of very bright young people who are the future of our province. They are seated in the members' gallery and are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Lorna MacKay and Mr. Darryl Propp as well as parent helpers Mr. Paches and Mrs. Sarafinchan. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. It is my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you three guests. First of all, a friend of mine who worked in this building a number of years ago and is back observing question period today, Charlene Adam. I'd also like to introduce my constituency office person who absolutely solves all of the problems of my constituents, Jaime Sorenson, and a young fellow who many of us know, Patrick Rea, who has been involved in youth politics since I think shortly after birth. I would ask them all to stand and receive a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly

a group of students and the co-ordinator representing an organization called caring for our Battle River watershed. All reps are from Camrose, which relies, of course, on the Battle River for its water supply. Seated in the members' gallery today are the project co-ordinator, Maurice Samm, and three award winners: Mark Wrubleski, Liz Solverson, and Jason Bratrud. A little later I will speak more about their activities in a member's statement; however, at this time I would ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two of my constituents. The first one is Anita Bocking. She is here with concerns about affordable rent. More than half of her income is going towards rent. The other one is Peter Tyleman. Peter is looking for more support from the government to stabilize those rental increases. I'd like them both to please now rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of the Legislative Assembly a group visiting from the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. This group is the Capilano seniors active group. They are led today by Mrs. Nettie Holmstrom. This group is a keen observer of provincial government affairs. They have a noted interest in the budget, and I look forward on occasion to meeting with them and discussing important provincial issues. They're in the public gallery, and I would now ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly several constituents of Edmonton-Centre who've come today to express their concerns about the lack of a temporary cap on rent increases and other measures needed to improve housing. Some of these constituents are on AISH. Some are on fixed incomes. Some work. All of them but one have had significant rent increases, and each one of them is hoping that the government will take some positive action. I would ask Brianne Hudson, Rita Wegner Home, Joy Mukarage and Winie, Alyssa Hudson, Nicole Pfiefer, and Vanja Krslak, who I think are all in the members' gallery, to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, my guest hasn't arrived yet. He's working his way through, but he won't be able to stay long.

The Speaker: Go ahead.

Dr. Taft: Well, it's a very special moment for him, and I'd like him to be here when I introduce him. So perhaps in a couple of minutes. Thank you.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it is my pleasure this afternoon to introduce to you and through you a constituent of Edmonton-Rutherford. Her name is Marilyn Sjulstad, and she's here this afternoon to hear her question asked of the Premier regarding the rental increase crisis. I would ask her to please give us a wave – she's in the members' gallery – and ask all members to give her the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly three of my constituents in Edmonton-McClung who are all here to voice concerns about the current housing crisis in Alberta and to hopefully see some of their questions answered by the Premier and the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Even though they're here to pressure this government into taking some action to assist and protect tenants, I still encourage all members from both sides of the House to grant them the traditional warm welcome that is known to this House. I ask Deloris Austin, James Arnott, and Marilyn Caskey to please rise and receive the welcome I mentioned.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly my constituent Mr. James Sexsmith. James is a veteran of World War II, and he's active in federal and provincial politics. He advocates for underprivileged and low-income people. He's extremely reliable to his friends. I want to thank him for coming to the Leg. He's here to voice his concern on rent relief. He's seated in the members' gallery. I request him to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Northern Alberta Development Council it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly board members and staff of the council. The council met earlier this morning with the northern MLAs, followed by a board meeting. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that they stand as I introduce them: newly elected vice-chair Carmen Ewing from Girouxville, Michael Ouellette from Grande Prairie, Harvey Yoder from Lac La Biche, Williard Strebchuk from Whitecourt, and newly appointed members Iris Callioux from Peace River, Dave Kirschner from Fort McMurray, and Joe Layton from Bonnyville. Also present is retiring member Mike Mihaly of High Level, who has served for the past four years. Thank you, Mike, for all the great work in support of northern Alberta. Also with them are staff members Jennifer Bisley, business officer from the Peace River office; Jan Mazurik, executive assistant; and Dan Dibbelt, executive director. I'd like all members to please join me in giving them the traditional warm welcome.

1:10

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

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly two constituents of mine from Edmonton-Meadowlark, Jenny Donohue

and Iris Grover, both of whom are renters who are extremely concerned about the rapid and often unwarranted escalation of rents in Edmonton. They are seated in the members' gallery, I believe, and I ask that they please stand or wave and accept the traditional warm greeting of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Doreen Fiddler. Doreen is one of the many Albertans who has received notice of a dramatic increase in rent, in her case from \$595 per month to \$1,595 per month, an incredible \$1,000 increase in one notice. She is currently searching for a new home. Doreen was born in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and came to Alberta in 1970 to be closer to her family. She's a single mother who raised six boys and one girl all on her own. She is now the proud grandmother of 15 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. She is accompanied by Robert Ross, an antipoverty activist in our community. I would now ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased today to introduce to you and members of the Assembly three guests seated in the public gallery. They are Menar Ibrahim, Jeremy O'Haver, and Richard Konkin. Menar, Jeremy, and Richard are Palace Casino workers entering their 242nd day on strike as they fight for better working conditions. It is unfortunate that this government has abdicated its responsibility in protecting Alberta workers when they face an unfair employer like the Palace Casino. Jeremy has worked at the Palace Casino for 13 years as a dealer and a pit boss. Menar started working at the Palace Casino in 2004 as a head cashier. Richard Konkin has been a dealer at the Palace Casino for the past eight years. I would now ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am honoured today to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly a very active member in my constituency. His name is Giancarlo Grande, and he is here with his building manager. Giancarlo suffers from a debilitating disease called ankylosing spondylitis, and as a result he is on AISH. His current housing situation is very precarious as he relies on the kindness of his building manager, who has to date been able to shield him from rent increases imposed on other tenants in his building, but I can tell you Giancarlo Grande is very concerned about his future. He is seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask him to wave and receive the warm welcome of all members of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you know and all members of the Assembly know, every year we're visited by a group of outstanding young Albertans as part of an ongoing program called the Forum for Young Albertans. A number of MLAs and staff have been involved in interacting with these young people. Every one of them is destined – I'm sure you'll agree with me – to become a leader of tomorrow. It's my pleasure on

behalf of the Premier to introduce to you and to members of the Assembly a number of these outstanding young people who have joined us in our galleries this afternoon. There is a group that was here at 1 o'clock. There'll be another group that comes in after they leave at 1:30. There simply are not enough seats in the galleries to accommodate all of them. Nevertheless, I would ask those that are with us in both the public and the members' galleries at this time to stand and be recognized by all members of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Lucy Alfaro. Lucy is a graduate of medical school from her home country of El Salvador. She is now practising homeopathic medicine here in Edmonton. Lucy is a very strong human rights and environmental activist. She's seated in the public gallery, and I would ask her now please to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Caring for the Battle River Watershed

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 14 I had the pleasure to attend the caring for our watersheds Battle River awards presentation. This program encourages students and the community to think about global environmental issues at the local level. It is modelled on the Caring for the Kenai project that is currently operating in Alaska.

This awards presentation recognized students who submitted proposals to answer the question: what can I do, create, invent, or improve to better care for the Battle River watershed? Some 60 students developed 22 proposals in response to the question. After an initial round of judging, three finalists at the university level and 12 finalists at the grade 8 to 12 level were invited to make public presentations.

This project was made possible by the support of Agrium Inc., the Battle River Community Foundation, the Battle River Watershed Alliance, the University of Alberta Augustana campus, the Battle River school boards, Caring for the Kenai, and the city of Camrose. Successful proposals were awarded with significant cash prizes. A total of \$6,000 was awarded to individuals, and \$10,000 was awarded to winning schools. These awards will support students and schools in pursuing concrete environmental actions, as laid out in their proposals.

I want to congratulate Mark Wrubleski from the Charlie Killam school for winning in the high school category. His winning project proposed using a solar, wind, or electric power pump to aerate bodies of water to maintain the health and vibrancy of our watershed. I also want to congratulate Chantel Bromley and James Phillips from the University of Alberta Augustana campus for receiving first place in the university category. This project proposed the creation of a wetland on the creek that flows through the Augustana campus. This contest would not have been possible without the help of project co-ordinator Maurice Samm, who is here in the members' gallery with three of the project winners. His work in preserving watersheds is commendable, and the success of this initial contest will undoubtedly encourage other communities to host similar contests.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Television Production in Hardisty

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, Alberta filmmakers and their industry partners abroad have long been familiar with the spectacular locations, cost advantages, and top-notch crews and services associated with choosing Alberta as a film production destination. It's my pleasure to be able to rise today and recognize a powerful and thought-provoking Alberta Film endeavour that will be taking place in the town of Hardisty in my constituency of Battle River-Wainwright.

In continuing with Alberta's rich history in film production, Paperny Films, a Vancouver-based television production company, has received support from the CBC to film a documentary called *The Week the Women Left*. On the heels of a similar and immensely popular program in the U.K. this highly informative and touching documentary will highlight and follow families and a community that have been left without women for a period of one week, from June 2 to 9.

Mr. Speaker, I'm also proud to announce that since I live in the community of Hardisty with my wife and son, I will be participating in this endeavour as well. I know that without my wife, even if it's just for a week, I will be lost. I have always said that I may win the bread in our family with my job, but she has three full-time jobs in looking after me, my son, and the house and is the hardest working person, like so many other women I know.

In preparation for the upcoming creation of the documentary, the town of Hardisty has worked very hard to be chosen out of so many communities across the west and are now busy working, setting the stage to ensure that all conditions are right to tell this powerful story. Town Mayor Anita Miller and all of the council, town administrator Tony Kulbisky, and hundreds of citizens at large, like Shawn and Ashley Gaetzman, deserve a lot of credit.

This event will bring the men in the community together as they work on a project for the community while the women are away. The event will bring the women together as they holiday at some beautiful resort here in Alberta. The project will do the community good and, I believe, lay the foundation of strong bonds that will drive Hardisty's assured success in the years to come. But mostly it will be a chance for both men and women in the community to appreciate what each other does not just in the home but in business. Good luck to them all.

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

Temporary Rent Regulation

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In recent days many of us have read of seniors facing increases of up to 50 per cent from landlords eager to hike rents before the crisis forces the government to intervene. They are encouraged by a party that's had a long and comfortable relationship with landlords and a Premier who states that he sees no need to put a brake on the market. With our economy under strain on many fronts Albertans find it hard to understand, as I do, how a handful of owners interested only in private profit have chosen to exact the maximum from fellow citizens irrespective of social cost and callous to human need.

1:20

If this situation is not addressed, the consequences will be far reaching. It will signal that gouging is acceptable and that there is no economic law beyond the law of the jungle. It will send a message that the good life in Alberta is limited to those who have it made already. It will confirm to those already living on the edge that the only limits are what they can get away with and that crime

has two levels: those who work the streets, and those who work the system.

This is not an example we want to set or an advantage Albertans are proud of. A government that permits this conduct is neither progressive nor conservative. It lacks the foresight to oversee an expanding future or the social values that guided us in the past.

Henry Ford and Conrad Black both saw the need for measures to curb excesses of the market not out of sentimentality but realism. They recognized that a society in which some cannot participate costs producers as well as consumers and is not a stable society.

The word "repentance" did not originally have to do with religion. Metanoia meant to see the big picture and to change accordingly. That is the kind of vision and adjustment we need in Alberta before the greed of some consumes us all.

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

Mental Health Week

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. May 7 to 13 has been proclaimed national Mental Health Week in Canada. Mental health is a crucial component of our overall health and is an essential resource for living. It influences how we feel, how we perceive, how we think, communicate, and understand. Without good mental health people are not able to reach their full potential or play an active role in society.

Mental health issues are wide ranging, from enhancing our emotional well-being and treating and preventing severe mental illness to the prevention of suicide. The government of Alberta has played a role and will continue to play a role in ensuring the delivery of mental health services in this province. Strengthening treatment of mental illness in the community supports Premier Stelmach's plan to improve Albertans' quality of life.

Mental illness has a profound impact on our society. It affects individuals of all ages, all cultures, and all educational and income levels. Mr. Speaker, in Canada mental illness affects 1 in 5 people and strikes early in life, with the highest prevalence in youth ages 15 to 24. A million Canadians live with a severe or persistent mental illness. In addition, approximately 8 per cent of adults will experience major depression at some point in their lives. Almost one-half of those who feel they have suffered from depression or anxiety have never gone to see a doctor about this problem. Stigma or discrimination attached to mental illness presents a serious barrier in today's society.

But the good news, Mr. Speaker, is that mental illness can be treated. The Alberta government is committed to advancing mental health in the province. It's part of the focus on overall wellness, to promote and improve individual and community health.

The Alberta Mental Health Board advances mental health in Alberta through a number of initiatives, including advocacy, policy advice, working with the regional health authorities and stakeholders. In raising awareness of Mental Health Week, the Alberta Mental Health Board in co-operation with several partners published an online book at amhb.ab.ca.

Thank you.

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

Temporary Rent Regulation

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Every day, as this government scrambles to justify an uncaring and uncompassionate response to Alberta's housing crisis, it becomes increasingly clear

that this government just doesn't care about working Albertans.

The government claims that it is taking a balanced, holistic approach to the problem. Yesterday the minister said that he needs to understand the situation from the side of the landlords that are gouging. If this government wants to understand the impact that the failure of our rental market is having, the minister doesn't need to turn to the landlords for insight. He needs to ask people like Doreen Fiddler, a senior in my riding who received a rental notice for \$1,000 and is now looking for a new place to live. He needs to stop taking direction from megalandlords like Boardwalk and start listening to the thousands of Albertans from across the province who have told him very clearly that they want temporary rent increase protection.

The Premier had an opportunity to show leadership on this issue. The Affordable Housing Task Force did some excellent work and made some very good recommendations. But the Premier dropped the ball. His failure to protect tenants was confirmed when a meeting of 1,400 well-heeled Conservative Party members voted against compassion by voting against temporary rent controls.

The housing crisis is a mess, there's no question. I hope the Premier is up to the job of fixing it, but so far we haven't been given much reason for optimism.

There is no excuse for this government to be caught off guard by this crisis. Calgarians have been getting hit with \$1,000 and even \$2,000 rent increases for the better part of a year. Last summer the NDP was already telling the government that it needed to act quickly to implement temporary rent guidelines and create a ministry of housing to deal with this complex issue. The government's failure to act has seriously hurt families across the province.

The Speaker: I'm afraid I must now proceed to the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Nuclear Power

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Times have changed. Nuclear energy is a non greenhouse gas emitting power source that can effectively replace fossil fuels and satisfy Canada's growing demand for energy. Nuclear power plants are a practical option for producing clean, cost-effective, reliable, and safe baseload power in the Alberta oil sands.

Nuclear energy is affordable. According to the Canadian Energy Research Institute nuclear is one of the most cost-effective energy sources available. At less than 5 cents per kilowatt hour nuclear energy is competitive with coal and natural gas yet has the benefit of not emitting greenhouse gases.

Given that seven CANDU reactors built in South Korea, China, and Romania over the past 15 years have been completed on time and on budget, as was the most recent Pickering unit refurbishment, it's clear that nuclear power plants are highly reliable and cost-effective.

Nuclear energy is safe. In 1979 a partial reactor core meltdown at Three Mile Island frightened people. At the time no one noticed that Three Mile Island was a success story. The concrete containment structure prevented radiation from escaping into the environment. There was no injury or death among the public or nuclear workers. This was the only serious accident in the history of nuclear energy in the west, Mr. Speaker.

Spent nuclear fuel is not waste. Recycling spent fuel, which contains 95 per cent of its original energy, will greatly reduce the need for treatment and disposal.

Nuclear power plants are not vulnerable to terrorist attack. The 1.5-metre thick reinforced concrete containment vessel protects contents from the outside as well as from the inside. Even if a

jumbo jet did crash into a reactor and breach the containment, the reactor would not explode, Mr. Speaker.

Nuclear weapons are no longer inextricably linked to the nuclear power plants. Centrifuge technology now allows nations to produce weapons-grade plutonium without first . . .

The Speaker: I'd like to thank the hon. member.

head: **Presenting Reports by
Standing and Special Committees**

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

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Standing Committee on Private Bills has had certain bills under consideration and wishes to report as follows. The committee advises that its consideration of the following private bill will be deferred to June 5, 2007: Bill Pr. 1, CyberPol – The Global Centre for Securing Cyberspace Act.

The committee recommends that the following private bill not proceed: Bill Pr. 2, Crest Leadership Centre Act.

Mr. Speaker, I request the concurrence of the Assembly in this recommendation.

The Speaker: All hon. members in favour of the report, please say aye.

Some Hon. Members: Aye.

The Speaker: Those opposed, please say no.

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Speaker: It's carried.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Temporary Rent Regulation

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The record of this government is just filled with double standards. Yesterday we saw that intervening to help those hurt by failed agricultural markets is good; intervening to help renters keep their homes is bad. This government appears ready, even eager to intervene in markets just before elections or to paper over their own mistakes, but they will not stand up for renters. It's a double standard. My question is to the Premier. Can the Premier explain why his government has spent billions of public dollars over the years on the natural gas rebate program to protect people from a failed energy market but refuses to provide real protection for renters in a failed housing market?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, yesterday I informed the House that we have put in place \$285 million over three years for affordable housing. We're following up with any renter, any person that would be displaced by either rent increases or any other issue. We don't want to see families on the street, and that's why our Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry has considerable dollars, millions of dollars, in her budget to take care of those individuals. As per the natural gas market it's the North American market, and we've been living with it for the last – I don't know – probably 15 years at least.

1:30

Dr. Taft: Well, we could live with a little better rent protection as well, Mr. Premier.

There are certain services that Albertans simply need, and government has a role to play to ensure that those services are available, but with this government there's a double standard. Can the Premier explain why this government requires automobile insurance companies to get provincial approval before raising auto insurance premiums but refuses to put in place temporary protection against rent gouging by landlords? Why the double standard?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, car insurance is something that's mandatory. You can't drive a car unless you have car insurance.

With respect to housing there are many different areas of housing that this plan of ours covers. There's homelessness, those that perhaps because of medical conditions or whatever are living in tents or whatever. We want to make sure that we have money in place to give to municipalities to support them. Then there are the working poor. We're doing whatever we can through the various programs we have to look after them. Also with respect to those looking to buy single dwellings, we want to put more land up for sale.

Dr. Taft: Well, Mr. Speaker, where is the moral leadership? Where is the moral leadership?

This government's claim that they won't impose a temporary rent regulation because the market forces will fix everything rings hollow. There is yet another double standard. To the Premier: can the Premier explain why regulated utility providers are required to apply to the EUB for rate increases, to quote the government website, "to ensure that customers receive safe and reliable service at just and reasonable rates," but this government refuses to provide renters with even temporary protection so they can keep their homes?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, if the leader doesn't support transmission operators going to the AEUB, tell us that. If he wants us to change the law, then tell us because I'm not quite sure what you're trying to get at here. You're mixing apples with oranges and with grapes, quite frankly.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the minister responsible for housing asked the opposition to forward to him any concerns from Albertans who are at risk of losing their homes due to unaffordable rent increases. Today we have 23 people sitting in the public gallery who would very much like to make their concerns known to this minister. For each of these people there are hundreds of others, perhaps thousands of others, who are living in fear of the next rent increase due to this government's refusal to develop a real solution to this problem. To the minister of housing: will the minister follow up on his words to hear the concerns of Albertans who are experiencing unaffordable rent increases, and will he meet with these 23 people?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, yes.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry read out a phone number in

this House for Albertans to call if “they’ve had a cost imposed on them” and need support. Well, what callers encounter when they dial this number is nothing less than a runaround, nothing that will help them today. To the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry: can the minister confirm that the number she read out in the Legislature yesterday and invited people in distress to call offers no, none, immediate support for tenants facing unaffordable rent increases?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, if the number has given people that impression, that is something that we have to correct. We have in fact offered that people can contact any number of the 59 Alberta Works offices to speak with somebody, to talk to them about their issues. We’re looking at those renters that are in danger of or at risk of eviction, and we would hope to hear from them. I will be doing a check almost immediately, I am sure, with that question. We’ll find out just exactly why they are receiving that kind of information if, in fact, that’s the case. We want to get this right, and we will be working until it is right.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Surely the minister knows her own programs are not set up in the way that she described.

To the Premier. This government continues to imply that stories of Albertans who are placed at risk of losing their homes are isolated. Well, they are far from isolated. The constituencies of the Official Opposition and, no doubt, many of the government MLAs have been flooded with calls from concerned residents every day. Will the Premier admit that this government’s refusal to help out the countless tenants at risk of losing their homes is un-Albertan and implement a temporary rent regulation?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we’ve debated this considerably. There’s a bill coming before the House over the next couple of days, I believe. So there’ll be ample time to debate and take positions in terms of the opposition position on it and, of course, the government position, and one of the privileges is to be able to get together in this Legislative Assembly and debate the merits of the bill that’s coming forward.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Everybody needs a home, and Alberta Liberals know that the affordable housing crisis is too important to get bogged down in ideology. Real-world problems affecting real people need practical solutions. Ideological responses make real-world, real people problems worse. To the Premier: given the massive, punishing rent hikes my constituents have faced and continue to face and since we’ve already established that temporary rent regulations could not make a rental vacancy situation this bad any worse, would the Premier share with this House what possible reason he could have other than enslavement to Conservative ideology for refusing to bring in temporary rent regulations?

Mr. Stelmach: Actually, Mr. Speaker, no matter how they try to twist the words and try and get everybody upset here, we’ve made a good decision in terms of increasing the number of housing units. In fact, for 3.3 million people in this province we by far have the largest increase, no matter how you measure it, per capita, however you want to do it, close to 52,000. So that means that every time a person moves from a rental unit into a single dwelling, they free up

more space in the rental units. This is one area that we’re going to continually pursue with municipalities and, as well, with the federal government.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, one of the most disturbing elements of the affordable housing crisis is the Conservatives’ repeated allegation that they’re listening to Albertans. Clearly, they’re not listening to Calgarians, and Calgarians are getting that message loud and clear. But whether it’s Calgary or Edmonton or Grande Prairie or Hinton or any one of a dozen other cities and towns, how can the Premier justify taking temporary rent regulations out of the solution mix when renters so desperately need short-term protection to bridge the gap until we can create a supply of affordable housing?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, once again wrong information. As a candidate for the leadership I recognized the issue of the critical shortage of housing. As tens of thousands of people move into this province, they need a place to live. That’s why we’ve focused on this priority of increasing the number of units in the province and also working with the municipalities to co-operate with each other to free up more developed land for more housing and looking at other creative solutions within the municipalities that will increase the number of living spaces in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Taylor: And in the meantime, Mr. Speaker, constituents like this one, one of my constituents, Candace Loken, a well-educated 59-year-old injured worker, continue to suffer. She gets by on disability payments of \$700 a month, which she supplements by using her savings and dipping into her RSPs. Her rent is about to increase by 30 per cent. How can the Premier say that his government has even begun to deal with the affordable housing crisis when Ms Loken has to choose between paying the rent and getting therapy for her pain? How many units of affordable housing has his plan brought on stream since April 24 if it’s so good? Where’s the Alberta advantage for Ms Loken?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, for the situation that the member just introduced, those are the kind of people that we’re reaching out to to ensure that we can support them during this period of the housing shortage. I know that our minister will check with the hon. member to get the name and check into that particular situation.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Megalandlord Boardwalk corporation’s 2006 annual report is quite revealing. It indicates a target rent of \$1,604 a month before investing in new rental units. Boardwalk sees an opportunity, as the report observes, that “demand for rental accommodation also remains high as affordability for home purchase continues to decline and prospective first time home-owners are increasingly priced out of the market.” In other words, they have a captive market, and they’re going to jack up rents to take advantage of it. My question is to the Premier. Does the Premier support what Boardwalk is doing, and if not, what is he going to do to stop it?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the company that the hon. leader of the third party is bringing forward is a housing and apartment complex holding company. Take it up with the company. If you want to

check in terms of what their audited financial statements are, you can talk to them. There are many people in the province of Alberta, many builders, many landlords, that are providing housing. There are so many not-for-profit organizations that we're supporting in this province. He brings up one company there. I don't know what he's trying to attempt to do here in the House. Is he saying that they're doing something improper? I haven't heard him say that.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I can't believe that answer from the Premier, what little of it I actually understood. I heard him say that I should take it up with the company if they're planning to jack up rents because of this government's failed policy. Mr. Premier, what is that if not an absolute abdication of your responsibility as Premier of this province?

Mr. Stelmach: Again it's an absolute twist on words. You didn't mention that they're going to be jacking up rents right across all the units they own by \$1,600 a month. You know, it's one thing to ask a question, but it's another thing to start twisting these things to try and embarrass a company or any other developer in this province. They constantly do that here, and they're wondering why people back off building more units? It's because of people like that.

Mr. Mason: There are some of us in this House that are at least trying to do our job.

Now, this report goes on to say, "In 2007, we expect our Alberta assets to continue to shine, remaining the main engine of our Trust's growth." In other words, they're expecting rents to continue to climb in this province, and they're going to make a big, fat profit from it. Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the Premier why he didn't see this coming. I'll quote from the report again. "Our market fundamentals are based on simple supply and demand forces which are fairly easily predicted." Why didn't the government predict this?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the success of government policies in the early '90s in terms of paying off the debt and putting in place a very predictable, sustainable investment climate in this province has attracted tens of thousands of new Albertans to this province, over 500,000, if not closer to 600,000, coming to the province of Alberta. They're coming from other provinces. They're coming from other parts of the country. And do you know why? Because they can find a job here. They can actually raise their family and lead to retirement. There's something that was said to me the other day. Alberta is the only province where a grandfather and parents and their children can stay in the same province. Children don't have to leave to seek their fortune someplace else. They stay right here.

The Speaker: The leader of the third party will table the appropriate copies of the appropriate document at tablings.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Deerfoot Trail Improvements

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all know that Calgary is a major contributor to Alberta's strength. Given that it has had a big population increase, many large construction projects everywhere, and heavy traffic congestion every day, some of my constituents have asked me what our government does for Calgary. For example, they experience traffic problems on Deerfoot Trail, and they want to know if our government is spending enough to solve the problem of the Deerfoot Trail. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Can you, hon. minister, tell my

constituents what your department is doing to deal with the Deerfoot Trail situation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're constantly reviewing the situation on the Deerfoot and always working to make improvements on the Deerfoot. Since taking over the road in 2000, we've spent over \$200 million on improvements to the Deerfoot. We've extended the road to the south, built new interchanges, and removed stop lights to improve traffic flow. To address the high volume of traffic on Deerfoot, we're investing hundreds of millions of dollars in the northeast and northwest sections of the ring road, and both of these projects are under construction as we speak.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's very good that the province embarked on construction of the costly ring road around Calgary and took over the costly maintenance of Deerfoot Trail, and 5 cents of the 9 cents per litre fuel tax in Calgary is for Calgary. Certainly, it lightens the tax burden for Calgaryans. But given that traffic safety is a vital issue, my supplemental question is to the same minister. What are you doing to improve the safety of the Deerfoot Trail?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, we have a number of projects to increase efficiency and safety on the Deerfoot Trail. We're improving the Peigan Trail interchange to make getting on and off Deerfoot a lot safer. We're adding extra lanes and doing improvements in the Beddington Trail area and to the interchange to make this part safer. We're looking at major changes to the intersection with Glenmore Trail in conjunction with city projects to make this part of the Deerfoot function much safer. Finally, we've installed a new post and cable barrier system to the north end of Deerfoot Trail to prevent vehicles from crossing the meridian.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that our government spent lots of taxpayers' dollars on the cable barrier along the centre of the Deerfoot Trail. My question is to the same minister. What evidence is there that this safety device is working?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, the new barriers got their first test last week. While I'm not overly encouraged to hear that this first test happened so quickly, I'm very pleased that the new barrier system performed as expected. It prevented a vehicle from crossing the median and crashing into oncoming traffic. Injuries to all those involved and damage to vehicles was minimal compared to what usually happens in head-on collisions and at highway speeds like they travel on the Deerfoot. So this new system has performed well, and I'm confident that we may be using it in a lot more areas.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Temporary Rent Regulation (continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's version of managing growth is to add locomotives to the runaway train of the economy. Rents have been increasing in my constituency of

Edmonton-Centre for over a year now, but not one new rental unit has been built to capitalize on this situation. What we have is a complete failure of the rental marketplace. My questions are to the minister of housing. The minister plans to meet with landlords who are gouging their tenants, but I'd like to know what definition the government is using to decide how much of an increase constitutes gouging. Twenty per cent? Fifty per cent? Two hundred per cent? What is it?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that in Alberta in the postsecondary education segment alone Alberta is responding with over a thousand student units.

The members opposite talk about ideologies, and I just want to talk about facts. The key is to create a greater supply of units available that will reduce the market pressure that we are facing. Putting regulations and controls that will reduce this incentive to build new supply will hurt exactly the people that the members opposite are trying to help. [interjections]

The Speaker: I recognize one hon. member to ask a question. I recognize somebody to respond. Then all I hear are catcalls. If I recognize you to ask a question, let's have the courtesy of hearing the answer.

The hon. member.

1:50

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I still want a definition of gouging.

To the same minister. Joy is a new mom living with her five-month-old baby in Edmonton-Centre, but even with a subsidy 70 per cent of her income is used to pay the rent. Joy recently became a Canadian citizen but is struggling to make ends meet. How does the minister expect to draw people from other provinces and countries to live and work in Alberta when they may face the same situation as Joy?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what rent supplements are about. Rent supplements are about trying to provide affordable housing for individuals that are in need, for individuals that need support. [interjections]

Mr. Speaker, if the opposition does not want to hear the answer, then that's okay.

The Speaker: Go on, hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister. This once-a-year limit on increases without the rest of the incentives to create housing and provide supports is penalizing the few good landlords I have who were raising rents by reasonable amounts over time. Why did the government cherry-pick through the package of recommendations from the task force rather than implementing a comprehensive plan that would actually work?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, on one hand the member of the opposition wants to provide incentives. On the other hand, the member of the opposition wants to present controls. You cannot have both. If you want to have an increase of rentals, you cannot have regulations that will suffocate growth.

We as a government are dealing with the issues of individuals that have challenges in paying for rent. Mr. Speaker, \$285 million of new money.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

School Board Deficits

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Education. It is a fact that in Alberta we spend more on education per capita than any other province in Canada, yet I'm concerned when I read that almost half our school boards may be in a deficit position. Now, the minister has said that there were no deficits. The opposition says that over 30 boards show deficits. Who's right? If there are deficits, can the minister explain to this House why school boards are running a deficit when our allocation is the highest in the country?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is a very good question because while some 30 school boards, as has been mentioned in this House, are currently running an annual deficit, with the exception of two boards we have accumulated surpluses with those school boards that total about \$220 million. The only way that you can access that accumulated surplus is if you run an annual deficit. So to say that the school boards are in a debt position is sort of like you, Mr. Speaker, being a hundred dollars overdrawn in your chequing account and having a thousand dollars in your savings account and saying that you're in debt.

Rev. Abbott: Well, that clears things up a little bit, Mr. Speaker. But to the same minister. Several school boards in my constituency have expressed concern to me that the 3 per cent grant in this year's budget will not meet the demands in their district. Can the minister help me in explaining to my school boards how they can get by on 3 per cent?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we did increase operating grants by 3 per cent over last year. What hasn't been mentioned is the substantial increases that have gone into English as a Second Language programs, early childhood services for mild and moderate disabilities, career and technology funding that has increased substantially, not to mention the \$25 million good-faith initiative for recruitment of teachers. So overall our increase, including the in-year funding of last year, is over 5 per cent, and if you take the budget documents that were tabled in this House last year and the exact same budget documents tabled this year, the increase in education spending is almost 10 per cent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Very eye-opening. My final supplementary to the same minister. More than 50 school districts in the province are facing salary negotiations with the teachers' union this fall, and again several school districts have expressed concern to me that we may be facing a number of strikes as students head back to school in September. Can the minister tell this House what he plans to do about the situation?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the reason some of the school boards are expressing concerns to the member is because of some of the irresponsible comments that are being made out there by those who are predicting doom and gloom in the labour negotiations before they even start. So I'm confident. I don't believe the majority of teachers in this province want to go on strike, so I would suggest: let's allow the local school boards and the local ATAs to negotiate. Unlike some of the opposition members I'm confident that we're going to have a situation where . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Rental Increases

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week my constituency office received 300 copies – 300 copies – of a land-use framework publication from Sustainable Resource Development. This is a worthwhile exercise which the Official Opposition has been calling for for some time. However, housing affordability is by far the number one issue in Edmonton-Rutherford right now. Landlords are confused about their responsibilities, tenants are panicking, yet when my staff asked for only 50 copies of the task force report on housing, we were informed by Municipal Affairs that we could only have five because of printing costs. That's simply not enough to meet the demand. My question is for the Premier. What immediate steps are you taking to alleviate the confusion and chaos that your government has created by mishandling its response to the task force recommendations? Can we get some more copies of the report?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, there's absolutely no question that there is confusion being sown by some people in this House. There's absolutely no question. The intention of this government has been very clear from the start. We will help the people that we are obligated to help, the people that need our help. We have responded in a very responsible manner to the report, and I can assure the hon. member that we will personally send over as many copies as he would like to his office should he bring it the attention of our office.

Mr. R. Miller: We already asked, and they said no. I will table the document later, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Marilyn Sjulstad is in the public gallery today. She is on AISH, a widow on a fixed income. Her survivor income is deducted from her AISH funds dollar for dollar. Her apartment rent has increased \$230 in the last nine months, and she fully expects that there will be another substantial increase soon. She's asked for and received the subsidized housing application forms from Capital Housing; however, she's worried because friends have told her that she has too much money in the bank, and her car is too new to receive the subsidy. Marilyn has written a question for the Premier, and it is this: what is your government going to do about the outrageous rent increases that people are dealing with?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, we are bringing forward legislation – I'm sure we're going to debate it this week – about putting stability into the number of rent increases that anyone is subject to. If the lady has already received a rent increase this year, then she won't be worried about another increase for at least a year, which does give her an opportunity and every Albertan a chance to plan their response to the particular situation they're in.

Mr. R. Miller: Mr. Speaker, Janis Stewart writes the following: living on a fixed income in a modest Edmonton apartment building in the vicinity of her terminally ill parent, having chronic illness, and confronting negligible accommodation options, she has been penalized with two rent increases in the past six months that make a total of more than 20 per cent. Her question for the Premier: will the hon. Premier reconsider his decision, which directly contributes to expanding the divide between the advantaged and disadvantaged Albertans, and impose a ceiling to allowable rent increases?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, you know, it's kind of strange that we're being accused of living in our political ideology that doesn't allow us to see their political ideology. The biggest difference is that ours works, and their's doesn't. We have history on our side.

We've got the simple facts that this government isn't ready to say to people: we're going to take what's yours without compensation. We're going to try and deal with those, and we'll be happy to. Like the hon. minister said yesterday, don't just bring it up here and grandstand and thump the desk. Bring the name forward, and let the different ministers responsible help the people when they need help instead of keeping the information on their desk until they can stand here and try and show Albertans that they really care when, in fact, obviously, the way they treat the people and grandstand is irresponsible.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Crown Prosecutors

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A recent media story suggested a concern about the high workload and low level of experience of Alberta's Crown prosecutors. My questions are all for the Minister of Justice. Can the minister tell me if there is cause for concern?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the outset let me say that, in fact, our Crown prosecutors are under significant pressure. We would like our average level of experience to be greater than it is, but let's put it in context. Alberta Justice is the largest law firm in the province. We have about 400 lawyers, 250 of whom are Crown prosecutors, and like all businesses in the province, we are fighting with the market to attract and retain good candidates. At this point in time, however, all of our Crown prosecutors are professionals, and the average experience level is 11 years.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can you tell us why the workload of Crown prosecutors in Alberta is so high?

Mr. Stevens: In 2004, when I became the Minister of Justice, the Crown prosecutors had the second highest level of workload in the country. The number of files has increased since that point in time. The complexity of the files has increased as a result of organized crime, as a result of Internet crime, as a result of economic crime, and also as a result of increased Charter defences. But what we are doing is addressing that. Over the last two years we've increased the number of prosecutors by 25, and we also have in this year's budget an additional 10. I can tell you also, Mr. Speaker, that we are in the process of taking a look at our pay schedule and benefits with respect to the Crown.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: can the minister tell us if this issue is placing the administration of justice in Alberta at risk?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that I'm aware of absolutely no significant cases which have been impacted as a result of this particular matter. In fact, the Crown continues to have a very good success rate with respect to the prosecution, and there have

been a number of significant cases in recent history where we have been successful, which have been on the front pages of our newspapers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Temporary Rent Regulation

(continued)

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government continues to defend what most Albertans see as a failure to address the affordable housing crisis. Simply throwing lots of money at a problem will not fix it. There needs to be a plan, and integral to that plan are solutions to short-term rent gouging that our constituents are faced with. Delores Austin has seen her rent increase by over \$200 a year. Renate Van Dorsser is looking at a \$300 increase. The list goes on and on, from seniors to students to families just trying to get by. They want answers, and they're watching. To the Premier: why is the government not helping decent, hard-working Albertans keep their homes in this out-of-control market by implementing temporary rent guidelines limiting the percentage that rents can go up by? Why? And what exactly is this \$285 million that the government keeps talking about? How is going to be split up, and what exactly is it going to pay for?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

An Hon. Member: Great question.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and it is a good question. The \$285 million is new money: \$100 million for the new municipal sustainability housing program – this is all increases, by the way – \$96 million in enhanced capital to increase affordable housing units, a \$13 million increase for homeless support, a \$3 million increase for provincial homeless initiative, a \$14.3 million increase for rent supplement programs, a \$4.3 million increase for housing providers and special-purpose housing, \$45 million allocated to Wood Buffalo in response to the Radke report, \$7 million to the new homeless and eviction fund, \$2.5 million for the new Alberta transition housing initiative, and . . .

The Speaker: And we'll go on.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On December 15, 2006, this Premier issued a so-called mandate letter to his new Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing outlining priorities and setting out the Premier's expectations of his new housing minister and his conduct. In terms of the housing crisis the letter included only one directive: to establish a housing task force to develop a plan to increase the availability of affordable housing. That was it. Obviously, the Premier feels that this has been accomplished, even if most Albertans feel differently and even though the minister came up with a plan that ignored over half of the recommendations of his own task force. To the Premier: are you satisfied with your housing minister's performance on this issue? Are you comfortable defending his and your entire government's way of handling this file in general and this housing crisis in particular? Are you comfortable with his performance?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I

need to say that, yes, in the mandate letter one of the mandates was to establish a housing task force. The mandate letter does not suggest that we should establish a housing task force and do nothing about it. The focus of the government with the \$285 million did exactly that. We took the housing task force and looked at the primary recommendations, and we have addressed them. So if the member opposite would look at the housing task force, look at what the primary recommendations were . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thirty-eight of the 52 recommendations, Mr. Speaker, were ignored. Thirty-eight.

No matter what we hear on the government side, there is no denying that thousands of Albertans feel that this government has failed them, people like Pat and James Arnott and Marilyn Caskey from Edmonton-McClung, who are in the gallery today. One sentence in the housing minister's mandate letter reads: "We need to be out from behind our desks, listening to what is truly important to Albertans." Well, we all know that the Premier listened to the Tory party faithful at the convention on the weekend when they rejected calls to protect renters. Given the massive Public Affairs Bureau, which answers to the Premier, will the Premier now try to listen to Albertans at large, who may not necessarily share the views of his party or caucus, and instruct the Public Affairs Bureau to immediately seek Albertans' public opinion on this issue, ask if temporary rent guidelines should be brought in, and ask whether the public approves of how you guys handled this situation?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, we just had a large gathering of our party members. They overwhelmingly said: "We respect what happened. We know that short-term solutions aren't the answer to this, that increasing capacity of all kinds of housing is really the only financially and morally responsible solution to what we face."

You know, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre said what a terrible thing it was that rents were going up in downtown Edmonton. Compared to the cities around the world, to have a vibrant and active and expanding downtown centre is a good thing. Most of them have been abandoned. Alberta has created an opportunity for many cities to expand and to have their downtowns vibrant. I, unfortunately, live in her riding.

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

Homeless and Eviction Fund

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday we heard the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry tell the House that the homeless and eviction fund will help people facing eviction because of huge rent increases. Well, we took the minister's advice and called 1-866-644-5135 about this fund, and we were told – I actually would like to play the recording, but I know I wouldn't get away with it. The minister would like to know. Let me quote. This is the answer given with that phone number: currently there is no way to access anything yet; they're working on it, and that's about all I can tell you. We asked when the fund would be ready and were told: unfortunately, they don't give us a time frame. Now, my question to the minister is simply this: why would the minister mislead thousands of renters facing eviction by promising funds that weren't there?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, clearly, I also indicated that if people had

difficulty, they could go to any of 59 offices or call any of 59 offices in Alberta and speak to them. We've been working on the guidelines with our ministry of municipal affairs and also our own ministry. We're on the threshold of announcing exactly how they would apply.

Let's take a look at the other fund we have in place. Mr. Speaker, for those that are low-income, when I spoke in this House about a hundred million dollars that is available to provide housing assistance, there is already a program in place. The fund that is going to be established is for those that are . . .

The Speaker: I have to call on the hon. member now. Hon. member, please.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is the government's own phone number that this minister quoted. There are thousands of Albertans facing a crisis. When they make a call and something like this happens, how can the government have any credibility? How can this minister have any credibility when she stands up in this House and says to phone this number and that's the type of message that they get?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, a previous questioner highlighted the same issue, and I have been asking our staff to immediately look into why that answer was given. What I can say to Albertans is that we hope that by at least Friday everybody will have an understanding of what the criteria are and know how it will be administered. The one point that I want to make quite clearly is that for those that are actually low-income, there is a fund that is well understood. This new fund on homeless and eviction is a fund that we have to be very clear is not intended to trespass onto the other particular fund. We will make it very clear how that fund will be expended this week.

2:10

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, the minister said that she didn't know. So this government is totally incompetent. They can't even plan their own eviction fund. When they stand up in the House and tell people to call, that's the type of message that they give. This eviction fund is something that came from the task force, but it was part of having rent guidelines in place. All this eviction fund is going to be is a supplement for landlords. Would the minister acknowledge that?

Ms Evans: No, I will not.

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

Highway 13

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Friday, April 20, about 80 people showed up for a meeting in the little town of Rosalind. Those concerned citizens were there to find out about the timelines for fixing the atrocious conditions of highway 13 from Killam to Legacy Junction outside of Camrose. That major provincial artery is hardly passable in the rain because of the ruts worn in the road, and most ambulances avoid the road altogether when possible because it's rough enough to endanger the health of sensitive patients being transported to Camrose. To the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation: when will this road be fixed to the standards of a major provincial artery?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I'd like to thank the hon. member for his question because this is a very, very serious issue. My department is very aware of the problems with highway 13. We are in the process of purchasing the right-of-way right now to do the eventual widening and reconstruction of the road. While this project is not in our current year's plan right now, we are taking the initial steps towards improving the program right away.

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, it was brought to my attention by a staff member of the department that the minister confirmed to the county of Camrose that there could be done a rut fill and thin lift overlay as a temporary solution to make the road tolerable and passable until such time as the necessary re-engineering and development of the road could be completed. My constituents would like to know: when can this important rut fill and thin lift overlay be completed?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, our plan is to try to get the rut fill done for sure this year and the thin overlay if possible. If not, it will be on our priority list for next year. In the meantime, as soon as the weather permits, our maintenance contractor is going to be out there doing whatever he can to get the ruts out of the road now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister assure me and my constituents that performing the temporary measure of a rut fill and thin lift overlay will not delay the major construction work of widening the road and rebuilding the base, that is so desperately needed to bring the road up to its proper status as a major provincial transportation artery?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, the rut fill is actually the first phase of the construction. It will not delay the eventual widening and reconstruction. The fill and overlay are meant to give motorists a better road surface until we can get the major project done, and it will have no effect on the timing of getting the major project done.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Temporary Rent Regulation

(continued)

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Jim Sexsmith is an 80-year-old veteran seated in the members' gallery who is still very active in my constituency. He's always advocating for the underdog. If he feels that there's an injustice, he always complains about it. He writes letters, e-mails, makes phone calls to try to sort things out. Now that his rent has increased 20 per cent, he's advocating for this government to do something. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: what does the minister have to say to Jim, who is afraid that he will have nowhere to live?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government has responded to the housing task force and the recommendations that were made by that housing task force. [interjections] I hear some comments from members opposite. There were, of course, some recommendations that weren't accepted. Those recommendations were not accepted because they were already being done. I want to say that we do have in place the support for those individuals.

Mr. Agnihotri: To the same minister. Jim has lived in the same apartment for 19 years, but he cannot afford to pay an extra \$125 per

month and cannot find an affordable housing option with an elevator to accommodate his disability. How does the government's policy help Jim today?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I do not know Jim's individual situation, but as I have said in this House before, we do have a program of rent supplement to try to address those concerns. So I ask that Jim contact either my office or 422-0122, which is the rent supplement program, and we would very much try to deal with his concerns.

Mr. Agnihotri: To the same minister again: can the minister tell Jim how this government's policies will relieve the stress, uncertainty, and burden of moving for seniors and people with disabilities?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would love to be able to help him to the best of my ability. If he will contact our office, I would be very happy to try to deal with his challenges.

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

Drug Treatment Courts

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Illegal drugs and alcohol addiction not only affect public safety, but they place a significant economic burden on all segments of society. Drug-related crime cannot be reduced without first addressing underlying addictions. By emphasizing treatment rather than incarceration, drug treatment courts can significantly reduce the tremendous burden of substance abuse and its related health/socioeconomic costs on society. A pilot drug treatment court was launched in Edmonton in March 2005, and the pilot was a success and resulted in cost savings. My first question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. How does this minister propose that judges in this province will actually decide who needs access to drug treatment as a provision of incarceration, and will a professional needs assessment take place?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, solutions to substance abuse are very complex, and one of the promising areas that we're working on are these pilot drug courts, particularly the one in Edmonton. The situation is that those who get into the program basically have an alternative to incarceration. If the treatment is completed, those who complete the program end up with a criminal record but do not serve jail time. The people who are selected for this particular program are carefully screened. First of all, they must apply. The files are reviewed by federal and provincial prosecutors to see if the offenders do in fact qualify. The eligibility criteria for participation include that the crime committed was not violent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Drug treatment courts have the potential to facilitate timely treatment responses to individuals with substance abuse problems. Research tells us that drug courts have experienced varied success in terms of long-term outcomes for participants and that there is also limited information available on the cost-effectiveness of this intervention. Again to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General: from this minister's experience what have the major issues across the country been with respect to drug

treatment courts, and are these issues being addressed adequately in Alberta?

Mr. Stevens: Well, Mr. Speaker, basically the question is whether or not they're effective. I think that the important information I need to get before you and the members of the House is the eligibility with respect to the matter. First of all, those who get into the program are ones where the crime committed was not violent, did not involve children, and the offender is not associated with a gang. In addition, an addiction assessment must be completed before the application is approved, and the assessment determines that if the crime was motivated by addiction, it could be prevented in the future if that addiction is not present.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Solutions to substance abuse are complex and need to include promising alternatives such as drug treatment courts. However, experience in the field of drug treatment is a primary focus here. Historically AADAC has provided treatment to individuals referred through the regular court system and now provides specialized addictions treatment to those identified through the Edmonton drug treatment court. Could the Minister of Justice and Attorney General please expand on the role an agency such as AADAC or other organizations would have in the preliminary development of a drug treatment court and in implementation?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, in Alberta we have the benefit of AADAC, which has experience in excess of 50 years. In other jurisdictions the communities, in fact, establish a specific program for these courts. Here in Alberta we get to use AADAC and the services that they have. That obviously enhances the effective nature of this. There's no doubt that the use of existing community facilities in courts like drug courts or other specialty courts is absolutely essential in those courts being effective.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 84 questions and answers today.

head:

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am actually continuing to table some signatures from all over the province – today it's 419 – calling on the government to

take immediate, meaningful measures to help low-income and fixed-income Albertans, Albertans with disabilities and those who are hard-to-house maintain their places of residence and cope with the escalating and frequent increases in their monthly rental costs.

Thank you.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Hon. leader of the third party, you have a tabling?

Mr. Mason: I do, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much. I would like to table excerpts from the 2006 annual report of Boardwalk Real Estate Investment Trust. The report trumpets the opportunity for rental increases because of Alberta's distorted housing market.

Thank you.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a letter from Giancarlo Grande of Edmonton. He is writing because he's concerned about rental increases. "For myself the rising rents are causing me great amounts of stress because I live off of AISH."

The second letter is from Linton Delainey. He's sending two letters, one to the Premier and one to Edmonton Mayor Mandel, indicating the urgent need for a province-wide regional governance plan as outlined in the report from the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table five copies of the proposal to build a huge 2,800 square foot fab shop in Tofield – this is going to employ over 2,000 temporary foreign workers – and its project profile. I would urge all hon. members to have a look at this.

Thank you.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the appropriate number of copies of correspondence between the constituency office of Edmonton-Rutherford and the office of the manager of the secretariat of the Affordable Housing Task Force, Municipal Affairs and Housing, where Edmonton-Rutherford asked for 50 copies of the housing task force report, and we were told that we could only have five. I look forward to the reversal of that decision.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a single tabling today, which is a letter to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing responding to the defamatory comments he made to me in this House yesterday. In the letter I reference the attachment of Sessional Paper 331/2007, a letter I wrote to both the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry and to him on April 24, '07, on behalf of my Calgary-Varsity constituents, seeking financial information.

Mr. Speaker, I will continue to forcefully advocate for my constituents . . .

The Speaker: Okay. That's fine.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I actually have several tablings. The first one is the Canadian Housing Observer report on average rents for two-bedroom apartments for the period '92 to 2005, detailing the Canadian average province by province and for the major metropolitan areas.

The second one is two pages from Rental Market Report: Alberta Highlights, released in December 2006 by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The first one talks about the vacancy rates by apartment type or bedroom type in Alberta's major centres in 2005 and 2006. Then the second one shows the average rental cost, again in the major centres and again by bedroom type, in '05 and '06.

The third one is a letter from Edmonton-McClung constituent Delores Austin, who is here today, talking about rental costs being out of reach for most of the working public and certainly for low-income families on assistance.

My fourth one is another letter from another constituent, Marilyn Caskey, who is here again today, addressed to the minister of municipal affairs and asking: what are people supposed to do in the meantime while waiting for new affordable housing units to be built?

The fifth tabling is a letter from another constituent, Roberta Baert, calling for help from the Premier for people on fixed incomes such as seniors – and she is one herself – indicating that without a percentage cap on allowable rent increases . . .

The Speaker: Let's just table and move on, okay?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Elsalhy: I have two more.

The Speaker: Well, fine. I'm recognizing now the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning. I'll come back to you later if you've got some more.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and table two sets of documents. One is a project description of the South Meager geothermal project from Western GeoPower Corp., which could in the near future provide power to 80,000 households in western Canada.

The second is Technologies & Applications in geothermal from Natural Resources Canada.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to table five copies today of a document which outlines the accumulated operating surplus of Alberta school boards as of August 31, 2006.

I also want to table five copies of a letter to Mr. Frank Bruseker, the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Food.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table the response to Written Question 11.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you indeed, Mr. Speaker. I have my two last ones. A handwritten letter from constituent James Arnott blames the government for creating this overheated housing market and refusing to do anything to assist renters. He questions why the Tories are so reluctant to impose rent controls.

The last one is another handwritten letter, from Pat Arnott, questioning: how many people does the term "Alberta boom" apply to? She calls it "a gold rush to poverty." She actually highlights how her rent has increased and the limited income that she is on.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister challenged the opposition to share these letters and stories. Mr. Minister, consider yourself served.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Speaker's Ruling Tabling Documents

The Speaker: I'm going to remind hon. members again that when it comes to tablings, this is one of the few jurisdictions anywhere that uses the British parliamentary model that allows tablings of

documents other than officially, statutorily required documents. We have to be very careful with this privilege that we have in here. It's meant to table and not to editorialize or give a statement with respect to it. The members have an opportunity in the Routine called Members' Statements. If they want to refer to letters that they've tabled in Members' Statements, that's perfectly fine under that two-minute thing, but here it deals with tablings, and brevity would be very much appreciated.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Ms Evans, Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry, pursuant to the Engineering, Geological and Geophysical Professions Act the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta annual report 2006.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Motions**

The Clerk: Government Motion 19, the hon. Mr. Hancock.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe we have agreement in the House that the motion that ought to be put today was slightly different than the one I gave notice of motion on. So with the pleasure of the Speaker, I'd like to test that theory by suggesting that the motion should read:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) the Legislative Assembly convene at 7 p.m. for hours 10 to 12 of Committee of Supply on Tuesday, May 8, and that the ministries called for consideration will now be Treasury Board, Health and Wellness, and Municipal Affairs and Housing; and at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, May 9, 2007, for government business; and that hours 13 to 15 of Committee of Supply, scheduled for the afternoon of Thursday, May 10, 2007, be rescheduled to the afternoon of May 16, 2007; and that a revised Committee of Supply schedule be tabled forthwith.

2:30

With the unanimous consent of the House to deal with that, it has the effect of accomplishing what we've discussed, which is to have Committee of Supply this evening be what was intended for tomorrow afternoon, which leaves free tomorrow afternoon and tomorrow evening to debate Bill 34 in second reading and committee and Thursday in the afternoon to hopefully complete committee and perhaps third reading of Bill 34. The Committee of Supply which was previously scheduled for Thursday afternoon would then be held on Wednesday, May 16. There's an afternoon there which will need to be scheduled, and that would be the subject of refile the schedule for Committee of Supply.

With the consent of the House we'll proceed on that motion. Failing that, I will move the government motion in the order that we gave notice and move an amendment.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair has to assume that there has been some discussion among the House leaders with respect to this matter. So the question that the hon. Government House Leader has: oral notice was given yesterday, and then the Order Paper today has a motion. Now the hon. Government House Leader is amending that motion with the request that we have unanimous consent so that we can go forward, but we also have a debatable motion that hon. members might have an option to debate. On the assumption – on the assumption – that there's agreement in the government caucus,

agreement in the opposition caucus, agreement in the third party caucus, and agreement from the other two members, the chair could ask for unanimous consent now, but if it isn't given . . .

Mr. Hancock: Then, Mr. Speaker, I'd propose to move forward with the motion at hand.

The Speaker: Well, this is a risky business, if the chair is to call the question for unanimous consent. This matter, by the way, has not been circulated to all members. I assume that all members have seen this. Have all members seen this? Okay. On the assumption that all members have seen this motion of the hon. Government House Leader, is there unanimous consent to move to approve Government Motion 19 as amended?

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: Then, Government House Leader.

Evening Sitings on May 8 and 9

19. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) the Legislative Assembly convene at 8 p.m. for night sittings on Tuesday, May 8, and Wednesday, May 9, 2007.

The Speaker: This is a debatable motion. Hon. Deputy Government House Leader, do you want to participate?

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I would like to propose an amendment to the motion, and I have a written copies of the amendment if I could ask one of the pages to circulate them if necessary.

The Speaker: Yes. We'll need that. You can read it into the record as it's being circulated to all members.

Mr. Renner: I move that Government Motion 19 be amended as follows:

- (a) by striking out "8 p.m. for night sittings on Tuesday, May 8," and substituting "7 p.m. for hours 10 to 12 of Committee of Supply on Tuesday, May 8, and that the ministries called for consideration will now be Treasury Board, Health and Wellness, and Municipal Affairs and Housing";
- (b) by striking out "and Wednesday, May 9, 2007," and substituting "convene at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, May 9, 2007, for government business";
- (c) by adding the following after "government business":
"; that hours 13 to 15 of Committee of Supply, scheduled for the afternoon of Thursday, May 10, 2007, be rescheduled to the afternoon of May 16, 2007; and that a revised Committee of Supply schedule be tabled forthwith."

The Speaker: We will await the circulation of this amendment before proceeding so that all members will know exactly what it is.

Well, hon. members, we have an amendment to a motion, and it's a debatable amendment. Is there anyone who would like to participate in the debate on the amendment?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, it was interesting, I thought, that the agreement that had been reached between the three official parties in the House was not agreed to by the House, which requires unanimous consent. I think it's important to say that all members of this House are important and need to be consulted when arrangements are made.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I do want to indicate just a concern at how quickly we have reverted to the old ways of doing things and having debates into the evening. I know that we had agreed as an interim measure to have evening sittings to help deal with the question of the estimates, and we agreed to that and certainly would honour that.

I do believe, Mr. Speaker, that the question of Bill 34 is something that needs a little bit of comment. This is a very, very important bill. It's very critical at this point. It's a very hot public issue now, and I certainly think that it's a matter of considerable urgency for many Albertans who are caught in a very difficult time. It is my view that that bill ought to be debated thoroughly and with full opportunity from all members of the House to participate and for amendments to come forward and receive due consideration. I think it's less than desirable to be having a debate on that bill late into the evenings, when the people who are affected by it are asleep in their beds, presuming that they have beds.

I will not oppose the motion, but I do want to indicate that I think it's very important that we recognize that this bill needs full debate in the light of day and under the scrutiny of the public, and I object to any suggestion that it should be dealt with in very late sittings.

We apparently had got past that and had made decisions that it would not be needed. If the government had been on top of this issue and was well organized, I don't think that it would have been necessary.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair has before himself an amendment. There's nothing in here about any bill, so relevancy in this discussion is also important. We're dealing with the amendment.

Would anybody else like to participate in this amendment?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: Now, should we call the question on the motion as amended?

Hon. Members: Question.

The Speaker: No one wishes to participate, then? Okay.

[Government Motion 19 as amended carried unanimously]

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

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

Before I call on the hon. minister of municipal affairs to start, I just want to clarify for all the members: I'm circulating Committee of Supply rules for the opposition parties for members on the floor. I'll read it into the record, and you'll be getting a copy.

It's my understanding that the House leaders have reached an agreement, or at least there's no opposition by members of the government, to have opposition caucus staff members on the floor of the Chamber during consideration of departmental estimates. As a result, I'd like to outline the rules which will govern the admission of caucus staff to the floor of the Assembly during Committee of Supply.

Only ongoing staff employed on behalf of a caucus by the

Legislative Assembly Office will be provided with this privilege. I sincerely hope that we will not be asked to interpret the understanding of this last statement. Opposition staff may advise and sit next to or behind the opposition critics; however, they may not speak on the member's behalf or participate in the debate nor respond in any way to the words being spoken in debate.

Officials must meet the accepted dress standard for access to the Chamber. Use of cellular phones is prohibited, but officials may use laptop computers or PDAs in support of their members. Access to the Internet or Legislative Assembly intranet will not be provided. Any official occupying the chair of a member who wishes to address the committee must yield the seat immediately to that member. Each caucus must provide on one day's notice in writing the names and job titles of the officials to be admitted to the Assembly floor to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, with a copy to the Sergeant-at-Arms.

This matter is being dealt with as an administrative interpretation by the Speaker as there is no provision in the Standing Orders to allow participation by opposition officials in the employ of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta on the floor of the Assembly. Standing Order 59.01(3) provides admission to the floor solely for officials of the government. Should a member raise a point of order or a point of privilege with respect to this interpretation, it is probable that the ruling would be in favour of the point raised, and Official Opposition officials would be unable to be on the floor. Needless to say, this procedural matter would be best accommodated by an additional clause in the Standing Orders which would permit such.

So that's basically it. If there are any questions on that, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Yes, Mr. Chair. Are you suggesting, then, that we can't bring our staff in today, that we have to have 24 hours' notice, so we can't start this until tomorrow?

The Chair: If you have a list of the staff that would be brought on, that would be fine.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks. So I can, in fact, have a list for today, give it to you, and then away we go.

The Chair: Right.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Mr. Chairman, just one small nit-picking detail, but there actually isn't a House leaders' agreement. I just simply indicated that if the opposition wishes to request, I wouldn't object.

The Chair: Yes, I did point that out. I said that at least there was no opposition from the Government House Leader that I was aware of.

Mr. Hancock: Also, I might indicate, Mr. Chairman, that as a result of this afternoon's question period, at which time there were a number of people in the galleries and members of the opposition asking questions and asking if the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing would meet with them and he'd said that he would, apparently 30 of them have shown up in his office. So I've indicated to the members opposite that we'll have to reverse the order of appearance today. The Minister of Health and Wellness will go first, and the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing will go second.

The Chair: All right. Then if that's all right, I will recognize the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

head: **Main Estimates 2007-08**

Health and Wellness

Mr. Hancock: I made opening remarks on the record the other day, and I'm sure that the hon. members have had an opportunity to peruse them, so rather than take more time, I'll just avail myself of any questions that they might have to ask.

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

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I start the discussion today with Health, I would say to the House leader that, you know, we planned for one thing and we got another. The minister should have known that he has a responsibility here. So, I mean, it just seems like disorganization. Now we have to scramble in our times. I hope that the message is very clear to the government that this is not the way to do business.

Mr. Chairman, to switch gears and go to health, I want to talk about . . .

Mr. Hancock: Point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Are you rising on a point of order?

Point of Order

Order of Business

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Chairman, if the opposition wants to insist on the order – I mean, they're the ones who asked the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to meet with the 30 people. If the member wants to insist on proceeding in the previous order, I'll have someone go down to the minister's office and indicate that the opposition would rather that he not meet with the people he sent down there and that he should get up here as early as possible. I'm entirely at his disposal.

Mr. Martin: It was not us that asked for the meeting, Mr. Chairman. It was the other opposition party.

The Chair: Please, hon. member.

Mr. Martin: Okay. We're here. We're ready to go. So let's move on. The point's been made.

The Chair: Could you direct your comments through the chair, please.

Mr. Martin: Yeah. Sorry. Are we ready, Mr. Chair, to go now?

The Chair: Are you ready to proceed on Health and Wellness?

Mr. Martin: Yes, I am.

The Chair: Okay. Then proceed.

Debate Continued

Mr. Martin: Okay. Mr. Chairman, I'd like to move into sort of staffing, to begin with. There's a myriad of issues, obviously, that we're facing in an overheated economy. We talk about housing, health care, education, but certainly the overheated economy is

creating pressures, to put it bluntly, in terms of health care. There's no doubt about that. We were supposed to have had a framework for the health workforce plan that's been promised to us for a long time, Mr. Chairman, and I'm now told that it's off somewhere down the line.

2:50

The reason I bring this up is because it ties into the questions that the minister – and thanks for getting back on these written questions. When we asked about the sick leave taken by registered nurses and LPNs, there were some very startling figures there, as the minister is well aware, especially, I noticed, in Calgary: almost double. I would suggest that the problem that we're facing in the health field is that it's sort of overstressed, overworked, and can't keep up. In Calgary we're dealing with code burgundies. It's the same situation in Edmonton, and we know what's happening in other places.

I'm not sure that there's an easy answer to this particular dilemma, but the task force, the health workforce plan, was to give us some suggestions about that. I think that, probably, it doesn't look very good. Now, I know that the minister will say: it's not just here in Alberta; I was just at a conference, and we have a problem with the health workers right across the country, perhaps in the world. Well, I don't know how we're going to deal with this. We had the cuts in the mid-90s. We were catching up there, and now we've got the influx of population that we've talked about. It's a very dangerous situation.

You know, we had the example today. The Cross Cancer Institute responded and I think in a meaningful way to the problems that they faced. Whether that was overwork or not, I guess that one could speculate on the human error there. But the short question that I have is: when can we expect the health workforce plan to come forward? It's been vague in question period before.

The other thing that I would like to ask flowing from that has to do with the announcement of the nursing spaces. A lot of the hype that went on with the two ministers was on how many more nursing spaces were being created in postsecondary education, and I know that it involved both the minister of advanced ed and this minister, but when we looked at it and had some people check into it, the announcement really created only 76 new spaces in the next little while. Now, I'm glad that there are 76 more spaces, but when we talk about the problems that we're facing, that is not going to do it. Now, I'm not sure that there's an easy answer to this question. There probably isn't, but it's a serious one in our health care system.

Now, the minister has dealt with the doctors. I was at the news conference. There were \$8,000 bonuses to stay and that sort of thing. It seems that that's what they felt was needed to deal with doctors. Even then they say that there probably won't be enough. As he knows, they're having trouble getting people into family practice, and that's a very dangerous situation too.

So there are a myriad of problems dealing with staffing, Mr. Chairman. I would like to come back to the workforce and see where that is so we can take a look at it and see how serious the problem is and ask the minister: when is that report due, and more importantly, what are we going to do about a very serious situation with the health workers right across the area? There are a number of other things that we'll go into, but I think that the workforce – here's the quote I wanted, Mr. Chairman. When the minister of advanced education and the health minister talked about 467 spaces, that will actually lead to only 77 new graduates in four years because a lot of it was degree granting and the rest of it. So it seems to me that, again, it's good that we're going to have 77 new spaces, but it's not going to be nearly enough to deal with the job. So maybe we can start there, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hancock: In fact, Mr. Chairman, that is a very good place to start because it is one of the essential issues with respect to Health and Wellness as we move forward, particularly recognizing that it's not just about acute care, although acute care is extremely important. It's about making sure that we have the health care professionals available in the community to assist Albertans who have taken responsibility for their health and their health status. So working towards making better use is the first piece of the workforce strategy.

The member will be pleased to know that I'm meeting with my colleagues the Minister of Employment, Industry and Immigration and the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology tomorrow morning on the finalization of the workforce strategy which we're bringing forward. So it is imminent that the workforce strategy will be forwarded. We published a version of it on the 13th of April when we met with stakeholders and discussed that, and we've taken the opportunity to revise it, to put more context around it as was asked for. We're meeting again, as I say, tomorrow to see if it's in a final form to take forward through a government process and then bring out as the actual workforce strategy and action plan. But it's a very good place to start.

Again, I want to emphasize primary care. Making best use of the health care professionals we have is the best place to start. The hon. member mentioned overstress and overwork and not being able to keep up. Those are very important elements. Some of it is about supply, about having more people, no question about that, and I'll get to that, but part of it is about working smarter, about having the right tools and the right technologies available so people can be as productive as possible and the right teams together so that they can use the talents that they have most productively. One of the key elements in that is the primary care networks where teams of not just doctors but doctors, nurses, dieticians, physiotherapists, pharmacists, and other health care professionals can work together and work in a team effort to deal with some of those issues that come from stress. But there's no question that in certain areas – emergencies would be a classic example – there undoubtedly is stress because of the workload that's there.

So it's not just the rebalancing of effort, although that's a very important part. It's not just addressing the workplace needs to make sure that there's a safe workplace so that we can get the best value for the people that are there and make it possible for them to be excited about getting up and going to work every day rather than feeling stressed about it. That's very important. The retention piece is important. Actually, across the workforce, for example, the retention rate of physicians in rural communities is currently 94 per cent over three years and 91 per cent over five years. So something is working in that respect. Some of the things that we're doing are being very successful.

We have I believe the number was an increase of 245 physicians last year. Other jurisdictions are very envious of the fact that we were able to attract new physicians to the province. Now, is it enough? Not yet, so we're still working at that. The retention bonuses that we talked about with respect to doctors are a very important part of keeping older doctors, people who have been serving for a longer period of time, in the workforce until we can bring in the supplementary resources, the new people.

Since 2000 Alberta Advanced Education has increased health program spaces by more than 4,500 spaces. The hon. member references a number of 76 with respect to nursing. I think that maybe he's overlooking the value of some of the newer type of programs. For example, the University of Alberta – and he may wish to ask the minister of advanced education about this – with the spaces awarded to them, will be offering an after-degree program

where actually you can bring nurses on more quickly if you start with somebody who already has a degree. Then it's basically a two-year program to get the after-degree program, which will allow them to get into nursing more quickly. So it expands the spaces there.

We're moving towards recruitment. You know, I'm always concerned about the idea that you're recruiting somebody else's health care professionals because they need them too, but to the extent that Alberta is an attractive place for people, and they want to come here, we should make it easier for them to move through the credentialing process and get them into practising their profession as quickly as they can. So we're working as part of the workforce strategy to deal with the question of credentialing, of professional credentials, to make sure that that's handled more effectively than it is now. For example, on physicians we're using, at least it seems to me, more part 5 exemptions so that you attract somebody in so they can begin to practise and then get the balance of their credentials in place.

So the workforce strategy is about retaining our existing workforce, making sure that they are as productive as possible, using the full extent of their training and expertise. We're adding different modalities of health delivery like Telehealth, for example, so we can use older nurses who might have otherwise retired. Nursing used to be a young person's profession. Now older people are in the profession, but we can use some of those people in a better way, on telehealth for example, so that they can provide advice in that manner. That's proved a very effective way of dealing with certain elements of health service delivery. The Capital Health Link, for example, has proved very effective at reducing some of the increased demand on emergencies.

3:00

So you can take some of the talents that we have that otherwise would have been lost to us and keep them in the process in a productive way. They feel valued, they are valued in the process, and they're adding service to Albertans by changing the way we practise, by using technology better, by addressing those workforce issues, the very workforce issues you're talking about, which are the stress and strain issues, which lose us valuable people because of sickness or strain or stress. It's the retention of our existing workforce. It's making it possible for our existing workforce health care professionals and technologists to practise to the full extent of their capability and expertise.

So I don't argue about how many doctors we need, for example. Some people would say that we need 1,500; some people say that we need 1,100. I know that we need more doctors, but we don't need as many as some people think because there are other ways of using health care professionals better.

That means we also have to be conscious of the people who help, and one of the areas that the hon. member didn't mention is personal care aides. That's an area, quite frankly, where we really need to do some work about recruiting people who can come and fill in in the caring and on the line working with people with personal care. That's a critical element.

So that comes to the third piece, recruiting; the first being retention, growing our own the second. We have to go abroad and recruit people to come to Alberta to fill some of those jobs that are not going to be filled in any other way. We have to be careful and do it in a moral and effective way. We're not stealing other people's professionals that they need. But in areas where there is a surplus – for example, in Britain, apparently, there are 10 applications for every physician position – well, we should go and let them know, and we have gone to let them know, that there are opportunities here. In other parts of the world where there are people who are surplus to

their needs, we should be letting them know the opportunity that's here. That's what we are doing, and that's what we plan to continue to do.

We do need to recruit people who are not at the professional level yet. Hopefully, with the new agreements with the federal government with respect to immigration we'll be able to make opportunities available for people who want to come and provide the care needs in our primary care centres, in our long-term care centres, or even personal attendants. One of the concerns in an economy like we have: as the wage levels go up, we have to deal with the question of paying a fair wage, obviously, but we also have to make sure that we can recruit people into those areas and make sure that they have the proper competencies.

So the workforce strategy is a multirange of strategies relative to promoting the opportunity for health care professionals to have a good opportunity to use their skills to their maximum, to feel valued in the workplace, and to support them with the proper technologies and support that they need so that they do want to get up and come to work every day, about providing spaces so that our Alberta students can get the credentials they need to participate fully in that workforce, and about bringing more people to the workforce in Alberta where appropriate.

The Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, I have had a request by the ND opposition to have a staff member, a research assistant, allowed on the floor of the Assembly. It requires one day's notice according to the Speaker's ruling that I had just passed out, but because it was just passed out, there was no opportunity for one day's notice. So I'm going to ask for unanimous consent to allow it for today. If there are any in opposition, say so now.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Seeing none, I would allow your researcher to be on the floor.

I would just also point out Standing Order 59.01(1)(b): every member has a chance to speak for no more than 10 minutes. However, I sensed some eagerness on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview to want to get involved in the discussion before the minister's time was up. You may combine your times for back-and-forth discussion, provided you both agree to combine your times for 20 minutes, but you have to notify the chair to do so.

So I would recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you. We'll see where it goes, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to follow up on the staffing because I think it is a serious problem. When I look at the figures – and I take it they're right because they came from your department in a written question – we show that Calgary nurses took over 55,000 sick days; Edmonton nurses, over 47,000; and LPNs, over 12,000. When I look at the Calgary situation, where it's almost double, I think we have a problem.

The minister talks about – and I agree. I'm not disagreeing with almost everything that the minister said about moving towards primary care. The community clinics were experimented with by Saskatchewan in Prince Albert and places like that many years ago, and they've had a lot of experience. I think it's the way to go, absolutely the right way to go.

I was at a conference on Thursday and Friday in Regina, and there were people talking about phase 2 of medicare, obviously people

like Roy Romanow and Stephen Lewis, Allen Blakeney, Shirley Douglas, people that have a vested interest about it. [interjection] Yeah, well, they'd know a lot more about it than you sitting back there. That's for sure.

Mr. Dunford: I don't think so. I was born in it. I've been in it all my life.

Mr. Martin: Were you? I thought you were hatched over there.

Mr. Dunford: Swift Current health region.

Mr. Martin: Well, I'll talk to the minister. He gets a little excited, that guy back there.

They had the nurses' federation and people working in the health care field there. The point that they were making – it's not just an Alberta phenomenon, obviously – is that even talking about moving to primary care and community clinics would probably require more people rather than less, outside of the doctors, you know, so it's not going to be a quick fix. I agree with the approach. It absolutely makes the most sense, the most possible sense, but I just say that it's still going to be very difficult to get the number of people to provide it. If there are doctors and they have extra people in Breton, fine, or wherever we can get them, but all provinces are going to be faced with each other.

I know that it's becoming a bit of a disadvantage here when we talk about housing for nurses and people like nurses and teachers and other health professionals. When they can't afford to buy a house here, that's not exactly going to be something that sells. I know that in Saskatchewan they've had some success at bringing people in because of the housing prices. So it's a difficulty that we have to deal with that has to do with the pace of development, Mr. Chairman.

I want to also look at another part of the workforce that, I take it, we're going to be talking about, and it's the other part of the questions. Again, I thank the minister for giving us this information.

Mental health – and that was also brought up at this conference – is a growing problem. The minister has alluded to it. He knows it. When I look at the amount of work we want to do – and we have a bill. I'll get the number of the bill: Bill 31. It's one thing to get people into treatment, but we have to have the people there to treat them. When I look at the 17 regional health authorities in Alberta, which amalgamated into eight larger regions, the important thing here is the number of psychiatrists: 318 for the province. Peace River has one psychiatrist available. Now, I know there are other people that can deal with some of these things, but we do need the psychiatrists overseeing it. So I guess I'm asking a little more about the framework, what the minister sees happening in the mental health area, Mr. Chairman.

3:10

I want to come back and suggest with the primary care, that the minister talked about – and I'd take it even further than what we were thinking about with primary care. I think that the minister has alluded to community clinics, health care professionals working together, other health care professionals, whether they're psychiatrists or whether they're social workers or whatever, that they work together in community clinics. Does the minister actually believe that that would take less staff or more? Is that part of the framework? Are we looking at community clinics dealing with that situation?

The last thing I would like to get from the minister – and I know I couldn't quite understand. It's gone to the policy committee. I

don't know what that means. I mean, we're not behind the framework because then I think that we can sit down, take a look at it, know exactly what the department is saying is going to happen. I take it that they're trying to be futuristic looking at it, where they're going to get these people, all the discussions that we're having here. The minister can appreciate that we've been a little impatient because we've been expecting this report for a fair length of time, and now it's going through some process. Can he at least allude to some of the things that we might be looking at and try to give us – I'm not holding him to an exact day – some idea so we might deal with this? I think this is the most crucial thing: our health workers.

Mr. Chairman, the other thing we were told at this conference: that they're also facing a huge problem. The LPNs said this: we can't do it all. The people that work in the cafeterias and clean the places and the rest of it provide a crucial role, and they're having trouble recruiting them too because, again, they can make more money; you know, the Tim Hortons syndrome. So the whole approach of dealing with our staff has to include those people too. They're very important partners in dealing with the whole health care approach.

I want to get some more specifics because, Mr. Chairman, it's a serious situation. The minister knows it. I recognize, as he said, that not everything has to do with acute care, but that's where people's lives right now are at risk. We've got to move to prevention. We've got to move to, you know, nutritionists. We've got to do all those things. But what people see right now is the emergency wards, where it's a life and death situation. It is serious, and I think that's part of what we're seeing in Calgary and Edmonton, with health professionals facing stress, pressure, till the body just gives out.

I think that we have to have some idea, a little more than what the minister said, about all these situations, so I'd like him to comment on those areas. Then I'll probably turn it over to somebody else.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, some very good comments there. Obviously, in terms of providing the acute-care services that are needed: a doctor can't operate if the operating room hasn't been cleaned. You know, you can't operate a health care facility, a hospital for example, if there aren't people who do the cleaning, who keep up the cafeteria, who provide the food service and that sort of thing. So it's not just the health care professionals, as the hon. member points out. It's the full team of people that are necessary to deliver the service appropriately, and that's true right across the board. We're conscious of that, that we need to make sure.

I mean, one of the concerns you have in an economy like this where employment is high, unemployment is low, the participation rate is as high as anywhere, higher than anywhere: the source of people to do the jobs that are needed to be done becomes difficult. There's no easy answer, so the answer has to be a combination of paying appropriate wages, attracting people who will come to take entry-level jobs, in essence, with the hope of doing better.

We have that history. We have history in times that I can remember, several cycles through our history where we've had people from other countries who came with their hopes and dreams and wanted to earn some money, send some money back to their family in the country that they came from with the hope of eventually bringing their family, and they did. Some are very good citizens of our community now, and they've helped to build our community. We're going to have to engage a number of different ways to make sure not just that we get the health care professionals but right across the board the people that we need to support this economy and this

community. That's one of the reasons why the workforce strategy became not just something that happened in health but something that the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry led as well. She's actively in the broader workforce strategy helping to provide the opportunity for us to recruit the broad cross-section of people that need to support the whole framework and infrastructure, not just in health but otherwise. So I would agree that we need to focus on that.

In terms of the primary care side and does it use more people, that remains to be seen, but what it does use is the talents that people have in a better way. It does in fact make it possible for more people to devote their talents to the health status of the community. We have people who leave the profession because they, quite frankly, get bored or get tired or want a change. If we can rebalance the workforce so that we're allowing people to work to the full extent of their knowledge, capability, and expertise, we can retain more of those people in the health workforce.

Now, that might cause a problem for someone else who wants them in their workforce, but in fact we can retain more people by making it possible for them to do more. We see that already. We see nurses who have retired and then become parish nurses and work for a church congregation that wants to have someone to visit the members of their congregation. That is good for health status in their community. There are many other ways I could demonstrate that health care professionals who might otherwise be lost to us in the workforce will stay and participate and help enhance health status. We also over time will have the opportunity, if not to reduce the demand, perhaps to flatten out the demand curve a little bit by providing that kind of support so the people can actually be healthier.

On the mental health side it was mentioned that there's no question that there are issues with respect to specialities in the medical profession. One of them is the psychiatric speciality. Jurisdictions are working hard to attract psychiatrists. You mentioned Peace Country health. They've been working to attract people to replace those that have moved. We're also seeing, of course – and this talks to what I've spoken about before in terms of using health professionals to the full extent of their capability – an increase now in the concept of psychiatric nursing. We didn't hear of that for a long time with a lot of emphasis, but now that's coming back, where people are seeing that they actually could be providing a good support for the psychiatric and mental health area from psychiatric nursing.

The trilateral agreement that we've just signed with the AMA and the health boards will help us to target resources into areas where we need to recruit or retain some of those specialities, and I think mental health might be one of those areas, although I don't want to prejudge how that gets applied. But areas of clinical practice where costs have gone up, which makes it difficult for people to continue to practise because, of course, they can't raise the prices – you know, family practice, psychiatric clinics, those sorts of areas – may well be supported by the trilateral agreement.

RHAs this year are receiving approximately \$291 million in the mental health area. The Mental Health Board has \$58 million and the innovation fund \$25 million. We've put an emphasis over the past year on mental health. The mental health framework that came out was a good place to start. The children's mental health framework was published in September; the aboriginal mental health framework, later on in the fall. I think it was in December. Personally, I believe that that's an area that we need to put some emphasis and support into, and I've been emphasizing that.

We've brought forward Bill 31, as the hon. member indicated, with respect to the community treatment orders, but it's not my

expectation that community treatment orders will stand by themselves. The regional health authorities will have to engage assertive community treatment to make sure that people have the community supports that they need. That's not going to be easy. None of this is easy. But focusing the resources to help people in that area, because if we can assist people early in the process so that they don't deteriorate to the state where they need to be hospitalized, in itself will save us some resources in the system, which can then be applied to more community treatment.

So there is work to be done in the mental health area both in terms of attracting and keeping the health care professionals but also in terms of allocating the resources that we now have to make sure that the funding is used in an appropriate way, to make sure that the community treatment is there, first of all, of course, to improve the quality of life for the people that are involved and the health status of the people involved but also to reduce the stress and strain on the acute-care side.

3:20

There's a lot of stuff in there, but I think the primary piece to come back to – the hon. member was talking about the workforce strategy. It comes back to, as he himself said: there's no easy answer to it. We've got a strong economy, and that makes it difficult to recruit and keep the people who are in the support staff area: the personal care aides and attendants, the people who do the work to make sure that you can open the facilities in the morning, who keep them clean and keep them in a position to be able to deliver the health care services. We've got to work on that. We've got to get more of those people, and we've got to be able to find a pay structure that pays them fairly. We need to continue to recruit the professionals that we need and to retain the ones we have and to value the ones we have so that they can provide their best value.

I'm not as concerned as the hon. member might be that going to primary care is going to increase the numbers that we need. Actually, in my view, it will rebalance it, and we'll get more productivity out of the existing members. That's not being disrespectful to the existing members. The demonstration of that is the bone and joint project, where they clearly demonstrated that by working in a team effort and making more effective use of the team resources and supplementing them with nonhealth resources where health resources were not needed, they could actually do more bone and joint surgery than before, reduce the waiting times, and patients could have access to the service much more quickly with the same coterie of health care professionals, the same group of people. So we've demonstrated that we can get more value out of it and be more effective in the service delivery already. I think we can see much more of that happening.

The key to this whole thing over the long term is health status, making sure that we have in place the supports for people to take responsibility for their own health so that we reduce the increase in demand for health services. That comes back to every Albertan being part of it, every Albertan being part of the health team, and making sure that they're doing what they can to keep their health status so that we can have the acute-care facility and the health care professionals that we need for our parents or our children when we need them.

The Chair: Hon. leader of the ND opposition, I can't recognize you unless you take your seat.

Mr. Mason: Oh, I have to be in my own chair?

The Chair: Now I can recognize the hon. leader of the ND opposition.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Sorry about that.

I wanted to begin by asking some fairly general or some fairly philosophical questions about the government's view of health care and maybe give the minister an opportunity to provide a little bit of framework for where he's coming from as he approaches this ministry and how the government approaches it. I want to deal a little bit with the whole question of private versus public health care. I'd appreciate the minister's views on the new government's approach to health care philosophically.

We had, of course, many discussions and debates in the House with the previous government on its approach to health care, and these sort of came to a culmination in the debates over the third way. There was, of course, a province-wide debate, and there were many debates in the Assembly, and it was a matter of very broad public concern. I understand, based on my following of statements that have been made by the new government and by the minister, that the general approach to private delivery of health care is not a priority for the government. I'd like to know in a little bit more detail the government's philosophical approach to health care and to health care reform and to managing health care costs. Health care costs are an important consideration for all of us and for the public as a whole, and I'm going to come back to that.

There were a couple of elements in the third way that gave a considerable concern, that I understood were taken off the table by the previous minister of health. They had to do with doctors operating in both the public and the private systems and the extension of private delivery of health care services in our province. I'd like to know where the minister sits on that, what the government's policy is, what the government's vision is for health care.

It's interesting, Mr. Chairman, that there's been a real sustained push not just in Alberta but across the country to try and increase the proportion of health care that is delivered privately. In my view, there are many companies that are interested in this because they are in the private health care delivery business, whether it's an insurance company, a private clinic or hospital supported by investors, or drug companies that have pushed different governments and different political parties across the country to move in this direction.

What has impressed me and encouraged me is just the absolute resistance of the Canadian public, including the Alberta public, to that direction. When governments have moved in that direction, the public has pushed back, and they have not been worn down by repeated attempts to introduce greater private delivery in one form or another. So I am modestly encouraged from what I've heard so far, but I do invite the minister to talk a little bit about that whole thing.

The second thing that I'd really like to raise, Mr. Chairman, is directly related, and it's a subject that I'm quite interested in, and that is innovation within the public system. We certainly do not want to see a public system that stagnates, that simply requires more and more taxpayers' money to deliver the same level of service. So looking for innovation within the public system is, in my view, what will save and what can save the public system and make it responsive and meaningful and give increasingly better service.

I want to give the department, particularly, and the health regions quite a bit of credit on this. I think that Alberta has been fairly innovative at the department level and at the health region level. Certainly, the wait time registry has been a particularly good example of how reorganizing the resources and sharing the resources within the public system can substantially reduce wait times and can save considerable costs.

Another one that I'm interested in and would like the minister to talk a little bit about is the whole development of urgent care within

the province and what the plans are generally and what the success has been and what is anticipated once that component is more fully developed. Diverting people from crowded and expensive emergency wards is a valuable direction, and I certainly think it decentralizes the system a little bit and brings it more into the community. So I'd be very interested in knowing the government's plans and results thus far moving in that direction.

The minister touched in his earlier comments on another approach that can reduce costs and more efficiently use resources, and that is making sure that the right professionals are doing the jobs and that you're not necessarily putting more expensive professionals such as physicians regularly doing jobs that can be done by someone with perhaps not less training but different training. So that's something that I'd really like to hear about.

3:30

The last thing I want to ask the minister about is the whole question of drug costs. Mr. Chairman, the cost of pharmaceuticals in this country is one of the main driving forces of health care costs for the public system. The Conference Board of Canada in 2004 identified drug costs as the fastest growing component of Canadian health care during the last 25 years, and nothing has changed in the last two or three years since that time. Payments for prescription medication account for about 80 per cent of all drug spending in Canada, representing an estimated \$14.6 billion as of 2006. Our health system hasn't been immune either. Twenty years ago spending on drugs represented only 8 per cent of health spending, but in 2005 Alberta spent \$1.6 billion on prescription drugs, an expenditure that now represents 11 and a half per cent of total health expenditure for that year.

The Alberta NDP opposition put forward a couple of years ago a proposal for a pharmaceutical savings agency, and that would be a government body that would co-ordinate the purchase of pharmaceuticals for the entire health system in the province and would engage in negotiations with drug companies to reduce costs through the bulk purchasing of pharmaceuticals for the whole health system. We already use a significant portion of generic drugs, but there's an awful lot more that can be done.

I should just indicate, Mr. Chairman, that in New Zealand this approach is used, and it's called Pharmac, the Pharmaceutical Management Agency. It was established in 1993. New Zealand has about the same population as the province of Alberta, and since 1993 their pharmaceutical expenditures have only risen by about 3 per cent per year compared to the OECD average of 14 per cent and Alberta's average over the same period of 10 per cent. Some have argued that New Zealand saved \$624 million on its drug subsidies in one year alone. That comes from the Conference Board of Canada report *Challenging Health Care System Sustainability*.

We were told at various times by the Minister of Health at that time that this was a good idea. [Mr. Mason's speaking time expired]

The Chair: I recognize the hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. There are a number of good topics there to deal with. Let's start with the government's philosophy. I think it's fair to say that this government and certainly this minister espouse the concept that every Albertan should have access to quality care on a timely basis without regard to ability to pay. That's the fundamental piece of the health care system, and it's important going forward. There has been a lot of discussion about delivery. In fact, the whole of last year there was a lot of consultation about delivery, and there was a publication, *The Way Forward*, I think it was called, with respect to delivery.

A lot of that discussion was more emotional, more heat than light, really. There wasn't a lot of value that came out in terms of how we actually deal with the issues, so I've focused instead on starting where I like to start, and that is: how do we deal with the long-term sustainability issue rather than how do we deal with the day-to-day requirements? We need to deal with the day-to-day requirements, but it's important to know where you're going, and the long term is that regardless of how you calculate or how you cut it, we're doing more things for more people now than ever before with new techniques and new technologies and new drugs.

We're doing hip surgery on 90-year-olds that you never used to do on 50-year-olds. We have MRIs. When I was first elected, I don't think there were more than four MRIs in the province, and that's only 10 years. Now we're doing thousands and thousands of scans per year. So we're doing exponentially more things for more people, for a broader pool of patients than ever had access to the system before. As I say, the heart surgeries and the hip surgeries and the things that are being done for older people who wouldn't have had access to it before are incredible, and we should recognize that we actually have an exceptional health system that does a lot of things for a lot of people.

The question about delivery is not so important as how we sustain the health system long term so that we can continue to do that, so that we can continue to expand the capacity of the system to keep people healthier longer and to improve their quality of life, and that has to come back fundamentally to the question of health status. How do we make sure that we are healthy people living in healthy communities? If all of us need intervention from the acute-care system on a multiple basis over the course of our lifetime and as we age in an increasing amount, we're not going to be able to sustain that level of service. So we need to have fewer people who need the system.

My focus as minister of health, first and foremost, is on wellness, on talking with Albertans about how we can each take responsibility for our health and our health status. Sure, there will be things that we can't avoid. There is sickness and disease and parts wear out and all sorts of things happen, but we can do more, and we need to focus on that end of it first. So rather than talking specifically about the delivery and whether it's public or private, let's talk about how we make the system sustainable over the long term by making sure that Albertans take responsibility for health status, that we're as healthy as we possibly can be so that we can have the acute-care system that we want and need for our parents when they need it, for our kids when they need it, and if necessary for ourselves when we need it. That's the real focus I want to take.

Will there be private delivery? Well, of course we have private delivery. We have physicians and all sorts of other service providers who work for fees. They run businesses. Profit isn't a dirty word in our world. But the reality of the situation we're in now, as we've just spent the last number of minutes talking about, is that we have a workforce shortage. There's no sense really, in my view, talking about whether you have a private clinic set up. First of all, you have to talk about: where are the nurses and the support staff and the other people who are going to have to function in it to come from?

I'm not going to spend an awful lot of time over the next 18 months or two years or however long I have the privilege of serving in this capacity talking about public versus private delivery when the priority for me is getting Albertans to focus on health status and working on things like the workforce strategy. How do we get the healthcare professionals that we need to work in the workforce that we have? You know, if there's a better way to deliver a service, sure, we can talk about that and talk about whether it makes sense or not. I think Albertans are alive to the fact that they want the service.

It's not that big a deal who provides it. But the focus is not there. That's not where I'm going. I'm going on health status, and I'm going on the long-term sustainable health status of Albertans rather than focusing so much time and energy on whether it's public or private delivery.

That piece, I hope, gives the hon. member an idea of the philosophy that I'm bringing to the job at least and that I think the government has at this point in time. In fact, as exhibited by my mandate letter, the Premier, when he asked me to take on this responsibility and gave me the opportunity to do so, really asked that I deal with things like a comprehensive workforce strategy as one of the four identifiable priorities dealing with a comprehensive work strategy, not just for now but for over the next 10 years, and a pharmaceutical strategy.

The hon. member mentioned drug costs. Drug costs are very important. Yes, they are one of the driving costs. Technology and drugs are two things that have really driven the costs of providing service. But in both of those we have to look at what I call the value equation. If a new drug comes on, what is it doing in terms of promoting quality of life, and what is it doing in terms of reducing other costs in the system? You know, is it adding value? I think you can support new drugs coming on even at a huge cost if, in fact, they provide an identifiable improvement in quality of life for the patient or an identifiable reduction in cost to the system by keeping the patient out of using other services because they're taking that drug. So it's not simply a matter of the drug costs, but it's about: what value do they add?

Having said that, the second piece of my mandate is implementing a new pharmaceutical strategy, and that has to be about how we acquire the drugs, whether we do it alone or whether we work with other provinces and can get them to work with us in terms of making arrangements with the pharmaceutical companies to make sure that we get the best price not just for government-purchased drugs but for Albertans. It means: how do we deal with catastrophic coverage, making sure that Albertans have access to the appropriate drugs, the high-cost drugs, notwithstanding ability to pay? It means: what do we do with respect to the orphan drugs, the situations like Hunter syndrome, where there is a drug that could help? It's in its way through the system, but even if it does get through the system, it's not going to make it onto the formulary for general coverage. It's truly an orphan drug, and we have to have a way of making appropriate decisions on appropriate circumstances so that we're giving access to those drugs where they provide real hope and not false hope.

3:40

I find it ironic that the hon. member would refer us to New Zealand, for example. I remember a few years ago when people were talking about the fiscal reforms that were going on and the New Zealand model. I think that perhaps even the hon. member was roundly trouncing New Zealand's fiscal model as being a bad place to look for an example. So that's sort of ironic.

Mr. Mason: It shows that we're not dogmatic.

Mr. Hancock: Let the record show that the hon. member said that it shows that he's not dogmatic and that there were chuckles from more than one member in the House.

So the question of drugs, an absolutely important question. It's part of the mandate. We need to make progress on that area, and we'll be dealing with that and hopefully bringing forward a pharmaceutical strategy relatively quickly.

Innovation in the public system is obviously very important, and

I already mentioned one of the improvements. But one of the cost drivers is new technology and new innovation. So we've got so many more things that are happening that we're doing.

One of the most important innovations is the electronic health record. When the electronic health record is fully complete – and by next year most Albertans will have an electronic health record – it'll have, I think, 75 per cent of their drugs, 100 per cent of their labs, 75 per cent of their diagnostics, and those sorts of numbers. So we're getting close to the point where a person can say that no matter where they present themselves to the system in Alberta, the health care provider who deals with them will have access to appropriate information with respect to their diagnostics, the drugs that they're on, and their health condition so that they can appropriately deal with them, whether they arrive by way of emergency or trauma or for some other reason. That kind of innovation has to continue to go ahead. We have to continue to be a leader in that area, and we're doing that.

We're looking at other ways of innovation. [Mr. Hancock's speaking time expired] I'll have to come back to it.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, I hadn't quite got to the end of my questions either, so I'll pick it up again. When we were raising the question of Alberta essentially establishing its own pharmaceutical savings agency for the bulk purchase of drugs for our health care system, we were told, again by the previous minister, that they were working on this nationally. We did a little bit of research at the time – and perhaps there's more current information than I have on this – and it was our understanding that they had agreed amongst the provinces that some national approach was desirable. But upon closer scrutiny we discovered that, in fact, there was nothing more than an agreement to do a bit of research into the issue and that no substantive progress had been made or was even being contemplated. So one of the things that I would like to know is: what is the status of the negotiations, the national negotiations, the interprovincial negotiations, for the establishment of such a body?

Mr. Chairman, I just want to indicate that I do believe that there are very substantial savings that can be realized by this approach, and they do not come at the cost of taxpayers. They come at the cost of large pharmaceutical companies, which are, of course, among the most profitable sector in the entire world. The prices that we're being charged, particularly given the framework of patent protection that they receive in Canada, means that they earn very, very significant profits indeed, and that comes at the price of very, very expensive drugs. Too high, in my view.

We're not talking about a regulatory approach or regulating the prices. We're talking about developing some market power so that we can negotiate in the marketplace a lower cost for Alberta taxpayers. I think that's a very important thing to do, and I think it's something that the government ought to do. We ought not to be paying more to those pharmaceutical corporations for the drugs that they're providing our system than we have to. I think the government has an obligation to get the best possible price for those drugs. The best way to do that, in my view, is to do bulk purchasing on behalf of the entire health care system in our province and using, of course, lower cost drugs and generic drugs wherever that might be possible.

I know that the minister didn't really get to the question of the urgent care centres. I know that there's an urgent care centre being constructed in my constituency of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, at the Cromdale school site, and while that has been the subject of

some controversy in terms of the process used by Capital health for the siting of it, I think it is, overall, a very beneficial facility that will directly relieve pressure on the Royal Alexandra hospital emergency room. I wonder if the minister in his answer can deal with that. Also, the question of nurse practitioners, in particular, or the greater use of nurses in the delivery of our health care system would be something he might want to expand upon.

He's touched a little bit on work to assist people with foreign credentials to be certified within the health system. I think there needs to be an acceleration there. The use of midwives is another area, I think, that we could make some considerable progress on. Mr. Chairman, my view is that if we innovate within the public system and work hard at improving it and improving its delivery and increasing its efficiency, it will remain the most cost-effective means of delivering health care services.

I appreciate the minister's focus on prevention and on wellness as a means of reducing the costs of our health care system, but it still remains that there is a substantial amount of hard health care service delivery that is going to have to continue to occur in this province, and it's going to have to grow. It's not just growing in terms of becoming more capital intensive through technology and drugs, but it is becoming more extensive as the population of the province grows.

3:50

So the question remains – and it's an important question – about the government's approach to the delivery of those services and whether or not the government sees that occurring within a public system, using innovation, using efficiency but keeping it public, or whether or not the government sees the creation, for example, of privately owned hospitals as, I guess, the most serious example and whether or not the minister accepts the evidence that seems to be fairly pervasive that that approach is more expensive than developing the public health care system.

My time is not up, Mr. Chairman, but my questions are, so I'll take my seat. I just want to end with a little rejoinder on the New Zealand comment that the minister made. I assure him that the approach that was taken here came well after Sir Roger Douglas had left office. As the minister should know, politics is not static in any country or in any party, for that matter, and in fact it is, I think, a very progressive approach.

Contrary to what the minister or some members opposite may feel, we do not necessarily think that the public purse is the measure of first resort. We think that if you can save money and if you can avoid paying too much when you're procuring your services and your goods in government, you have an obligation to do so. You also have an obligation to provide the most efficient and effective and innovative means of providing public services. If government does that and that's part of the culture of the government and part of the values of the government, the role for privatization is substantially reduced, which is part of our philosophical approach, I think it's fair to say.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member is continuing to want to get me into this whole public/private debate, and I've already said that I'm not going to go there. I'm not interested in getting into philosophical debates about what the most effective delivery model is. We've got both long-term strategies with respect to health status that need to be focused on – and I'm going to focus on those – and short-term strategies with respect to

current situations which I've been tasked with by our Premier: to implement a workforce strategy; to implement a new pharmaceutical strategy; to implement health care productivity and reforms and long-term sustainability initiatives; to strengthen public health services that promote wellness, injury and disease prevention, and provide preparedness for public health emergencies. That's a fairly significant and comprehensive list of tasks, so to engage with the hon. member in some philosophical debate about public or private delivery is not on at this point in time.

The hon. member did raise some questions about the use of health care professionals and nurse practitioners, and he mentioned midwives. That's at the root of the whole question of finding the right health care professionals to do the right jobs in the right places. When I was articling as a law student and had a course from now Justice of the Court of Appeal Côté, one of the things he said to us is that you should put a sign on your desk that says: does it take an LL.B. to do this? Of course, when I considered that, there wasn't much left for me to do. But what we should be doing is saying: with the credentials that I have, am I making the most effective use of the abilities that I have?

We should be looking to midwives to help with the health care system in the areas that they're appropriately trained to help and to nurse practitioners to supplement and to physician assistants, perhaps. There are a number of physician assistants coming out of the military now, where they've been used for years, and looking for a place in the general community. They could play a fairly effective role. In fact, there could be a role for internationally trained medical graduates who may not have the competencies necessary to get professional credentials here, but they may be able to still serve in the health system at another level, and that could be at a physician assistant's level. There's a role for respiratory nurses.

There are a number of ways in which we can enhance the role of health care professionals to make it interesting for them to continue to work in the field. There can be a laddering, if you will. You could even see a day when people could come into the system as a personal care aide, progress through an LPN process, perhaps into a nursing assistant or a registered nurse and then into the specialty area of psychiatric nursing and those sorts of issues. So, yes, there's room for a multitude of health care professionals and technologists in the system, to make more extensive use of them.

The hon. member indicates, and he's quite right, that we're not going to have the acute-care system decline in service. The best we can hope for, probably, over time is to flatten out the exponential growth by health status. So we should make sure we focus on health status so that we can deal with that side of the equation and try to flatten out that curve. But we are going to need more of the health system, and that means that we need to make the most effective use of the resources that we have in the system.

With respect to the national drug strategy that the hon. member mentioned, I'm given to understand that at one time there was a national drug strategy on the table being discussed by federal/provincial ministers. That did not progress. I'm given to believe that the federal government backed away from the discussion. In any event, there may be some more interest now. We're seeing signs in some particular areas of an intention to co-operate. But we can't wait. We have to move forward.

I've been tasked with bringing forward a pharmaceutical strategy. I'm going to do that. We're going to try to work with our neighbouring provinces and with others to see if we can bring together a larger group, but we need to move forward. We are doing that in some areas. For example, with some of the oncology drugs we're able to do that now. So with respect to the national drug strategy, if there's interest across the country, then we'll be happy to be at the

table. We'll work to try to encourage as much co-operation across the country as we can. But we need to move forward on it.

Just briefly on the area of urgent care. Urgent and emergency care are very important. Urgent care centres, obviously, can have the benefit of making access easier for people and, actually, focusing the access in a more appropriate way. For example, you could see in an urgent care centre, perhaps, if there was a large population of older people there, more of a focus on geriatric care. If you had any experience with it, as I have, going to emergency with an 80- or 90-year-old is not always the best place to be because often you're not there in an acute trauma situation, and therefore you don't get served first in the triage process, nor do you necessarily have health care professionals who are used to dealing with frailty. So if you can develop an urgent care centre which has the health care team of people there who, perhaps, have a better handle on geriatric care, you can actually provide better service on a more timely basis.

We do have some good things happening on the emergency side. I've spoken with the head of the emergency doctors in the province, someone whom I've had a lot of conversations with both before and after becoming Minister of Health and Wellness. I've taken the opportunity to take the suggestions that the emergency doctors brought forward with respect to the full-capacity protocol and have spoken with both the Capital health authority and the Calgary health authority.

Capital has moved ahead at four of their sites with the full-capacity protocol, which is not a long-term solution but is a very beneficial process to add because part of the problem that they have is that emergency actually focuses on the door, as they should, the people coming in with an emergency. Their focus is to deal with that emergency. Once they've admitted people or determined that they need to be admitted to the hospital, that's not their focus anymore. So the people who have been admitted but are still occupying beds in emergency, arguably, are not receiving the type of care that they should be receiving, the caring side. With the full-capacity protocol the concept is to move them upstairs into the wards.

Experience in other parts of North America, in New York and in St. Paul's in Vancouver, is that 30 per cent of the people who moved up to the wards had a bed by the time the elevator door opened. In other words, the process actually improved just by virtue of moving the patient. Now, we can't count on that for everything, obviously. But another 40 per cent, I think is the right number, of the people were in beds within four hours. So moving to that capacity to allow emergency doctors to focus where they should be focused and other health care professionals in emergency to focus on the front door, the people coming in with an emergency, as opposed to being bound up by the people who they've already seen and who are waiting for someone to provide the next level of care is a very good step forward. Also, movement to, as I say, build urgent care centres and the Health Link, so telehealth, so that those who don't need to be there can get the advice that they need elsewhere is a good move.

4:00

We still have to deal with capacity issues, and we still have to deal with the number of beds and keep up with the growth and those sorts of issues, but we're working at dealing with the issues from an immediate perspective and then also working on the long-term perspective to make sure that we have the right capacities in the system to deal with the flow-through of people in the system. We're working with others across western Canada in that regard with respect to acute care to make sure that we have both the excellence in acute care and the relief valve, if you will, in appropriate circumstances where we need help.

There was a lot of talk in January about newborns in Calgary having to go to Montana or B.C. or other places. Well, at times there's a spike, and you don't have the local capacity. Thank goodness we can make arrangements with our neighbours to help us with capacity needs when we need it, and of course we help them when they need it. So there are a number of things that we can work on in the system to deal with that.

Obviously, development of the primary care networks and urgent care centres is a critical part of making sure that for the vast majority of people who need access to urgent care, they can get it on a timely basis, leaving emergency available to those people who really need the emergency care, the trauma care. That's part and parcel of the system we're developing.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and make a few observations on the budget for 2007-2008 related to the Department of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Chairman, perhaps I should quickly note that the current minister and I were elected the same year, 1997 I guess, to this Assembly. We've been around for 10 and a half years. He has had responsibility for a variety of departments and portfolios, held portfolios, and this is the toughest one in which to survive. I do wish him well on this one. I also want to thank the staff of the department who are here today to assist the minister to answer some questions that he's receiving from us. It's much appreciated.

The last point I wanted to make in respect of having been around, he and I, for roughly 10 and a half years is that during those 10 and a half years I'm hearing a lot about this government's intention to seek the privatization route to make our health care sustainable. The minister doesn't want to go there, he says now, because it's a purely philosophical question. I just want to note that it's been more than a philosophical question for this government. It has been, in fact, part of its policy. The minister doesn't want to speak about now because the Premier's mandate doesn't call for it. It's something that makes me wonder whether or not the privatization plans have been abandoned altogether because they have been discredited by experience and the record in various places. Or is it just a tactical shift until the next election, and then we are going to see the rhetoric of privatization come back?

So the minister might want to dissociate himself completely from – this is an opportunity for him to go – the privatization route because it's a discredited path. It certainly will not lead to increased sustainability of the system. We need to find other means of doing it, and there are other means available to us. All we need to do is to have a spirit of co-operation and perhaps the political will to get there.

That said, Mr. Chairman, I want to quickly move on, in the limited time that I have, to make some comments on the long-term care front. It's a growing area of our health care system that this minister is responsible for. We have currently close to 330,000 seniors over the age of 65, with approximately 153,000 over the age of 75. I must say, with some regret or with some anticipation, that in less than a year I'll be joining the ranks of the 153,000 who are over 75 and, hopefully, healthy. I would like to ask the minister because of his focus on wellness and on health status and on prevention: what specific strategies and plans are built into this budget to focus on keeping seniors healthy in this province so that they don't have to seek and receive the medical care that he says is increasingly becoming expensive?

I agree with him. It's expensive, and there's no reason. The quality of life is very much impacted by illness, so if you can keep

people healthy, it will save money. But it also improves quality of life, so it's a win-win situation in many ways. Maybe he would like to comment on the implementation of his wellness and health status, sort of focus with respect to seniors and the long-term care area.

Mr. Chairman, there are close to 21,000 people living in approximately 400 supported living facilities across the province: lodges, enhanced lodges, designated assisted living group homes, adult family living and family care homes. Similarly, there are 14,500 or so people living in approximately 200 long-term care facilities. Now, the problem of standards in these facilities affecting so many seniors in the province was raised a couple of years ago by the Auditor General in his review of seniors' care programs in his 2005 report. The Auditor General's review drew attention to the lack of maintenance of standards of care and the lack of capacity within the health care system and the department itself to enforce those mechanisms and monitor compliance with those standards.

There is some reference here in the budget to increased capacity for compliance with standards. The introduction of standards has just kicked in, I understand. They come into effect this month. I want the minister to perhaps comment on how the increase in the capacity to monitor and ensure compliance with these standards is being offered by way of the budget that's before us.

The failure of oversight and lack of compliance, Mr. Chairman, have had quite tragic results. We have been told that the Health Facilities Review Committee did an examination of the Bethany long-term care centre in 2005 and recommended that Alzheimer's patients be given private rooms. If such a recommendation had in fact been implemented, it may have prevented a recent death at that facility. Could the minister confirm that this occurrence has in fact happened and if there's a report on it and whether he can share that report on this incident at Bethany Care with us today?

Could the minister tell us also the mechanism by which inspection reports are made available to both residents and their families, and, of course, the general public, including this House, and will they be made available now that we are beginning to focus on improving the system in a variety of respects and the new standards are being put in place?

The longer term wait times are another issue, Mr. Chairman, that I want to ask the minister a few questions about. Goal 3 in the performance measures is about improved access to health services, which includes targets for wait lists for continuing care. My question is: currently how long are people waiting for placement? We know the number of people waiting for it, but what's the maximum time of wait, and what's the minimum? What's the average waiting time for placement?

I also notice that in one of the tables, long-term care placement, the number of people waiting has come down over the years, which is good news, if I read this table right. I wonder: is it because of the expansion of spaces at most places now, spaces in long-term care? Is that what explains the decline in the numbers waiting in an acute-care hospital, the number of urgent cases waiting in the community? It's that table that I'm talking about. In general, the wait times are an issue that we are hearing a great deal about. The minister might want to comment on that as to the budgetary response to this problem.

4:10

The privatization issue for long-term care is alive and well, Mr. Chairman, although the minister says that he doesn't want to go there. The problem this year at the Holy Cross hospital illustrates potential problems with privatization in long-term care services. Indeed, the problems at that facility illustrate the devastating impact of creating privatization in continuing care. The profit mode in

long-term care leads to the same problem that it does in any other kind of health care service: higher costs and lower quality. That's, at least, what the Auditor General's study showed us.

Private operators do have a vested interest in keeping down the costs of providing service through cutting back on labour and on the quality of services in order to maximize profits for the shareholders, and I don't blame these private investors. That's what they are there for: to respond to their stakeholders' expectations to maximize their returns on their investments. But our responsibility as public officials is to ensure the quality of care and the enforcement of standards to make sure that the proper care is available.

The other concern, the question that's really a growing concern around the province, is the conversion of long-term care facilities to assisted living centres, which translates into shifting the costs of servicing the care onto residents.

Maybe I'll stop here and let the minister respond.

The Chair: The time has elapsed for this order of business on Health and Wellness. Perhaps the minister would want to respond in writing to some of the questions, or if there's time at the end of the debate on Municipal Affairs and Housing, there may be time for some further questions on that.

Now I'll recognize the hon. Minister for Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased . . .

The Chair: You have a point of order, hon. member?

Point of Order Committee Proceedings

Mr. Mason: It was our understanding that the allocation of the time between the two ministries was up to the NDP caucus, and it certainly would be our preference that the Minister of Health and Wellness finish his response.

The Chair: Well, I'm here at your pleasure, but it was my understanding that there was an hour and a half allocated for Health and Wellness and an hour and a half allocated for . . .

Mr. Martin: We haven't had that though. We were short. We were behind time when we started.

Mr. Mason: Because of the confusion about what's going on.

The Chair: Well, the time starts when the committee is called to order. If there are any points of order that are raised and clarifications regarding that, that comes off the time. There's not extra time allocated for that.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Chairman, for the convenience of the third party I would be very glad to sit down and let the hon. minister of health finish his presentation.

The Chair: If that's your pleasure, I'll allow the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness to continue.

Mr. Hancock: Just for the record, we tried to put an allocation so that people would have an idea of when they had to appear, but I would agree with the leader of the third party. This afternoon is the NDs' afternoon, and they get to choose their time allocation. We want to make sure that people are ready when they're supposed to be

called, and we've worked with them to try and make sure that that happened. But there wasn't any intention on the tabling to cement a time of an hour and a half or that sort of thing.

Mr. Martin: I think the minister over there needs a break.

Mr. Hancock: And he's had a good afternoon already, I understand.

The Chair: The chair would appreciate some notification in the future of what the various parties are intending to do, but go ahead, hon. minister.

Debate Continued

Mr. Hancock: So there are a number of questions that I'll respond to. With respect to the incident that the hon. member referred to at the Bethany, very clearly there'll be a fatality inquiry. That's the appropriate place. There's no value to me speculating on that. There'll be a fatality inquiry, and there'll be a report, and that will be thoroughly investigated. I'm sure that the Bethany centre is already looking at the issues arising from it, but I won't comment further on it until that inquiry has been held.

With respect to long-term care wait times if we have information that's more definitive, I'm certainly happy to get there, but my understanding is that wait times have come down, that sometimes people are waiting because they want their choice of facility, but most people are able to be placed within a reasonable period of time in long-term care.

When you talk about privatization, of course, that absolutely neglects the fact that there's been a history in this province of public long-term care, private long-term care, and nongovernmental organizations, or not-for-profit long-term care. It has been a good mix. It has been there. There are very excellent private providers who are concerned about the quality of life of the residents of their facilities, and the profit motive doesn't take any of the concept of caring away necessarily. So the suggestion that because there's a profit involved, one can't care for the people and make sure there's a quality of life is not accurate. Just to put that out.

There was an incident with respect to the Holy Cross in Calgary. I think that was dealt with by the regional health authority, which happens to be not only a provider of long-term care but a regulator with respect to quality of care and standards and the payer. So when they perceived that there was a safety element that wasn't being taken care of in terms of the service and in terms of the safety codes, they worked with the provider. When they weren't satisfied with the result, they cancelled the contract, and that suggests, I guess, that the system works.

I'm not going to get into the details because there are discussions between them and the provider, but the bottom line is that there are standards. We put in place standards. We're going to make sure that service providers, whether they're public, private, or not for profit, get their people up to those standards and within a reasonable period of time. Obviously, we have to work with them in this environment when it's difficult to get people, but to make sure that those standards are achieved and are adhered to is absolutely important for us.

The first role of government, in my view, is quality assurance. That's our job. The second role is to make sure that there's effective use of the public resources, the most effective and efficient use of the public resources. Where that can be done more effectively using private services as opposed to public services, I would suggest that the hon. member adhere to what his leader said and not be dogmatic about it but look for the best bang for the buck, so to

speaking, the best care that you can get, the best quality of care that you can get for the dollar.

That's where we're going to be going. I'm not going to adhere to any philosophical issue on whether it's antiprofit or proprofit. That's not the driver of it. The question is: how can we get the best quality of care, how can we get the best access to care on a timely basis without regard to the ability to pay, whether it's in the acute system, or how can we ensure that seniors have the care that they need in the system? When we talk about the care that they need, quite frankly, I'll be working with the minister of seniors and others in government to make sure that we have that continuum of care so that seniors can be healthy in their own home for as long as possible.

The hon. member indicates that he will soon be joining the over-75 club, and I'm sad to hear that he's not intending to run in the next election because the best way that a person can be healthy is to be active, to be mentally and physically active. One might argue as to whether sitting in here is mentally or physically active, but I would argue that it is. So I only hope that he'll find some other way to keep himself mentally and physically active because that's going to be the way that he best improves and keeps his health care up.

We need to be working at ways we can ensure that people can make the quality of life choice, the living choice that they want to make and then support it with the appropriate health care support that they need to have so that they can stay as healthy as possible as long as possible and then die quickly.

The Chair: Hon. member, do you wish to continue?

Dr. Pannu: No, Mr. Chairman. I'm done. Thank you.

The Chair: Now do you wish to go to Municipal Affairs and Housing?

4:20

Mr. Mason: Please. We thought he should have a brief rest.

The Chair: I'll call on the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Municipal Affairs and Housing

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to present an overview of Municipal Affairs and Housing for the 2007-2008 spending estimates as well as the 2007-2010 ministry business plan. Before I start, Mr. Chairman, I would like to do some introductions of individuals that are here today. As the members of the third party will appreciate, the work that our ministry was saddled with in the last three months has been overwhelming, and I especially want to thank my staff because they have worked so diligently.

With my hand on my heart I really want to thank them and introduce them: first of all, my deputy minister, Shelley Ewart-Johnson, who is beside me and has been my right-hand person all the time; Brian Quickfall, the assistant deputy minister of local government services. Also, I would like to introduce Robin Wigston, the assistant deputy minister of the housing division. We also have Ivan Moore, in the gallery, who is the assistant deputy minister of the public safety division. We also have Peter Crerar, who is the assistant deputy minister of corporate strategic services. It's an honour for me to introduce Tracy Balash, the director of communications. I'd like to again, as I've said, thank all of the individuals, all of the staff, who have worked so hard back in the office and back in the department, because their help is very, very much appreciated.

[Mr. Cardinal in the chair]

I'll start my presentation by providing an overview of our 2007-2010 business plan. This will illustrate the basis for our spending estimates. This year's business plan has changed dramatically to include the introduction of housing and libraries and volunteer services. We've identified six opportunities and challenges that have affected our business plan. To achieve this, we are helping to ensure the long-term stability of municipalities through appropriate legislation, capacity building, initiatives, and financial support. We are working with municipalities to provide advisory, dispute resolution, and financial supports. The key to this is enhancing the relationship between the provincial government, municipalities, and municipal organizations. The ministry will continue to work with municipal partners to identify ways to enhance these relationships through various mechanisms such as the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability.

One of the challenges we face has to do with unprecedented economic growth. With growth intensifying in many areas of the province, municipalities are in some cases struggling to address this issue. We've heard from our stakeholders that they want us to work with them to address broad planning and co-ordination issues. This will help us in both maximizing opportunities and minimizing disputes. Tied into this is the challenge of municipal sustainability and predictability. While some municipalities are growing, others are facing economic and demographic decline. Municipal Affairs and Housing needs to work with other ministries to help these primarily small urban and rural municipalities to deliver their needed services within the constraints of their revenue sources.

Mr. Chairman, another challenge deals with Affordable Housing Task Force recommendations. We are implementing approved recommendations from the task force to increase the availability of affordable housing. To do this, we are providing housing support to Albertans who have difficulty meeting their housing needs. We are also encouraging municipalities, private, and nonprofit housing sectors to develop sustainable housing initiatives that meet identified community needs through approved capital funding.

The provincial emergency management system continues to be challenged by evolving risks. These could include health emergencies like the pandemic influenza or the potentially hazardous activities of high-risk industries. Communities across Alberta are also facing a challenge in sustaining volunteer fire services. There is an increasing need to support these communities by providing increased technical assistance and education programs that help prevent fires and emergency incidences. It is also a challenge for municipalities to manage the risks associated with the escalated rate of building and development required to support the high level of growth in this province.

In addition to everything else that we are doing, I have three areas I would like to quickly mention. Our community services community development facilitators work with all communities in your constituencies to deal with community issues such as family violence, drug strategies, Water for Life initiatives, and crime prevention. Mr. Chairman, they support many of our provincial public input processes that result in community activities.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The Alberta not-for-profit volunteer sector initiative will create a policy framework for us as a government to work with community organizations and volunteers in the province that are supporting so many vital initiatives that impact Albertans' quality of life. This is essential as these organizations face many issues that are placing

them at risk. Alberta's public libraries are truly something to brag about, as they are an example of a public service that serves all Albertans and contributes to our success as a province.

In terms of our core businesses we are setting our sights on the following goals: a responsive, co-operative, and well-managed local government sector; financially sustainable and accountable municipalities; a well-managed and efficient assessment and property tax system in which stakeholders have confidence; a Municipal Government Board that administers appeals and issues timely and impartial decisions of high quality; an accessible public library service and effectively supported communities and voluntary sectors; low-income Albertans having access to a range of housing options and effectively managed housing programs that are focused on those most in need; a comprehensive system of safety codes and standards that provides an appropriate level of public safety; an effective emergency management system; and implementing the approved recommendations of the Affordable Housing Task Force report.

4:30

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that, and I appreciate the comments of the minister very much. I want to compliment the minister. He's had a rather difficult two or three weeks, and he has retained an even keel and a good sense of humour throughout. He's wrong. But he's got a sense of humour, and it was certainly appreciated.

I just want to talk in my first 10 minutes about the nonhousing element of the department of municipal affairs. I'm sure that the minister is aware that like many other members of this Assembly I come from municipal government and served as a city councillor with Edmonton for 11 and a half years. So I have a strong affinity to the issues of municipal government and a strong affinity to municipal government. I happen to believe that of all of the orders of government in this country it's the one that is closest to the citizens, and it provides the most value for money. It certainly is, in my view, an efficient order of government, providing a wide range of services, including social services, housing, utilities, public services like police and housing and recreation as well as cultural programs and does so, I think, by and large, extremely well and without, I might add, ever running a deficit, which, as the minister knows, is simply not allowed.

So municipal government I think has an excellent track record in our province and is in many respects an ideal delivery mechanism for programs that may fall within the jurisdiction of the other two orders of government. I think municipal governments generally look at that in a fairly positive way. The problem is, of course, that they often get these responsibilities pushed onto them without consultation and often without adequate funding. We've seen numerous examples of that over the years, whether it comes to child care or housing or any number of programs that the provincial government in the past or even federally sometimes push onto municipal governments. I think there's a greater role for municipal government in our province in helping us meet our challenges. But it is essential that municipal governments be fully consulted about any such programs from the ground up and that they receive full funding for any programs that they are expected to deliver. With respect to housing I will come back to that question. In terms of the financing of municipal governments I think that's an important question.

These are not so much questions for the minister but just a broad take that I have on this issue. When I was first elected to the Legislature in 2000, I attended a chamber of commerce luncheon,

and the guest speaker was then the municipal affairs minister, Steve West. He promised at that time to vacate over a period of time the provincial portion of the property tax to municipalities by freezing the take; that is, the total number of dollars that the province takes for provincial property tax. That promise was then broken by the subsequent Minister of Finance, who said that they would freeze the mill rate. Of course, as the assessment grew both in value and extent, the take of the province from the provincial portion of property tax grew fairly substantially as well. So it wasn't quite the same thing. If you freeze the total number of dollars taken from provincial property tax, then the mill rate tends to fall as assessment grows, and it gives room to municipalities. That was one of the first broken promises that I observed with respect to that.

I think it is necessary but not sufficient for the province eventually to get out of the property tax altogether and leave the room entirely for municipalities. That would be my view. Obviously, that's quite a bit of money, and it needs to take a careful and patient approach, but I do think that position is valid.

I also believe, Mr. Chairman, that the municipalities deserve an additional source of funds that is based on the general tax revenue of the province, and particularly that is the income tax, and that is nonrenewable resource revenues. So our approach is to take a fixed amount and put it in legislation so that it isn't a matter of being fiddled with in each provincial budget but that there's a formula that's negotiated and agreed upon between the province and municipalities so that they have the financial resources they need to do their job.

I don't support one of the ideas that's currently being floated of giving municipalities a grab bag of little taxes that they can impose at will. I think that off-loads the responsibility to the municipalities to make individual decisions. It creates a patchwork of municipal financing, and it really doesn't address the question that municipalities are providing a very significant portion of public services in this province, and they do not have access to the main sources of revenue in this province. So I think that when voters see all of the different taxes that have been proposed for municipalities to impose, they're not going to be very happy. I think a greater share of existing government revenue is a more rational and more sustainable way to go.

I wanted to talk a little bit about regional planning as well, Mr. Chairman, because I think this is a really serious issue that has emerged in this province. If we look at the examples of some municipalities south of the border, we can see very, very serious consequences of not dealing well with municipal planning issues, and particularly intermunicipal planning issues.

I served on the Edmonton Regional Planning Commission and its executive committee at the time that the aforementioned Steve West decided to wrap up the affairs of the municipal planning commissions in this province. It was a difficult challenge. You know, the municipal planning commissions may not have been perfect or ideal, but they dealt with something that was very important and provided an important service, and that is to keep the land use appropriate for urban municipalities separate from the land use that is appropriate for rural municipalities and to make sure that everybody had a share in decision-making with respect to planning in a given region and that that share took into account, to a degree, differences in population.

Since that time the bilateral intermunicipal planning approach I think has failed. We don't have to look much farther than the proposals of the county of Strathcona to develop new industrial sites as well as new urban sites on its land on the boundary of Edmonton. That same problem has been replicated in a number of urban and rural centres around the province. When having discussions as I've

had with mayors in places like Grande Prairie and in Red Deer and so on, it's pretty clear that they as well as people in the AUMA have a great deal of concern about the strategies being employed by what are ostensibly rural municipalities to ring cities and ring towns with urban development so that all future development takes place in the rural municipality.

4:40

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I want to compliment the leader of the third party. The reason that I want to compliment him, even though I do not always agree with his philosophies, is that it is indeed very refreshing to have an individual that does understand the challenges of municipalities and that we are able to converse, I believe, with understanding. With that, I'm not sure the hon. member knows that I am giving him a compliment, but I want to thank him for that.

One of the comments that he made is: the most value for their money. Mr. Chairman, the hon. member is absolutely right. Local municipalities and the work that they do in their communities are very critical. Their involvement with the communities and at the grassroots, involving the libraries, volunteerism, and really what are the concerns of the individuals, I think is paramount.

I believe that you were talking about the ideal delivery for a program, the discussion of how the delivery took place with this government. It is the delivery of programs. It is the delivery for which municipalities need to have that autonomy, and they have asked for that autonomy.

Now, I guess that I need to talk about it from two different sides, municipalities under the auspices of Municipal Affairs. You know, if municipalities ask for autonomy, then with autonomy needs to come taxation because it is their choice. But I think that when we look in the past and we look at supporting municipalities, then there need to be some guidelines, and I think we need to be on the side of autonomy with support.

Mr. Chairman, there were comments that we do not need to push things on municipalities. I want to say that it is important that municipalities plan locally and plan regionally. I do not want to go back to the planning commissions because I don't believe that they truly worked, but we need to look at co-operation. We need to look at municipalities working together, to making sure that we can eliminate the duplication where duplication only is, let's say, a root of identity. We can have identity within our own municipalities and co-operate on services, co-operate on infrastructure, co-operate maybe even with administration.

The hon. leader of the third party also talked about full consultation. Through the minister's council we did have consultation. There was representation from both mayors of the large cities. There was representation from the AAMD and C, representation from the AUMA, and, Mr. Chairman, they do represent their own and separate interests. We also had meetings with the associations and individual municipalities, and they told us that we need to work together, that we need a regional plan but also that we need support.

Mr. Chairman, municipalities, as the hon. member has said, deserve an additional source of funding. This budget is providing that. This budget has provided \$400 million of additional support that will be ramped up after three years to \$1.4 billion.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Mr. Danyluk: One point four billion dollars. That does allow for some predictability, it does allow for some sustainability, and it does

allow for municipalities to be able to work together because they do have some additional capital to try to address some of those very important needs.

I was a little bit concerned when you talked about vacating the property tax. Well, as you spoke, then I realized that you talked about the vacating of the education tax or the education portion of property taxes. When we look at the needs of municipalities, I think a very good solution is that the property tax is still there because, you know, we have individuals, and we do have a responsibility to education. The municipal sustainability initiative provides that balance and takes that education tax or thereabouts, and it's going to be reverted to municipalities.

You made a comment about not supporting grab bags. You know, some municipalities would love the supporting of the grab bag, if I understand it, just to have, you know, a little bit of support here and a little bit of support there. I don't want to call it a system, but let me say to you that we definitely need to have a program that supports municipalities. Do we need to work on the present program that we have? Yes, we need to work on it a little bit because we still need to have the initiative for municipalities to work together. We need to address the needs of municipalities that have very high growth areas. We need to look at municipalities that don't have the equalized assessment yet have the population. We need to look at municipalities who are suffering because, through no fault their own, of not having development. I think that this municipal sustainability fund is going to address those needs. I see it happening, and I see it as very, very positive.

Last, Mr. Chairman, is the discussion of land use, the comparison between the urban and the rural, and looking at two distinct areas and what their role should be. Well, there are different identities in rural and urban areas, but at the same time I believe that the land-use framework that is going to come forward is going to identify individuality yet look at the province as a whole because land use is such an important issue for this province.

So for the next session I'll sit down until you have more questions, if that's all right.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much to the minister for those answers – they were certainly very helpful – and as well for the unusual compliment, which didn't surprise me as much as some members of his side, who I don't think all necessarily agreed with the minister on that point.

4:50

I want to sort of pick up where I left off and where the minister left off, and that's on the whole question of regional planning. I don't necessarily think that regional planning commissions were the ultimate answer, but we do need some comprehensive regional planning to solve intermunicipal land-use issues. You know, that can't be solved, in my view, by a series of bilateral negotiations and agreements between municipalities.

I just want to indicate to the minister that I think the problem needs a very direct solution, and it may well be solved by being negotiated, by the rural and the urban municipalities talking to each other, but I think that you need a set of principles to guide the discussion. I think the basic principle that I've talked about with municipal officials is that urban development should take place in urban areas and that rural development should take place in rural areas, and if urban development begins to develop in a rural area contiguous to an urban municipality, then that development needs to become part of the urban municipality.

We don't think that annexation is a dirty word. In fact, I think we need to go back to a policy that has some clear guidelines and says that if there's a whole bunch of high-density housing going into an area or a major commercial development that is contiguous to a city or a town, then that city or town should have the right – and it should be supported – to annex that particular piece so that the urban municipality remains urban.

I also think that rural municipalities have a role. Of course, there's agricultural development, and some of that is fairly industrial in nature. There's also the question of heavy industry, and it may well be that heavy industry is not always appropriate to be located right in or next to very seriously populated areas. So I think that there's an exception there, a special case that needs to be developed.

The minister must be aware of the G7 – now, I guess, it's the G8 – the group of counties that are following a systematic plan, an organized plan to ring urban municipalities with urban style developments so that all further development, then, must take place within their boundaries, and all of the tax revenue thereby flows to those. That should be stopped. We're really clear on this. The minister, I think, needs to take a really clear and a principled stand on this question.

I want to talk a little bit about regional government. I think that where there is a group or a cluster of urban municipalities in close proximity that are incorporated as urban municipalities, then there is a role for some form of regional government. That's different than a single urban municipality with perhaps several rural neighbours where there are unincorporated hamlets and so on involved. In that case I think I would take a rather different approach. I think this needs to be tackled, Mr. Minister. I think that this is an issue that really needs some attention. So negotiation: yes. Municipalities working with each other: yes. But there have to be some principles involved.

I think that another principle is the preservation of agricultural land and good recreational areas in our province. I think that's a role for municipalities: to support agriculture and to support agricultural land and to preserve recreational areas and natural areas. I think that's an important role as well for rural municipalities.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I'm going to just switch a little bit to housing and just deal with that issue. I start by expressing appreciation to the minister for his taking the step shortly after assuming office of establishing a committee that was fairly broadly based to look at the housing issue in this province, to look at affordable housing, and for including representatives of the two official opposition parties on that committee. I think that was a good step. It was in many respects a breath of fresh air, and we had quite a bit of hope for it.

I also want to thank the committee, which I think worked very hard under some fairly strict timelines that the minister imposed, met with hundreds of Albertans, travelled around the province, and, I think, developed a very good rapport. At that point there was, I guess, not quite the follow-through that we had hoped for.

I think that in terms of the process, it went off the rails a little bit when the report was not released publicly and the government made its decision about the report's recommendations while the public was unaware of the contents of the report. I think that's backwards, Mr. Chairman. I think that it's important that if we're going to have real public discussion and democracy in this province, if we're really going to democratize the political process in this province, then you let the public debate go on. You listen to it, and then you make your decision, not before. I think that had the government done that, they may have avoided some of the political difficulties that they're now finding themselves in.

Mr. Chairman, I just want to make the general point, which we have made before, that building new housing and providing

affordable housing opportunities for Albertans is a high priority. We recognize that the government sees that as a high priority, and we also recognize that it's ultimately the answer to the high rents that people are facing. It's a supply and demand issue. There's an insufficiency of supply. But the supply just doesn't appear because there's a demand. There are long lead times. There are many other factors that are preventing an appropriate supply from coming on quickly. And the government has admitted that it may be two years at minimum, perhaps quite a bit longer, before the supply issue is resolved.

The question then is: what do you do about the people who are being hit by unfair rents? You don't just call them names. You don't just say, "You're being un-Albertan" and all of that because that doesn't do anything. What really needs to happen is some protection for renters in the province. I don't know if there's a different way, if we can call it something else. We didn't want to call it rent controls because we didn't think the government would like that. We'd call it rent guidelines, you know, to try to soften the language a little bit. Maybe we can change the language a bit more. I don't know what you want to call it. Maybe we could just call it free enterprise in housing. [interjection] Then I think the minister of sustainable development might actually support it. But you do need to do something.

You need to resolve this question for people on a temporary basis, and that's all we've ever said: that these need to be in place on a temporary basis and that they shouldn't apply to new units. The argument has been made, of course, that if you put rent controls or guidelines or whatever on new units, then people won't build them. So we're saying: don't. Put it on the existing supply of rental accommodation. Then that should have no particular impact on new investment.

The fact of the matter remains that there is very little investment in rental accommodation now in Alberta without rent guidelines. So what's going to change if we bring rent guidelines in? In Ontario, where they have rent guidelines, there is substantially more investment in new rental units than there is here in Alberta. It doesn't follow that just because you have rent guidelines in place, somehow it affects the investment. I think there are a lot of other reasons why it's not happening in Alberta, but I encourage the minister to relook at that particular issue.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm not exactly sure what the hon. member said: that it can be solved by regional planning. I'm sorry. We need regional planning, and I agree with you on that. And he says that it can be solved by bilateral solutions.

An Hon. Member: Cannot be solved.

5:00

Mr. Danyluk: Cannot be solved. Okay. Well, then, that makes more sense. I didn't hear the "not" part. So I think we do need to talk together, and, I mean, we do need to have basic principles. You're right. You talked about: the urbans should have their place and the rurals should have their place, and their developments should take place in their own kind of areas. Right? You know, in actuality, that philosophy, that utopian philosophy, is right, except when we progress through the evolution of our province. Our urban areas are expanding. Regardless if we expand straight up, we are going to also expand in a horizontal fashion. So when we look at that, some of the boundaries – and we talk about annexation – need to be expanded.

Now, the question that arises to me is that I don't have a problem with that development. Being a farmer, my heart is for the preservation of land because it very much bothers me when we abuse land because we just can't make it again, at least not with the technology that we do have. But where I do have some difficulty – and I will admit it to you – is that the development part doesn't bother me as much in adjoining municipalities except when one municipality takes advantage of the opportunity of another.

Let me give you an example where you have a municipality, and they may be an urban municipality – and I'm only using this as an example – that is expanding in growth, and a municipality beside that municipality that is growing, but they snuggle right up to the first municipality and lower the mill rate and try to encourage development just outside. So they're really taking advantage of the large centre yet not having to have the commitment of the services, the community support, that is necessary. I think that part of what we're doing is trying to narrow that gap, that co-operation. I've always had the premise that we are one community and we really need to work as one community.

Should we have independence? Well, you know, I need to reflect back to my constituency when I talk about education. In my hometown of St. Paul and area we have a regional division education board. We have the public and the private in one board, and we work together. There is no other board like that in Alberta. There is none in Canada. There is really none in the Commonwealth. It makes sense for the people to work together. But the identity is at the site-based level, at the school. So if I relate that to municipalities, I would suggest to you that I think we can maintain independence but instill co-operation. I think we are doing that.

Regional government is important. There are opportunities. We need to, as I've said many times, communicate, collaborate, and co-operate. We go to the same hockey games. We shop at the same stores. We go to the same churches. Yet we want to build silos when we are involved in municipal politics. We need to narrow those gaps. We don't need to have so many stovepipes in one house. Working together, working regionally, I think, is a fundamental focus for where this government is going.

Mr. Chairman, let me refer to the housing issues or the housing task force. I agree with you that we must applaud those individuals who worked on that task force. I very much recognize the member who sat on that task force and all of the other individuals – we have the member opposite, member of the third party – who really came to the challenge and committed their time, their energy for 45 days. You did listen to the focus of the task force.

The task force recommended eight immediate recommendations, and we accepted all but one from the first grouping. I highlight that we committed \$96 million in 2007-2008, also adding the \$100 million for the municipal sustainability fund. We created three new initiatives: the homeless eviction and prevention fund, the transition housing initiative, the direct-to-tenant rent supplement programs. We increased funding for existing programs for the homeless shelters. We made changes to the tenant notices to bring short-term stability to a very much, as we know, heated market.

The task force recommended five short-term recommendations, and at this time the government accepted one, referred another one, and did not accept the recommendations like affordable land and moving towards a block funding because they are already being worked on in a department.

I want to say that the task force recommended an additional 33 long-term recommendations which involved more than just addressing a mandate of the task force to seek solutions but the creation of accessible and affordable housing. These either had been accepted in part, and there were nine of them, or referred to the interdepart-

mental assistant deputy ministers' committee – I believe we have nine ministries involved – and there were 11 of them. Thirteen were not accepted.

I want to say to the leader of the third party that we took this seriously. We took the recommendations seriously. In this House in question period and numerous other times this government gets criticized for looking in the short term or not looking in the long term when it comes to rent controls. Mr. Chairman, we do need to look in the long term and address the concerns in the short term. In the long term we need to have a continual building of units in Alberta. Last year we had a hundred thousand people come to this province. They need housing. They came to this province without doctors. [Mr. Danyluk's speaking time expired] I'll try to answer the rest of it.

Thank you.

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

5:10

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's appropriate that we continue the housing discussion, as we will. Again I will say that working with the task force, they were good people, and I know that the minister was serious about it. I would just echo what the leader said, though. I think the mistake is that it came to the Tory caucus ahead of being out there for debate.

Now, admittedly, there are some good things that the minister has talked about. Some of the recommendations they accepted, and we recognize that. The minister in question period talked about the \$285 million. Yes, I mean, the problem, though, is that as much as it sounds, when it comes to the other things, that amount of money may not be enough, with the overheated economy. We're always playing catch-up.

What we found as we travelled across the province was that the demand was so heavy. I mean, we heard from a lot of people. Yes, \$285 million goes some way, and some of the things that the government has talked about are good. The point that I'd like to stress to the minister, though, is that we saw this as a package, short-term and long-term. The problem is when you begin to look at it without the short term, and that's why we talked about temporary rent guidelines. It wasn't reinventing the wheel. They've had it in Alberta. It's because you just can't keep up. They can't build that housing fast enough.

We did talk about incentives – and we'll come to that – to get developers to build housing. We talked about that a lot. We talked about even trying to get people, first-time home buyers, into the market. But in the short run that would take time, and as the minister knows, today there are thousands of people out there that are feeling the stress of what's happening now. Yeah, it's okay to say that we can only do it once a year, but that may mean, as we're finding out, that some landlords – not all, but some – are just raising it faster than they would ordinarily, so it doesn't solve the problem.

You see, if you put the guidelines in on a temporary basis, as they do in other places, and say to the people, "We'll give you incentives. Build some markets. Put some affordable housing out there," I would suggest then that eventually we won't need the guidelines, as I like to call them, or rent stability, or whatever. But in the short run, I mean, what do we do with all these people that are paying 50, 60, 70 per cent of their income? Mr. Minister, I don't think you can have an office big enough to keep dealing with it in that way. I don't envy the minister, you know, trying to deal with this without the policy guidelines that are there.

That's all we were saying. In fact, the committee put two years on it. Hopefully, some of that affordable housing that you were talking

about will be coming onto the market then so that perhaps we wouldn't need them. But I honestly don't know what you do in the short run with all the people that are suffering at this particular time. It's not an easy problem, and I do have some sympathy for the minister because I know his heart's in the right place. I don't think of him as a person that doesn't care. I honestly don't. What we're talking about here is policy, and that's what I think has been missed, a big part of that task force.

I want to say that the other problem without the guidelines, I believe, is the volatility. We've found that that's been a bit of a disaster with the planning, as we now know today because it's not ready yet, even though it was said here yesterday that it was. They took the rent supplement program and increased it to basically what we had said to do, but if you don't have the guidelines, where's that money going to end up? You know, with no guidelines, rent increases carrying on all the time, that money may well end up in the pockets of the people that don't need it, the landlords.

That's why you need to put all these things together as a package, Mr. Chairman. That's the point that we were trying to make. The only other thing – I want to go through the report to some degree, but we won't have time, obviously, to go through all of it. The funding: good; \$35 million for temporary emergency homeless shelter spaces. We heard that loud and clear, and I'm glad that the minister is bringing that forward.

One of the things that we heard a lot – and I think the Member for Edmonton-Glenora would agree with me on this – is that that's important: we need the shelters for the homeless and the rest of it, and we probably can't build them fast enough right now. But, boy, did we get an earful about the Alberta transitional housing initiative. We put \$2.5 million there, but I don't think that's going to come close to dealing with it. The advocates kept saying: look, it's like a revolving door; we get people in shelters, and then we don't have enough to keep them. We're sort of talking that period of time, one to two years, to get them off addictions or whatever we do, to get established. They said that was just as important as the actual shelter allowance.

I think we could have trumped that up a bit, Mr. Chairman, because we have a growing problem, both with addictions, with homeless people. I think that's something that in that end of it, if we top that up a little more, you could have some real impact there with what you've done, and I'd like you to perhaps take a look at that in that whole area, you know, in the short run, dealing with that end of the spectrum.

As the committee, as the minister is well aware, we were trying to deal with the spectrum, right from homeless through to transitional housing, right to where we sought to help the first-time home buyers. We saw the spectrum. I think there is some good work at that end of it. I think that if we looked at the transitional housing, my recollection – and the minister can correct me – of what we talked about, \$12 million rings in my mind, and I haven't had a chance to go back, but that that may have some of the impact that we want at that end. So maybe that's something that we could take a look at, and that would deal with that end of it.

Mr. Chairman, I want to start to go through, though, some of it. We probably won't have time, and I'd like to get my colleagues in, but I want to talk about a couple of recommendations that were turned down, because there were a lot of them. One was the planning in the long term. Well, let's say it was short term and long term: establish an Alberta housing plan and establish an Alberta housing secretariat. The reason that we said that is not because we didn't want the minister to have a job, but what we heard right across the way was that we are in a crisis. We heard that everywhere. It is a crisis. Housing is in crisis. We wanted to bring that

forward. In the Lougheed government they established a ministry of housing and established what they wanted to do as a result of that. That's the point that we wanted with this secretariat. I know that the minister is saying that there is some discussion among the various groups that have to deal with housing. But just as an example today, with the minister of employment standing up about a number, and obviously the minister thought that that number was doing something, and they didn't have it.

That's why we were saying that. We are in such a crisis, that a secretariat who had access to the minister – I mean, with municipal affairs, all the other things you do are pretty important, as we've just had that discussion with the leader, that you've got a lot on the platter there. But in the short run at least, if not a housing ministry, like they've had in the past, that's why we're advocating a secretariat that would come out with a housing plan down the way, a 10-year plan or whatever. I think we still need that.

It's nice that there's \$285 million going forward, but I think the minister recognizes that in an overheated economy – and we're not prepared to put the brakes on – this is going to be, even with the \$285 million, an ongoing situation. So that's why we wanted it. I was sort of curious, I guess, why we would reject that, even if it was done through the present ministry, why that was rejected. All we're just saying is that this puts an emphasis that something important is occurring.

Thank you.

5:20

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Let me start off by discussing the long term and the short term. I know that the hon. leader of the third party has said that he knows what the answer is going to be. So I will speak directly – I'm trying to answer your question, hon. member.

Mr. Mason: I'll listen in my office.

Mr. Danyluk: You're going to listen in your office. That sounds very good.

Mr. Chairman, in comment to the long term, it is critical that we keep the movement of development, encourage the movement of development of new units. We cannot totally emphasize the short-term solutions without looking at the long term. This government has very much recognized the short term.

The hon. member mentioned the \$285 million, so I will respond to the \$285 million. One hundred million for new municipal sustainability housing. Mr. Chairman, this funding plus \$96 million in enhanced capital to increase affordable housing units is funding that is going to municipalities. Municipalities in high-growth areas are the best to understand their needs. Municipalities can spend this funding in the way that they see fit, that best addresses the needs in their communities, whether it is the building of new units, the renovation of buildings, getting involved in secondary suites, which is more immediate, whether it is rent supplements. Rent supplements have been in place. There has been an additional amount of funds put into rent supplements that does not support the landlord: \$9 million goes directly to individuals.

Mr. Chairman, \$13 million increase for homeless support, \$3 million increase for the provincial homeless initiative, \$14 million increase in the rent supplement program, \$4.3 million increase in support to housing providers and special purpose housing, \$45 million to affordable housing in Wood Buffalo, \$7 million for a new homeless and eviction fund initiative, and \$2.5 million for the

Alberta transition housing initiative. These are incentives and initiatives that came forward from the housing task force. On comments from the member of the third party, "Is this enough; is \$285 million enough?" I'm not sure what enough is.

I want to compliment our caucus for recognizing that there is a need, that there need to be solutions. Mr. Chairman, I need to say that solutions that need to be looked at need to be balanced. We cannot only look at the long term. We cannot only look at the short term. The predictability of this province would be a lot easier if we said: okay, from today on there will be no more people coming to this province; none of our children will be looking for housing. What happens is we will cut off any sort of housing increases. It wouldn't be very hard to solve it that way. But we have a continuing influx into Alberta. We have our children who are working, and they are getting involved in the marketplace for new units. At the same time, some of those individuals provide opportunities for others when they build a new home, when they start and maybe move into a new condominium. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we do need to have a balance.

I want to speak just for a moment about the \$2.5 million for the new transitional housing initiative. The government clearly heard that building units without having services attached is an issue. This program will assist people in transition to move into more stable accommodations once they are ready. Through the task force recommendation of \$12 million – they base this on new units built for five years – we approved \$2.5 million, a complement of units that will be created this year. There is also \$16 million in new transitional supports to seven major municipalities. That started on April 1, 2007. It's \$8 million per year. It's over a two-year program. Mr. Chairman, I stress to you again that it is very necessary to have that balanced approach.

We had a meeting today. This government does listen. The members opposite had individuals come to this House. We met with those individuals. First of all, we had a presentation by those individuals, which included press and members opposite, and then this government had a meeting with those individuals to discuss their direct concerns. Mr. Chairman, it was a very good meeting. We discussed the challenges and the hardships that individuals had, what was happening in their community. We talked about solutions, and I believe that, maybe with the exception of one individual, we understood each other's challenges. We had staff who stayed and met with those individuals one on one because that is what is so important. We need to look at the immediate concerns that individuals have. We cannot forget about one segment of our population. This government, this caucus has looked at a balanced approach and a package deal.

Mr. Chairman, when we talk about doing it fast – and I'm taking their comments – that if they talk about a housing secretariat, that housing secretariat would be another form, I believe, of government. We have in place a ministry that very much understands the issues, the issues that were brought forward by the task force, a ministry that is working hard to deal with the issues.

5:30

The Chair: We'll come back to that after we recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thanks, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak this time on Municipal Affairs and Housing. Obviously, we're all engulfed in this issue. Housing is an emergency situation right across the province, and certainly in my own constituency of Edmonton-Calder I'm receiving literally dozens of calls every single day from people that are in a tight spot, so to speak, with rents going

up or eviction notices being served. So I've been reflecting on this a great deal because it comes down to the most fundamental thing that people require to survive and to put all the other elements of their lives together, and that is to have a roof over their head. If you don't have that, you're less able to continue with your education, your health is likely to suffer, the family unit is likely to be fractured in some way, and a myriad of other physical and psychological problems. So it comes down to the most central thing that we are meant to protect here as the provincial Legislature and legislators.

So much is being said about spending so much money, but really in my mind and I think in the public's mind this is a regulatory issue. It's not a question of spending hundreds of millions of dollars. It's taking the official duty that we have here to make regulations to protect people from being gouged in their rents. Mr. Chair, it's a regulatory issue, and we don't have to talk about throwing in hundreds of millions of dollars. Certainly, we do when we are looking at building affordable housing in the long term, but we can't expect those units to be in place for weeks or months or even years, I would venture to say, considering how difficult it is to build something in this province, with the tremendous economy that we have.

What we are faced with now is to put a regulation in place to ensure that people aren't getting gouged and that we're not having this huge transfer of money away from the working people of this province, the middle class of this province, the young families of this province, transferring that money out of their pockets and into the landlord system and the landlord and rental companies that are currently enjoying the situation. That's what it's all about, Mr. Chair. It's not about spending hundreds or millions of dollars. I'm tired of hearing these numbers being bandied about. Certainly, it's fine and dandy, and that's what we're doing, but it is a regulatory issue that will save people money, and that is the distinction that everybody who's getting gouged knows, but we're slow to understand it here in this Chamber, at least on the other side.

You know, again, rental companies want to have some idea about what's coming down the tube, as well, and the confusion that we're creating at this juncture is even making people gouge worse because they don't know if something is going to come down. As a result, the rents go up even further and faster and in a more erratic sort of way. That's what we're facing here now, and we're just throwing gasoline on the crisis by dilly-dallying about and not taking decisive action, the responsibility of this House, to provide regulation and direction for the most essential service and industry that all citizens require in this province.

Moving along with that, you know, as we spoke about earlier today in the House, the rental companies know that they have a huge sector of the population over a barrel. They are the people who have been less able or unable to afford a mortgage because, let's say, in Edmonton houses have doubled in the last year or so. So they are stuck having to rent a little bit more. They want to buy a place, but then they're lined up in the crosshairs of rental companies, who can then gouge them even more. So they get stuck in that spinning cycle.

You know, Mr. Chair, if we don't deal with this now, we're going to have a whole generation of young people who are unable to buy their own homes, unable to buy their own condominiums, and less able to start their own families. Really, that's the foundation, the structure by which we move on and we create a responsible society. Landownership is a fundamental building block to building a stable society. People have ownership, they take responsibility, and they have the stability to have a family and to start their own family.

When I look at young people out there, at my own family, I'm just absolutely sick to see that we're not seizing hold of this situation and

putting it back on course. We have the opportunity to do that, certainly. We're not outside of the ability to deal with the situation. We can't flounder around like we have been. We can in fact put in reasonable rent guidelines, stabilize the situation, and focus back on making it possible for these young people to buy their first bit of property, a condominium or a small home or something like that, through some sort of mortgage assistance program.

You know, this same Alberta government – well, it's not really the same because I certainly saw much more responsibility in administrations past – foresaw the requirement of giving some assistance to people who are seeking their first mortgage and putting in place a mechanism by which they can have affordable loans to do that. Quite frankly, you know, this goes past and over ideological grounds right across the whole spectrum because the bottom line is to have a stable population, a stable population who has an investment in the future. Quite frankly, this isn't just talking about people's rents and rent guidelines, rent controls, or whatever. We're talking about the future of this province and where people are going to live.

So I really wanted to say my piece on that. I find it quite offensive that we're wasting the time that's available to us to deal with an emergency situation. I appreciate that the minister is stuck between a rock and a hard place, but if there's anything I can do to move that rock along, to give it a push, just give me a ring, and I would be glad to put my shoulder to it. You know what? This is not something that you have to face alone. I know that there are other members across the way that would like to see some rent guidelines in place too. At the very least, electorally, you know, it's going to be a bit of a tight spot whenever that election comes.

An Hon. Member: That's for sure.

Mr. Eggen: Absolutely. You know, you face the music if you don't, right? There are lots of renters that are going to suddenly start voting, and then see what happens.

I wanted to speak about that, but I also have some other issues that are very important, I think, to this budget coming up. You know, as I've come to realize, really the best value for investment for public monies is running it through municipalities. Municipalities have a degree of efficiency that usually delivers the greatest amount of goods for the most reasonable price. What I'm encouraging, whatever initiative we put forward here for housing and for municipalities in general, is that we consult with municipalities in the most interactive way possible.

I have a very good example of an initiative that took place in the city of Edmonton, actually in Edmonton-Calder, in regard to providing affordable housing. The Ascot Garden complex in the Wellington community in my area is just in the process of probably being rebuilt. It was affordable housing and affordable housing units, so it's a difficult situation, of course, because we're trying to protect those units and then also develop the area, create densification. It's all good. So what the city of Edmonton did was go in and buy a percentage of those places before they were even built, thus ensuring that those are going to be affordable housing units for assisted living and suchlike.

This is just an example of a way by which we can look at a local initiative and perhaps apply it to a broader circumstance and encourage municipalities to do this throughout the province: have a certain percentage of any new building that is earmarked for affordable housing or have that developer pay the equivalent into a fund that will build affordable housing in some appropriate place.

I was down in Calgary a couple of weeks ago. They had a housing and homelessness conference down at the Stampede grounds, and that's like ground zero for, you know, a transition from

what used to be quite a lot of affordable housing, albeit not such great affordable housing, to a sort of condo, high-rise phenomenon that's taking place around the Stampede grounds. What a great place to impose such an idea, where in fact each of those units being built as new condos could have a percentage that goes to affordable housing either in that development or somewhere close by. Lots of development is taking place. Lots of building is taking place, and we want to make sure that that continues for the whole spectrum of the population.

Municipalities are at the forefront with being able to deal with homelessness as well. Certainly, we have some new funding in regard to the homeless initiative, and we should work as closely as possible. I would like to encourage the municipalities having a hand in a number of initiatives that we see in both Edmonton and Calgary and in Red Deer as well to ensure that that money is being spent in the most efficient way possible.

Another area of concern that I have in regard to . . . [Mr. Eggen's speaking time expired]

5:40

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I need to address a couple of issues. The hon. member talks about the future of Alberta, then feels sick about what's happening because of rent guidelines and the stability situation. I want to inform the hon. member that you cannot turn on rent guidelines or rent controls for a year or for two years and then expect private enterprise to come back in and build. What happens is that as soon as you turn on those rent controls, it adds stability. There is no initiative or incentive to build, and it doesn't turn on the day that you turn off rent controls because those entrepreneurs need stability for investment. That adds to the situation. So you won't have building for four or five years or longer. They need to have confidence in the investment and in the government.

I'm working a little backwards on some of the comments that were made. The hon. member talked about the appropriate place to build, and, you know, he has the direction of the appropriate place. Well, Mr. Chairman, there are so many people who also have the focus of where it's appropriate to have housing, that it should occur in their areas. It's not quite the solution that it looks to be.

Mr. Chairman, how much time?

The Clerk: Two minutes.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Chairman, I need to speak about rent supplements. This government's policy is that individuals should not pay more than 30 per cent of their salaries for housing. Now, the individuals that get support are those who are most in need. We have a set amount of money, so when we look at the criteria and the challenges that people come to us with, the individuals that most need the support get the support most. I heard the other day a member of the opposition, I believe, say that there was an individual who had been waiting for three years to get affordable housing. Well, that could very well be true, but there were probably a lot of individuals that needed it more than the person that was waiting. I mean, we need to look at the individuals that need it most.

Mr. Chairman, the other one is when we have discussions about gouging by landlords. Your interpretation of gouging could be a lot different than the interpretation they have. Landlords are not all enjoying the situation. They have higher maintenance costs. I talked to one landlord that can't get a painter, can't get a plumber in. Maintenance is a problem. Repairs are a problem.

The Chair: I hate to interrupt the hon. minister, but pursuant to Standing Order 59.02(9)(a) the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the departments of Municipal Affairs and Housing and Health and Wellness relating to the 2007-08 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2008, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

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

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Speaker: Before I recognize the hon. Deputy Government House Leader, I would like to advise that earlier this afternoon while the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing was speaking, perhaps it wasn't the Standing Orders that were breached, but accepted practice in this Assembly was breached – and I didn't want to intervene at the time – when an hon. member walked casually through the centre of the Assembly, which isn't normally accepted practice. I would like to perhaps point out to all members that Standing Orders 13(4), (5), and (6) and *Beauchesne's* 458(1) might make interesting reading for that hon. member and all hon. members in the future. I know that the rules are a little more relaxed during committee, but I think we still have to maintain a certain level of decorum in the House.

With that, I would recognize the hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be sure and check out that reading list over the supper break.

Given the hour and given the fact that we've made good progress today, I would like to move that we call it 6 o'clock and that pursuant to Government Motion 19 we reconvene at 7 p.m. in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; at 5:49 p.m. the Assembly adjourned until 7 p.m.]