

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 14, 2007**

1:00 p.m.

Date: 07/05/14

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Author of all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, we ask for guidance in order that truth and justice may prevail in all of our judgments. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, I'm now going to invite Mr. Paul Lorieau to lead us in the singing of our national anthem, and I'd like all to join in in the singing of our anthem in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 21 bright students seated in the members' gallery from Fort Saskatchewan Christian school. Today they are here with their teachers, Stacey Paulsen and Mrs. Karen Maslanko, and parent helpers Mrs. Renee Goodbrand and Mrs. Caroline Bartz. Fort Saskatchewan Christian is one of the many exceptional schools in my riding, and it is wonderful to see these eager young students in our Legislature learning about how government works.

Before I'd ask them to rise, I'd also, Mr. Speaker, like to share with you that Ms Stacey Paulsen, who is, of course, one of the teachers I introduced, is marrying a young lad that's well known to our caucus, our caucus director, Mr. Michael Simpson, this Sunday.

With that, we extend to you sincere congratulations and ask all of the students and teachers and helpers to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

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

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly on behalf of the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security students and teachers from the SCOPE home-school in the Stony Plain constituency. Accompanying the students today are teachers and parent helpers Rosemary Lee, Jenny Stone, and Christine Clements. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you a visiting class from Springbank, Alberta, in the

district of Foothills-Rocky View. They're accompanied by their teachers, Mr. Scott Sharun, Mr. Dickson Morris, and Ms Tammy Hodgson. Please join me in welcoming them to the Legislative Assembly.

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

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague from Wetaskiwin-Camrose I'd like to introduce to you and through you a group of students and adults from the Gwynne school, which is in the Wetaskiwin-Camrose riding. There are 25 students and their teachers, Mrs. Char Fraser, Mrs. Kathryn Weremey, and Ms Lisa Roasting, and parent helpers Carol Senz and Terri Pawloske. I'd ask these people to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two parents of children who are autistic, Kierstin Hatt and Eleanor Mui. I would ask that they please rise for the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House an outstanding artist who lives in my constituency – in fact, she lives with me in our home – my wife of 37 years, Rhea Jansen, and her sister who's visiting from Ottawa, Bertha Lesage. I invite them to stand and receive the warm welcome of this House.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Nikolai Lubchenko and Don Durocher. Nikolai and Don are Palace Casino workers entering their 248th day on the picket line due in part to this government's failure to protect Alberta workers from unfair employers.

Nikolai was born in Ukraine and came to Canada in 1992. Before coming to Canada, he worked in the research institute in Kiev. He's been working at the Palace Casino since 1999 as a dealer. Nikolai is very involved in the Latin dance community and enjoys getting out with the music and ballroom dancing every opportunity he can get.

Don Durocher has been a worker at the Palace Casino since 1992, shortly after its opening, and has been in the casino industry for over 20 years. Don, a pit boss for 10 years, served in the former Palace Casino Staff Association as president prior to the merger with UFCW. When he's not working, Don loves to sing and dance. He runs a karaoke show out of Calmar every weekend, and people come from miles around to participate in his show. In addition to his singing talents, he has a great enthusiasm for dance as well, and he was formerly a dance instructor.

They're joined by UFCW local 401 representative Don Crisall, and I would ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, did you have an introduction? Please proceed.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure and honour today to rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of this great Alberta House of democracy Sonia Donaldson. Now, Sonia is the president of ACTRA Edmonton. She's the owner-operator of her own small business, ProSound Productions. She's a Big Sister mentor with Ben Calf Robe school, a tremendous Edmontonian and Albertan. Sonia, please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly Mr. Will Broome. Will has a passion for politics, having recently been active in the provincial PC leadership. Before that, he was special assistant to Lee Richardson, MP, Calgary Centre. These days Will focuses his efforts as a public relations consultant in Calgary. He recently joined the Calgary-Glenmore board of directors, and I look forward to working with him. Will is here today in the members' gallery. I would ask for him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

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

Cities of the Future Awards for Edmonton

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to congratulate the city of Edmonton for winning three North American cities of the future awards. The awards were presented by an independent index published by *Foreign Direct Investment* magazine out of the United Kingdom. The publication listed Edmonton as having the best economic potential of any large North American city between a population of 500,000 and 2 million people.

The strong economic potential combined with a growing infrastructure, high standard of living, cost-effectiveness, and good human resources gave Edmonton the number 4 spot. They also determined that Edmonton is in the top five large cities with the best development and investment promotion. The independent panel of nine judges used seven selection factors in making their decision that included 108 cities with more than 60 criteria used to determine the potential of each city to attract business prospects.

With the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation promoting the city, Edmonton has the distinction of being the only Canadian city to appear on the top-10 large cities list. All of *Foreign Direct Investment's* 2007 North American cities of the future awards will be displayed in the magazine's April/May issue. I would like everyone to join me in congratulating those who made it possible, including our provincial government, for Edmonton to become a city of the future.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

1:10 Municipal Safety Award for Slave Lake

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I liked Maya Angelou's statement when she said how important it is to recognize and celebrate our heroes and 'sheroes.' Today I want to identify a few heroes and 'sheroes' from the beautiful constituency of Lesser Slave Lake.

At a time of tremendous growth and industrial activity safety is of utmost importance to the continued quality of life of all Albertans.

The town of Slave Lake has worked and is working hard at being proactive in keeping its residents in the town secure. So it is with great pleasure that I congratulate the town of Slave Lake for being honoured by the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing for its outstanding safety practices on May 4, 2007, in Banff. Her Worship Karina Pillay-Kinnee, the mayor of Slave Lake, on behalf of the town of Slave Lake accepted the municipal safety award.

Receiving the award is a special honour because it signifies remarkable performance and dedication to safety. Gaining this recognition is no easy task. The municipal safety award is presented annually to municipalities which have reached a five-year accreditation milestone in providing safety code services under the Safety Codes Act. The town of Slave Lake marked its 10-year accreditation anniversary in 2006 and is now being formally recognized. This is a very impressive track record.

I am proud to recognize this important milestone for the 'sheroes' and heroes – Mayor Karina Pillay-Kinnee; councillors Elaine Carmichael, Valerie Tradewell, Laura Ross, George Snider, Rob Irwin, Doug Bolan, and the staff from the town of Slave Lake – and their dedication to ensuring that the safety of its residents is upheld. Keep up the great leadership.

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

Team Canada World Hockey Champions

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Sunday Canada's men's hockey team did something no team has done since 1937, going 9-0 to win the world hockey championship in Moscow. Alberta's contribution to this championship team was substantial, from star players to role players to behind the scenes. On the roster were Chris Mason from Red Deer, Cam Ward from Sherwood Park, Mike Commodore from Fort Saskatchewan, Jason Chimera from Edmonton, Dion Phaneuf from Edmonton, and an unsung hero of any team, equipment manager Robin McDonald from Didsbury.

Certainly, no Albertan contributed more under trying circumstances than Shane Doan from Halkirk. Doan was the target of a scurrilous attempt at defamation by federal politicians who alleged that Doan uttered anti-French slurs during an NHL game in 2005. The fact that Doan was cleared by the NHL of uttering the slurs and is widely regarded as an upstanding citizen did not deter self-aggrandizing, publicity-seeking federal politicians from dragging his name through the mud to elevate themselves.

No federal party covered themselves in glory in this rush to judgment, not the federal Liberals who joined in the charade, not the federal New Democrats who expressed their usual knee-jerk outrage, not the federal Conservatives who sat back and allowed this sorry spectacle to be played out. Of course, the leaders of this crew were the Bloc Québécois, the merry band of hypocrites who accept their fat federal government paycheques while trying to destroy the federal system that feeds them. Is it any wonder, Mr. Speaker, that Canadians hold their politicians in such low regard?

While his name was being sullied for the benefit of cheap headlines, Doan went about his work captaining Team Canada. Happily, Shane Doan gets the last laugh. The ultimate revenge for Doan is the gold medal that he will have in his possession long after the Ottawa politicians who tried to score points at his expense are gone from the scene.

On behalf of the Alberta Liberal caucus congratulations to Chris Mason, Cam Ward, Mike Commodore, Jason Chimera, Dion Phaneuf, Robin McDonald, Shane Doan, and all members of Team Canada for their world championship victory. You did yourselves and all Canadians proud even if some politicians in Ottawa did not.

Thank you.

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

Excellence in Teaching Award for Don Steenwinkel

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to recognize the recipients of the 2007 excellence in teaching awards. For almost 20 years the excellence in teaching awards have recognized the innovative and outstanding teaching that takes place every day across our province. Since its inception in 1989 over 400 teachers have received an excellence in teaching award, and an astounding 7,900 teachers have been nominated. I had the pleasure of attending the awards ceremony on Saturday evening, when the recipients were honoured, and I'm proud to say that one of those recipients is from my constituency.

Don Steenwinkel is presently teaching instrumental music, choral music, and musical theatre at the Leduc composite high school. Don was honoured for his ability to encourage students to be the best that they can be. Over the past 12 years under Don's leadership the music program has doubled, Mr. Speaker, and he has set up a recording studio where students can record their own music. I can personally attest to his qualities as all three of my children have been members of his band. In the words of his students: there is no substitute for the wisdom passed on by Mr. S. and no comparison for the passion with which he teaches.

Don reflects the passion and the commitment of great teachers all across our province. Alberta's teachers do more than instill knowledge and information; they breathe life into the curriculum to ensure that students succeed. Every day Alberta teachers motivate our youth to achieve their individual dreams, dreams which become the foundation of Alberta's future.

The excellence in teaching awards are a wonderful way to say thank you so much. It is an acknowledgement from the teacher's local school, community, and the province that they are held in high esteem for their valued contribution to the lives of their students.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of this government and all Albertans I would like to say congratulations to all those teachers who have been recognized through this year's excellence in teaching awards program and to say to them all: thank you.

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

Temporary Foreign Workers

Mr. Eggen: Thank you. The Canada/Alberta agreement signed by this government last week intends to facilitate the entry of foreign immigrant workers even though there is massive evidence that such programs have been abused by some employers in order to keep wages artificially low and to undermine Canadian workers.

While there are thousands of Albertan union members waiting for a well-paid job, this government focuses on bringing cheaper workers for short periods of time. Most temporary workers come in on six-month to one-year visas. They often face language barriers, a lack of proper preparation, and have no access to a social support system. They are very vulnerable because they do not know their rights and do not have access to agencies that can help them when employers might mistreat them. Additionally, they have no mobility, as other Canadians might, since they depend on their employers to stay in the country.

By enhancing a policy of temporary workers, the government prevents many Albertans from receiving skills training and from having access to the jobs that our economy is generating. At the same time, this policy is creating an underclass of workers who live in precarious situations and who are not well protected. This is another example of the lack of long-term planning that characterizes

this government. A larger workforce requires more houses, more schools, and more hospitals. Temporary workers live thousands of miles away from their families and are not provided with education or proper living conditions. If there is a labour deficit, it should be solved by promoting higher wages, proper housing, better training, and long-term immigration.

If these workers are good enough to work here, they should also be good enough to stay here as residents of the country, to enjoy the complete protection of federal and provincial laws, to join unions and defend their rights, and to fully develop as part of this community. A policy that pits immigrant workers against Albertans might be made in Alberta, but it is not in the public interest.

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

Team Canada World Hockey Champions

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Without political comment I rise today to recognize the 2007 men's world hockey champions, Team Canada. En route to the gold medal Team Canada defeated Germany, Norway, Belarus, Czech Republic, Sweden, Slovakia, and – to the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, if she's here – the United States of America, Switzerland, and finally, Finland. This team was led by general manager Steve Yzerman, coach Andy Murray, and captained by Albertan Shane Doan.

Mr. Speaker, not only a gold medal, but we also have on the world team the most valuable player, Rick Nash, and a two-time gold medal winner from Winnipeg, Jonathan Toews. He played also in the juniors this year, winning the gold.

This is Canada's third gold medal in five years, and this year, 2007, we won the men's gold, women's gold, and the juniors' gold.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a petition with 93 signatures. The petition calls for province-wide inspections and enforcement of health facilities and urges the government to "immediately establish a public inquiry into the failure of the health . . . system to protect the safety of patients in its care and to provide recommendations to correct the situation."

1:20

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

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition signed by 35 people asking that remuneration paid to employees working with people with disabilities be standardized across the sector, regardless of whether the workers are employed by government or by community-based or private providers, that they are fairly compensated and that they remain competitive with other sectors to reflect the valuable and crucial service they provide, that they have professional development opportunities, and that province-wide service and outcomes-focused level-of-care standards are introduced.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair is tabling with the Assembly the report by the Ethics Commissioner into allegations involving hon. members – and I will mention their names because that is title of the text – Ed Stelmach, Premier; David Hancock, Minister of Health and Wellness; and Lyle Oberg, Minister of Finance. The

report is dated May 11, 2007, and this report was distributed to all members earlier today.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure today to table five copies of the program that was part of the excellence in teaching awards on Saturday evening. I would suggest that members take a look at the program because it outlines the 27 recipients and some of the great stories of teaching in Alberta.

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

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three today. I'm pleased to table responses to the questions raised during the debate of Bill 32, the Animal Health Act.

As well, I am tabling four annual reports for the Alberta Agricultural Products Marketing Council for the years 2003 to 2007 and also the annual report of the Farmers' Advocate of Alberta for the year ended March 31, 2007. This report also includes details for the farm implement compensation fund for the year ended December 31, 2006.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have copies of a rent increase notice that the leader of the third party referenced in his questions Thursday. The notice was given to Jessica Fox and is dated a week after the government announced that it closed the door on rent guidelines. The increase is for \$1,200, bringing the total rent for the young family to \$1,695.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling two sets of documents. One is an article about ACTRA: ACTRA has taken a lead role in just about every major cultural issue concerning performing arts in Canada.

Another is a letter from Betty Ganert in my constituency about the difficulties in staffing home care in our province and the great problems she has had in gaining consistent home care for her husband, Ernie, who has MS.

Thank you.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two letters to table today. The first one is from Anna Cooper of Red Deer, in which she is expressing concern that her nephew is going to have his specialized services, funded by Children's Services' family supports for children with disabilities, cut up to 75 per cent "because he failed to demonstrate enough growth to justify the level of service he had." She says that this error needs to be corrected.

The second letter is from Stephen Renaud of Edmonton, and it is concerning a disturbing matter where he believes that the quality of support for our most vulnerable citizens, those with developmental disabilities, needs to receive far more attention.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have four tablings today. The first is the program of *Isabella's Renaissance*, a wonderful both historic and comedic theatrical treatment of the Italian Renaissance by grades 8 and 9 students of the Calgary Arts Academy, which my

wife and I had the pleasure to attend last month at the Vertigo Theatre in Calgary.

My second tabling highlights another in the enjoyable May-long series of *ImaginAsian* events. *String Fever* combined the individual talents of Aarti Shankar, Mei Han, Amir Amiri, and Pham Duc Thanh with the multitalents of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra this past Friday, May 11, at the Jack Singer.

My third tabling is the Saturday, May 12, program of a marvellous *Meals on Wheels* dinner and fundraiser with a 1950s theme entitled *Cuisine & Concours d'Élégance*. *Meals on Wheels* is celebrating its 42nd year of serving a variety of special Calgarians, from seniors who are able to live independently through the supports provided, to high-needs elementary schools and daily bag lunches for the working poor. *Meals on Wheels* has raised almost 6 and a half million dollars for their much-needed new facility.

My final tabling is the tag from the tag-a-tree event which began at noon hour in Bragg Creek this past Saturday, May 12, to raise awareness that the clear-cutting in the Kananaskis scheduled to begin next month would have a much more devastating effect on the watershed, the flora and the fauna, and the recreation and tourism than the pine beetle.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table a letter from Kierstin Hatt and Brian Small of Camrose, Kimberly and Brian Hockin of Wetaskiwin, Jody and Tomi Heiskanen of Red Deer, and Eleanor and Andy Mui of Edmonton. These are parents of children with autism. Their letter is to the Minister of Children's Services, presenting evidence of ministry failures to follow regulations and existing procedures within the FSCD program, as adult children with autism are denied treatment that they need and to which they are entitled under the FSCD Act. This also results in enormous additional burden to the families, to say nothing of the waste of ministry resources . . .

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

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling the required five copies of my letter and receipt regarding my donation to the Interfaith Food Bank as per my pledge in the Assembly on April 2. This pledge constitutes half of my indexed pay raise. The Interfaith Food Bank assists 1,400 people every month. I believe that I am making a point in public, not grandstanding.

head: **Oral Question Period**

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

Calgary Municipal Funding

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has decided to treat the city of Calgary and their duly elected local representatives as children of the province by micromanaging municipal funding. Of course, this is not what the Premier promised during the leadership campaign. The fact is that municipal governments are closest to the people and know what needs to be done in their communities. My question is to the Premier. Can the Premier tell us why his government does not trust Calgary city council to make the right decisions?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I just want to point out the fact that this Premier does keep his promises. In fact, during the

election campaign I talked about a \$1.4 billion fund to go to municipalities. This, of course, is to be based roughly on the amount of money that is paid towards education through property tax. We also fully understood and understand as our caucus that municipalities are facing pressures on a daily basis, just like we are in government, in terms of growth, more people moving into the province. We want to work in partnership with all municipalities to find a way we can distribute these funds and be accountable at the same time.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing met with the mayor of Calgary to discuss municipal funding. The minister apparently promised the mayor that he would take to his caucus a proposal to define Calgary as a special municipality and allocate municipal funding on a population model. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: is this minister prepared to grant Calgary the special status that they have proposed?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I invited the mayor of Calgary to meet with me if he so desired. The mayor of Calgary accepted that invitation. We had numerous discussions centralizing around funding. I had at that time told the mayor that I would bring his requests and some of his challenges and basically report about the meeting that we did have to caucus, which I did.

Dr. Taft: Okay, Mr. Speaker. Well, a major consideration in the debate over special status for the city of Calgary is of course: what about the city of Edmonton? The city of Edmonton also faces unique challenges and, therefore, would deserve the same consideration as a special municipality. To the Premier: is the Premier prepared to give the city of Edmonton the same consideration as Calgary?

1:30

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, once again I think the hon. member has a few so-called facts mixed up. There are many municipalities that are looking at what is the most equitable way of allocating funds from the \$1.4 billion. He's saying that the city of Calgary is talking about population base. Actually, that's not true. All I know from previous history, and Alberta history at least, is that there was one special municipality – and that still holds – and I believe it's the county of Strathcona that participates both in the AUMA and the AAMD and C. But this is an issue of the best way to try to allocate the \$1.4 billion.

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

Temporary Rent Regulation

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government doesn't want to be seen to be flip-flopping on the need for temporary rent regulations, so they're tying themselves in knots, creating among other things a new landlord/tenant body that will attempt, rather feebly I am sure, to do what rent regulations could have done simply and effectively. To the Premier: can the Premier explain specifically how the mandate of the new landlord/tenant body announced by the President of the Treasury Board is supposed to mesh with the existing residential tenancies advisory committee and with the

existing tenancy dispute resolution mechanism? It's quite a dog's breakfast, isn't it?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I think that the only person that was in knots last Thursday was the Leader of the Opposition.

Quite frankly, the ministers are being proactive, looking at different ways of bringing in landlords and seeing how we can work through this particular situation. For the second question the minister responsible will respond.

Dr. Taft: Which minister would that be?

Instead of establishing temporary rent regulations for existing buildings, this government is proposing to shame landlords through a public website. Responsible, competent governments set policy and enforce it. They don't attempt to punish behaviour that they continue on the other hand to defend as perfectly legal. To the Premier: can the Premier tell us what legislative authority the rent fairness standards will have and whether it's appropriate to publicly expose or shame landlords for doing what this government maintains is perfectly legal?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, the advisory board was created back in 2003, so unless there are ministerial powers that I didn't know about, that they could think that's right, they've been there offering positive suggestions to the government for years. They are actually proactive in trying to come up with solutions that work, rather than simply hiding behind the fact that unless we have rent control, nothing will work. These are a group of dedicated Albertans who have asked to sit down and talk about how they can best work together to solve the problem we're facing, not into grandstanding with different individuals here.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Among those dedicated Albertans are a number of housing experts in particular communities, including, for example, places like Red Deer, who have already commented that the government's new scheme would not be effective in their communities. To the Premier: what is the Premier prepared to do to prevent rent gouging in the communities where the proposed mechanisms clearly won't work even as admitted by the members the Treasury president just referred to?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, to suggest that this new body or that we have come up with new schemes is simply irresponsible. We have asked to sit down with them, and they have asked to sit with us and look at if collectively we can come up with some solutions to these problems. So to prejudge or presuppose what they might suggest to us is simply reading their own press releases and coming to the conclusion of what might happen. I think it's laudable that this group is willing to come forward and actually work to help some of these people who need our help in the difficult times that we all face, not this kind of help that they're offering.

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

Media Access to Premier's Office

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Accounts have surfaced recently of the Premier's office attempting to muzzle and intimidate members of the provincial media on their coverage of the affordable housing crisis. For example, one reporter from a major news organization was denied access to an interview with this Premier due to the

critical budget coverage that was deemed, quote: a betrayal to the government. My question to the Premier: is it the Premier's policy to award favourable reporting with access and to freeze out those who point out that this government continues to stumble?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I would think that reporting in the newspapers and in the television media would be fair and recognize, of course, at some point the good strengths of our government and maybe even look at those areas where we need improvement. So I don't know what the leader is getting at here.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, thousands of Albertans rely on the provincial media as their source of information on affordable housing. These Albertans would surely be concerned to know the facts: that there have been widespread reports of the Premier's office intimidating reporters over critical coverage on the government's handling of this crisis. Will the Premier admit that in refusing media access because reporters may criticize this government's performance, he is breaking his promise of governing with integrity and transparency?

Mr. Stelmach: You know, Mr. Speaker, I don't think there's ever a Legislative Assembly that the media – and the media is watching over there; they're watching these questions here – is going to the Leader of the Opposition to say that the media has been treated unfairly. So I suppose that you're supporting a hundred per cent what the media has been saying. Guess what? The answer will be yes. I can hear it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks. I'm glad we can get the Premier in giggles. The fact is, if the media can't report on the unfavourable record of this government, there won't be much left for them to report on.

Given the Premier's giggles on this question, to the Premier: does this mean that the Premier has his communication staff implementing a policy on muzzling reporters that he knows nothing about?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, it's well known that as Premier I have numerous media availabilities. Most of the time here in the House, the media availability, the two opposition leaders are there. I answer the questions that are given to me. I do media scrums. We interviewed, in fact, over the weekend. Last week I don't know how many times, so I don't know what the leader is getting at. If there is a specific concern, you know, you've got the protection of the House. Bring the name forward of this so-called media person. Don't hide it. You want to be open and transparent? Just tell me: who are you talking about? It might be based all the way back in those secret deals that you were supposed to give us about – what? – three months ago.

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

Federal/Provincial Fiscal Relations

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Alberta Premiers have established a long tradition of standing up to Ottawa to protect Alberta's oil and gas resources. [interjections] Wait for it. From the days of Peter Lougheed Albertans could count on a vigorous defence of Alberta's economic golden goose. Not anymore, Mr. Speaker, not anymore. The current Premier has been standing by while Ottawa has been helping itself to our birthright, first by cutting capital costs allowance and then by a carbon tax on Alberta resources. Not a peep of protest from you, Mr. Premier. Why not?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, his caucus are the ones that are supporting capital costs allowance because they want to slow down the growth. We've been talking about it the last three months in this House. Make up your mind: do you want it to go or to reduce?

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. A very serious matter, Mr. Speaker. There's a long tradition in this province of Premiers standing up to Ottawa. This Premier has failed to do it. Perhaps it's because of his federal cousins being in the shop, but his finance minister made a statement last week to Bay Street who used the federal cash grab as an excuse for potentially not raising our royalties. Is that a deliberate policy on the part of this government to let the federal government help themselves so that we don't have to raise royalties ourselves?

1:40

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, in the last five months we've accomplished a number of things with the federal government. The first time in a long, long time being recognized as Canadians, meaning that equal per capita funding, finally, for all of the social transfers. That's phenomenal. That's phenomenal.

Last week we signed an immigration agreement with the federal government. It's only the second time in history. The first one was to Quebec a number of years ago, the second one here in the province of Alberta. That is outstanding, and that just shows the kind of co-operation.

With respect to the issues tied with transfers of wealth in this province, Mr. Speaker, we took a very firm stand in this Assembly. We said that any transfers for greenhouse credits will stay in Alberta to be invested in the province of Alberta. Period.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, we need no evidence that this government is very cosy with their cousins in Ottawa.

Current royalty rates were set in the day of \$15 a barrel of oil. Now it's \$60 and going up. We're still collecting only 1 cent on the dollar for most tar sands production, Mr. Speaker. The rest goes to big oil or to the federal government. To the Premier: why doesn't he stand up for Albertans? Why is he selling us out?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, some of the information that the hon. member has given is not true. With respect to the 1 per cent there are different stages in terms of royalty paid to the province. However, what we are doing is thoroughly reviewing the royalty regime, both for oil sands, conventional oil and gas, and also coal-bed methane. That information will be presented to the public sometime towards the end of August. All Albertans will have a look at the information and determine if we're getting a fair return.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Municipal Funding

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many families and communities are having a difficult time making ends meet, and the direction and the policy of this government are making it tougher. Premier Klein always said that the only way taxes are going in Alberta is down, though his actions were many times different. This

government continues to increase family taxes each year through market value assessment on unrealized gain on their property. To add insult to injury, this government is now through conditional funding forcing municipalities to consider new taxes to sustain their communities. My question is to the Premier. Albertans want to know this government's policy on taxes. Which direction are they going to go: up or down?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, as evidenced in this budget, taxes are going down, and the Minister of Finance may give further detail to that.

Mr. Hinman: Well, we're talking real taxes, not the numbers.

Mr. Speaker, conditional funding policy is affecting more than just the municipality of Calgary. Municipal leaders were anxiously awaiting additional funding from municipal sustainability initiatives, only to be bitterly disappointed to find that this government had been misleading them all along, thinking that this was unconditional funding. My question again to the Premier: did the government use conditional funding for municipalities because they know the needs of communities better than local elected people, or does this government just think municipal leaders are incompetent?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, you know, sometimes it's really difficult to find a way of allocating new money to municipalities. We recognize that there are so many differences amongst municipalities based on assessment levels, based on needs, based on kilometres of roads, and some of the social issues in various municipalities. We're looking at addressing those, but at the end of the day the money is being transferred from the global taxpayer to the municipalities. As the Legislature we have to be accountable. We are looking at what we can put in place, in agreement, so that when the money is transferred to municipalities, we can be accountable to this House.

Mr. Hinman: Mr. Speaker, they're addressing local needs and missing out the rest of the province.

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation gave our Premier's leadership campaign a generous D plus, the lowest mark given to our leadership candidates. Now with the budget and the talk of implementing new municipal taxes, an F for failure will be more in order. This budget and the Premier's policy on conditional funding is an attack on our families and their communities. This is a blatant case of he who has the gold makes the rules. Again to the Premier: will you do the right thing for our families and our communities and renounce the new taxes being discussed with municipalities and remove the conditional funding to municipalities?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, just for the purpose of those people watching and listening, the municipal sustainability initiative, the report, is the report given to us by municipalities. The municipalities collectively, AUMA, AAMD and C, and the two city mayors have a number of proposals. I believe five of their recommendations are to look at ways of us giving the municipalities the power to tax certain things. It's not coming from the government. It's in our hands today to fully discuss. The minister responsible for municipal affairs will take that back to municipalities to have a look at and again chat with municipalities. But in light of the fact that we're giving new funding, a lot of those tax powers may not be necessary.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Member for Peace River.

Capital Region Municipal Planning

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All my questions are to the Premier. The city of Edmonton and its regional partners are smack in the middle of the unprecedented growth pressures Alberta is facing. The sheer scope of all the development has the potential to cause major problems across many sectors if planned wrong. What is obvious is a need to plan for future growth potential in the capital region in a co-ordinated manner. The capital region tried but failed, and the province has been silent. My question is to the Premier. Can the Premier tell us why the government refuses to establish a regional planning mechanism for high-growth areas that has the authority to make binding decisions?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the government through the ministers responsible, but especially the minister of municipal affairs, has been meeting with the municipalities. I can assure you that ACRA, the Alberta Capital Region Alliance, has shown great leadership in years past in terms of sharing all of the ideas and thoughts on how to get the best value for the infrastructure. That's one of the reasons why the city of Edmonton and the communities around saw the Anthony Henday expedited, the number of bridges that were built. This all came as a result of co-operation amongst all of the municipalities, that they should be congratulated for.

Mr. Bonko: The current planning system that serves a million residents of the capital region allows discussions to be made in isolation, with 23 approaches to every question that only adds mass confusion. Apparently, the provincial government believes that this is the way to plan. A new report by the Northeast Capital Industrial Association states that the position that the city of Edmonton is pushing for for mandatory regional planning is wrong. The report advocates voluntary co-operation in the regional planning, but the mayor says, you know: "It just isn't working. The municipalities have tried, and it's just not working." So to the Premier: can the Premier tell us if he agrees with the report of the Northeast Capital Industrial Association and if he refuses to support the city of Edmonton's call for regional mandatory planning? Who are you backing, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, in this particular area of unprecedented growth, especially in the areas around the industrial heartland, we're going to require not only planning in terms of the province sitting down with all of the municipalities but also intermunicipal because there are issues tied to roads, bridges, as well as where the new housing initiatives will occur. I'm confident that the municipalities are working towards this goal. Of course, it will be further expedited by the minister of municipal affairs, who is getting all of the municipalities together. He'll be present to put something down on paper, a direction we can take over the next few months.

Mr. Bonko: There's no disputing the mounting evidence that the long-term future potential of the capital region is jeopardized by the lack of regional co-ordination. The government's own Radke report, the Percy report, and the 50-year-old McNally royal commission all call for regional co-ordination. Public opinion states that 89 per cent of the capital residents want more regional co-operation, yet when regional planning for the capital region gets to Executive Council for discussion, it disappears. Someone doesn't want the discussion to take place. Will the Premier inform us who in his government is blocking regional planning for the capital region?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, you know, you can see how they try to sit on both sides of the fence in terms of the opposition. First of all, they're arguing the fact that we shouldn't have any accountability for the dollars that are going to municipalities in terms of regional co-ordination, regional planning. That's a no-no. We shouldn't be going that. Yet, on the other hand, they flip-flop the other way and say: well, you should do something. Well, we are. We're putting money on the table, creating incentives for municipalities to get together and do long-range planning. What better plan than that can you put together? It's a great incentive.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Electric System Operator Review

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that it's been announced that the Market Surveillance Administrator is reviewing the practices of the Alberta Electric System Operator. My questions today are for the Minister of Energy. Can he inform this House exactly what this review is about?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's the AESO's responsibility to provide safe, reliable, and economic planning and operation of our electricity system. Part of this involves a purchase of ancillary, or backup, power services, which act as an insurance policy at all times to ensure system reliability. As part of the AESO's ongoing review of practices, certain activities related to the transactions were identified as unsuitable and were immediately stopped. As the body established to ensure fairness and open competition in the market, I look forward to the MSA's findings in this matter.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can he inform this House as to what steps he has taken to address this situation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once this issue was brought to my attention, I asked the department to consult with the AESO and ensure that appropriate steps were being taken. Since then AESO has conducted an internal review of all their purchase practices and introduced new training processes. The AESO also forwarded this matter to the Market Surveillance Administrator for review. The MSA has legislated authority to investigate and take appropriate action into matters such as this. The system and its checks and balances have worked as they should.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, to the same minister. I know that my constituents will be wondering how this affected them. Can the minister inform us: are consumers affected by these practices?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you. Mr. Speaker, I've been assured by the AESO that there is absolutely no evidence that would indicate that consumers were affected in any way. There's also no evidence of any personal impropriety or personal gain by AESO's employees or that of AESO itself, since it's a not-for-profit group. In the spirit of openness and accountability, it's important to allow the MSA to conduct its independent and external review, the results of which will be made public. Appropriate responses have been taken to date, and any additional steps recommended by the MSA will be addressed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Support for Families with Autistic Children

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Autism spectrum disorder places a substantial burden on families with children affected by it. In Alberta these families have been pushed to the breaking point by the process in place for assessing the eligibility of autistic children for specialized treatment. Every single year parents must travel often far distances to prove that their children are indeed deserving of treatment. Local multidisciplinary team processes are family-centred and meet the requirements of the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act. To the Minister of Children's Services: will your department ensure that families can engage in the multidisciplinary team, MDT, process with professionals in their own communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The first thing I want to say is that we understand in Children's Services that raising a child with a disability can be very challenging. I'm really proud to be part of a government that believes that these families deserve our support and our help. I'd also like to point out that the Alberta family support for children with disabilities program is unique in Canada, and in my short time here I've heard that from people right across this country. So just to start with those comments.

With respect to the eligibility process regarding autism, I will get back to you with more information.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have heard several complaints from families that are seeking funding for relationship development interventions. They're very concerned because department regulations are not being followed, and they feel they have been forced into unnecessary and expensive appeal processes. To the Minister of Children's Services: if your department has agreed to fund RDI for one child, why is it later forcing some parents into painful appeal processes to demonstrate that RDI meets FSCD regulations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My understanding with respect to autism is that the multidisciplinary teams provide expertise. They try to determine a child's needs in order to provide the level required. So I do know that we are looking at different delivery of services for the spectrum of autism. Once again, I will get you more information on the eligibility process and get more details for you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I emphasize the need for local input. Two parents have made the trip to Edmonton again today to seek a fair resolution for their particular situations. Their children cannot go without needed treatment any longer. These parents have brought with them substantial documentation of instances where ministry staff have failed to follow department regulations and procedures. To the Minister of Children's Services: the concerns of these parents are reflective of larger problems with the way this department treats people and families with autistic children. Will you agree to meet with these parents today and to hear first-hand how abusive the MDT appeal process can be?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I will say is if you could please ask those individuals to forward the documentation to me, I will take a look at it as well as follow up and get that information I told you earlier.

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

Temporary Foreign Workers

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. When demand outstrips the supply costs and prices rise, government needs to help the increase of supply to dampen the rising costs and prices. With the tremendous growth in Calgary and everywhere in Alberta the demand for human resources has outstripped the supply. Given that last Friday, May 11, in Calgary our Premier and our Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry signed an Alberta/Canada immigration agreement, my question today is to the hon. Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry. Minister, what does this agreement mean, and how does it affect Alberta businesses?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, it was a great pleasure to have the Member for Calgary-Fort and the Member for Calgary-Lougheed in attendance while we signed the agreement. It will put the right person with the right skills and the right supports in place. We have labour shortages in Alberta. That is acknowledged. This agreement, a made-in-Alberta solution, expands our efforts during the provincial nominee program and gives us an opportunity to do more consultative work with the federal government in marketing, in other points where people might be considering Alberta. It adds resources. It puts in place additional supports for integrated settlement services that will be unique to Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. It's great news for businesses.

To the same minister: what does this agreement mean to the employees? How does it ensure priority employment to our local Albertans and our work safety standards?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, before foreign workers can be retained for employment in Alberta, it's necessary for the company or the corporation in question to illustrate that they are not able to fill that job with an Albertan. That is the first part of the labour market opinion.

The temporary foreign worker, Mr. Speaker, is also subject to the same capacities, the same rules and regulations that are applied to

everybody else in terms of occupational health and safety and has the same rights and privileges. It gives an opportunity for that foreign worker to fill a much-needed position, especially where we have situations which haven't been filled by other people here in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you. That's great.

To the same minister: given that the Canada/Alberta immigration agreement has been signed, when can employers expect its implementation and the processes for them to follow?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, there is certainly going to be more interest in the provincial nominee program. As an example, that program will give an opportunity over the next 15 to 18 months to increase significantly the numbers of academic and skilled workers. The federal government has agreed to contact anybody that has indicated a desire to work as a physician, as a nurse, as a pharmacist, or as a physiotherapist. They will contact them by letter, find out if they're interested in being in receipt of a job opportunity, and with that particular pilot project it will give us an opportunity to encourage more people. Provincial nominee numbers will go up. We will be continuing to work on the annex to the agreement on the temporary foreign workers side so that employers will be abundantly clear on all of the things they must do to make it comfortable.

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

2:00 Safety of Temporary Foreign Workers

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. News reports over this weekend confirmed that yet another tank has collapsed at the Canadian Natural Resources Horizon oil sands project. Fortunately, no one was injured this time, but the collapse of two tanks in such a short period of time suggests that safety standards are being ignored. Unions on the site have confirmed these fears, and there's reason to believe that yet a third tank is on the verge of collapse. The Horizon site must be shut down until the Chinese contractor building the tanks adheres to Alberta safety standards. My questions are to the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry. Surely there's enough evidence to indicate that workers' safety on the Horizon site is at risk. Will you act quickly to protect Alberta's workers and halt construction on this site?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, in actual fact, there is a stop-work order on this site. The investigative team has been there. Occupational Health and Safety has hired an engineering company to consult about whether or not the previous terrible and tragic accident was the result of one factor or another, either environmental or engineering standards. They'll look at the full gamut. Very fortunately, there was nobody on the site when the tank collapsed on the weekend. So we already have a stop-work order, and at this present time until we are satisfied and the inspectors are satisfied that safety is prevalent, that it's been addressed, we will not open . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. B. Miller: Mr. Speaker, this contractor, actually, is slated to build between 10 and 12 more or these huge tanks. Without

intervention on the part of the government this contractor can continue to build the remaining tanks with the same design, construction principles, materials, and work crews. So to the same minister: will you shut down this construction site until we can prove that no more workers will be injured by faulty design?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm rather confused because I did just say that there is no work going on on that site, and until we know exactly why there's been a problem, then I don't think that we will be reinstating work. So we have to find out that information before anything starts again. I think we're doing exactly what the hon. member is asking.

Dr. B. Miller: What about the other 10 or 12 tanks in the future?

Anyway, the situation at the Horizon site, which last month saw the deaths of two temporary foreign workers, raises all sorts of questions about the provincial program to bring temporary foreign workers here. More recently I have heard from other workers in this program who have been subjected to abuse by their employers and recruiting firms. Many workers come here to Edmonton only to discover that the jobs that were promised no longer exist. To the same minister: given that the temporary foreign worker program forms a very large part of your ministry's made-in-Alberta immigration strategy, how can you refuse to take responsibility for the treatment of these vulnerable workers, who are in our province at your request? Why is it that the Alberta Federation of Labour sets up an advocacy office, and your government . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, people who come under the temporary foreign worker program come because there's not a worker from Alberta to work there. They've already exhausted that supply. The company, in actual fact, applies to the federal government. A labour market opinion is done.

Mr. Speaker, I'm concerned about the safety of all workers. Whether they're temporary foreign workers or permanent Alberta residents, if they're working on a job site, we're vitally concerned. We are no less concerned about people who come as temporary workers than absolutely anybody else.

Mr. Speaker, we look forward to getting further reports. The hon. member has alleged that this program opens the doors for people to be poorly treated. May I please state . . .

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

Affordable Housing Solutions

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Conservative government's housing policy shows a total lack of compassion for renters. It's disorganized, and it's leading to chaos, and that sums up a good day for this government and its housing policy. In the wee hours of Thursday morning the Minister of Service Alberta concocted some sort of toothless tribunal rather than come up with good policies that stop the abuse of renters in the first place. My question is to that minister. How will this rent review panel, dreamed up by the minister when he was asleep, stop renters from being gouged?

The Speaker: The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, probably if I had enough time here to think up a bunch of goofy suggestions, I

could put them in a book and sell them. Oh, but that's been done. Sorry.

Mr. Speaker, this advisory board was created in 2003. They're a group of people involved in both sectors of the industry that are willing to come forward and help the government and all the departments of the government come up with real solutions to real problems involving real people, not some hypothetical namby-pamby that the NDs think will be the solution. It's really simple. We are proactive. We are looking for innovation, and we are looking for industry involvement.

Mr. Martin: I feel hurt being called namby-pamby – namby-pamby – and all these quotes from the minister. That's what you're going to send out, I take it, Mr. Minister.

The bottom line is that we should have got through over many hours to this minister that renters are being hurt now, that they are being gouged, and that this particular tribunal has no teeth at all. So my question is to the minister. How is it going to work to protect renters from being gouged? Tell us how?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I feel that it's somewhat like an old Johnny Carson show here, where they know the answer before we put the question. We've got opposition members that accuse ministers, that haven't even set up a program yet, of giving it to top Tories. We've got the NDs telling us what this board is going to do before we've ever even met with them. We're going to sit down with them and ask them what they can offer. Is it your point that we shouldn't meet with these groups, that it doesn't matter what they say?

Mr. Martin: Mr. Minister, it should have even crossed over into this side of the bench that we have been offering alternatives. There's a simple one that we've tried to get through to this minister. Rent guidelines work in other provinces. What you could do with the board is that if they had extra costs, whether it be utilities or maintenance or security or whatever, have them come to the board and ask to pass it on then. This is my question to the minister: why won't the minister do the commonsense thing and do that instead of this namby-pamby thing that he's doing?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to quote, and I'll table this document when we're done, from the *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*. "Economists are virtually unanimous," now, only 98 per cent of them, ". . . that rent controls are destructive." It's all backed up. It simply doesn't work. You can live in the past and pretend. The fact is that in the short term it might make you feel good, but in the long run it just takes longer to create the spaces that we need to put these people in. So please try to come up with something new or, maybe, meet with the group that actually knows what they're talking about, like I'm going to do this afternoon.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Calgary Municipal Funding (continued)

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing met this morning with the mayor of the city of Calgary. The mayor has expressed concerns in recent weeks over conditions attached to the funding under the municipal sustainability initiative. To the minister: have the conditions been altered or removed so that Calgary can get on with its life?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The conditions as stated by the hon. member have remained in place for this year. In our discussions about the conditions and their focuses I believe that the Calgary mayor understands better the flexibility that can take place. I have committed to the mayor to write not only to him but the rest of the municipalities throughout Alberta to maybe better describe some of the possibilities of the flexibility and to clarify the guidelines that are in question.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the economy remains strong, the city of Calgary may grow by another 300,000 people over the next 10 years, so it's very critical that the government commit to a long-term funding arrangement that will allow the city of Calgary to plan around priority infrastructure projects in anticipation of this growth. To the same minister: what long-term funding commitments can the government give the mayor?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, in our Committee of Supply we have been discussing the budget. This year – I believe that adds sustainability to the budget – we have presented \$400 million for the sustainability of municipalities. Next year it'll be at \$500 million. The year after that it will be at \$600 million. I've always said that that formula is for this year. We are going to consult with municipalities, with the association, with the minister's council and look at how that money should be distributed to municipalities, having their input, making sure that the flexibility addresses the needs of sustainability and predictability.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I understand it, the engineering of the west leg of the LRT is substantially complete. The mayor has said that Calgary cannot proceed because of the perceived strings to the municipal sustainability initiative. Did your meeting this morning clear up, remove any barriers to this project moving forward in the city of Calgary?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I recognize the need not only by Calgary but by other municipalities for stability and predictability. Also, we need to look at accountability. Our discussions this morning very much revolved around the city of Calgary having some assurance that there will be funding in the future. It would not be, if I can say, responsible of myself if I tried to predict from year four to year 10, but I can say that in the three-year plan we do have money, as I stated before, and at that time we're asking the chair of the Calgary caucus to meet with the Calgary council to discuss some of those . . .

The Speaker: And we'll hear from the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Long-term Care Funding

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Accessible home care programs are needed to ensure that seniors can remain in their homes and communities while getting the quality care that they need. It has been estimated that in 10 years 15 per cent of Alberta's population will be seniors. My question is to the minister of health. In the 2003 first ministers' health accord Alberta agreed to make home care a

priority initiative in our province. Years later home care is understaffed, underfunded, and underrecognized as an essential part of the health care field. Does the failure to follow through on the goals of the Canadian health accord represent yet just another promise?

Mr. Hancock: Well, no, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member would know, because she's been part of the process, that there's been a considerable review of standards of care and the provision of long-term care in the province and that the government has moved to implement the standards of care and to ensure that there's training and accreditation for workers in the area. Yes, we still have a lot of work to do in terms of being able to attract the workers that we need, but that's not exclusive to the health field or the long-term care field. That's an issue right across the province, and we've been working very closely with the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry on that issue. But this is very much a high priority.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that answer. Again we're into this business of continuing care, long-term care, et cetera. What has the minister done to improve home care and really prove that home care is a priority for this government?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First and foremost, I've met with, I think, most of the organizations active in the province – organizations representing seniors, organizations representing the home care association, the long-term care association, and others – to make sure that I was fully up to speed with respect to the various perspectives of all of them, and I'll be working carefully with the health authorities and with the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports as we go forward to make sure that we have that continuum of care that's necessary so that seniors can choose where they live and have the necessary health support to do so.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that answer. I'm delighted that you're speaking with the health authorities, and hopefully they were all at the same table to hear the same message.

My next question would be to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. An estimated 90 per cent of home care is provided by nonprofessionals, creating immense physical and emotional pressures for families. Professional home care services would relieve this burden and assist people in need of care to remain in their homes instead of being confined to hospitals, yet the level of support given to home care by the government doesn't suggest that this important service is a priority.

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, the member, having worked on the continuing care standards, would and should re-emphasize that home care is one of the very, I think, long-term opportunities that we ought to continue to support and pursue. Those types of options that we have from Alberta Aids to Daily Living are part of the pieces to the puzzle. Also, working with health and ensuring that the staffing and support services could be there in their own homes is an outstanding direction that we want to continue to pursue.

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

Community Initiatives Program

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some of the volunteers and nonprofit organizations in my constituency are very concerned by

the criticisms of unmatched grants to the community initiatives program. Some of these organizations would not be able to carry out the good work they do in our community if they're required to match the funding required through the grants. They simply can't raise enough funding for all their projects. When the Medicine Hat Volunteerism in Action Association needed funding for worthy projects, they were able to get support through your CIP program. My first question is to the Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture. Can the minister provide these groups with some assurance that nonmatching grants will still be considered for community projects?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member highlights an excellent example of one of the very important community projects that received nonmatching funding through the community initiatives program. My department has just completed a review of all the projects that received grants valued at more than \$10,000 without matching funds. I can say that all of the projects involve good community initiatives, dedicated volunteers, and eligible nonprofit organizations. In several cases the CIP funding made it possible for these organizations to get through temporary setbacks and get back on a solid foundation. I believe that these grants should continue to be available to support worthy community projects even if . . .

The Speaker: We'll ask the hon. member to continue.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Did your review of the grants turn up projects that shouldn't have received funding?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The short answer to that question is no. No rules were broken. The guidelines were followed in every case. The organizations were eligible to apply for funding. Their applications met the requirements, and they made a good case for the funding they received for their community projects. To this end I will be tabling the existing guidelines for the CIP programs and a summary of the projects that were approved for unmatched funding over \$10,000.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. Can the minister tell this House what he's doing to improve communications and transparency around lottery funding programs so that everyone – everyone – will have the same understanding of these guidelines?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated before, the information regarding grant recipients and the funding they receive is already available on the Alberta lottery fund website. The guidelines I'm tabling today reflect the requirements and process for the review and approval of grants.

Moving forward, our department plans to certainly increase our communications about lottery grants and recipients to the public and the Legislature on a more regular basis. We are also consulting with the Auditor General on the guidelines as a matter of course, and we'll continue to do that, Mr. Speaker.

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

We have one unfinished matter of business. Hon. President of the Treasury Board, you have sufficient copies of the document that you wish to table to wrap that up today?

Mr. Snelgrove: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I do: five copies from the *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

[The Clerk read the following written questions, which had been accepted]

FOIP Requests

Q12. Mr. R. Miller:
For each of the fiscal years 2001-2002 through 2005-2006 what percentage of requests for information under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act were met within 30 days of the initial request?

Resource Rebate Program

Q13. Mr. R. Miller:
As of April 11, 2007, what is the total cost of efforts to recover cheques that were sent to people who did not qualify for the Alberta 2005 resource rebate program?

Resource Rebate Program

Q14. Mr. R. Miller:
What was the total cost associated with administering the Alberta 2005 resource rebate program?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the balance of questions appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: 2:20 **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Wednesday, May 9, motions for returns 5 and 6 will be dealt with today. The remaining motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper will stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

Mountain Pine Beetle

M5. Mr. Bonko proposed that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, including studies, reports, and environmental or economical impact assessments, relating to the effects of the presence of mountain pine beetles in Alberta forests from fiscal years 2002-2003 through 2006-2007.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am rejecting Motion for a Return 5, concerning documentation relating to the mountain pine beetle. The difficulty is that the request was for all documents – all documents – over a four-year period relating to the effects of the presence of mountain pine beetle in Alberta forests since 2002. The request is simply too broad, as there are numerous documents, studies, reports related to the presence of mountain pine beetle in our forests. We can only provide those documents that are available to us.

I appreciate that many Albertans seek more information about mountain pine beetle and our action plan, and I share their interest in making this information public, but it only makes sense to provide documents that were used in my department to shape our mountain pine beetle plan. Fourteen public documents and studies available to Sustainable Resource Development were referenced and billed in our action plan. I will table a list of those 14 public documents in the Legislature with details about where they can be accessed. That list will be tabled tomorrow.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Others?

Shall I call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, then, to close debate?

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's not surprising. I'm a little disappointed, considering it has been declared a state of emergency. If the minister felt that the piece of information I was looking for was a little bit too broad, perhaps he could have made an amendment allowing myself and Albertans to have some more pertinent information, then.

[Motion for a Return 5 lost]

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

Foster Parent Campaign

M6. Mrs. Mather proposed that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a detailed breakdown of all expenses relating to advertising and promotional campaigns encouraging Albertans to become foster parents in each of the fiscal years 2002-2003 through 2006-2007.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Foster care in Alberta is under significant pressure on a number of different fronts. Lack of adequate funding for social workers negatively affects recruitment and retention and puts additional strain on the staff monitoring and assisting foster homes. The shortage of available foster families leads to overloading and hotel stays, puts additional strain on a system that is already stretched. This is an unsustainable solution that makes it more and more difficult to protect Alberta's most vulnerable citizens. We are hearing about cases where foster children are either being placed in families that are overloaded or being housed in a hotel while waiting for a foster family who can take them in. This is a clear sign that the system as it stands is unsustainable.

In the past year 19 children have suffered an injury that resulted in hospitalization or death while receiving protective services, and the percentage of aboriginal children in care who suffered injury resulting in hospitalization or death has doubled. One death is too many. There's a clear need for immediate action to protect Alberta's children. I'm sure that most foster families in the province are doing great work, but we need to have consistent monitoring and better support for foster parents to ensure the safety of children in care. If

the government can't accomplish this, even more children will slip through the cracks, and this is unacceptable.

We need to encourage fostering by families. The fostering process can be very upsetting for the child, and being suddenly moved from home to home can cause emotional trauma for the children we are trying to protect. We should have policies in place to ensure that the transition to a new home is as smooth as possible. This also includes addressing the critical shortage of foster homes that we have.

The recent budget included an increase of \$7 million for foster care, which is earmarked for training and recruitment of foster families. This funding is desperately needed, and I'm really happy to see that increase, but the number of foster families in Alberta is decreasing in the capital region and across the province. There were about 850 families in the Edmonton area last year, but the total dropped by 12 per cent to around 750 families this year, and the downward trend has existed for the past five years.

The Children's Services' business plan 2001-2005 shows that the shortage of foster families has been identified and recognized by this government for years. It's crucial that we have a plan to do everything that we possibly can to encourage more families to become foster families. This motion is to look at what we have actually done in terms of advertising and promotion so that we can make a decision to do even better so that more families will feel that they do have the support they need if they take this important step.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Motion for a Return 6. First, I'd like to thank the member for her concern about foster homes in our province, and I can assure her that I share this very same concern in this area. Recruiting new foster parents and caregivers for children in government care is an integral part of our business at Children's Services. In fact, it's built into so many of our larger initiatives.

At Children's Services foster parent recruitment is a collaborative effort between the department, our child and family services authorities, delegated First Nation agencies, the Alberta Foster Parent Association, 24 regional foster parent associations, and a number of contracted agencies. All these agencies are required to recruit foster parents as part of their contracts and work tirelessly to ensure that children in government care have a safe, family-based setting where they can go in times of need.

We do not track foster care recruitment, including promotional campaign material, separately, on its own budget item, because it's considered an integral program activity as opposed to a stand-alone activity. Therefore, determining a figure for total dedicated expenditures for foster parent recruitment is not possible given the collaborative and the integrated nature of recruitment activities across Alberta.

Although figures for foster parent recruitment expenditures for the requested time periods are unavailable, I can inform the Assembly that this year we'll be investing \$650,000 in addition to our regular contracts to recruit more foster parents and aboriginal caregivers for children in government care.

Given that accurate figures for foster parent recruitment expenditures in the requested time periods are unavailable, I recommend that Motion for a Return 6 be rejected.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We often talk of family as a pillar of society, and so it is, but families the way we usually use

the term are simply biological bonds, and looking out for one's clan or next of kin can be seen simply as a matter of self-interest. Those who foster take kinship to another level of inclusiveness, that is the bedrock of civilization, another way of relating to each other: to take on care for community.

The Speech from the Throne set the quality of life as one of the government's objectives for Alberta. That is a welcome balance to the preoccupation with economic development that has driven public policy for the past decade. A nurturing quality is one of the things that is needed to make a physical house a home. This is found not primarily in putting up big facilities and funding programs and having more agencies but in the simple gifts of life that we offer each other.

We hear a lot of praise of family values in Alberta. Often these words are spoken by those who fear for their own families and feel that they'll be adversely affected by someone else's choices. We hear much in support of children and their right to security, love, and a good start in life. Words can be inspirational, but they're not enough.

2:30

I know the challenges of adoption. I respect those who face these challenges not just once but in succession with different children. Foster care goes beyond providing the basic necessities of life. The word "foster" is usually used as an adjective. It is also a verb, a word that describes an action or a state of being. To foster is to encourage qualities, to nurture our humanity, to offer the gifts of life that we all deserve simply by being alive.

So when we look at what we're doing in Alberta, I'm glad to hear that it is a priority and that we're looking at ways that we can encourage more parents to foster. I think this is such a huge issue that I can't stress enough, so I'm going to use some words that were written by a foster child, a 16-year-old girl. She began:

Happy are those children that have railroads in the hall
Painting in the kitchen and stories when they're small.

And she ends:

Sometimes kids are fortunate, and people can be found
To foster them and care for them and always be around
All these people ever ask is just a chance to share
With all the kids who need it, their Castles in the Air.

So I urge our Children's Services ministry to do all that is possible to promote that fostering and support fostering once we do have foster families in place.

[Motion for a Return 6 lost]

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

**Bill 207
Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act**

[Debate adjourned May 7: Mrs. Jablonski speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to once again join the discussion on Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act, 2007. Once again, I also wish to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for furthering discussion on this topic as I feel that this is a subject most worthy of attention. Our children are Alberta's most precious resource, and it remains a priority of this government to address the well-being of our young people.

While increasing spaces and improving access are key initiatives being undertaken by the government, we are always seeking to not only improve quantity in terms of child care spaces but also to improve the quality of the spaces that are provided. As the first piece of legislation in Alberta to focus entirely on child care, Bill 4 aims to create new licensing categories that will generate more options for parents, especially in rural areas. It will provide for more effective monitoring to ensure that operators are in compliance with the act, and it will reward excellence by allowing child care operators to obtain a multiyear licence. By reducing the time and effort child care operators spend on paperwork, this government will enable those operators to put more effort into providing quality child care.

With Bill 4 this government is following through on a commitment to Albertans. We recognize that part of managing growth pressures means addressing the well-being of our children. While I support the spirit of Bill 207, I feel that it is not necessary to enact this legislation as its legitimate concerns are already being addressed by new government legislation in Bill 4.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's clear that child care is a critical issue in Alberta, and we need to see dramatic action to remedy the years of neglect, particularly in space and funding. The new funding is less than the increase that we would have liked to have seen when the federal government agreement on child care was in place, but we are pleased to see that there are no cuts to child care and that funding has gone up.

I was at an annual general meeting of a daycare in St. Albert. One of the things expressed by the people there was a need for a longer term type of funding to give them the feeling that they can plan and do their staffing and attract more people into utilizing their service. Another issue that is particularly important in St. Albert is the question of affordable child care spaces. For example, in the particular child care that I was at about three weeks ago, there are no spaces available in the fall, and this is of particular concern to me.

In the past Alberta was a leader in terms of child care, and now we seem to be losing our leading kind of role that we played. Considering the wealth of the province, there is no excuse, I think, for the government's failure to show leadership in this very, very important issue. I remember that at one time they showed tremendous leadership. In fact, I think Minister Hyndman was one of the initial ones that initiated child care in the province, if I'm not mistaken, but I may be wrong on that. But I know his wife and himself were very, very interested in child care across the province.

Families should be free to make the best choices for their children, be that having one or both parents stay home, leaving children in the care of relatives, or placing children in safe, regulated care. But if there is no child care space available, many families are forced to make bad decisions for their children. I would again urge the Minister of Children's Services to look at a process of education for parents. I think that's a very, very important thing to do so that when they are looking for child care spaces, they can do it with some idea of what things to look for. I think this would be very, very important to do that.

Again, I'm concerned with the lack of space and the lack of good choices made by parents for children's services in this way. I'll leave it at that, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon caught my eye. The hon. member has already participated. He can't do it again.

Mr. Rogers: To speak?

The Speaker: Yes. You can't speak twice.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and join the debate on Bill 207, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. I want to say at the very outset that I support the bill. The issue of child care is of critical importance in this day and age. Everyone pays lip service to the importance of early childhood care and development, particularly for children who come from underprivileged families and groups, who need very special care very early on in order for them to prepare themselves for schooling and adult life following that. Success at school, success as responsible citizens and as part of the society depends very much on the experience the children have early on, and developmental experience, in particular, is very, very important. So I cannot overemphasize the importance of child care, its availability, affordability, quality: all of these are concerns that are, I think, now shared across political lines and partisan lines.

The point is: what do we do about this? I know that the government, under the new minister's leadership, is beginning to pay more attention to it than has been the case for years. Bill 4, that was discussed in this House some time ago, certainly will help move us in the direction of improving the quality of care and the availability of care to some extent. Mr. Speaker, what we need to do is to measure our success through some sort of an ongoing mechanism which allows for accountability, which allows us to monitor – in fact, obliges us to monitor – issues of accessibility, affordability, availability, and quality.

That's what I think Bill 207 is about. It calls for the government to prepare a 10-year plan and the minister who has the responsibility to monitor on a yearly basis every year starting, say, in 2008 to 2017 progress made to move towards a set target of making the spaces available. Bill 207 proposes that the number of spaces available by the end of this period should approach 30 per cent of all the children up to the age of 12. Now, one can certainly debate whether it should be 30 per cent or 35 per cent or 32 per cent, but certainly I think there is merit in identifying a target such as the one that's identified in this bill and then start working on achieving that set target and seeing how much progress we've made from one year to the next over the next 10 years.

2:40

Progress reports, as the bill proposes, should be made available to this Legislature on an annual basis when the House is in session. When it's not in session, Mr. Speaker, through your office that report can be distributed to all members even when they're not meeting at that time in this Chamber under this roof. Then at the end of the 10 years the bill proposes to have a full evaluation done with respect to the stages of daycare and child care – reference is made here to daycare facilities in particular in the bill – and have an overall report card prepared with respect to the performance of the government. I mean, that's a good way of ensuring that there will be some accountability and also with respect to accessibility, affordability, quality, and availability of care.

We do want to make sure that every child who needs this service gets it. Parents of young children who want to work and are

desperately looking for child care spaces that they can put their trust in in terms of the quality of care provided there and their ability to afford to send their children there should have these places accessible and available to them, but there is no such thing at the moment. There is a very severe shortage of daycare spaces in the province. Parents have to wait for years sometimes to get their child placed in a daycare facility, and the costs are exorbitant. In many cases most parents can't afford them. The quality of care remains still a big challenge that we have to pay attention to. In addition, of course, refocusing child care on the developmental needs of children when they're very young is an issue on which we are just barely beginning to make a start and progress.

So, Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I think that Bill 207 does not overlap anything that's offered by Bill 4. It deserves the support of the House, and I'm certainly very pleased to express my support for this bill.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I'm going to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford and then the Minister of Agriculture and Food and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora and then Edmonton-Meadowlark.

I have another piece of paper here which lists some certain speakers. It comes from Executive Council office, but it lists speakers for the Liberals. I've been using the sheet that was provided to me by the Official Opposition House Leader, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this afternoon and speak in support of Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act. There have been a number of good points made over the last few minutes today and the debate that took place last Monday.

I do have a few thoughts that I would like to add to it, but before I do that, Mr. Speaker, I would just like to echo the comments of my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods when she was referring to foster care and the need for foster care. In a way, it is relevant to child care as well. I grew up in a family that had a number of foster children go through our home. I think the total number was 16 if I remember correctly. I'd like to credit the person that I am today to a large extent to having had the experience of having children from many different cultures and backgrounds go through our home. I think the comments that the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods made were most appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 207, as has been outlined, aims to increase the number of child care spaces for children under the age of 12 to 30 per cent; that is, to make that a target, to have 30 per cent of children under the age of 12 have spaces available to them and to accomplish that over a 10-year period. I think one of the things that has to be stressed – and others may have made the point already, but I think it's really important that we keep this in mind – is that while this bill speaks specifically to child care spaces and accessibility and accountability for those spaces, it really is timely in terms of the debate that's taking place right now in this province regarding labour shortage and also, I suppose, has a connection to the current housing situation and the debate that took place in this Assembly last week regarding affordable housing. One of the things – and I'm sure I don't have to tell members opposite this – is that all of these issues are tied together and very much interrelated as a result of the unprecedented economic boom that we're experiencing and, I would submit, the lack of planning on the part of this government to somehow control that growth.

What we've seen is skyrocketing rental rates as we discussed and had individual examples of in the galleries last week. We've seen a dramatic shortage of not just skilled but unskilled labour in the province, and we've seen a dramatic decrease in the availability of child care spaces. All of these sort of feed on each other, and you end up in this vicious cycle where, you know, one causes the other to be worse, and that causes the other to be worse, and it just keeps exacerbating the situation. So I think the need to pass Bill 207 and set some firm targets in terms of how many spaces would be available is very, very timely not just because of the current shortage in child care spaces but also particularly as it relates to labour in this province.

One of the things we know for sure is that for particularly, I suppose one would say, two-parent families where the stay-at-home parent is considering entering the workforce, a primary consideration always is child care and (a) of course would be whether or not reasonable child care is available and then (b) whether or not it's at a price that can justify to the parents both of them going to work. If, in fact, the child care isn't available or if the cost to access that child care is such that it just doesn't make it economically feasible for both parents to work, then you have removed a potential worker from the workforce. These, as I've suggested, may be unskilled workers, or they may well be professionals that, you know, we desperately need and aren't fully accessing. So I think that that is a very important thing for all members to note when they're considering whether or not to support this bill.

The bill, Mr. Speaker, talks about increasing the transparency in terms of annual reporting about the type, cost, and location of the spaces that would be created. Boy, is this ever a timely thing to note given the report out of Ottawa this week regarding the lack of accountability for the federal child care dollars that have been passed on down to the provinces. I understand that Alberta is one of the provinces that the federal ministry is having difficulty getting access to information on. So, clearly, anything that we can do that improves the accountability and the reporting of dollars that are being spent on child care is something that we know for sure the federal Auditor General would like to see, and I'm going to guess that the provincial Auditor General would be fully supportive as well.

I think, Mr. Speaker, the other thing that has to be noted in discussions with the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, who is proposing this bill, is that this is the first part of a broader strategy to address child care initiatives. I know that she has spoken to me personally about the need to develop a comprehensive plan that would work in conjunction with this bill to support parents who choose to stay at home and look after their children. She has assured me that that is the next part of the plan that she's working on.

You know, for myself as a parent who chose to make the sacrifice to keep one wage earner at home and look after the children while they were young, I know what a big sacrifice that is, and I recognize how important a contribution that is. I don't think that we as a government do enough to accommodate those parents who make that difficult decision. So I look forward to working with the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods as she moves forward to the next step of this process. I think that that's really important as well.

2:50

I clearly support this bill and the measures that are outlined in it in terms of making more spaces available and making the reporting of those initiatives to build those spaces more accountable and more transparent for members of the taxpaying public to access. Certainly, as I said, having a target of making spaces available for 30 per cent of those children I think is wonderful.

One of the things that I would like to point out, when I talk about how all these issues tie in, is a specific case that I was made aware of on Friday. I had a young mom and father come into my constituency office with concerns about their child care. They have a young child that's in preschool and another child who is in an after school care program. The mom is going to school, trying to further her education so that she can get back into the workforce as a nurse, if I recall correctly, and they've just been hit with two rather large increases for their child care expenses for both the preschooler and the older child, who is in after school care.

Now, because the mom is in school and taking some upgrading courses, this family is receiving a supplement, but fees for the preschooler, as an example, Mr. Speaker, went up from approximately \$500 to approximately \$800, and the supplement is only going to cover \$27 of that. So in one fell swoop the family is facing an increase of nearly \$300 in their monthly expenses. That's dramatic on its own, but in light of the conversation we had in this Assembly last week on out-of-control rent increases, I can only imagine the difficulties that this family would face if they should happen to be hit with a large rental increase any time in the near future. You know, they're trying to absorb a large increase in child care expenses, and if you top that off with a large increase in rental expenses and gasoline, which, as we all know, is now \$1.12 or \$1.13 a litre, it just goes on and on.

Mr. Speaker, as the former Premier was once very fond of saying, there is only one taxpayer. Well, I would submit to you that that one taxpayer is finding it very difficult to keep up with cost-of-living increases in this province right now. You've got families like this one that was in my office on Friday absorbing, in this case, a rather large increase in child care. I'm not necessarily suggesting that it's gouging, but from \$500 to \$800 is a 60 per cent increase, and that's going to be very difficult for that family to deal with.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Food, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to join the debate on Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act, which proposes to establish a 10-year target for the creation of new child care spaces for no less than 30 per cent of the children under age 12 in Alberta. Bill 207 fails to identify the need or cost of providing child care to 30 per cent of Alberta's children. There is no evidence to support this target.

Work is under way by Children's Services to identify the supply and demand for spaces so that we can determine Alberta's need for child care spaces from now until the year 2016. According to what we heard from Alberta's consultation on the creation of child spaces, completed in September 2006, parents want more child care choices. Respondents in this consultation noted that creating spaces within a regulated child care system will not meet the needs of many children and their families. They felt that the government should provide parents with the funding they need to access child care programs of their choice.

Mr. Speaker, the government is improving the quality of child care services for children using three key objectives: regulating and monitoring the quality of child care services for families in Alberta and ensuring that children's safety and development needs are met, subsidizing the cost of child care for families in need or in circumstances where parental participation in the workforce must be sustained, and introducing child care standards of excellence and linkages to accredited child care options.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 4 enables the creation of new licensing categories, one being a new group of family daycare for seven to 10 children in approved private homes. Operators will also be able to make better use of their spaces. Spaces for school-aged children that would have previously sat empty during school hours can be used for preschool children.

In 2007 the Alberta government is investing close to \$16 million towards creating more child care spaces, attracting and retaining qualified staff, and making child care more affordable for low- and middle-income parents who want to work or, indeed, go to school.

Two million dollars will be put towards a new space creation innovation fund that will help cover the start-up costs of creating more child care spaces across the province. Children's Services will begin accepting space creation innovation fund proposals for one-time start-up grants of up to \$1,500 for each new child care space from people interested in starting up new child care programs or expanding existing spaces.

As of August 2006 there were 69,267 child care spaces in Alberta. Of these, 59,269 were located in licensed facilities, and 9,998 child care spaces were available in agency-approved family day homes. Between October 2005 and September 2006 332 additional child care spaces were created.

To promote excellence in child care settings, Alberta Children's Services is supporting high-quality child care through the accreditation of child care programs. Accreditation is a voluntary process that objectively assesses child care programs that meet child care standards of excellence. Alberta Children's Services contracts with the Alberta Association for the Accreditation Of Early Learning and Care Services to evaluate, assess, and approve child care programs for accreditation. Accreditation provides daycare centres and family day home agencies with assistance in the recruitment and retention of trained and qualified staff through grant funding, and 168 programs have been accredited with another 353 working towards the same goal.

Qualified staff, Mr. Speaker, are essential to maintaining existing child care spaces and creating new ones. Most operators determine the availability of space by the availability of staff. The Alberta government has recently invested an additional 13 and a half million dollars to address staff recruitment and retention. This helps address a serious issue for day homes, daycare centres, contracted agencies, and women's shelters. This funding is also available for Alberta operators to maintain the availability of 29,000 child care spaces. This year \$2 million will be invested to increase staff support funding for child care professionals working in preaccredited and accredited child care programs retroactive to January 1, 2007.

The government is already providing additional funding for child care and has proposed Bill 4 to give Alberta parents more child care options.

I do not support Bill 207 as it does not explain the need or cost of increasing child care spaces to 30 per cent of Alberta's child population, and I would ask my colleagues not to support this bill as we have Bill 4 in the wings, in waiting. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:00

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

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to stand and speak in second reading on Bill 207, Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act. I thank my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods for crafting this bill. As it says in the bill, "The purpose of this Act is to increase accessibility to, and govern-

ment accountability for, universal, affordable and high quality child care." All those words are very important words – accessibility, accountability, universal, affordable, and high quality – in establishing criteria for looking at child care in this province. The goal of this bill is to make sure that we provide "sufficient child care spaces for not less than 30% of the children in Alberta who are 12 years of age or younger."

Well, Canada lags behind other countries, especially if you look at the OECD countries, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Those countries that comprise OECD are convinced that care and education are inseparable. In most countries of the European Union, for example, children by the age of three are a part of the universal public education system, and in many cases two-year-olds are also included. I quote from an OECD document: "The trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the three- to six-year-old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling."

Mr. Speaker, other countries offer a child care guarantee to their citizens. Why? Because most people in the field know that early childhood education ensures very positive developmental outcomes. If we invest money in our youngest children, then there are tremendous dividends down the road. An OECD report entitled Starting Strong states:

Research shows that participation in quality, centre-based [early childhood education and care] programmes can have important and immediate short-term impacts on the cognitive and socio-emotional development of disadvantaged children.

Policy-makers in Canada and especially in Alberta seem to be deaf to the evidence-based research. If they read that research, they would be determined to have just the best possible system for child care that we can possibly have in Alberta. The typical Conservative approach of giving money to parents in the name of equality of opportunity pales in comparison to the universal, affordable, high-quality approach which we have in European countries, which is all about equality of results, not just equality of opportunity but equality of results.

This bill, Bill 207, is geared to results, to outcomes. It proposes that there be a 10-year action plan that will increase child care spaces in this province. In order to achieve the results we need, there should be an annual review conducted by the minister which should focus on the availability of child care spaces, on the affordability of child care spaces, and on indicators of quality and indicators of accessibility. Mr. Speaker, providing child care spaces is not simply a question of just spaces. People are not interested in just custodial care, in a kind of superbabysitting. They want quality care. I mean, we're talking about our youngest children.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

This is what the QUAD child care principles are about. In November 2004 ministers from federal, provincial, and territorial governments with the exception of Quebec agreed on four principles to guide the development of a national system of early childhood care. QUAD stands for quality, universally inclusive, accessible child care with a developmental focus. Those are just terrific criteria and principles that would undergird a child care philosophy and program in this country.

European countries, including the United Kingdom, have been developing child care strategies focused on quality, so I really stress that. Quality is what we need. There must be a system in place, as this bill is suggesting, where we monitor the quality, that we look forward to what the outcomes, what the results might be if we focus

on quality. Research identifies three characteristics of quality for child care: low child-to-adult ratios, highly educated staff with specialized training, and the availability of adequate facilities and equipment.

I had the chance to visit a facility some time ago, and I was distressed when I heard from teachers, from caregivers that because of low wages and the inability to keep staff, the child-to-adult ratio keeps going up. I think it's quite a shame that in our rich province we don't have enough money to support – well, of course, we do have the money to support, but we're not channelling that money into providing high-quality child care.

Mr. Speaker, there are many other points I could add in terms of quality. The bill does a good job in outlining the indicators of quality: training requirements, staff qualifications, staff remuneration, and so on.

I think this bill is very important, and I want to see it continue. I think it might be an appropriate time for me now to suggest that we should amend this bill in second reading and refer it to a committee, so I would like to do that now. I have the notice of amendment here, and I'm ready to distribute it.

The Deputy Speaker: If you would hand them to the pages and then just give us a moment until we get them distributed.

Dr. B. Miller: Right. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Is there someone wishing to rise on a point?

Mr. Chase: No, just to the amendment when we have the opportunity.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member on the amendment.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move that Bill 207, Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill stand referred to the Standing Committee on Community Services in accordance with temporary Standing Order 74.2.

Mr. Speaker, I think members of the opposition were quite elated to be able to move ahead with these field committees that are now established under our Standing Orders. There are four policy field committees. The first one listed in the Standing Orders under 52.01 is the Standing Committee on Community Services, which has the mandate "to relate to the areas of health, education, children's services, seniors, supports for the disabled, tourism, parks, recreation and culture." So this is the appropriate committee to refer a bill like this since this committee deals with children's services.

3:10

You know, I've had two very good experiences of being on all-party committees. One was the select review committee that looked at the conflict of interest legislation. There was representation by all parties on that committee, and I thought that our work was very good and is proceeding through the Legislature now. I was also appointed to the Affordable Housing Task Force, and as an all-party committee that was very successful also in promoting the recommendations and doing analysis and suggesting excellent recommendations for the government to act on.

I think this bill is very worthy of further discussion, and it seems to me that it's appropriate to refer it. I notice that in the Order Paper there's a resolution to refer Bill 1, the Lobbyists Act, to a field committee. A government bill is being referred. Why not a private member's bill? I mean, it seems appropriate that we would be able to refer this particular bill for further consideration by this commit-

tee. That's my rationale for making this amendment. I look forward to the discussion on this amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on the amendment.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, support the amendment. We have put forward the idea that through all-party participation in the policy field committees, there will be a greater coherence, a greater transparency, a greater accountability. The mover of the bill, from Edmonton-Mill Woods, is extremely dedicated and concerned about the well-being of children in the province of Alberta. She has heard from other representatives of the government that have questions with regard to Bill 4 and the proposed bill.

What we are proposing is that the whole committee put their collective wisdom to the task of coming up with the best possible outcome, which is what this bill attempts to provide. The amount of time that we would spend in committee as a whole compared to the collective wisdom that could be brought to it in the standing committee, upon which there is representation from all committees, would provide a sort of a litmus test, a sort of a situation whereby we could judge not only the value of the bill but also the value of the committee and the exercise. Can we have the transparency, can we have the accountability, the camaraderie, the colleagues working together that the standing committees now open to all parties hope to accomplish?

Therefore, I would strongly recommend that all members of this House support the amendment and support the idea of a thorough examination of the bill and that whatever changes are necessary be recommended at that time. Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the idea of all-party committees, as everyone in this House knows, is relatively new. As one of the members has already indicated, there is on the Order Paper a provision that Bill 1 will be referred to the committee for detailed study. The Lobbyists Act, being referred to the all-party committee, is one that has broad implications. This particular act, Mr. Speaker – and I happen to have a fair bit of experience in this field – is one that has very narrow connotations to it. In addition to that, the Minister of Children's Services has dealt with a number of issues that this bill would propose to deal with, and I don't believe that all-party committee study would enhance in any way this particular act. I would suggest that the House not approve the amendment at this time.

Thank you.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I have to respond to the Minister of Education and his comments about Bill 1, the Lobbyists Act, being so much more broad than this bill, which deals with child care accessibility and accountability. I'm going to suggest that there might be an awful lot more families that deal with child care issues than there would be lobbyists, even with this government, that's been in power for so long. So I'm not sure it can be interpreted as not being broad enough. I think this bill probably impacts almost every working family in the province.

But having said that, really, the issue is whether or not this particular Bill 207 is one that would be suitable to refer to the standing committee. I think there are a number of reasons why this

is a good candidate to be referred but in particular in response to the comments made earlier this afternoon by the Minister of Agriculture and Food. He raised the question as to the costing of this bill. I think that's the perfect reason and the perfect opportunity to refer this bill so that that can be explored.

I'm happy to inform the agriculture minister that in fact this bill has been fully costed as part of the Liberal policy. He should know that any policy proposals that we bring forward in this Legislature have been fully costed and all fit within our funding Alberta's future plan, as this bill does. The reason that it's not in here – and he's been in the House long enough that he should know this – is that private members' bills cannot compel the government to spend money. We cannot introduce money bills in this Legislature. That's the reason that there's no reference in this bill to dollar figures, Mr. Minister, but it has been fully costed.

I'm pleased to tell you that over the first three years of the program the costing is about \$30 million. Now, that's a relatively small amount in terms of the overall budget that the government has just proposed, so I'm sure that it wouldn't be too hard for the government to come up with \$30 million over the next three years to fund this bill were it to be passed. But as I suggest, this is a really good opportunity, I think, to explore the work that the Official Opposition has done in terms of costing this bill and making sure that it fits within our funding Alberta's future plan. If the minister is so interested in learning how those numbers were reached and exactly what the cost to the taxpayer would be, then I'm assuming that he'll be glad to lend his support to this amendment and refer the bill to the standing committee. We can have that discussion there because, as I've already pointed out, under the rules of this House we were not allowed to include the costs in the bill.

So that would be my submission, Mr. Speaker. I think also, as was pointed out by my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora, just in the spirit of opening up democracy in this province and greater co-operation between both sides of the House, that this is an excellent opportunity to have a government bill sent to the standing committee and to have an opposition bill sent to a standing committee. Let's show how we can work together in making bills from both sides of the House better. That would be my hope, that the government will see the logic in doing that, and I look forward to further debate.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: On the amendment the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I would like to thank the hon. member for bringing forward this amendment. However, I would encourage all of my colleagues to vote against this amendment. I really do think that this is a little bit premature, trying to refer this to the policy field committees. The policy field committees are just being set up, and they do have a lot of very important work to do with regard to government bills. In fact, I know that there are actually a lot of groups lining up in order to appear before these policy field committees. Certainly, with regard to some of the bills, like Bill 1 and Bill 2, that I think we've already referred to the policy field committees – and I know that there are other bills that are going to be referred to policy field committees that are again government bills. I think we really need to spend our time majoring on the majors, focusing on the things that, you know, the Alberta citizens would like us to focus on.

Mr. Speaker, I think that Bill 207 is a very worthy bill. It's a good bill, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act. I'd like to thank the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for bringing it

forward. But I think that the time to debate this bill is right here and right now. We have a certain amount of time that's allotted for private members' business here on the floor of the House. I know that this bill has been before the House for several weeks, was introduced several weeks back, and now we have time to debate it. Certainly, all of the members here have had time to look at the bill, to read it over.

3:20

I have the bill right in my hands here, and it's a great bill. It's about three pages long, and it certainly focuses on about 20 to 30 per cent of the ministry's objectives. As a private member's bill goes, it's a good bill, but, like I said, I really do believe, Mr. Speaker, that the majority of this bill can be debated and taken care of right here on the floor of the Legislature. I think that to try to refer this to a policy field committee will only delay the passage or the defeat of this bill, and I think we would like to deal with this bill on an immediate, expedient basis.

Like I said, there are some good things here. The bill is very clear. The members can certainly read this bill and understand where the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is coming from. She's given some good debate on the bill already in, you know, the beginning comments on second reading. I would encourage the members to listen to those comments and to vote accordingly in accordance with their conscience and what they've heard their constituents say.

Mr. Speaker, I would speak against this amendment because I don't believe that it's necessary to refer this on to the policy field committee's time and to delay the voting or the proceedings on Bill 207.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I look at this notice of amendment to move that Bill 207, Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act, go to the Standing Committee on Community Services, I think about the history of amendments and motions. Often, some amendments have been made to refer because they were attempts to sidestep. It was said of William Lyon MacKenzie King that when steering around a controversial issue, the height of his ambition was to pile a special committee on a royal commission to let Parliament decide later.

This is not an amendment to do that. Some amendments to refer are attempts to avoid an otherwise inevitable outcome, to buy time rather than face certain defeat. This is an amendment for more time but not an attempt to stave off or defer one outcome as much as to allow another to take shape.

Bill 207 needs time to be considered, to be discussed, to develop a consensus and support from all sides of the House, and to pass. The process by which it is accepted is as important as the provisions of the bill itself, and it is for this reason that I support this amendment.

Standards and spaces for child care is an important issue for us all. It is not a Liberal issue or a Conservative issue, an Alliance or a New Democratic Party issue. It goes with the turf of being parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, Albertans and human beings.

What is proposed in Bill 207 is not a motherhood issue, one of those polite affirmations we can sandwich between the weightier matters of budget and ballooning growth. It is an issue and an area that if we can effect change here, many other things would change as well, and for the better.

Alberta leads the country as a debt-free province. It leads the continent as an energy producer. It leads the developed world in the achievement levels of many of our students and educational institutions. If Alberta were to lead as a child-friendly society, a quality and a distinction that must involve many policy sectors and most of our citizens, the impact of that leadership would be truly lasting.

This is a matter for municipalities, for the province, and for our country. That is why I support this amendment for consideration of this bill in committee: to allow its importance to dawn on us and its possibilities to move us into action. That is an achievement well worth waiting for.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would just speak as my hon. colleague from Drayton Valley-Calmar has regarding the advisability of sending this Bill 207 to one of the policy field committees that have been set up. I would agree with him that it's probably not the type of bill that would be profitable to send there because I think that there are some broad issues of philosophy and policy in there. There are obviously very divergent views. So if we're going to spin our wheels and send this off to a committee, I'm not sure how much further we would be ahead. It's a fairly simple bill. It's black and white, and I think that it would be prudent for the House to discuss it fully today, to have a vote up and down on it, and not to send it to one of these policy field committees.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can't believe what I've been hearing. Probably it's my old age.

Mr. Johnston: Agreed.

Mr. Flaherty: Shut up. You know, for the sake of our kids and our families I think day care and child care is so important, and I think we have to open the doors. I think this would be a wonderful thing to take on by the task force because we'd get the public involved – the people, the parents – that are most directly affected by this. There's no disrespect to the good work of my colleague – she's done some wonderful work – but I think she's laid the foundation to do something like that.

There are a number of things that I think could be looked at in terms of the questions of spacing, funding, inspection, and choices that parents make. So I think to enhance the quality of child care services in this province, we should open the doors and ask the parents and ask the community at large what they think about this bill and what they are thinking of child care. I guess I will go back to my comments during, I guess it was, Bill 34. What is the government going to use these committees for? Are they not going to open the doors to listen to people about some of their concerns? I can't think of a more important issue right here than the sake of our kids and our families, to look at them and see if we're doing a perfect job. We've laid the foundation. Why not take it out and see what the public thinks and then make it even better than what it is now?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise to speak to the amendment and to oppose the amendment for many of the same

reasons that have already been identified. I need to point out that Bill 207, while it has the best of intention, is very, very specific, and the bill itself is confined to the creation of this 10-year plan and then the annual reporting requirements. I would suggest that that is not as difficult as one might think to deal with in this House. We do have a good deal of time that's allocated to deal with the Bill at second reading. Should the bill receive the support of the members in the House at second reading, it would go on to Committee of the Whole.

The kinds of bills that I envision turning over to the policy field committees are those kinds of bills that will generate a broader discussion than what is very specific in this bill. I would suggest that there very well may be some appropriate ways that the minister may bring forward and suggest that the field committee look at various policies related to child care, and that would be very appropriate for the committee to do. But I believe that if we were to send this bill to committee, we would really be handcuffing that committee, and we would be restricting the kinds of discussions that they would have, and at the end of the day all they can do is come back to this House, refer the bill back to this House, perhaps with one or two amendments attached. But, frankly, we would still be dealing with a very, very restricted part of the overall issue of child care.

I'll give you an example, Mr. Speaker. As Minister of Environment I'm working right as we speak with officials in my department to bring forward to the relevant field committee a review of the regulations respecting beverage container recycling. It's a very broad issue. The regulations are about to come to the point where they need to be renewed, so I think it's appropriate that we deal with that at one of the field committees so that they can hear from all of the various components that are involved. They can hear from recycling associations; they can hear from the consumer; they can hear from the manufacturers: get all of that general context and then provide some advice to the government on what our future regulations should look like, whether we should simply re-engage what's already there or we should bring some new ideas to the train.

3:30

The same kind of concept maybe could apply within Children's Services, but it needs to be very broad in its context. I have concern that by referring Bill 207 to the committee, we will be far too restrictive on the kinds of issues that the committee can deal with, and for that reason I encourage all members not to support this amendment.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've listened with interest to the Deputy House Leader's explanation, and I would say that, of course, the policy field committees are a work in progress. We're not sure at least on this side of the House how they will be used, when they will be used. I think that to begin with, it would seem appropriate that a bill like Bill 207 could be directed from the opposition – we talked about transparency – to be looked at. Now, it seems to me that just because that one particular bill is sent to the policy field committee, it does not rule out taking a broader look at issues in Children's Services. I don't see that there has to be an either/or sort of situation. If all of a sudden you had sent Bill 207, that's specific, to be looked at, that does not stop the policy field committee from reviewing other areas in terms of Children's Services.

Just as the minister was talking about, you know, he's got some ideas about how a policy field committee might operate with

recycling. Fine, but there might be some other views, too, that the policy field committee would want to do. I think it would be appropriate from the Legislature, not always just flowing from the minister and things. It might be very valuable to look at, but the idea of a policy field committee is that the opposition would have some say in the types of things that were coming forward. That's why we have all-party committees.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think that from time to time we should from the Legislature say that this is something we want to look at. Maybe it's not something the minister particularly wants to look at, but the policy field committees should not just be under the purview, if you like, of the minister. I think the left hand and the right hand sometimes can give you two different things, so I don't think it rules out.

Let me say, Mr. Minister, from the example that you used, that somebody wanted to look at CO₂ proposals that had come forward. Why couldn't the policy field committees look at both areas? You know, maybe they need two or three more or four or five more meetings, but that's the purpose of policy field committees. To say that we reject this Bill 207 going to a policy field committee because it's not broad enough, that we couldn't look at other things: of course we can.

So I would say, Mr. Speaker, that because it is a work in progress, we should allow some of these things to come forward from the Assembly if in the spirit of openness and transparency we really want these policy field committees to work. Otherwise, the policy field committees will be just things that the ministers want, and we have to deal with it. Then the vote will come, and the Conservative members will vote one way and the opposition the other, and we won't have accomplished much. I don't think that's the purpose of them.

So I would say to the government and the members of the governing side that if we really want these things to work, we should be a little more open in terms of how they come to the policy field committee. It seems to me that Bill 207 is a bill that could have some good work done at those policy field committees. So let's not say that it's either/or, that there's only one thing that these committees can deal with. They can deal with a lot more than that, and I think the Legislature should be directing somewhat the things that they want to speak about.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment to second reading of Bill 207 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: Back on the bill.

Dr. B. Miller: I think I have a couple of minutes.

The Deputy Speaker: No. Your time has elapsed, Edmonton-Glenora.

The next person I have on the list is the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to address Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act. I thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for bringing this act to the Assembly. I have some concerns with the prescriptive nature of Bill 207. It only supports specified types of child care: licensed daycare centres, approved family day homes, and licensed out-of-school care centres. It states how many child care positions should be available in Alberta.

As children are the most cherished parts of parents' lives, selecting the right child care option is an extremely personal

decision. Child care providers are trusted with helping to raise, educate, and care for our kin. Different parents seek different qualities in care providers. Parents can care for their children in the manner in which they see fit. Albertans have many different lifestyles. Some live in remote areas of the province, work irregular hours, are single parents, or have special needs. Because of this variety no one child care type is right for all Albertans.

The government recognizes the personal nature of child care. This recognition has led to Bill 4, the Child Care Licensing Act. The bill allows Albertans to get the special service they need from child care by allowing for greater program choice and flexibility. Bill 4 provides parents with options. However, there are still more parents who prefer to use alternate means to raise their children. The Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act unevenly supports one type of child care. Albertans actually have more child care options which should be addressed. For example, this bill does not acknowledge the possibility of hiring a nanny to watch children in their own homes.

While Bill 207 is very well intentioned, it is at the same time very prescriptive. It goes as far as stating a specified target of placements to achieve. Bill 207 calls for the creation of enough child care spaces for 30 per cent of Alberta's children aged 12 years or less. There is no evidence indicating that there is a need for this many child care spots in Alberta. There could be enough demand to fill the spaces called for today, but what about tomorrow? Supply versus demand.

It will be difficult for a province facing a labour shortage to ensure that sufficient employees are available to accommodate the child care positions this act calls for. As it now stands, we are working hard on staff attraction to encourage people to promote child care as a profession of choice to meet today's child care needs.

Albertans should be free to take care of and raise their children the way they see fit. That can be at home with a dad or mom, at another family member's home, through an employee's workplace program, or in a licensed child care facility. While consulting with Albertans, the government found that creating spaces within the regular child care system will not meet the needs of many families. They felt that we should be providing funding to access the child care program they choose.

We need to ensure that parents have access to affordable and high-quality child care. The way to achieve this is not by prescribing the number of child care spaces. I urge the members of this Assembly to contemplate the type of message this bill sends to Albertans and how it could affect their child care choices.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to speak in favour of Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act. First, I would just like to thank the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for bringing this bill forward. I've had the pleasure of knowing the hon. member for the last two and a half years, and I can tell you that she is the most dedicated MLA I know. She works long, hard hours and is doing an outstanding job in this position, and I thank her for all the work she's done on behalf of Alberta children and families.

3:40

Mr. Speaker, Bill 207 has two clear, straightforward goals: increase the number of quality child care spaces available to Albertans and increase the level of governmental transparency and

accountability regarding child care in Alberta. I don't think that anyone can argue that Alberta doesn't need more high-quality, affordable child care spaces. As much as it would be nice to believe that we can go back to the days when mom stayed at home and tended to the child rearing while dad went to work, for an increasing number of Albertans that is simply not realistic. In a province where house prices are doubling and rents are going through the roof, even those who want to have one parent stay home are finding that it is truly an impossible dream.

Bill 207 would give the government a clear and obtainable target of achieving 30 per cent access for children 12 years of age and under over the next decade. Right now we only have child care spaces for about 10 per cent of children, so clearly we have a long way to go. By requiring the reporting of where spaces are being created and what type of space is created, the bill will enhance the quality, universality, accessibility, and developmental focus of child care in Alberta. It is important to note that this bill does not tell the government how to achieve the target number of spaces – this gives the government lots of room for out-of-the-box thinking in regard to the issue – and it doesn't tie the government to any particular spending amount. It gives the government a goal that it must reach within a reasonable time frame.

Bill 207 seeks to address the quite surprising numbers regarding child care in Alberta. In Canada's richest province regulated child care spaces are available to only about 10 per cent of our children. Only Newfoundland and Saskatchewan fare worse. Even more surprising is the fact that the number of daycare spaces in Alberta has actually dropped from 1992 to 2004. The situation has become so dire that some parents are putting their children's names on wait-lists even before they're born. Wait-lists now stretch for years.

The lack of child care spaces in Alberta is not just a social issue but an economic one. The unavailability of child care spaces is robbing the Alberta economy of thousands of people, both men and women, who could be lending their expertise in a red-hot employment market but instead are denied their opportunity to participate in Alberta's booming economy, that is crying out for workers.

Mr. Speaker, that's all I have to say. I'm fully supportive of this measure. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to commend the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods for introducing Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act. Everyone here can agree that Alberta's children deserve the very best care. Bill 207 is intended to increase accessibility to child care through legislated space creation and requires the minister to report annually on child care availability, affordability, quality, accessibility, and expenditures. It is quite similar in intent to the government's Bill 4, which will increase accessibility to child care by allowing the establishment of innovative child care programs and by allowing child care operators to make better use of their child care spaces.

Beyond the actions of Bill 4 the government has recently brought down a budget that includes significant support for child care. These measures are sure to improve the quality of life of young Albertans and parents with families. Child care is receiving significantly more funding to help address growth pressures, like a lack of affordable child care spaces in growing communities and the difficulty of attracting and retaining staff members to work with children.

In 2007-08 Children's Services will invest \$972 million in Alberta's children, youth, families, and communities. This is a 7 and a half per cent increase from the 2006-07 forecast. A hundred and

thirty-four million dollars of this funding will go to expanding access to quality, affordable child care options. This is an increase of \$16 million, almost 14 per cent, in addition to the 51 per cent increase provided in '06-07. Five point six million dollars will improve subsidies for parents and help child care programs cover the costs of processing these subsidies. Two million dollars will go to a space creation innovation fund to help cover the costs of creating more child care spaces.

Children's Services' very first strategic priority for 2007-10 is to ensure that parents have access to quality and affordable child care options. Children's Services is going to continue to implement the five-point child care investment plan that was developed in response to consultations with Alberta's families in 2005. The government does not need to develop another 10-year plan to increase child care spaces, as Bill 207 proposes, because we already have a plan that we are implementing.

Two of the points of this investment plan are important to this debate: firstly, helping low- and middle-income families access affordable child care and, also, improving the quality of child care and increasing wages and training opportunities for child care professionals. Since this plan was introduced in October 2005, 30 per cent more families are accessing child care subsidies, and staff wage top-ups have increased by 40 per cent. The government is offering \$400,000 to fund incentives to encourage people to re-enter the child care workforce and promote child care as a profession of choice. We're offering 1 and a half million dollars in a new Children's Services child care bursary, which offsets the cost for education for leaders and aspiring leaders working in child care.

Bill 207 would require annual reporting, which would be redundant because the ministry already reports its progress in child care. For example, it already reports annually on the number of child care programs that have received provincial accreditation. This voluntary process sets standards of excellence, promoting each child's early growth and development, which improves outcomes for children, families, and staff in Alberta's communities. Under the 2007-10 strategic plan the ministry has set a goal that in 2007-08 42 per cent of licensed day care centres and contracted family day home agencies will receive accreditation. In '05-06 only 16 and a half per cent of these facilities were accredited. The ministry has set a target for nearly two-thirds of these facilities to be accredited in 2009-10.

Mr. Speaker, the first years of a child's life . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, but under Standing Order 8(7)(a)(i), which provides up to five minutes for the sponsor of the private member's bill to close debate, I would now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to close debate on Bill 207.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have studied carefully the comments made in debate by colleagues on all sides of the House, and I've considered their various opinions. I want to thank you all for your consideration of this bill. While I shall defend the turf that goes with Bill 207, it is my preference to deal with the overarching and more enduring issue of Alberta's children, for that is where this discussion began.

I'd like to turn to the points being made in opposing this bill. Here again, it appears to me that there are two issues, not to be confused with the two positions from which the criticism is coming. The first is the allegation of overlap, that Bill 207 is unnecessary because it duplicates the provisions of the government's own Bill 4, the Child Care Licensing Act. The second is the argument of

ideology, that this reflects a Liberal mindset of intervention at the expense of freedom of choice. Before I deal with each of these in turn, I point out that they cannot both be true at the same time.

If in fact Bill 207 duplicates Bill 4 in its provisions, as the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon suggested, then there cannot be between the two bills the great gulf of status versus free enterprise philosophy that the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays has found. If there is a great philosophical gap between the two positions, then the opposition to Bill 207, by which I mean the government, cannot claim that it says the same thing as their own Bill 4.

The well-being of our children is a human issue that concerns us all, and therefore even the differing strategies we may pursue to achieve it are ultimately compatible as we seek the greatest good for the greatest number. Freedom of choice, which we all support, cannot exist without choices. The mandated child care spaces which Bill 207 provides are one of those choices and a necessary one for those who do not have access to the extended-family, in-house option that others have. This situation applies to many new Albertans who do not have other nonworking family here in sufficient numbers to provide the option that more long-standing Albertans may enjoy. So to mandate spaces, as Bill 207 does, is not to intervene in people's private lives but to create a level playing field in offering an option to more Albertans that only some Albertans have at present.

3:50

For fellow members who still believe that there's something sacred in an ideological stance here, I point to our history. The founding government of Sir John A. Macdonald was a liberal Conservative one: liberal in its generosity and intentions; conservative in its upholding of timeless values. People saw no contradiction in that. Let us leave the ideological debates to the annals of history, where they belong, and turn to face present realities together.

I'd like to devote the rest of my comments to reply to what I consider the greater challenge: the argument of overlap, that Bill 207 duplicates the government's own child care initiative and is therefore unnecessary. I do not believe that this is true. Bill 207 is intended to safeguard access to child care for those who need it and do not have access to it through other channels.

Even if this were provided under the government's Bill 4, adoption of Bill 207, which is designed to strengthen the aspect of available spaces, makes the message clearer, broader, and stronger. Adding standards for the number of child care spaces no more duplicates monitoring of programs than measuring height duplicates measuring weight. They are two complementary aspects to give us information about a whole.

What are we building for Alberta's children? What we are building for Alberta's children is bigger than any one party, person, or point of view. As long as it does not conflict with pieces of the structure put in place by others, additions that support and enhance a larger picture should be allowed and encouraged. So I put forward this measure not simply to score points for my own party and not to make any other party look bad. I do so because it addresses the needs of Alberta children.

I'm going to assume that the government will not surprise us and will simply vote this bill down. If it takes this course of action and votes the bill down, my next question will be a simple: why? If it's because the government intends to bring in something better of its own, I will await its action and applaud if it is due. If it claims that it's rejecting the bill because the timing is not right, I ask: how much longer? How many more incidents? How many deaths will it take until we learn that too many people have died, to quote Bob Dylan, while we continue to blow in the wind? What will it take before the

government is prepared to act? This is not an issue that is going to go away. It is not an issue that is going to get any better, any clearer, any more evident by leaving it.

[Motion for second reading of Bill 207 lost]

Bill 208
School (Restrictions on Fees and Fundraising)
Amendment Act, 2007

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The purpose of this bill is to eliminate school fees and fundraising for all curricular activities. The Department of Education will be ultimately responsible for ensuring that public education is funded adequately following this change. Fundraising will not be allowed for educational materials but is allowed for extracurricular activities, including clubs, school sports, and extracurricular trips.

Eliminating school fees will divert responsibility for school fees from parents back to the provincial government where they belong. Eliminating school fees would also ensure that quality of education is not determined by the wealth and willingness of parents to pay. The impact of this change will be determined by the willingness of government to replace this lost resource revenue with government funding. The bill requires that the ministry report to the Legislature with a strategy to ensure that school programming and instruction will not be negatively affected by the reduction of school fees. To ensure that students and school boards are not negatively affected by the loss of revenue, the Minister of Education must make a report to the Legislature detailing how the department will ensure that restricting school fees will not negatively affect the quality of education.

Article 26 of the United Nations' declaration of human rights states that "everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages." School fees can create a financial burden for families and for low-income families, in particular in Edmonton. Through its own documents the department is saying that 20 per cent of kids and families are in the poverty domain. Higher school fees for some curricular activities, including things like band and class field trips, can be prohibitive for some students, leading to a situation in which the students obtain different educational experiences based on their financial resources.

The refusal to introduce a cap on fees and fundraising or to provide a province-wide guideline on these activities leads to confusion and vast differences from school board to school board. Currently students enrolled in public school face different school fees based on where they live and what school board their school is in. This creates inequality in the level of financial contribution parents are expected to provide for their children's schooling based simply on the place of residence.

School fees are charged to make up for budgetary shortfalls in the education system. In Alberta there is no cap on school fees, and the provincial government has refused to take any action on this issue. Currently fees can be charged for supplies and materials provided for the student's personal use or consumption. This includes things like workbooks, locker rentals, art supplies, and calculators.

School fees and fundraising activities are generally determined by local school boards through consultation with school councils and the ministry, and they have been trending upwards in the past few years. School boards have traditionally been protective of the right to raise funds. This is likely a result of continual financial pressure of being asked to do a lot with inadequate government funding.

If this initiative is going to succeed, the government will have to step up and provide the funding necessary to have a high-quality and equitable education system across Alberta. School fees can present an unreasonable economic burden on low-income families. School fees and fundraising allow governments to pass on the costs of delivering public services to parents and communities. Higher fees attached to specialized programs can affect who can and cannot attend or take part based on family income. Educational opportunities may differ from region to region based on the relative wealth and willingness of parents to pay.

School fees and fundraising put school boards and staff in the position of having to raise money to pay for public services. This takes time and energy away from educating and administrating. In fact, we have a principal in St. Albert that has given up her position because of the time spent on other things rather than education.

Currently the School Act allows school boards to charge fees to cover the cost of instructional supplies and materials. Tuition fees are not allowed. In 2005 the Alberta School Boards Association released a report showing that while income from school fees remained relatively stable from 2000 to 2003, around \$31 million, they began increasing thereafter and reached \$40 million in 2005. This amounts to an average fee of \$70 per student each year. There is currently no cap on what school boards can charge in terms of fees. This means that students in one jurisdiction can pay fees that are entirely different from students in another. Furthermore, there's no unified policy on how to address parents who are unable to pay. Recently there was some controversy in Alberta when a school board directed a file to collection agents.

The government has firmly supported the right of school boards to raise funds through school fees but has also refused to provide adequate funding to school boards. Fully covering the amount of funding gained through school fees would represent only .78 per cent of the current education budget.

The Alberta Learning Commission made the following recommendations regarding school fees. Recommendation 95:

Set province-wide policies on school fees that would:

- Prohibit fees to cover the costs of basic education items
- Detail what charges can be levied and set maximum caps on school fees
- Allow reasonable fees for extra-curricular activities.

Following these recommendations, the government pledged to define and set province-wide policy on what is considered basic and what are considered extras in relation to fees. This has not been done, and we're still waiting.

Provincial comparisons. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador increased the education budget to cover the revenue previously gained through school fees. The province decided to take this step to reduce regional inequity, reduce confusion, and ease the financial burden of parents with school-age children. The situation in British Columbia is quite different from that of Newfoundland because the change to school fees came about as a result of a legal challenge rather than a change in government policy.

4:00

In Alberta a situation could not happen because the School Act gives the school boards the right for instructional materials. The preamble lays out that children should have access to the same basic level of education regardless of their income or region of residence and that the government is ultimately responsible for funding public education. That's the layout of the bill, Mr. Speaker.

Section 49.1 is amended to clearly prohibit school boards from charging school fees or fundraising to pay for any programs or supplies required to complete recognized courses in the public education system. Section 49.1(2) of the bill allows school boards

to charge fees or fund raise for extracurricular activities. Sections 49.1(3) and (4) provide protocol and a timeline for schools to repay funds that were raised for purposes that contravene the act.

Section 60(2)(j) is repealed. Section 60(2)(j) previously allowed boards to "charge a parent of a student fees with respect to instructional supplies or materials." This is now disallowed.

Section 147.1 is added. This section will ensure that the revenue lost from school fees will not negatively affect the quality of education in Alberta. Following the passage of these amendments, school boards will submit a report to the Department of Education detailing the effects of lost revenue from school fees. The minister is then required to develop an action plan to ensure that revenue lost does not negatively affect the quality of education in our province.

Mr. Speaker, I'll stop there. I have some other things here. We'll open it for further discussion.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It does give me, actually, great pleasure to speak today because it gives me a chance to correct some of the misinformation that this member and his colleagues have been spreading far and wide across the land. As with many Liberal proposals this one on the surface seems maybe okay, but if you start to peel back the layers of the onion, it is fraught with lots of problems.

First, let me talk a bit about charging of fees and about the fact that the hon. member says that public education should be free. Well, we happen to believe on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, that nothing in life is free, and certainly education and health care are not free. They're public and accessible to all, but they're not free.

Let me give you an example of why that should be. Let's take the example of textbooks. Now, let's assume for a moment that we are charging fees, which is really a rental of textbooks, and if all of a sudden school boards didn't charge those fees, what incentive would there be for students to bring back those textbooks to be used again and again? What incentive would there be for students to simply not bother remembering where they happened to leave their textbook? Because it was free. So, Mr. Speaker, I think one of the reasons that we have fees is to ensure that there's some accountability in the system.

But I think what I'd like to spend a little bit more time on is the whole area around comments that this particular member and his colleagues happen to be making consistently, words like inadequate funding for education, underfunding for education, starvation diet for education. If those were the words that actually described our education system in this province, Mr. Speaker, I would ask the following questions: why do school boards across this province have combined accumulated surpluses of some \$220 million, why do we have the highest paid teachers in Canada, and why are our student achievement results ranking among the highest in the world? That is hardly underfunding education.

So then we get to the \$70 million that fees and fundraising actually contribute to education. I hear a lot from these guys over here about the Liberal plan. Well, let me say, Mr. Speaker: what they want is they want us to take away the ability for school boards to raise fees and fund raise. So that's another \$70 million that we need to spend on education.

I just heard a few minutes ago in the debate on the last bill that the government should be spending about that much money again on child care spaces. That's not to forget about the constant request for

full-day kindergarten and junior kindergarten. Then the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has the audacity to say that the government should write a cheque out of the heritage fund for \$2 billion to cover the unfunded pension liability of teachers. Then, finally, there's the Member for Calgary-Varsity, who never wants to look at any alternative methods for funding school construction. He wants us to write a cheque for \$3 billion. Where is this money going to come from, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Groeneveld: And we're going to put 30 per cent in the heritage fund.

Mr. Liepert: Yes. As my hon. colleague says, before we do all of that – spend more money on health care; spend more money on seniors' programs; spend more money on this, roads, high-speed rail – first, we're going to put 30 per cent in the heritage fund. Now, talk about booga-booga economics. Blowing and sucking at the same time. There is one way to accomplish what they say: raise taxes, bring in a sales tax, and go into debt. We are not going to do that, Mr. Speaker, so take your pick. If you like the Liberal plan – I've just laid it out for you – vote for it.

However, I think the real issue with this bill is where decision-making should be made. Should it be made at the local level, or should it be made here in Edmonton by 83 elected people and a number of people working in the Department of Education? I happen to agree that it should be at the local level, Mr. Speaker. What the current situation allows is for school boards to make decisions that apply at the local level. I don't want the Member for Red Deer-North to come to the Minister of Education and say: "You know what? A school in my constituency has a band, and they want to go to a competition, but because the Liberals wouldn't allow us to raise funds, Mr. Minister, would you approve some money so that my band can go to a competition?" I don't want to do that. I want the school board to make that decision.

So to quickly wrap up, Mr. Speaker, I would like to encourage all members of this House to not support this bill for three reasons. Number one, school board associations are currently reviewing this issue, and they are going to come forward with some recommendations soon. Let's let them do the job that they were asked to do. Secondly, this is bad legislation based on bad policy, and third, the system we have in place actually works because we let local people make the decision.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Mather: Oh, boy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, support local autonomy, and that is true local autonomy where school boards would actually get the funds that they need so that they can make the decisions at the local level. At a time of year when all of us are looking forward to spring, schools across Alberta are planning for fall. Principals are being appointed, staffing levels and enrolment projections for next year are being analyzed, and school fees are no doubt being looked at so that schools can make up the difference between what they receive from the province and what they need to operate their programs so that all children can learn.

School boards across this province have the goal of educating all young Albertans. I see it in the mission statements of every board and school that I visit, yet boards and schools continue to have to dip into that often shallow well of parents' pockets. There seems to be a commonly accepted feeling that parents can, quote, pay for the extras, and this has been sold to the public as anything that is an

enhancement to the basic programs that schools offer. What are the extras? How are schools to know who can pay and who cannot pay?

What are some of these fees used to pay for? Textbook upkeep or deposit fees are requested by many schools to pay for the worn or destroyed texts. Schools ask for field trip money to teach through experience. Student activity fees are often requested to promote school community and positive interaction. Some schools even request parents to buy and pay for Kleenex. The list goes on and on depending on the school one attends.

Are these items really an enhancement? Is it an enhancement to ask that textbooks be provided in a reasonable condition without having to pay? Is it an enhancement to provide hands-on experience in different settings that will help children learn? Is it an enhancement to have children learn to build a healthy school community and fun activities? Finally, is it an enhancement to have a ready supply of Kleenex in the classroom?

4:10

Should children from low-income families have to take money away from their food, rent, or transportation to pay for school fees? Should schools that sympathize with these families be forced to absorb the costs of these fees from their regular budgets and forgo maintenance, professional development, or school supplies such as Kleenex? Should teachers be told that their budget for sick time is dwindling because of paying for programs and that teachers need to limit time off when ill? Principals are being asked to make tough decisions to pay for the essentials to run a comprehensive program that seeks to educate all children while trying to enhance the educational and life experiences of our children.

If we are to support the mission of our schools to educate all children equally and not penalize all school budgets that try to support low-income families, we have to look at how to support parents in their difficult job and schools that are trying to teach our kids curriculum but give them the life experiences that teach them to be strong citizens and contributors to the future of our great province. We often tend to overlook this latter point of building strong citizens in favour of strong test results on provincial achievement tests. It is almost as if we feel that achievement results exclusively translate into a strong community. There's no question that students' achievement is important and contributes to citizens who can innovate, invent, and become productive citizens; in other words, contribute to our economy and quality of life.

But our economy is only one important piece of what it takes to build a strong human being that is able to interact positively with others, be a good spouse, care for their children, serve the community, and be productive economically. By providing many of the extras, we are building our children into strong human beings, and surely this will have positive impacts for all of us.

How many of the members here today can think of instances where they learned many of the great lessons of life from our experiences outside of the classroom? Most of us will say that these experiences changed our lives fundamentally. It might have been an experience that led to an interest in public service or an interest in law or teaching or health care or the environment or engineering. I believe we all recognize the need to build our children in a variety of ways and even more so in the increasingly complex world we live in. As the role of the family has changed over the last generation or more, our schools have taken on many of the responsibilities that the family had in the past. Whether we support this notion or not, schools are taking on many of the roles of the family. For many of our children the school is the family.

This bill calls for the end of school fees for all children and families in Alberta. If we are to truly leave no child behind, as our

cousins to the south are fond of saying, we need to provide the opportunities for success to all of our students, and this means that principals should not have to take money from necessary programs in order to subsidize families that cannot afford to pay. In a Chamber such as this, where all of us speak of the future with great hope for what we can achieve, we need to take the lead and eliminate an obstacle in reaching this future. We can leave no greater legacy.

As schools now plan for September, many parents wonder whether they will get the money to give their child what all the others have while others dread having to pull out their wallets yet again to pay for things we should all be able to count as valued. If it is important enough to be happening in our schools, it should be important enough to be funded appropriately. By passing this bill calling for an end to school fees, I believe the government can lead us to a healthier education system and stronger communities.

This September holds the opportunity for families to see the new face of an education system that values the actual needs of children and the experiences that will provide for a healthier and stronger Alberta. Is it the case or is it not the case that every student of every economic status has the right to a quality public education free of charge in Alberta? If this is the case, then we must ask why it is not in fact happening in public schools throughout the province. If school fees are needed in order for schools to meet the cost of providing basic services and supplies to students and replace used or abused texts and equipment, then the gap between what is being funded and what needs to be funded must be bridged, not through the levy of extra fees or through the vehicle of fundraising but by the implementation of adequate funding for all provincial public schools.

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

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege today to be able to rise and speak to Bill 208, and I'd like to thank the hon. Member for St. Albert for bringing forward this bill. I think he's put his finger on a very important subject area, and it's one that I'm glad to contribute to the debate on.

As I look at the preamble of the bill, it says, "Whereas every person has the right to public education." I don't think there is a member in this Assembly that does not believe that. I mean, I've always felt very blessed to live in a country that valued education and had public education accessible. Last week I was meeting with somebody in my church congregation as they described to me living in a country where that was not available and how blessed they felt to be able to come to a country where they did not have to worry about that for their children. So sometimes I think we lose track of what a great privilege and how happy we are that in this country we believe in it, that we know that it's the right thing to do.

But as I look at the bill, I see it as having two different issues. The first is fundraising, and the second is school fees. In the bill the member says that it would restrict a school operating by a board from raising funds for extracurricular activities offered by the school, or if you go to 49.1(1):

No school operated by a board shall charge a student or a student's parent or otherwise raise funds for services or supplies required by courses of study or education programs prescribed, authorized or approved by the Minister under [certain sections].

Now, I was a parent council chair and involved in parent council for many years, and I know as I visit with my parent councils today that if I was to say to them tomorrow that I was supporting this bill, I would probably get some push back from my constituents. They, fundamentally, as parents have organized under the rules that we've

placed, and they have told me on many occasions that they participate because they want to, that it is their choice, that there are things that they would like to provide for their children above and beyond what is provided by a public education system.

I look at things like, for example, school band programs. There are very, very well-organized parent groups that help support school band programs, send kids on band trips. My own children – I have four of them – participated for many years in a school band program that I helped fund raise for. I also know that there are other things that they provide.

Now, I often hear people say, "Well, we have to fund raise for textbooks," and I've heard many superintendents of school boards tell me and assure me that parents do not have to fund raise for textbooks, that those funds are provided. Often that is used as, I call it, the red herring of the educational debate. I would say to you that when I was in the parent council chair position, we did not fund raise for textbooks. Now, sometimes school curriculums changed, and it did create pressure because there were all new textbooks required. But, generally speaking, we never raised for textbooks.

That being said, I would say to you also that the entire world is changing in the textbook world. I mean, I hear teachers tell me now that they don't want one textbook. They want a chapter from one textbook and a chapter from another. The technology is starting to allow them to make and create innovative programs for their students.

So the old debate about whether we're fund raising for textbooks I think is a red herring. But I will say this to you. I know that the parents that I represent would resent my coming in and making laws that prevent them from raising money or choosing to raise money on behalf of their children for extras. They would. I know that they would. I know that they would push back. It's one of the reasons that I have a bit of an issue with this bill.

The other is this idea that fees haven't existed. I remember carrying boxes of kleenex to school. I remember carrying school supplies to school. In fact, I remember the day that I graduated from high school and going across the platform and opening up my diploma, and it said: you owe \$10.35, and you will not receive your diploma until that fee is taken care of. So I had to go and ransom my diploma for \$10.35 in order to get it.

So fees are not new. They have existed over time. This suggestion that suddenly they're curtailing education or that there's some new piece because we're not funding properly I would suggest to you is not true. They have been around for a long time. When it comes to school fees, I would like to spend just a moment and talk about that.

4:20

As I said before, I think of education as the right investment and a good investment. For my four sons I had a variety of learners. Some needed more help than others. Some needed more supports than others. I could find lots of ways to support my boys educationally and in other areas of their life, but at some point there was an income line there that I had to live with, so we made choices as we do in everything that we do. The hon. Education minister talked about the funding that we do provide: a lot of funding. I think we decided that it was some 32 per cent of the provincial budget that is spent in this area.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Are school fees fair, or are they not fair? Under the act we give school boards the right to charge fees for supplies and materials. I think that if I were listening to my constituency, they would say to

me that sometimes they think school boards go too far with fees. What they want from us as government is a more clear definition of what a fee should be and what it shouldn't be. I think I have some sympathy for them in that area, that it should be very much a clear direction from us as government as to what is and isn't a fee.

Could we do some better work around the definition? Yes. I do believe that we can and that sometimes, as parents show me the extent to which school fees have gone up today, they do have an argument, particularly when they have multiple children.

While I agree that there should be fees – and as the minister said earlier, things that are free are often not valued – and I do think that it does prepare and make people participate, I think a clearer definition would be one good aspect to this bill and one that I would love to see the minister take a longer look at. But at this point in time I can't support the bill because I don't believe my constituents would want me directing them about fundraising in their world.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by Strathcona, then Edmonton-Decore, then Peace River.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in favour of Bill 208, but to begin with, I want to refute some of the allegations that have been brought against the provincial Liberal Party in general and Liberals in particular.

The hon. Minister of Education talked about Liberals and the clichéd phrases of tax-and-spend Liberals. Then he went on to say – and it was sort of echoed by one of his members – that if you don't pay for something, you don't value it. These are the standard sort of Fraser Institute responses, but the statement that I found the most amusing is the one: we let local people make the decisions.

Nothing could be farther from the truth than that statement. All you have to do is go back to 1994, when this government in its wisdom decided to take away the ability of the board to raise half of their operating budget through the education portion of the property tax. At that point, any individual discretion, any autonomy that boards had was taken away by this centralist government, which does not like to be interfered with in their day-to-day process by the federal government in Ottawa but has no problems reaching in, tying strings around, micromanaging every part of, whether it's the school boards' or the city councils', budgetary decisions.

It is the equivalent of a spider web. Every allotment that is provided comes with so many restrictions that the word "autonomy" is absolutely lost for local school boards. That's a shame because they're the local individuals whose decisions should carry the greatest amount of weight, but unfortunately they have to go cap in hand to this minister for any types of funding decisions.

Now, public education also involves separate education because the Catholic boards are part of the public board. Bishop Henry has made a very strong statement – and he had some difficulty with some of his parishioners, and some trustees initially took offence, but I think those offences and fences have been mended – when he said that he was against schools having to go out and take part in casino fundraisers or even the former traditional Catholic form of fundraising, which was the local church bingo. Bishop Henry spoke very strongly on this issue that it is the province's responsibility to fund education and that parents should be at home assisting their children or attending mass, as the case may be, but not attending casinos and other fundraisers to pay for the basics of education.

I agree very strongly with the bishop. If ever there was a tilting of the playing field, it's only those parents who are in well-to-do districts who have the time available because of their economic well-being to donate their time to attend casinos where the schools

prosper. In those socioeconomic areas where the parents are forced by this government's minimum wage policy to have two or three jobs, they don't have the luxury of going and carrying chips or looking at the VLT and slot revenue that is funding education. This is a sad circumstance.

Now, the phoniness of the education portion of the property tax remains. The government collects this tax in the name of education. Does it go to education? No. It disappears into general revenue. So, please, hon. Minister of Education, don't ever talk about tax-and-spend Liberals. It's the phony tax and underspend Conservatives that delight in punishing people, including seniors, with property tax. Now, some of the seniors on fixed incomes get a break in that their increases don't show up on their tax bill, but they are still being taxed.

The other difference between members of the Liberal Party – and I believe I can speak somewhat for the ND Party, although they're very capable of speaking for themselves – is the idea that education is an investment. The money we put into education produces at least a threefold return.

Now, I would like to think that I know something about education, having spent the better part of my life, 34 years, as a teacher, and it was the lack of support for education that forced me to become more involved in the politics of education, first within the Alberta Teachers' Association, where I served as a member of the economic policy committee, the teacher welfare committee, from 1988 to 1998. I have worked with a variety of trustees, including the group that formerly was a member of the SPEAK group, support public education, act for kids. I worked with a number of individuals on that campaign because I saw that they had the best interests of not only their parents but their children in place.

Now, this government that claims to be concerned about the well-being of education represents – we've got 20 representatives in Calgary, the area where we're short 40 schools. We've got 40 districts without schools. We've got kids who spend a hundred thousand kilometres on buses. So this government is quite willing to spend money on gasoline. It'll spend money on buses, whether they be the city buses that are involved in a transit strike potentially now or whether they spend the money on the yellow buses. But when it comes to spending money at the school level, they have other concerns.

4:30

When I taught at F.E. Osborne – and I also, like the member across the way, was a member of our parent council for a number of years – we did a variety of fundraisers. We sold the entertainment books. My leadership kids as part of an environmental and economic circumstance recycled. What we found out was that with the exception of – and I'm not including the money that goes towards teachers' salaries, which is a large portion of the budget, but for everything else the money that the government provided for the basic operations, the day-to-day operations for the school accounted for only one-third of our total budget. When we looked at what parents contributed either to the cafeteria, to the junk food machines, to the casinos, any of the external fundraisings that parents were involved in, that accounted for two-thirds of the operational budget of the school. Out of that extra fundraising, out of that extra basic operations . . .

An Hon. Member: Table the numbers.

Mr. Chase: I'd be glad to. Thank you.

Out of those basic operations parents did the majority of the work. Parents got tired, whether they were Catholic or public parents, of

trotting off to the casinos, but they wanted the best for their kids, and they understood that the government wasn't providing it. So they felt, morally and ethically, that they had to go out and achieve the best education results for their kids.

Now, since the early 2000s I have attended meetings with a group called Parents for Public Education. Dennis Locking is the chair of that group. His group has been extremely opposed to parents having to pay school fees. He sees this as another tax on parents that are already paying, as are all other property owners, the education portion . . . [Mr. Chase's speaking time expired]

Thank you. I look forward to Committee of the Whole.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, then Peace River, then Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In listening to the Member for Calgary-Varsity and recognizing that some of my experiences are somewhat similar to his, having been involved with the economic policy committees and negotiating on behalf of the local teachers, I'm somewhat astounded how we have such diverse conclusions from similar experiences. We will differ quite greatly on this.

Mr. Speaker, probably no one likes fundraising less than I do. I have always been reluctant to be engaged in that activity although, certainly, when people do come along and they've got something that they're fundraising for, I'm always happy to participate in that, but not from the other side, not to be out fundraising and seeking to raise funds. So on the surface it might be quite simple to say: let the government pay for everything, and we'll do away with that fundraising.

I'd like to start at the back end of this bill where it talks about reporting on the impact of restriction on fees and fundraising. I notice in that part that the fundraising is quite absent from the reporting mechanism, and I'd like to talk briefly about the fallacy of the time spent fundraising, trying to put together a few dollars to support some school activity.

Oftentimes I hear about administration and staff in schools spending huge amounts of time fundraising. One hon. member just mentioned a minute ago that some vice-principal quit because of the time spent on things other than education. What a travesty: administration and staff out there fundraising for a few dollars when they could better spend that time teaching a class, reducing the time spent – wasted, I would say – fundraising. Rather, put it into the staffing component, reduce the costs that way, and contribute that money to whatever this other project is that would be of value to the school. It's a false economy to go and spend that time fundraising – and I will use the term “wasting” judiciously – wasting time fundraising when it could be better spent doing other things.

Certainly, fundraising is important for all sorts of things that people want to spend money on: to take off on a band trip or field trips of some sort or going here, going there. There are all sorts of things that kids are involved in that are very, very beneficial to them, so in many cases they fund raise to make the costs to the individuals less. In many other cases those are just paid for. If it's not in the school setting, people are paying for it all the time, whether it's minor hockey or whatever else, and nobody goes to the government with a request that those be funded.

It disturbs me a little bit that there's an absence in the bill about reporting on the impact of fundraising. I would also suggest that if there was reporting on this, it would be very difficult to get that information. Several years ago there was a great deal of hue and cry in this Assembly, and the Minister of Education at the time was

asked: how come in Elk Island public schools the average fundraising was – and it was a huge number, like, maybe in the order of \$400 or \$500 per student. I had just left the school system at that time, and \$400 or \$500 seemed like an awful lot for every student, including the elementary.

Well, when I investigated further, I found out that the numbers that were being reported included things like cafeteria receipts, graduation fees, any money that came into the school system that was to pay for things like that. It was all wrapped together and inappropriately reported. It was a very negative attempt to tag the government with some kind of an underfunding scheme that the parents were paying several hundreds of dollars for each student to compensate for.

I agree with the Minister of Education when he talks about the claims being made about how badly underfunded education is. You know, for years we heard from the opposition and other folks that chronic underfunding – that was the watchword for years: chronic underfunding of education – yet we're the highest funded, our teachers are the highest paid, and we have the best results. This term gets repeated over and over again perhaps in an attempt to have people believe that. So I think it's lacking that we don't have in this bill: report on fees and fundraising. I would like to see that cost-benefit analysis of how much time is spent – and I used the term before: wasted – on fundraising when, in fact, that time could be better spent doing something else.

I think, too, that I agree with one of the members who talked about: “What if there was no more fundraising allowed? What if there was a blanket statement made that you will not fund raise for any school activity?” What would the parents feel about that when they would be unable to fund raise for all sorts of other things that might be happening?

I'd like to look next at the restrictions on fees and fundraising. That's part 3 in this bill. I've underlined here the word “required.” They can't raise funds for services or supplies required by courses “prescribed, authorized or approved.” A great many courses – and let's take some examples like the locally approved courses, the 25s and 35s. Those locally approved courses in many cases are completely outside of the offerings of other schools. So they offer these courses, and students in many cases will pay extra for them because they're some special course. Maybe it's phys ed 35, and they're going to do some special phys ed programs.

How about those hockey schools that are offered these days? We've even got some baseball schools. I think one of them is in southern Alberta. I forget the community that hosts it. What happens with those kinds of courses? Will there be no extra fees for promoting and sponsoring in a school system that particular course?

4:40

Now, to some extent what happens here in this definition where it says “required,” I think, is that largely this refers to what might be supplied by the school board. There are all sorts of things required for courses, from pens and paper to the textbooks themselves and to other things that might be required. What if a student has decided to take one of the shop courses and they have all sorts of wood that's required to make their projects? Who pays for the wood? Who's going to take care of that? School boards have assigned for those courses some extra fees, and they have to be paid for by somebody.

It was mentioned a little while ago this inaccurate statement about budgetary shortfalls and the estimate of the inadequate funding. At one point it was mentioned that it would be .78 per cent. I don't know whether that was of operating or total expenditures for the school board, all the school boards, but I think that that would require a little bit more investigation. I'd be really interested to see how much it would amount to.

In fact, it's not like this is going to come from – who knows where? It's going to have to be acquired from someplace. There was talk about property taxes a minute ago. What would be the impact on school property taxes to supply this extra shortfall? Somebody is going to have to pay for it. It's like it was going to be supplied by the government and would just come along at no cost to anybody.

So, Mr. Speaker, there are many parts to this bill where there are many questions I would have. Extracurricular activities: there's nothing restricting a school operated by a board from raising funds for extracurricular activities offered by the school. But in the first part it talks about the "prescribed, authorized or approved" courses. What about those courses offered by dance schools, where they get a credit-equivalent unit? There's some payment to those schools for courses offered in what would be definitely an extracurricular context. You're outside of the school system, yet this funding comes from . . .

The Speaker: I'm afraid we'll have to move on. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Member for Peace River, then Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bonko: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I've been listening, and there have been some interesting viewpoints on both sides of the House. The member was just speaking here with regard to band and sports schools. Well, having been with Edmonton public schools and a trustee for many years, approving some alternative programs because those are natural drawing cards to a variety of people as well as broadening the educational base, those specific programs – and we had hockey, and there were other sports ones – wouldn't have been considered as extracurricular activities because that was part of the ongoing, I guess, recruitment or activity that that person wanted to excel at, such as skiing.

They adjusted their school year to coincide with that activity so it wasn't prohibitive. If they were going to excel or perhaps go on to become Olympians or baseball players professionally as well as football or hockey, the school made those arrangements so they could fit it in as well as time for practice. So that wasn't really considered extracurricular; it was part of their educational experience, part of their out-of-school aspirations and dreams. So it wouldn't have been, you know, a part of this particular bill. It wouldn't have had an extra fee associated with it. They knew that the equipment and all the other services with it were just part of the program that they were trying to take, that they subscribed to, that they signed up for. So that was above and different.

With regard to band, well the band in itself – my son was at Wellington, and that school was known as being phenomenal fundraisers for the band. Again, that was part of the program that the people went into. That wouldn't have been extracurricular. They could still fund raise for that particular type of program. That's not what this bill is intending. It's not saying that you can't fund raise for the band. You can still fund raise for the band because that was a concern with the member across. In some of the cases the instruments cost thousands of dollars. They have textbook rentals as well – and I'll get on to that one – but for the band, they did it for offsetting some of the costs. Because of constant usage, you have to repair them, and they break down. So that wouldn't have been considered as part of this bill as a fee but perhaps as a user fee, which would be, I think, not subject to this bill.

We talk about doing fundraisers, period. Some of the times when the schools or parents were doing fundraising, they'd be raising for library books, not textbooks but library books, to be a complement to the overall experience of school as well as raising for computers,

and they would do the big casinos. That would be considered essential services that would be supplied by the school, but somehow the parents always added and topped up because they knew full well that the schools wouldn't be able to provide \$75,000 for a library of computers or to have another computer classroom.

One of these black holes that the schools continually fund raise for is computers. The technology changes so rapidly from year to year that the things are obsolete in a couple of years or the ongoing upkeep and maintenance of it. So that's what some of the parents are constantly and currently fundraising for.

When I was on the board – it must have been about four or five years ago – the now Minister of the Environment, I think, was charged with the task of determining what were school fees, and I thought that he had done a great job on that. But we are at the same thing about the question of fundraising. This is something that a lot of parents have angst about. I can't say that any of them are particularly supportive of, you know, going out there and doing it, be it the chocolates if they still do that occasionally, which I know they do, or the Mundare sausage, or it's going and doing bingo and casino nights. It is getting out of hand in some cases because you're also then doing the sports for the community as well, so some parents are at your door for three different events. But the point is: let's try and make sure that we know what fees are considered for textbooks or for essential rentals and what are just user fees.

When the kids go into junior high and high school, they end up paying fees for textbook rentals, the replacement costs. The school does the original purchase of the books. Say they're \$85 to \$115. They have a shelf life of so many years, but as the kids use them, they pay a textbook rental fee, and providing they give the book back in good repair, they get their fee back. [interjection] That's exactly it. So I'm not against that because that's fair and that's right. The kids know that, and the parents know that. That's altogether different than what this bill is trying to propose. [interjection] Well, again, all these varying opinions on this. We'll read it. We can read a book and come up with 15 different conclusions of it. It all depends on how you read the thing. But in this particular piece I don't see it as being prohibitive against that.

It's prohibitive against the basics, for parents using it to raise funds for essentials that the schools should be providing, such as, as I said earlier, the library fees and/or for computers. It shouldn't be included. Band is different because that is an extracurricular activity which you support such as outdoor education when they go on canoe trips. That would be fine as well because they know that that's an added experience for the kids overall, you know, in high schools where they do that. That would be separate, and that's not included within this bill, not included. So that would still be allowed, as far as I know.

So, again, Mr. Speaker, there's a lot to still contemplate in this. I would support this bill, but it maybe could use some tweaking or some amendments from both sides to have it completely palatable. I think the intent of it, reducing the burden on Alberta families as well as the fees, would certainly be appreciated by all families here in Alberta and, I know, those within the Legislature who do have kids as well that are experiencing it. So I would urge, you know, both sides of the House to be receptive and at least hear and be mindful of what some of the members are trying to propose for this because it isn't all bad. Some of it is actually quite good.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just rise briefly partially in support of the Minister of Education and his comments on Liberals

and Liberal philosophy and maybe on a couple of members opposite. I do agree that you can't do it all. The members have argued: we're going to do all of this plus we're going to save 30 per cent. The other night in the housing debate a few members in the ND caucus as well as the Member for Calgary-Varsity argued: yes, we can do all of that; we can supply all of the housing, and we'll still save 30 per cent. At some point, you know, you have to understand that there are trade-offs in governance because the taxpayer is not an endless funder of all the things that we might like to do in this Legislature. So we have to keep that in mind.

With regard to Bill 208 I support the minister in that I don't think this should be supported. The hon. Member for Strathcona pointed out that basic education is already covered, and the minister himself pointed out that we have quite possibly one of the best education systems in the world. We do.

4:50

Mr. Speaker, when I was young, I had a principal in school that I used to visit occasionally, and he said that probably the best thing you could do for the education system would be to bulldoze a school every five years. The reason for that, he said, was that upon bulldozing it, we should force parents to participate in the reconstruction of the school. In his experience the most successful schools and the most successful school programs were those which had a very strong component of parent involvement, some ownership. The minister, I believe, pointed out that if you give it for free, there's no valuing or no ownership in that and no incentive to partake or make it better.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods spoke long and eloquently about her beliefs on this bill. Certainly, it's not for me to question her passion on the issue of children and child care and education. She's devoted hours to the topic. However, she debated not whether we should be allowing fundraising activities for schools but what the school curriculum should be. She talked about citizenship and values, a very large broadening of the definition of basic education, as I understand it, in this province. Maybe that's a debate worth having. It's not a debate worth having while we're discussing a bill on whether we should be raising funds. That's not a backdoor way to talk about changing the whole education system.

I believe we have a good system in place, Mr. Speaker, and I support the minister. I believe we should defeat the bill.

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

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's interesting that the government members are talking about local autonomy. Having been a school board member, I remember when we practised some local autonomy, as did the Member for Edmonton-Decore. After the provincial government got involved in terms of arbitration with the teachers' strikes, in fact, we waited for some help, and then when we went public with that debate, we were told: oh, we must be wasting all our money, that we needed to be audited, that obviously we weren't responsible enough. So it's all right to say that it's for local autonomy. It's local autonomy to do all the least desirable things that the government wants us to do. That's what local autonomy means to this government.

This debate has been going on for a long time about what is essential. You know, in terms of what is extra, the bill very clearly says that fundraising for extracurricular activities can be allowed. I read that very clearly. But, Mr. Speaker, we have not come to grips – and we've been trying to do it for four or five years – with what is essential in terms of the school programs. We still haven't come to that definition, and until we do that, we're going to have this particular debate.

Are computers in this day and age part of the program? Some would argue yes; some would argue no. A lot of the fundraising that I saw going on as a public school trustee had to do with computers in the schools. The schools and school councils felt that they were an absolute necessity to bring in.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, but the time limit for consideration of this business has now escaped us.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

High-speed Rail System

507. Dr. Taft moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to immediately begin assembling land and/or negotiating rights-of-way for a high-speed electric rail line between Edmonton and Calgary with additional stops as warranted.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview in his capacity as the Leader of the Official Opposition has a speaking time limit of 20 minutes.

Dr. Taft: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that.

This is a very timely motion, in my view, Mr. Speaker, for a whole range of reasons. It is one that every member of this Assembly will be at least generally familiar with: the idea of building a high-speed rail link between Calgary and Edmonton quite possibly with a stop in or near Red Deer and other stops along the way, which could include the Edmonton International Airport and the Calgary International Airport. So you could get on a train in downtown Calgary, have one stop at the Calgary airport, one stop in Red Deer, one stop at the Edmonton International airport, and one stop downtown.

Indeed, I believe there's already provincial land available for such a terminal in Edmonton very close to the Legislature, just across 109th Street, which would be handy indeed. I also understand that the minister of infrastructure has recently overseen the purchase of land in central Calgary, in downtown Calgary, for an equivalent potential terminus there. That is, in my view, a step in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker, the whole point of this motion is to keep that process moving because even as we speak, given the rapid development of land in the Edmonton-Calgary corridor we are losing easy and inexpensive access to the necessary rights-of-way for a high-speed rail link. Businesses are expanding on lands which would be right on the right-of-way. Subdivisions are expanding on land which would be right on the right-of-way, other infrastructures coming and overlapping that right-of-way. Every time that happens, it makes it just that much more difficult and that much more expensive to fulfill the dream of a high-speed rail link between Calgary and Edmonton.

In fact, something for us all to keep in mind is that it's common for the greatest expense in constructing rail links not to be the railway itself and not to be the cars and the engines or the stations or anything else. It's common for the most expensive portion of these projects to be actually just expropriating or purchasing the rights-of-way for the line to be built. So this motion is intended for the government to get on quickly with assembling the land or negotiating the rights-of-way for that rail line so that that can be undertaken before the opportunity gets too expensive.

Now, I'm sure that every member of this Assembly has carefully read this motion. I can see various ministers smiling at the idea, but they will have noted that this actually would not commit the government to constructing or financing the railway itself. This is

a more prudent motion than that. We're simply saying: let's keep this option open; let's assemble the land and the rights-of-way now so that whether we choose to proceed with a high-speed rail link next year or in 10 years or in 25 years, the option will be there for us. That's why I think this is an important motion for all members of this Assembly to support.

The question is, I think: what vision of Alberta does this motion support? Certainly, it's how the opposition – I might say visionary opposition – foresees the future of Alberta. We see a future in this province where the big cities are linked, where all Albertans are linked, or at least many Albertans are linked through a rail system. We see a future in which there's an integrated transportation plan for this province that works at many, many levels. It works right from the level of local neighbourhoods where there might be public transit stops or smaller arterial roads feeding into larger systems like rail transit, LRT, or C-Train in Calgary, which would in turn feed into something like a high-speed rail link. Those would also have to, in our vision ought to, interlink with airports, with truck terminals, with roadways, a fully integrated transportation system. This, Mr. Speaker, could be the absolute jewel in the crown of that transportation system, but the only way we can achieve that jewel, the only way we can make it shine in all its glory would be to begin now by setting aside the rights-of-way and negotiating the land.

5:00

You know, Mr. Speaker, the possibilities from this project are genuinely exciting. There's every possibility that, for example, a student at the University of Calgary could take the C-Train there down to the terminus of the high-speed rail link, zip up to Edmonton; could leave right after breakfast and be in downtown Edmonton, here, observing the proceedings of the Legislature, for example, to write a paper for a political science course – all right; I'm getting thumbs-up from various members here – and be back at home before supper.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Or I think I could imagine an engineering technology student from NAIT working on a specific project that actually requires collaboration with a lab at SAIT and those people being able to zip back and forth on a high-speed rail link in a way that is safe and that is efficient and that is environmentally very friendly.

A couple of months ago there was a very exciting ballet program in Calgary featuring the music of Joni Mitchell. There's no reason in the world that people from Edmonton couldn't, with a high-speed rail link, zip down in an hour and a half, take in the ballet, and be back at home before midnight.

Once that high-speed rail link is established, I can imagine a kind of liftoff occurring for this province, in which the spinoffs, the synergies, the cultural enrichment, the intellectual energy in this province just goes to a higher level. I think that's the kind of future we need to look to for this province because if we just stay with the same old plans that we've had for the last many decades, we're going to end up in the same old places. So in a general sense a vision for this province with a fully integrated transportation plan featuring, among other things, a high-speed rail link.

Now, I realize that there are serious economic questions to address with a high-speed rail link, and I don't want to rush into this. It may be that it's not initially feasible. There are people who say it is, and there are people who say it isn't. I've frankly found myself wondering: if we have the rights-of-way secure, do we have to go immediately to a high-speed rail link, or could we just have any old passenger rail link? I mean, why is it impossible to get from Calgary to Edmonton by train?

Mr. R. Miller: Well, you can do it, but you have to go to Vancouver.

Dr. Taft: Without going through Vancouver. It just doesn't make any sense. It used to be that there were Dayliners; there was rail service.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that the traffic on highway 2 and the wear and tear on highway 2 is huge. It seems to me just basic logic that we need to be looking at passenger rail service between these two cities.

The current rail system poses a lot of problems. It was constructed many, many decades ago. It runs right through the middle of all kinds of small towns. There are a tremendous number of level crossings. There are huge safety issues. All of us who remember the old days of the Dayliner and what seemed like a crash a month will remember that. So that would not be acceptable, but there have got to be other ways of doing it. There are cities around the world that are linked by train.

One of the reasons, of course, that people are going to train use more and more is the environmental concerns about heavy use of the automobile. [some applause] That's getting stirring applause from the Assembly. Many of us will be alert to the fact that the climate change issue is beginning to overtake many, many other issues, and I think we're only beginning to feel the impact of that. While it's often said in here that burning coal and exploiting the oil sands generate all kinds of greenhouse gases, as they do, so does transportation, Mr. Speaker. The transportation sector is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gases and, therefore, to climate change. As climate change accelerates, we're going to see greater and greater pressure to get away from gasoline-powered and diesel-powered cars and trucks, and the obvious choice is to train.

You will notice, in fact, in this motion that we specify "high-speed electric rail line," and there's a reason for that. In our view, an electric high-speed rail line has the greatest potential to have the least environmental impact. We can imagine at some point electric generation through various means. It could be clean power. Maybe it could be nuclear power in the dreams of the Tories. It could be something else. But electrical generation doesn't produce greenhouse gas emissions and therefore a high-speed train from Calgary to Edmonton that has absolutely minimal environmental impact and carries thousands of passengers a day.

So I think the environmental issues here are going to ultimately force – force – this project to go ahead. We're going to see the price of gasoline and diesel get higher and higher, the price of the carbon generated from those fuels get higher and higher, and at some point people will absolutely insist on a rail link between the two cities. So let's get on today with acquiring the rights-of-way to establish that link.

We also need to compare the cost of the railway with the cost of maintaining and expanding highway 2. Many of us here will drive highway 2 many times a month, sometimes several times a week. All of us will know that many stretches of highway 2 are in poor states of repair. I should be, perhaps, more correct in my term and call it the Queen Elizabeth II motorway, the QE II. Anyway, it's got many names. We all know it as the road from Calgary to Edmonton.

It needs expansion. The traffic loads are enormous. It needs major repair. All of that is going to cost a tremendous amount of money. Adding an additional lane in both directions to that highway would cost hundreds of millions of dollars or perhaps more. I mean, we can't even get highway 63 to Fort McMurray twinned. I can only imagine the cost and delays in expanding highway 2 between Edmonton and Calgary. So if we're going to put money into that, maybe we should instead consider putting some kind of support into

an improved rail link for passengers between Edmonton and Calgary. I could go on at length on this.

There are two competing bids for this project, Mr. Speaker. There is one which is, I believe, being advocated by one of the major railways – I don't need to name which one – which would use the current rail line between the two major cities. As I indicated a few moments ago, there are a lot of concerns with that. That line runs right through places like Ponoka and Wetaskiwin and Hobbema and many, many other centres. That's okay, perhaps, for freight traffic, but if you're getting high-speed passenger traffic, it raises a lot of concerns. It's also a less straight route, and if we want to have the potential for a true high-speed rail link, we want to have as few curves as possible on this line.

There is a competing proposal, which would see a brand new line constructed with only a very, very small number of curves in the entire length of the line. It would bypass or avoid, I think, virtually every town between the two cities, except those where there were scheduled stops, so that would be in some ways a better option.

5:10

The question is coming up, and it's a very important question: what cost? I will be forthright here and say that the costs I've seen from the backers of either proposal don't convince me that they're right on top of this one. We all know how much the costs for construction are escalating. There's no reason to think that costs for railway construction won't be escalating as well. So we do need to be very careful for the cost. But I can tell you that the quickest way for us to secure the cost of this in the long run is to get on today with this motion, with securing the rights-of-way for the high-speed rail link.

So, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to some animated debate on this motion, and I look forward to an open vote on this. It'd be fun and good for democracy to have a free vote on this motion, given that it is a motion. It's not binding on the government; it simply urges a general action upon the government. So I will do my best to respond to questions, and I will be paying close attention to any comments that any members of this Assembly might have.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've listened attentively to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview's comments. He preceded his comments by saying that his vision for the future and the Liberal Party's vision for the future on this particular topic, on the topic of a high-speed train, is 20/20.

Well, I hate to tell the member that his vision may be 20/20, but he needs to turn around because he's looking back. If he checks the records carefully, this issue has been debated in this House not that long ago. As a result of the debate in 2004 the Van Horne Institute performed a feasibility study on the issue of a high-speed train. That was in 2004; this is 2007. Van Horne indeed indicated that perhaps such a mode of transportation would be feasible, but there would be a great deal of taxpayers' money involved if this government was to proceed with this particular project.

A prudent thing to do any time spending government dollars on a project of this scale would be to find out, one, if Albertans would actually use such a mode of transportation between Edmonton and Calgary. The second one: why not find out how much they would pay to use such a mode of transportation and which technology is best for this project? As we all probably will agree around here,

there are many different variations of high-speed trains that could be implemented. [interjections] It is great that the members for Edmonton-Rutherford and Edmonton-Decore are so enthusiastic about it, but maybe if they just listened, they may learn something.

Before acting on this particular project, it would be reasonable to consult on this study. After debating the high-speed train in 2006 in this Assembly, the Assembly decided that this government was not in a position to fund this mode of transportation exclusively, and that is the reason why then Motion 501 failed. Well, the objections to Motion 501 have not changed since that time, and just to refresh the members' memories, some of the objections included the source of funding for a high-speed rail – no answers have been found yet – which train and rail type should be used, how long it would take the train to travel between the two centres and how many stops should there be in between, how Albertans living close to the line would be affected, how much a ticket would cost, and Albertans' desire for this type of transportation. Those questions have not been, to date, answered conclusively. Hence, perhaps the motion is premature at this time, as 501 was in 2006.

Notwithstanding this, it is important to stress that this government has not set aside the idea of a high-speed train, because I agree with the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. A train between Edmonton and Calgary would open up many possibilities. First of all, on a world scale a population of 3.2 million people: we are hardly a medium-sized city in Asia or Europe. Now, with a high-speed train, as the Member for Edmonton-Riverview indicated, a student could actually live in Calgary and attend NAIT or vice versa. We would become more of a centralized market and have more of a combined economic power on a world scale. However, the results of the market assessment are not yet in, and we are awaiting the results.

Notwithstanding this, as the Member for Edmonton-Riverview has indicated, this government has been taking steps in securing land, and the most recent acquisitions were the ones in Calgary. The rights-of-way are being protected, as we speak, throughout the corridor between Edmonton and Calgary. More problematic issues arise in Calgary, I understand, than they do in Edmonton as we do have some corridors that have been vacated by other rail lines that would make it possible for us to proceed.

So is there work being done? Definitely there is work being done. Rights-of-way are being secured. There is a feasibility study in progress of which we will receive results in the short, forthcoming future. We are consulting with Albertans to find out what mode of transportation they will be using, how they will be using it, where the stops should be, and how many of them should be in between here and there. Hence, Mr. Speaker, reading the motion as stated right now, one would conclude that nothing is being done because it urges government to commence work on this project where the work is more than in progress. We're in the midst of studying this particular issue.

What I will do, Mr. Speaker, is table an amendment to the member's motion, and the amendment shall say:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to continue assembling land and negotiating rights-of-way for a high-speed rail line between Edmonton and Calgary with additional stops as warranted.

I will table the appropriate number.

Mr. Speaker, indeed, I am glad that the Liberal opposition is on the side of this government and will support this government in continuing its work to study and acquire rights-of-way if, indeed, this train system becomes a feasible and desirable project.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: We'll just distribute the amendment, and if you want to, you can use the remainder of your time to speak to the

amendment. Hon. member, did you wish to continue to speak on the amendment?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, as circulated, the main variations in my amendment will include that we will be striking out “immediately begin” and substituting it with “continue”. Also, we will be striking out “/or”, section (b), and striking out “electric” because we do not have conclusive studies at this point whether, indeed, this source of energy and this source of propulsion is the most appropriate one. But, indeed, I am glad to hear that the opposition will be supporting the continuing work on this topic.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the amendment.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the spirit of collaboration and because I think it’s an important project and I wouldn’t claim to have all the answers, I think I can live with this as an amendment. My most specific concern is that the word “electric” has been struck out because I think that in the long term that is, as far as we know, the preferable way to go for reasons I outlined earlier. But if it’s a matter of getting this motion passed, then I’m happy to accept this amendment because I think it’s at least generally in the same spirit as what we were proposing. So there we go. I’ll accept the amendment.

Thank you.

5:20

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview on the amendment, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Martin: Thank you. Well, it doesn’t matter much to me whether it’s the amendment or we talk about the particular motion. Mr. Speaker, I think that in principle we agree that the high-speed rail link between Calgary and Edmonton probably down the way at some point makes some sense. I know that this debate has been going on for at least for 30 years that I can recall, so it’s ongoing. When is the right time? Who knows.

I would like to say, though, that we should take it in a broader perspective. The member talked about an integrated plan, and I agree with that. I think that’s where we should start as a province-wide plan. We’ve got a huge infrastructure deficit right now, and if we’re trying to build all the schools that we need and all the hospitals, some of them that are blowing up, and the roads that are falling apart all over the province, we need to deal with that too. It has to be put in some sort of priority.

The other thing that we need to do – and I think the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, the Leader of the Opposition, was alluding to this. Our transportation in this country and generally in this province doesn’t make any sense at all. We could learn from what Europe does, for example. Everything works together. That’s why I say that we need a little broader approach than this. We should say: “How are we going to get people from Medicine Hat to Calgary and Edmonton? How are we going to get people from Grande Prairie, from Fort McMurray, certainly from other smaller towns? How do we work all this in an integrated way?” I think, then, the high-speed rail becomes part of that.

The problem that I see is that we have to again get all modes of transportation working together. It makes no sense at all environmentally or economically to have airplanes that fly between Calgary and Edmonton. They get up; they come down. And flying between

Lethbridge and Calgary, for example, makes no economic or environmental sense in this day and age. Airplanes should be there for longer distances, trains for mid-length distances.

This is where the rail link between Calgary and Edmonton makes sense. But it should also make sense from other parts of the province, whether it’s a high-speed rail link or not. We probably need rail links between a number of places. Then buses coordinating their times, getting in there at the same times from the rural areas. This is what they do in Europe. They move millions of people very quickly because all of these things work together. Of course, this would take probably a federal approach for it to work, but we could begin to do some of these things in Alberta.

The member talked about environmentally, and we are buying up some land, I suppose. What that cost would be tomorrow in terms of supplying land is another thing. But I think we need to broaden the approach with transportation and look at right across the province and put it in perspective with dealing with the infrastructure deficit that we have. What priorities do we maintain?

Now, I know that we don’t have to make a decision, but I guess we are if we’re buying up land. At some point down the way we’re going to do that. In principle I have no particular problem with that, but I think the problem is broader than just the rail link between Calgary and Edmonton. It’s how a province grows immensely in population. There’s some speculation that we could be 6 million people if we go the way we’re going, if we don’t put the foot on the brakes. Six million people. The economic development department has said publicly to people that they expect 6 million people here in a very short period of time, you know, 2 million in the Edmonton area, 2 million in the Calgary area, 2 million in the rest of the province. We need to begin to do some long-range planning about infrastructure, about transportation and see how the rail link fits into all of it, Mr. Speaker.

As I say, in principle I have no particular problem with the motion as read, but I really do say that we have to take it in a broader context than just the rail link. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The debate on Motion 507 involves contemplating a whole new way of connecting the province of Alberta, and I’m very pleased to speak to the amendment. A high-speed rail connection between Edmonton and Calgary is something this government has been exploring for a very long time, and I appreciate that the opposition recognizes this. As we speak, the demand for such a project is being determined, and I’m eagerly awaiting the results of the market assessment study. The government has been proactive in taking the steps necessary to ensure what land is required for a high-speed rail system in the event that such a project is agreed upon.

Mr. Speaker, I’m convinced that a high-speed rail connection between Calgary and Edmonton would bring many benefits to our economy and to the environment and to the quality of life of all Albertans. Having travelled on high-speed rail on a number of continents for personal and professional reasons, I’m convinced that this is an idea that’s long overdue. A high-speed rail connection between Alberta’s two largest economic centres could help the flow of commerce driving Alberta, facilitate tourism, leisure and business travel, and be a reliable and expedient way to travel, especially if the trains were to go directly into the two city centres.

This sort of communal travel could be environmentally friendly. Fewer vehicles would be used, and high-speed rail represents an alternative to using one’s own vehicle. The train also has the potential to alleviate traffic pressures on the QE II by lowering

maintenance costs, presenting an alternative to expanding the highway, and decreasing accidents on the highway. Depending on the type of service provided by this mode of transportation, Albertans in rural areas also could be presented with a choice of easily commuting to the larger cities to work.

In a report to Mr. David A. Martin, chair of the Alberta Value-Added and Technology Commercialization Task Force, which is dated April 16, 2007, there are a number of quotations I would like to bring to the attention of the House. Firstly, they mentioned that “Edmonton firstly, and Calgary secondly, were the first two cities in North America that built and operated Light Rail Transit systems.” Interesting that it’s Alberta that Americans came to when they were looking to learn how to build and run an LRT system. We were ahead of the curve, and we need to stay there.

They go on to mention five important points. One is that Calgary and Edmonton are less than 300 kilometres apart, and that’s the ideal distance for an HSR service anywhere. The second point is that the combined population of these two greater Alberta metropolitan areas is over 2 million people. That’s a watershed mark for successful HSR service. Number 3, successful high-speed rail service requires a dedicated roadbed. Number 4, successful HSR service is designed for the markets it intends to serve. And there are many, many different economic benefits.

They actually refer to an editorial from the *Calgary Herald* which reads:

Some may question the economic feasibility of building a high-speed rail that links Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton, but the real cost is in doing nothing. Alberta is growing at a record pace and can no longer afford to sit back and watch this train pass it by. Linking the three cities by high-speed rail would create a massive economic unit that would put the corridor on the world map.

However – and I think that our Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor may agree – while there are many possible benefits to this sort of project, there are some issues that have to be kept in mind when determining the feasibility of the project. The Alberta government is leading by example by analyzing the situation before starting any large projects. Of course, cost is a huge mitigating factor. Capital costs are extremely high, and they are not known for certain. In our ever-expanding economy it’s hard to determine the exact cost of any large project of this sort. We’ve seen estimates anywhere from \$2 billion to \$8 billion, depending on which type of technology is used. We are all very, very well aware of the labour and material costs that are rising every day, as are real estate prices. But I will remind members that it could easily be argued that these prices will only increase, so now, indeed, is the time to do this.

Mr. Speaker, it’s worthy to note that while Europe and Japan have electrical systems – and I’ve ridden on them – they are subsidized. As has been mentioned, the Van Horne study showed that such an endeavour would not be viable without government funding. The role of government must be made clear before any action is taken. We have to be very clear on that. For high-speed rail to be viable in Alberta, the cost of a ticket, in the minds of the consumer, I’m sure, would have to be less expensive than a bus ticket or a flight or a tank of gas in order for people to see the link as an attractive alternative.

5:30

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the idea of a high-speed rail link between Edmonton and Calgary is an interesting and exciting idea. The technology for this kind of travel is expanding every day. Some members may be aware that last month a French high-speed train broke the world record for conventional trains, reaching speeds of 574 kilometres an hour. It wouldn’t take long to get anywhere in the province. That being said, I’d like to further the idea of having a high-speed rail link between Calgary and Edmonton, but I’d like it

to go further than that, of course to Red Deer, with a stop there, but other destinations. With time I’d like to see a high-speed rail link to Fort McMurray, Medicine Hat, and Lethbridge as well as Grande Prairie and Banff, just to name a few. Those are future plans.

In the meantime, I’m glad that Infrastructure and Transportation is studying the possibility of creating a high-speed rail link while it’s acquiring land in case it’s needed for the future. It’s very prudent. It’s very proactive. So I believe that the current government action is all that is currently required.

I look forward to seeing and hearing further debate by other members. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It’s my pleasure to rise and contribute to the Motion 507 debate this afternoon. I’d just like to point out to the Member for Calgary-Lougheed that we currently subsidize high-speed horses in this province to a rather extensive dollar figure.

Mr. Speaker, I would applaud the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs for bringing forward this amendment, which looks like it has the support of the government. My concern, like that of my leader, is in taking out the word “electric.” Let me tell you why taking out the word “electric” causes me some concern. The reason why “electric” was included in Motion 501, which was debated in this House last year, and the reason why it was included in Motion 507 this year is because by using the word “electric,” for all intents and purposes you remove the so-called brownfield option; that is, the idea of following the current right-of-way with the CPR line, which, as the Leader of the Official Opposition pointed out, runs through a number of communities like Ponoka and Hobbema and Crossfield and Carstairs.

Not only does that put a high-speed train running through built-up residential areas and brings in all sorts of concerns, whether it might be noise or people violating the security fence and that sort of thing, but the other thing that it does for sure, Mr. Speaker, is it negates the possibility of keeping that line as straight as possible. In fact, we understand that as soon as you start adding curves and hills, then the speeds have to come down. When the speeds go down, the travel time goes up, and when the travel time goes up, the ridership goes down.

If you read the Van Horne Institute report, it’s built on attracting sufficient ridership to make it feasible. As soon as the travel time goes up, then the ridership goes down, and then we have a problem. So it’s important that we manage to keep the travel time down as much as possible, and that is the reason why “electric” was in the motion last year and appears in the motion again this year.

Now, I’m pleased to see that the government is willing to move forward on this motion with some amendments. One of the things that I noted when I was reviewing the debate from last year, is that two of the ministers of the day spoke out strongly in favour of land acquisition, and I’ll just quote very quickly from *Hansard*. The then minister of economic development, the Member for Lethbridge-West, said:

I do agree with the minister and others that have spoken in terms of making sure that we have the rights-of-way protected. In some cases we’ll have to go out and gain ownership of those rights-of-way, and I think that we should of course do that.

Then later on in the debate – or perhaps it was earlier in the debate – the Finance minister said in response to a previous speaker:

The hon. member does choose a good time to bring this up because the other point that we have to consider very strongly is protecting the right-of-way into downtown Calgary and into downtown Edmonton before it gets bought up.

Clearly, there's been support from the government in the past on this initiative, and it looks like we'll have it again if this amendment is successful in passing.

Now, I would like to point out that in the Van Horne Institute report, for a greenfield right-of-way – that is, the straight line that would accommodate high-speed electric or perhaps even maglev if somebody wanted to spend that much money – the total cost for land acquisition in 2005 dollars was \$47.8 million.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Mr. R. Miller: Forty-seven point eight million dollars only. In terms of the amount of money that flows through this treasury, clearly that's easily feasible and, in fact, less money – less money, Mr. Speaker – than is currently used to subsidize high-speed horses. So I think that even with the little bit of inflationary pressure that undoubtedly has taken place since Van Horne released that report, it's still very doable.

The Member for Edmonton-Riverview talked about the number of developments that are taking place already that are interfering with the greenfield option. I had a call not that long ago from the Red Deer airport authority indicating that on a farm just outside of their property, directly in line with where the high-speed train would have gone, a local resident just built a \$2 million home. That sort of thing is going to continue to happen the longer we wait in terms of making this land acquisition, so it really is important that we do this and do this as soon as possible. I think the comments that the Member for Calgary-Lougheed made were bang on when he referenced a report that said: it's not how much it's going to cost us but how much it's going to cost us if we don't do it. That is a very valid point.

Also, there's been some reference this afternoon to the economic output. I've read a number of reports that show that both Edmonton and Calgary in terms of North American economic output right now rank somewhere in the low to mid-50s in terms of their GDP, yet when you put Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, and that power corridor together in one economic unit, as a high-speed rail system would do, it actually moves us up to number 16 or 17 North America wide. I'm sure that even when you look at major cities across Europe, that would rank us very favourably. So there are good arguments for doing that.

Another thing that I think is important to note is a softening in the position by the Edmonton airport authority over the last couple of years. With some new management and new direction at Edmonton airports there isn't the vehement opposition to the inclusion of a station on Edmonton airports' property at the international, as there once was. At their annual general meeting just two weeks ago the question was raised. Their concern is that they don't necessarily see this as something that's imminent, but they did indicate that they have spoken with the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, and they'd like to keep those communication lines open. They are very interested at this point in being part of whatever might eventually take place.

I would certainly urge the government and, in particular, the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, as he's continuing to look at possible land acquisition, to please dialogue as much as possible with Edmonton airports. Certainly, although there was a time that they were not at all supportive of high-speed rail, with it becoming more evident that this is an idea whose time is coming sooner rather than later, I think there's a realization on their part that they would rather be a part of whatever does take place than be bypassed by it. So I would certainly implore the government and the minister to keep them involved, however possible, with that.

Mr. Speaker, there is, unfortunately, so little time when we do private members' motions to debate this, so since we've had a couple of speakers already speak in favour of the amendment, what I'm going to do at this point is ask if we can put the question on the amendment and return to the debate on the motion, if that's all right.

5:40

The Deputy Speaker: I have other speakers that have indicated their desire. Is the Assembly in favour of the amendment being put now? This would require unanimous consent.

[Unanimous consent granted]

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Deputy Speaker: On the debate on the motion as amended, the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I'd like to support the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, who has realized that the light at the end of the tunnel is indeed a high-speed train, which he wants to get on board.

This is a case of all-party wisdom. This isn't a Liberal idea or an NDP idea or a Conservative idea. It's an idea whose time has come, as the Member for Calgary-Lougheed recognized. For once we can be ahead of the game. There was a time back in the late '70s when in Fort McMurray there were actually sewer lines and roads before there were houses. We're in the midst of a boom that we want to continue, and the high-speed rail will provide us with that economic connective opportunity. I do again reference the wisdom of the Member for Calgary-Lougheed in saying that this is not just a north-south potential. I'd like to add the east-west link.

While I'm not as well travelled as the member, I did have an opportunity this past fall to ride on the jet train or the speed train in France, which I took with my wife, first west to the Loire Valley and then back through Paris and down to Aix-en-Provence, and it was a wonderful ride. This was an electric train that approached speeds of 300 kilometres an hour. While I regret the fact that the electric part has been taken out of the amendment, I think that upon looking at all the studies, that electric option will probably be brought back. The diesel option is not environmentally sound. The magnetic option is considerably more expensive than the electric. So I think we'll get back eventually to the electric notion.

I've spent considerable time with Peter Wallis from the Van Horne Institute, which is located at the University of Calgary. Peter is also a member of the Calgary Airport Authority. I've heard him explain the values of the various systems. I've also heard from the independent group, that has a different approach to financing. They also have a different route, which basically parallels highway 2, the cost of which was previously listed at approximately \$46 million, and I think those were 2005-2006 figures.

This train basically has us join the rest of the world in terms of realizing the economic support and potential. One of the beliefs that I have about this train is that under no circumstance should it share any part of the line with freight trains. The accidents that have occurred, such as in the States with Amtrak and so on, have occurred when passenger rail and freight were on the same line. I would envision a there-and-back circumstance so that the trains could be passing each other, so a double electric line would be my preference.

I'm very pleased that this House has the vision of getting ahead of the game instead of playing what we've been doing for the last 14 years, and that's been catch-up. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to join my colleagues in speaking in favour of the motion as amended. I believe that the economic feasibility of this line right now may not be there, but there will be a time in the not-too-distant future when the economics will certainly justify such a line. That may be in 10 years, it may be in 20 years, it could be in 60 years, but if we can look at some of the lessons from geographic development in places like Europe and Great Britain, I think we can learn something from that. The population of Great Britain only 200 years ago, at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, was about 11 million. It's now close to 70 million on the island of Great Britain.

I think that if we look at the population of Alberta, in the 1901 census the entire population of Alberta and Saskatchewan combined was approximately 159,000, and here we are now in the province of Alberta with a population of somewhere around 3 million. So if we care to extrapolate into the future, I don't think it takes much imagination to imagine a time when this population density in the corridor of Calgary-Edmonton would certainly justify a high-speed rail line. Therefore, I think it is prudent for us to proceed with accumulating the necessary land that we need in the future.

Again looking back to some of the examples in Europe, when the channel tunnel was implemented between France and Great Britain, there was a great deal of consternation, a great deal of difficulty in establishing that high-speed line across the densely populated countryside of Kent into the city of London. Of course, the longer we wait and the more that development and density build up, whether it be industrial or farms or residential, the harder it's going to be to accumulate the necessary land and the more expensive as well.

So I would just conclude by saying that I am very much in favour of this. I think it's a very forward-looking motion, and I would encourage all my colleagues to support it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to speak to the motion as amended. The original motion asked us to start, but of course, as we discussed, we started many years ago. The amendment says to continue, which is great, and we appreciate the Liberal support for our foresight.

Motion 507. This motion is laudable. Albertans wish to have environmentally prudent transport options and less congestion on our highways. Persons travelling between Calgary and Edmonton would certainly appreciate another affordable and reliable transit option. The ridership and therefore profitability of a high-speed rail line is still uncertain and therefore demands further study. A market assessment study is currently under way and should be completed in July.

Alberta can consider the feasibility of this system by also looking to the operation of high-speed trains in other countries. France, Germany, and Japan have convenient, reliable, and comfortable high-speed rail systems between their major cities. These systems succeed only because of their population densities and their dense intercity rail networks. These densities make the use of public transit a viable option for an entire trip. While Alberta does not yet have these sorts of densities, growth will possibly produce them in the future. By assembling land and rights-of-way now, Alberta will be able to construct a high-speed rail line when it is viable.

Without dense intercity transit options people want to have their vehicle when travelling in a city. This makes them more likely to drive for the entire trip. Further investment in light rail transit in Edmonton and Calgary may be needed before a high-speed rail link is built. Investing in light rail transit will help make a high-speed rail line a success.

Recent studies have indicated that there may currently be enough demand for a Calgary to Edmonton high-speed rail line. However, experience elsewhere indicates that forecasting demand for a nonexisting rail service is often difficult. Populations, employment, incomes, and economic linkage between cities are hard to predict. Costs of using other types of transportation, like airline fares and gas prices, are also difficult to forecast. An expensive undertaking like a rail link requires reasonable certainty that there is enough demand to justify the investment.

Traffic on the Queen Elizabeth II highway has increased dramatically in recent years. The construction of a high-speed rail link is one way to reduce this congestion and its environmental effects. If congestion or bad weather conditions on the Queen Elizabeth II highway are a significant concern to travellers, there are already mass transit options in the Calgary-Edmonton corridor. Both Greyhound and Red Arrow offer daily limited stops and express bus services. Airline service is available for those who require faster transit. However, Albertans may appreciate another transit option.

The government's potential role in the high-speed rail link is yet to be determined. The current policy is that the rail should be a private-sector initiative, but that does not absolutely rule out government participation. A high-speed rail link is a nice idea whose time may not yet have come, but we should be prepared for the future. This motion encourages the government to continue to be forward thinking and innovative in preparing for the time when this link is clearly feasible. I encourage all members to vote in favour of this motion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

5:50

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you. We might as well all get on the official record as on-board. Right? It is – are you going to stand, Mr. Speaker, and tell me that I'm out of time?

The Deputy Speaker: Have you spoken on this motion before?

Mr. Bonko: I have not.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay. Proceed.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you for allowing me to continue.

I think it is a good opportunity here for us to be able to acquire the necessary land. We're not talking about actually building the high-speed rail, but we're talking about the acquisition of the land, which is very important to be able to have the rail. One day, 10 years from now maybe at the latest, we would be able to have that thing, but it'll take a lot of time to be able to construct it. But first and foremost, what the motion talks about is acquiring the land, and apparently we're already doing that. It would be great to have detailed updates as to how successful or unsuccessful or what sort of obstacles we're facing currently because, as we say, as land becomes more and more valuable, as the population increases, as Alberta's opportunity continues to expand, that's the number one concern.

So I'm glad that we are so far meeting very little opposition with regard to this. It looks like everyone is in support. I again would like to lend my support to this as well. I know that we are going to run out of time here quickly, so I just wanted to get on record as saying that I do support the motion, acquiring the land. Let's see where the residents of Alberta go from there with regard to their support for actually supporting the rail. So far, I would encourage all members to support the motion.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any others?

Then I would invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to close debate.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Boy, it's a privilege to participate in a debate in this Assembly where lots of good ideas come up. It's all in the spirit of co-operation, and I thank all members for participating: Edmonton-Castle Downs for bringing forward an amendment that passed without a whisper of objection, the members for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, Calgary-Lougheed, Edmonton-Rutherford, Calgary-Varsity, Calgary-Nose Hill, Calgary-Hays, and Edmonton-Decore.

I do notice that all those members who participated were from either Edmonton or Calgary, and I hope that doesn't indicate that this project is seen as strictly serving the two big cities because I think that it would be a great boon to the whole province, Red Deer most notably. If there was a stop in Red Deer, it could benefit very directly.

But as some of the ideas that have come out have been described, this could be the beginning of a very long-term rail network that connected Medicine Hat and Lethbridge and Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray and Banff or Jasper. It could be the beginning of an entire long-term transformation in transportation in this province. So it would have been great, if we had more time, to hear from members from outside the two big cities, but we don't have more time.

Some of the points that were brought up. We all agree that this is about looking at the future. This is about having a plan, having a vision and taking the province in that direction, and if we take the right steps now, we can move to that future much more smoothly and much more economically than if we just go willy-nilly and let

the chips fall as they may. So it's great to see a spirit of planning and looking to the future in here.

I agree with the Member from Edmonton-Decore that it would be useful once in a while for the government, perhaps the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation if he's the one overseeing the acquisitions of the land or acquisition of the rights-of-way, to give some updates, or maybe if his officials are following this debate, they would from time to time provide the Assembly with updates on how those acquisitions are going.

There are, of course, lots of ways to structure this. One model is as we do with roads, which is that the public pays for the roads, and the users of the roads pay, of course, taxes, and they cover the costs of their own vehicles. Maybe, therefore, there should be public support for the infrastructure and a private-sector operator. Maybe it's all public. Maybe it's all private. I have no idea. There are lots of options. We don't have to sort those out any time soon. But we do need to continue purchasing the land and the rights-of-way for this to ever even be a possibility.

So, Mr. Speaker, I close by thanking all members for the good-spirited and well-intentioned discussion here. I look forward to the possibility of this motion passing with the full support of the Assembly. Thank you.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 507 as amended carried]

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

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move that we call it 6 p.m. and that when we reconvene at 7 p.m., we do so in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:58 p.m.]

