

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, May 17, 2007**

1:00 p.m.

Date: 07/05/17

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome.

Let us pray. In our mind's eye let us see the awesome grandeur of the Rockies, the denseness of our forests, the fertility of our farmland, the splendour of our rivers, the richness of our resources, the energy of our people. Then let us rededicate ourselves as wise stewards of such bounty on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

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

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a special treat today to introduce a former member of this Assembly who is seated in your gallery, Mr. Len Bracko. Mr. Bracko was first elected in 1993 as an Alberta Liberal Member for St. Albert. Before that, he was a teacher at St. Albert high school as well as an alderman in the city of St. Albert, and he is once again a councillor in the city of St. Albert. He's a wonderful servant of that city and of the entire province. I would ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of all members here.

Thank you very much.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to introduce to you and through you to all Members of this Legislative Assembly three very special guests seated in the members' gallery. The first is Mr. Darren Hill, who's a Saskatoon city councillor and president and CEO of Junior Achievement of Saskatchewan. Accompanying Darren is Jay Ball, president and CEO of Junior Achievement of Northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories, and of course a very good public speaker, a past junior achiever and university student, Mr. Ryan Lim. They were all present yesterday at the wonderful celebration of Junior Achievement in this province, and together with the Minister of Education we enjoyed a wonderful evening of hospitality.

Once again, on behalf of all Albertans we extend to each and every one of you a sincere thank you for the effort and the time you spend with our students in all the schools and with junior achievers. Thank you so much. I ask you to all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our Legislature pedway has been the host site for several years for the annual Historica Fair, providing an opportunity for students from schools in the surrounding area to present projects celebrating Canada's heritage. This year the Legislative Assembly of Alberta initiated a new award to recognize an Historica Fair participant who demonstrates outstanding achievement in celebrating an aspect of Canadian parliamentary democracy, governance, or political history with a specific focus on Alberta.

It's now my pleasure to introduce the inaugural winner of this award, a grade 5 student who presented a most spirited and enthusiastic representation of the life and work of Nellie McClung, specifically her role as an Alberta MLA and one of the Famous Five. Please join me in congratulating Tierra Stokes, a grade 5 student from John Paul II school in Stony Plain. Tierra has also been invited to take part in the national fair, to be held this year in Lethbridge. She's accompanied by her mother, Mrs. Brenda Stokes, and her teacher, Mrs. Cory Berndt. If they would stand in the Speaker's gallery and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

As well, Mr. Speaker, we're always delighted to recognize young people who show such interest and initiative in participating in such events as the Historica Fair, and I'm pleased to welcome Colin Benesch, who is a grade 6 student who was chosen by his school to participate in the regional fair. He attends Leo Nickerson school in St. Albert, and he is accompanied by his father, Chris Benesch, also in the Speaker's gallery. If they would rise and receive the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and privilege to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly three guests that I have here today. The first is Mrs. Rosemarie Oberg, who is a cousin of mine from Forestburg, Alberta. The second is Virginia Schorak, who is a friend from Forestburg, Alberta, and the third is well known to you and well known, certainly, to a lot of members in this Assembly, my wife, Evelyn Oberg. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 15 students from the Sturgeon composite high school in my constituency. Along with their teacher I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure and an honour to introduce a group of volunteers from the constituency of Edmonton-Castle Downs but, more particularly, from the neighbourhood of Dunluce. This week is Crime Prevention Week. Many volunteers throughout Alberta do magnificent things to limit and curb crime in our communities. Well, the Dunluce Crime Council has been chosen by the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security as a winner among this year's crime prevention programs. With us today is Alice Althouse, a manager of McMan Youth Services in north Edmonton; Donna Harasem, a capacity builder for the neighbourhood empowerment team, Edmonton Police Service, north division; Constable Neil North of the neighbourhood empowerment team, Edmonton Police Service, north division; and Maureen Morris, the resident manager of Lancaster Terrace in Dunluce. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure on behalf of the Member for Battle River-Wainwright to introduce

to you and through you to all the members of this House 15 students from Coronation school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Dan Kinakin, and parent helpers Terry Kopas, Terry Belcourt, Roxanne Canadine, Betty Tellier, and George Nichols. If you would please join me in welcoming them all with our traditional warm welcome.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 12 individuals from the inner-city schools' Breakfast for Learning program. This is an organization that promotes nutritional breakfasts for schoolchildren. They are in the gallery: Chelsey Chalifoux, Nelson Egbende, Nick Lannin, Cheyenne Moses, Meagen Pancel, Dave Sherburne, Don Turner, Deron Bilous, supervisor/teacher Nik Linden, supervisor/teacher Jayme Metzger, supervisor Val Wilbur of Breakfast for Learning, and Kay Joyce of Breakfast for Learning. Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure that all of my guests are here, but I will introduce the group that has arrived so far. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a group of concerned Alberta citizens. They're here today to say with one voice: enough is enough; we need rent stability and affordable housing. These guests were among the hundreds of people gathered on the steps to support the NDP's call for affordable housing and for rent guidelines. They're just a small fraction of the people who are affected by skyrocketing rent control increases. They're here to witness first-hand how the government responds to the calls for action from the NDP opposition. They are all seated in the members' and public galleries, and I would now ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. First of all, I would like to introduce 15 members of CASA House who are here today to watch the proceedings and who are led by Ms Mary Johnston along with Najib Mohamed, Janet Cathro, Lyle Steele, Jamie Parry. They are seated in the public gallery, and I would like them now to stand and receive the welcome of the Legislature.

As well, I would like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Deron Bilous. Deron was born and raised here in Edmonton, received his bachelor of education degree from the University of Alberta, teaches English and phys ed at Inner City high, and he is our candidate in Edmonton-Centre for the next election. He is seated in the public gallery, and I would ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:10

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and to members of the Assembly Rosalie Cristobal, Merla Jamandron, and Shirley Dalmacio. They are Palace Casino workers entering the 251st day on strike due to this government's failure to protect Alberta workers from unfair employers.

Rosalie has worked at the Palace Casino for five and a half years in the slots department. Rosalie is a very strong voice for her fellow workers, and she has spent many hours each week on the picket line.

Merla has been at the casino for almost three years in the slots department. She went on strike because the wages within her department are simply not enough to live on. When she's not working, Merla likes to spend time sewing, embroidering, and crocheting, and she gives all of her creations to her grandkids. She has five grandkids, ranging in age from eight months to 14 years of age.

Shirley has been at the casino for just over a year. When she is not being an advocate for workers' rights, you will find her either bowling or in her garden.

Rosalie, Merla, and Shirley are seated in the gallery, and I would ask now that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to introduce to you and through you today to the Assembly Harold Neth, one of my constituents who is a teacher and a member of the ATA's provincial executive council, one of three in Edmonton representing teachers in both locals. I'd like to ask Harold to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One other introduction for me, to you and through you to all members of the Assembly, is Sherry Robbins, who is an ATA district representative for the Edmonton public teachers' local. She is here to watch proceedings this afternoon carefully and to express her disapproval of the government's attitude towards teachers.

Thank you very much.

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

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House the summer STEP student for the Edmonton-Glenora constituency office, C.D. Saint. He has a BA from the University of Alberta in music and Canadian studies. In the fall he will be going to Austria for his master's degree in peace and conflict studies. Mr. Speaker, if you'd like to use him as a resource, I'd be glad to loan him. I invite him to stand and receive the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Louheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and to the members assembled Mr. Jim Sirup, vice-president of Jayman MasterBuilt, an organization supporting the Alberta MS Society. Jim is in the members' gallery. I'd ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Members' Statements

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

Crime Prevention Week

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Crime prevention is about communities taking ownership of neighbourhood crime issues. It's

about families, businesses, all levels of government, and police working together towards a common goal of safe and secure communities.

May 13 to 20 is Crime Prevention Week in Alberta, and it's a good time to talk about what each of us can do to prevent crime in our communities. Our police do an excellent job every day preventing crime across the province, but every Albertan also has a role to play. Whether its kids, grandparents, businesspeople, homeowners, or renters, everyone has something to contribute in the fight against crime.

The efforts of individual Albertans are also being recognized. Every year the Solicitor General and Public Security crime prevention awards honour people and organizations whose actions have helped in preventing crime. This year, Mr. Speaker, the award ceremony is being held on Friday, May 18, in Calgary, and I extend my congratulations to the award recipients. I'm sure their actions will inspire others across Alberta to take action on crime-related challenges in their own neighbourhoods.

I'd like to extend a special congratulation to the Dunluce Crime Council, award recipients from my constituency. This group meets monthly to discuss community crime trends and develops action plans to address issues that arise. The Dunluce Crime Council also hosts community barbecues and cleanup projects to revitalize the neighbourhood.

Mr. Speaker, thriving and safe communities are made up of people who know each other, people who spend time with each other, and people who look out for each other. This week I encourage every Albertan to take the time to get to know their neighbours better and to work together to find ways to make their community safer.

Thank you.

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

International Museum Day

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and speak about the importance of museums. Tomorrow, May 18, marks International Museum Day. Alberta is home to hundreds of museums, from those in our smallest rural communities to the world-renowned Royal Tyrrell Museum and Royal Alberta Museum.

Albertans and visitors outside of Alberta come to our museums and support our communities. Last year visitors spent \$30 million visiting 17 provincially owned museums and historic sites, generating an economic impact of over \$60 million to our province and helping to employ over 1,300 Albertans.

While museums have employment and economic benefits, more importantly, Mr. Speaker, they educate us, entertain us, and enrich us. As stewards of our past museums help us to understand and appreciate our heritage. At the same time, museums encourage us all to be responsible ambassadors for our future. They do this through collections, research, exhibitions, curriculum-based education, and lifelong learning opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, International Museum Day has been celebrated around the world since 1977 as a day to raise awareness of the value of museums. This year's theme for International Museum Day is Museums and Universal Heritage, reminding us that museums and all of us have a role in preserving and promoting our heritage.

And now for the really good news. To celebrate International Museum Day many of our heritage facilities will be offering free general admission on May 18. For the first time on International Museum Day Albertans and visitors to our province will be able to visit these historic sites at no charge for one day, an awesome opportunity for young and old to learn more about our great province of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all Albertans to remember how important our museums are. They're not just about our past; they're also about our potential. Museums share the Alberta story in all its dimensions while opening a window on the world for us all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May is Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month. The MS Society in Alberta kicked off the month by opening a new, expanded facility in Edmonton, which will offer even more education, support, and care to those who live with the chronic disease. This new facility was made possible in part by a grant from the Alberta government.

The grand opening of the facility featured a \$1 million gift from builder Jayman MasterBuilt. This gift will be used to improve multiple sclerosis care through education and research. I am pleased that Jay Westman, president of Jayman MasterBuilt, and his sister Diana Joseph, of Wen-Di Interiors, are represented today in the gallery by Jim Sirup, vice-president of Jayman MasterBuilt's home division.

There are more than 11,000 people affected by MS who receive care through community neurologists and through MS clinics in Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer. Access to the clinics, to the neurologists, and to the continuing care system throughout the province is vital. It's vital because Alberta has one of the highest rates of MS in the world, and that number is growing.

There is research being done which holds hope for new treatments and an eventual end to this devastating disease. The MS Society in Alberta is a leading investor in research being done at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary.

However, a shrinking talent pool threatens to slow or stop the dramatic achievements made in recent years. The MS Society of Canada is building a program that will accelerate research so that new treatments and a cure can be discovered. It will also encourage young scientists and clinicians to choose MS research in Canada as their career path.

The MS Society in Alberta is doing what it can to improve the quality of life of Albertans with MS and to find a cure. So are donors like Jay and Diana, and they are to be commended.

Thank you.

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

1:20

AMPIA Awards

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 28 at the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association dinner recipients of the Alberta film and television award, the Rosie, were announced. However, just to be nominated by a peer group is an award. There were 50 categories and on average five persons nominated for each.

Large numbers of professionals are required to make these movies, television shows, advertisements, and the written and musical scores. I was cheering for George and Sherri Gallant. They have Coulee Pictures, based in Lethbridge. Sherri is an awarded journalist. George as producer was nominated for best production reflecting cultural diversity. His documentary *Alone in Chinatown* is an amazing look at what remains of a very vibrant Chinese community in Lethbridge.

Chinatown has always been a part of Lethbridge's history. Of course, a fact of interest is the fact that some of the herbs and medicines found in their original jars were a hundred years old and

very valuable, but the knowledge that accompanies these herbs is beyond value.

This nomination is not the first nor will it be the last for Coulee Pictures. My frustration is: how do I and other Albertans access these productions? How can our young people interested in this industry examine nominated and winning works and learn from them? How about the general public just wanting to enjoy a good show?

I heard two days ago in this House how this government sent a thousand copies of a documentary by a Toronto filmmaker to schools across Canada. May I suggest that this government do the same for these award-nominated productions and send them to all the public, university, and school libraries across Alberta. In the past Alberta books were donated in this manner. There are four appropriate ministries that could cost share. What a legacy, visionary action, and benefit that all Albertans would use and enjoy.

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

Provincial Skills Competition

Mr. Herard: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on Tuesday the Minister of Education as well as the members for Lethbridge-West, Calgary-Bow, Cardston-Taber-Warner, and I had the pleasure of attending the 15th annual provincial skills competition held here in Edmonton. This three-day Olympic-style event allows competitors from around the province to demonstrate and test their skills in their chosen craft. This year was no exception, with more than 600 of Alberta's most talented high school and postsecondary students and apprentices competing in more than 35 different areas of trades and technology. Competing disciplines range from automotive services to website design, electrical wiring to culinary arts. Winners will be competing in a national skills competition to be held in Saskatoon from June 6 to 9, 2007.

What is remarkable, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that many of the organizers who started this competition 15 years ago are still involved today. Karen Fetterly, from Alberta Education, and Terry Cooke, formerly from NAIT, were among the organizers of the first skills competition held at St. Joseph's high school in 1992. There were only eight events and 80 competitors involved back then, compared to the 35 events and 700 competitors today. Terry Cooke is now the national president of Skills Canada and also presides over WorldSkills Calgary 2009, when Calgary will host the international WorldSkills competitions in September 2009, with more than 40 countries competing in more than 40 skills, with thousands of students, experts, craftsmen, jurists, and parents from all over the world converging on Calgary.

Mr. Speaker, today's students are tomorrow's workers. The provincial skills competition is doing its part to ensure that our students are well prepared to leave school ready for the world of work.

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

Aga Khan Development Network

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Global poverty affects us all. Throwing money at it doesn't fix the problem. Give a hungry man a fish and you will feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime. We must find smart solutions.

Albertans, Canadians are some of the best in the world at innovating to build a better world for all of us. Health, education, rural development, the enhancement of nongovernmental organizations in the Third World require smart solutions. The Aga Khan Foundation Canada targets training and expert technical assistance to overseas

partners. It also sends young Canadians overseas to assist in international development.

The Aga Khan Development Network is a nondenominational group set up 40 ago years by His Highness the Aga Khan. It is dedicated to improving living conditions primarily in Asia and Africa. The members of the network share a common objective, which is to empower people to take charge of their own lives and environment. This network emphasizes community participation, the creation and use of local expertise, rigorous management of resources, use of appropriate technology, and ultimately self-sufficiency.

John Stackhouse in the *Globe and Mail* said, and I quote: through the Aga Khan world support program, Pakistan, more than 100,000 people have formed village groups that cover 3 out of 4 rural households in Northern Pakistan; they have built irrigation canals, schools, and health centres and pooled about \$10 million in savings; it has proved a textbook case of success. Unquote.

On Sunday, May 27, the Aga Khan Foundation Canada will be holding their 2007 World Partnership Walk in Edmonton. The opening ceremonies will start at 11 a.m. at our Legislature Grounds. Tens of thousands of Canadians in nine cities will come together to support this wonderful effort to alleviate global poverty. One hundred per cent of proceeds goes to programs. That is good. I wish all members, indeed all Albertans to support this walk.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This time I am tabling 27 signatures, mainly from Edmonton, on a petition that reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, hereby petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government . . . to take immediate, meaningful measures to help low-income and fixed-income Albertans, Albertans with disabilities and those who are hard-to-house maintain their places of residence in light of the ongoing rent affordability crisis which is contributing to Alberta's worsening homelessness situation.

Thank you.

head:

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 211

Planning for the Future of Communities Act

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Calgary-Currie I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act.

The purpose of Bill 211 is to provide a mechanism to plan for future sustainable communities where growth pressures are presenting a challenge to municipalities that have implications beyond their borders. This legislation will allow us to make rational and balanced decisions about the way we grow in the future, decisions that will strengthen our economy, promote a healthy and sustainable environment, and support a high quality of life for all Albertans.

This is enabling legislation that would allow the designation of certain geographical areas as growth plan areas and the development of plans to focus and guide the region's future development. These are goals deserving of this Legislature, and Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act, will allow us to achieve them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 211 read a first time]

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

Bill 212

Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act, Bill 212.

[Motion carried; Bill 212 read a first time]

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ryley Landfill Project

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The landfill at Ryley, east of Edmonton, is poised to become the largest landfill in North America, yet nearby landowners and area residents have repeatedly raised concerns about adverse impacts on their lands and livelihoods and on the integrity of the environment. It has grown tenfold since it received original approval 15 years ago, and it hopes to grow much larger still, yet an environmental impact assessment has never been done, and impacts are accumulating. It's been piecemeal approval, typical of development in Alberta. To the Premier. The Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, section 40(c), requires an impact assessment prior to approvals of large-scale developments. Will the Premier commit to getting an environmental impact assessment?

1:30

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is talking about an approval establishing the landfill that goes back probably 12, 13, 14, maybe even 15 years. It's the county of Beaver and the regional landfill commission, and they have worked over the years with the Department of Environment, held extensive hearings. That area has been tested time and time again. The group bought a fair amount of land, a buffer zone, around that whole area. Extensive, extensive testing. If there is something, if the hon. member has a specific issue that we have not identified in the years and years of testing, I'd be willing to carry that forward.

Dr. Swann: Well, there are concerns, Mr. Speaker. Protection of groundwater and surface water is essential. It cannot be sacrificed to profit margins and other considerations. Leakage from the landfill site, known as leachate, is toxic and contaminates groundwater and surface water if there's poor design, poor maintenance, or flooding. Residents are concerned that the leachate systems were reported to have, quote, blockages or even collapsed without being fixed. Is the Premier confident that the landfill is being operated effectively to ensure maximum protection against contamination?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, today maybe there was someone who brought an issue forward to the hon. member. That development is in the constituency that I represent. I don't have a letter in hand today from any resident that said that there was some blockage. I watched some of that construction and toured the facility a number of times. We have, really, the latest technology applied there in the development. I guess that the best way to describe it is: one of the best natural bathtubs. It's blue clay. I can give much more information in terms of how impervious this is to any seepage.

Dr. Swann: We're also concerned about surface spray and spills as a result of flooding.

Mr. Premier, last year the landfill received approval to recirculate leachate, and concerned residents appealed it. At the appeal hearings the appeal board raised concerns about "important gaps in the scientific information . . . regarding possible negative impacts" when he made his original decision, including information on the effects of the toxic substances on the landfill's liner. To the Premier: is the Premier fully confident that critical environmental decisions on this landfill are being made on the basis of complete information and scientifically sound evidence?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I am confident in not only the engineering firms that have tested this but, of course, our staff in Alberta Environment. Again, if there is a specific concern, now is the time to send it to me personally. As I said, it's a development in my constituency, and I'd like to hear from the individual or individuals who had raised a concern. I've not received anything that I'm aware of in our constituency office but would certainly be willing to hear from those individuals.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Student Accommodation Costs

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've heard much over the past two weeks about the plight of Albertans on lower fixed incomes who face excessive rent increases. Alberta's postsecondary students are particularly susceptible to rent increases. This government's belated moves to increase the cost-of-living allowance will be completely negated by rent increases. My question is to the Premier. With Alberta's postsecondary institutions located in Edmonton and Calgary, does the Premier accept that the housing crisis presents a barrier, particularly for rural students, that may deter them from pursuing postsecondary education?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, our government has a concern for all students in all communities. There are pressures, of course, in Grande Prairie, Lethbridge as well, and larger urban communities for students to find accommodation. That is one area that both the minister of municipal affairs and the minister of advanced education will be addressing: finding accommodation for students. It is a barrier. There's no doubt about it. It is increasing costs for those competing for space in these communities, so we are going to be addressing it.

Mr. Tougas: Caitlin Scruggs, a student at MacEwan College who wrote to the Official Opposition, certainly has a far better understanding of the housing situation than this government. She put it this way, and I quote: sometimes it seems that the boom in Alberta is only booming in the pockets of a few and busting the pockets of many. That's a pretty good definition of the price of prosperity. Students like her will have to take out bigger loans, and more will need hardship grants. Again to the Premier: what can the Premier say to this student and so many like her who are going to fall further and further into debt simply to keep a roof over their heads while they pursue their studies?

Mr. Stelmach: The college that the hon. member was referring to has of course just completed a large housing unit for students. I'm not quite sure if it has been fully subscribed, but it's millions of dollars of investment in housing. It's just another example of how we're working towards building more units in the province to reduce the pressures and increase the number of available units of housing.

Mr. Tougas: Alberta is the only province in Canada that allows its student residences to be charged municipal property taxes. At the University of Alberta alone that bill came to \$900,000 last year. Residences across the province pay millions of dollars to municipalities, and those dollars come from increased rents paid by students. There are two clear options for the government: either close the loophole that allows municipalities to assess property taxes on residences or pay the property tax. To the minister of municipal affairs: which of these two approaches will the minister take to ensure that, come September, students living in residence will have at least a slightly more affordable university experience?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of municipal affairs.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This government very much understands the challenges of students coming from rural Alberta to find housing, to find accommodation. That is why we have added funding for municipalities to try to address some of those issues as well through secondary suites. We have had discussions with universities. We've had discussions as well with student representative bodies, talking about housing and how we could best deal with those challenges.

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

Government Appointments

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It appears to Albertans that on the Premier's list of priorities, appointing political supporters is above integrity and transparency. The Premier's practice of rewarding his supporters is very clear. Just look at his cabinet. Mark Norris is the only one of the Premier's leadership supporters that has not received a cushy appointment. [interjections] Well, you can see. To the Premier: has the Premier had any communication with the minister in charge regarding the possible appointment of Mark Norris as an Olympic ambassador? Yes or no?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm quite sure some of the people sitting on the front bench here don't look at it as a cushy appointment.

I believe what the hon. member is talking about is that starting this evening and into tomorrow we'll be meeting with the government of B.C. This is the fifth time that both governments are meeting to discuss items of mutual interest to both provinces. We've come, really, so far ahead. What the hon. member is referring to is a letter that Premier Campbell sent to the province of Alberta, to me personally, to ask how we can work with the province of B.C. in terms of exposing more advertising for the province of Alberta during the upcoming Olympics.

Mr. Agnihotri: To the Premier again: does the potential appointment of a defeated Tory as an ambassador mean that the Premier is not confident that the minister of tourism is capable of doing his job to promote Alberta?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I have tremendous confidence in my cabinet. In fact, they're all doing really great things for the province of Alberta.

Look, we're meeting with the province of B.C. They are our guests today, and all of this stuff being raised just takes away from the very positive story. Do you know what our attempt is? It's to build a much larger economic marketplace, build up western Canada

so we're a greater force within Canada, globally competitive around the world. There are so many positive things. Day in and day out just picking away, nibbling at the ankles: I don't know what it all means. You know, we're still going to stay focused.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

1:40

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier again. The federal government publishes a guide showing government positions, rules for appointments, and compensation rates. This allows for an open process that prevents positions from being created to satisfy party loyalists. Will this Premier follow through on his promise of openness and transparency and create a similar guide for Alberta?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we're way ahead of where the opposition is today. In fact, we do have a committee that was put together to review all boards, agencies, the way we appoint people to these agencies and commissions, and also a good governance model for both. We'll be bringing that report forward to the House once it's complete. It'll be a model, I think, that others can follow, and . . .

Mr. Agnihotri: This is their model. You show me yours.

Mr. Stelmach: The poor fellow gets excited over the smallest things.

We'll be bringing this forward this fall for further examination.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, when you utter the phrase, "You show me yours if I show you mine," it may lead us in opposite directions here.

The leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Affordable Housing

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I hate to sound a sour note on the day that the government is meeting with their soulmates, the Liberal government of British Columbia, but I have to ask this question. The rent crisis deepens, and this Premier has no answer. Alberta's NDP has heard from hundreds of Albertans faced with unaffordable rent hikes, and they get no answers from this government. They want action today, Mr. Premier. Will you help them?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we are helping. Many times in the House I talked about the four-point plan.

I just want to cover one statement that was made with respect to our visitors to the province. The Premier of British Columbia coupled with the former Premier of this province have brought forward tremendous vision in terms of harmonizing regulations, reducing the trade barriers that we have between and amongst provinces. It is an agreement that's helped us. Other provinces are asking to join in to see how we can work together and reduce the \$14 billion worth of economic costs to Canadians as a result of provinces not being able to work together.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There are close to a million Albertans who live in rental accommodation, and the Premier can't even be bothered to answer a question on that issue.

There's no new rental housing currently being built in Alberta. What little affordable housing that is going ahead will take between two and five years to become available. In the meantime, rents will continue to rise in this province for the next two to five years. Why doesn't this government take some real action for renters and support the Alberta NDP's proposal for temporary rent guidelines?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, we held our convention a few weeks ago inside. Apparently, we should pick the stairs to hold it in the future.

I want to read you some housing stats: home base housing projects, 26 units, 17 affordable; Habitat for Humanity, low to moderate income, partnerships with every one involved, 40 units; the relocation project from Rotary, low-income single males, 20 units; North Bridge Suites in Ponoka, low to moderate single income, persons with special needs, 23 units; Heartland affordable housing project, town of Stettler, 30 units. To say that nothing is being done is absolutely nonsensical.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I have the government news release, and I'd like to inform the minister that this is all federal money. You haven't even put a nickel into this. It's 150 units. No units in Calgary. When are you going to get off your duff and do something for the renters of this province?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, let's keep trying. If he doesn't like that, how about the 200 at St. Michael's in Lethbridge? How about the 140 extended care in Lethbridge? How about the Medicine Hat Cypress View lodge, 40 more? This is all Alberta money. How about Spruce Grove? Or the 60 in Macleod Place? Or Sherwood Park, Summerwood Village, 30 more? Rosedale in Sherwood Park, 30 more? There are over 2,000 units on here that have been in the planning and in the works since 2005. So for the hon. member to suggest that nothing has been done or is being done is simply irresponsible.

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

Capital Investment in Alberta

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Oil prices rise and fall, are hot and cold like the seasons. Alberta knows the seasons. Capital investment, especially major projects investment, is the real driver in our booming Alberta economy. Many present projects were started in a climate of \$20 oil, but Alberta has high costs. Stability is the key to investment. Wages, income tax, royalties, and other revenues follow. At the Construction Owners Association conference yesterday in Edmonton it was reported that major investors have levelled off their investment plans for the coming years. My question is to the Minister of Finance. What is the minister doing to ensure that major investors in international investment sources continue to regard Alberta as a stable investment site?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's an excellent and a very astute question. As a matter of fact, I attended the Alberta Chamber of Resources this morning, and they said exactly the same thing. Last week I had the opportunity of attending to bond agencies to private equity investors to the Wall Street people and the Bay Street people in both New York and Toronto, and the message that I wanted to send to them is that Alberta is still wide open, that

things are wonderful in Alberta, and that we would like them to invest in Alberta. The message I got back was a message of confidence from these people. Indeed, in going to Moody's and Standard & Poor's, the bond rating agency, they advised: well, I'm sorry, but we can't give you anything higher than triple A rating.

Mr. Backs: A supplementary to the same minister. The rest of Canada gains huge dividends in every province from the development of our energy reserves in Alberta. What are the estimated levels of economic activity in the rest of Canada that are the result of the Alberta boom?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again a very good question. What we have to remember in Alberta and in Canada in general is that when Alberta booms, the rest of the country benefits. CERI, the Canadian Energy Research Institute, has estimated that in the next 20 years there'll be \$885 million in spinoff benefits from the oil sands alone, and of that \$102 billion is designated for the rest of Canada. When it comes to federal taxes, we receive about \$17 billion in services from the federal government yet pay out \$32 billion. That \$15 billion goes directly to the federal government and other provinces. So the bottom line is that what happens in Alberta is good for the rest of Canada.

Mr. Backs: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. The biggest benefit from large capital investments has been work for Alberta businesses and Alberta workers. They pay their taxes here and contribute to the community. Temporary foreign workers send their paycheques home. Foreign contractors do the same. Will the government be taxing temporary foreign workers and contractors to gain benefit for Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much. Again an excellent and very astute question by the hon. member. Temporary foreign workers do pay taxes in Alberta. They pay taxes at exactly the same rate as any other worker in the province of Alberta, and it's money that is kept in Alberta. Yes, they do send money home, but that comes out of their net income. When it comes to foreign companies working in Alberta, if there is a treaty signed, then basically they do pay taxes here as well. They receive benefit from Alberta, and we want to ensure that they are putting their money back into Alberta as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Alberta/B.C. Joint Cabinet Meeting

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fifth annual Alberta/British Columbia joint cabinet meeting will be held tomorrow here in Edmonton. My questions are to the Minister of International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations. Can the minister give the House a general outline of what will be discussed?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutillier: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. One thing about this government and its Conservative principles, we work with those who have principles and want to keep taxpayers' money in

their own pocket. Unlike the Liberal opposition and New Democrats, who want to shut down economic growth like the oil sands, we are working on labour mobility. We are working with investment. On the agenda will be environmental issues, will be the Olympics. They want to learn from the Calgary Olympics, which is so important. We're going to be sharing with them best practices, and ultimately we are going to be demonstrating private/public partnerships. Alberta is viewed as a leader all over North America.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Can the minister tell us what concrete results have come about from previous joint Alberta/B.C. cabinet meetings?

Mr. Boutilier: Well, it certainly is a pleasure working with a government with principles in British Columbia that have a plan about things that we have. Did you know that there were 25 agreements between both provinces that have helped the voters and the citizens of Alberta and British Columbia? Did you know that 7.8 million citizens benefit because of the principles we employ in this province, that B.C. wants to look toward sharing with us and them together. It's amazing that, ultimately, a Liberal government with good principles, unlike what we hear here, is something that can truly work in helping citizens . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. Can the minister advise us what will be discussed relative to the Alberta/B.C. trade investment and labour mobility agreement, TILMA, at tomorrow's joint cabinet meeting?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, as you're aware, on April 1 we signed a monumental agreement with British Columbia. It is truly an economic juggernaut. Unlike the Official Opposition, who want to shut down development in Alberta, British Columbia is learning from Alberta. We're learning from British Columbia. Ultimately, the economic juggernaut that the rest of Canada is looking at is exactly why we are working collectively together with the Liberal government in British Columbia, who believe in the plan that this government is working on.

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

School Nutrition Programs

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hunger is often described as a real and persistent but hidden problem. It rears its head when a child is forced to show up for school with an empty belly, dreads having to go to the lunchroom, or makes excuses for not having their own meal. In a province as wealthy as Alberta it is unacceptable for that child to go hungry. It is here, though, where more than one in eight children live in poverty, and tens of thousands go to school hungry each day. To the Minister of Education: why does this province refuse to follow the lead of almost every other developed country and implement a comprehensive school lunch program?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, let's make sure that we understand that it is not the government's responsibility to feed, clothe, and shelter every child in Alberta. Therefore, we have a number of schools in Alberta, some 48 out of 62 school jurisdictions,

who do provide some sort of lunch program for those children in need. That's what we should be focusing on, children in need, not a blanket lunch program for every child going to school.

Mr. Flaherty: Well, let's look at it from an education point of view. A child who is hungry has difficulty concentrating, is more easily distracted, and may exhibit behavioural problems. Nineteen published studies connect participation in school nutrition programs with higher achievement on standardized test scores. Establishing healthy eating habits now can also prevent future problems with student performance and adult health. For a relatively tiny investment we can ensure that no child goes hungry and improve the long-term health and learning outcomes of all Alberta students. To the Minister of Education: why don't you make this an investment and get at it?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, that tiny investment would be added to the one that the hon. member yesterday suggested: that we increase the amount of funding so that we can give teachers salaries that exceed 5 and a half per cent. Then it adds to the one in the estimates yesterday that he talked about: that we need to increase our funding for disabilities by in excess of 6 and a half per cent. Then there's another one here where the hon. member is suggesting that our program unit funding go beyond kindergarten and go to grade 3. There's a whole list of them here. By the time this Liberal plan would be implemented, we'd be at \$10 billion for education and saving 30 per cent in the heritage fund. Booga-booga.

Mr. Flaherty: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thought the budget was to be discussed this afternoon.

Anyway, let's try this one. Alberta is the only province in this country that does not directly support school breakfast or lunch programs. In Canada other provinces have taken the lead, Mr. Speaker. This year the Ontario government, which is Liberal, will provide meals to over 270,000 students in close to 3,000 sites across the province. To the Minister of Education again. Can you answer this question? How can Alberta have the best kindergarten to grade 12 system in the world that he tells us about when other provinces are much more dedicated to the nutrition and health of their students?

Mr. Liepert: The easy answer to that question is that I could say, "Yes, I can answer the question," and sit down because that's what the question was. However, I think I want to continue here, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday we had the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford suggesting that we write a cheque for \$6 billion or \$7 billion to pay off the unfunded liability. I think we're now up to \$16 billion, \$17 billion a year on education under the Liberal plan, that is going to first of all take 30 per cent out of the nonrenewable revenue and put it in the heritage fund, which I don't disagree with, and they're only going to increase spending by 2 per cent across the board. It's unbelievable.

The Speaker: There will be a point of order raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, obviously, with this exchange that has just gone on. I'll ask both of the members to be there.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Removal of Home Care Ceiling

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There's been a very welcome decrease in wait times for my constituents in Calgary

emergency rooms due to recently improved processes at the Calgary region. However, the region still cites a shortage of hospital beds, clogging the emergency room access. In turn, they point to a lack of long-term care beds clogging up the availability of hospital beds. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: what can we as a province do to help address this situation?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, there was quite a lot of noise, and I didn't catch the full gist of the question, but if I understood it correctly, it was: what can we do to add more long-term care beds so that people who are currently in acute-care beds who should be in long-term care will free up those beds so that we can get more access from emergency? If I caught that correctly, I guess there's a whole strategy relative to that. We do need to add long-term care capacity, but where we're adding even more capacity is in the continuing care end and at the home care side. The hon. member might be aware that there was an announcement with respect to home care where we took the \$3,000 per month cap off. That will go some way to assisting in this area. It is a complex issue. Since the Broda report more beds have been added in continuing care, designated assisted living, and long-term care to help deal with that issue.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister: can the minister explain how the removal of this home care funding cap will specifically address the needs of younger Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Often when we talk about long-term care, we think of it in terms of seniors. The reality is that there are a number of younger Albertans as well who have care needs which create a dependency. They need to either be in long-term care or they need assistance to stay at home; they need the assistance of a home care aide. By removing the cap of \$3,000 per month, a number which hasn't been adjusted for a considerable number of years, regional health authorities can work with individuals and their families to ensure that they have the supports they need so that if living at home is a choice, they'll be able to manage it within the dollars available.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

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

Temporary Foreign Workers

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week members of the Alberta Liberal caucus met with labour leaders representing a wide diversity of Alberta workers and professionals. Labour plays a critical role in Alberta not only in ensuring fairness and safety for workers but also ensuring the economic strength of Alberta. Unfortunately, this Conservative government has too often ignored their concerns and marginalized their voices. My questions are to the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry. The number of temporary foreign workers will soon double from 25,000 to 50,000, yet many unions report significant numbers of underemployed or unemployed skilled tradespeople from right here in Alberta. How can the minister claim that all of these temporary foreign workers are needed when we still have skilled Albertans ready and waiting for work?

2:00

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, it's quite correct that there are frequently workers that are not employed where other jobs exist, and simply put, in many cases these workers refuse or choose not to take jobs in remote or outlying locations. Frequently that has been the issue. I've spoken with some of those people, for example, in the greater Edmonton community that have deliberately chosen for their own reasons not to take those jobs in remote locations. So there may be Albertans available to work, but they're not in the right place. I somewhat resent the implication that this ministry is not meeting with the labour unions. I have met with the labour unions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister has claimed that employment standards protect all workers, including foreign temporary workers, yet this claim ignores the fact that workers seeking protection have to come forward with complaints. As the minister well knows, these temporary foreign workers have limited mobility rights, often language problems, and their jobs may be at risk if they come forward. Will the minister commit to a reasonable, realistic inspection program to ensure that foreign temporary workers are fully protected by employment standards and can come forward and complain?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, two nights ago the hon. member opposite that has just tabled the question was here when I explained that we hired 72 more workers in our department principally for the reason of enforcement of occupational health and safety and labour standards, investigators that will do just that. As testimony to the belief that the unions have that we're doing a good job, I have a letter from a Mr. Gil McGowan. He was highly complimentary. He could hardly believe his eyes when he read our budget and realized that this government is . . .

An Hon. Member: Will you table that?

Ms Evans: I would be pleased to table that letter the next week because, Mr. Speaker, I don't have it in front of me. But I think he was very pleased to see that we are putting our money where our mouth is.

Dr. B. Miller: These same labour groups that we met with are deeply concerned about the trade investment and the labour mobility agreement, or TILMA. The process behind this agreement was profoundly undemocratic. The government did not consult with the public before signing TILMA. The government did not properly consult with labour groups before signing TILMA. The only people the government did consult with were those they wanted to. That is not democracy. Will the government, therefore, commit to having a full debate in this House so that we can deal with the issues, the concerns that labour groups have so that we can better understand this agreement?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, further to TILMA agreement, I know that the minister of intergovernmental and aboriginal affairs will respond, but could I just say that we have not had those concerns expressed. We have had officials meeting with British Columbia officials. They're currently meeting on foreign certification and are very satisfied that we're working through some of the issues on certification. But about the agreement itself, to my colleague.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the preamble was 100 per cent totally inaccurate balderdash. We have consulted. We continue to consult. Furthermore, Chambers of Commerce, as I mentioned, the association of nurses had indicated their contribution towards this consultation process. We are in the Legislature now with it. Nothing could be further from what the hon. member has said relative to his preamble to the question.

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

Food Safety in Restaurants

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The restaurant and food business is vital to Alberta's economy and enriches our cultural diversity and quality of life. A recent discovery of a Calgary restaurant kitchen worker with hepatitis A has led the Calgary health region to issue a rare public warning. This affects a number of people directly and scares a lot more Calgarians. My first question is to the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. What are our government's policies and enforcement laws to prevent such health scares and threats to the public confidence in the restaurant business?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Each regional health authority has a medical officer of health, and each regional health authority is responsible for ensuring public safety, making sure the public is protected when infectious diseases such as hepatitis A are confirmed. The Calgary health authority in this case took immediate steps to ensure public safety when the case of a food handler at the Wildwood Grill & Brewing Company was confirmed. The health authority issued a public alert to advise patrons who ate food at the Calgary restaurant from April 30 to May 13 that may have been exposed to hepatitis A. The health region has been holding public vaccination clinics throughout the week, and several hundred people have already been vaccinated as a preventative measure. The region indicates that the restaurant has been providing full co-operation during the investigation. In short, it must be made public, and it must be dealt with.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Given that prevention is better than a cure, does our government have laws or regulations that require health screening for restaurant food handlers or similar measures?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Public Health Act food regulations require food establishments with six or more employees on the premises to have at least one management or supervisory staff member who is trained in food safety and hygiene on-site during the hours of operation. The regional health authorities work closely with food establishments to ensure that food regulations are understood and followed. Courses in food safety and hygiene are offered at SAIT, NAIT, the Red Deer College, and through regional health authorities as well as through a number of private education providers. There are currently more than 50,000 food service workers certified in food safety and hygiene in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, it's not always easy to detect a disease like this early, but when it is detected, then there are mechanisms in place to make sure that the public is protected after the fact.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the same minister. In general, can the minister inform us of the effectiveness of the food service health safety inspection program in terms of inspections, number of violations, and remedies?

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Mr. Speaker, Albertans can be confident of the safety and quality in our food system. Health inspections of food establishments are performed by public health inspectors employed by local health regions. We depend on the health regions to use their judgment and local expertise as to how they can best ensure public health. In this case the Calgary health region exercised prompt action to protect the public.

As we discussed last night, there's also a pilot project happening with the Capital health authority with respect to the posting of health inspection reports on the Internet. If the pilot project works out, it will be expanded across the province.

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

Affordable Housing

(continued)

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The housing crisis is going to get worse before it gets better. Canada Mortgage and Housing has made that very clear, but this government stubbornly refuses to even consider rent guidelines because of the triumph of ideology over common sense. But at the very minimum, then, what they should be doing is telling us exactly what is affordable housing. How much of a person's income should be going towards housing? My question is to the minister of municipal affairs. What is the government's definition of affordability?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member is talking about rent supplements, this government has a policy at the present time that an individual should not pay more than 30 per cent of his or her salary towards housing. At that time there is a program, the rent supplement program that does support individuals, to support them with that cost.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, then I'm sort of confused why the government would not accept from the task force when it says to adopt a consistent definition of affordable housing for policy and program development. It is 30 per cent. That's a standard thing. But the government doesn't accept the task force's recommendation, yet the minister is saying that 30 per cent is the case. Why didn't you accept that when the task force said it?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government did not accept it because we are already doing it. At the same time, we are having consultation with municipalities, with different groups and making sure that we do have the right definition of the needs of low-cost housing for individuals.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, that doesn't make any sense at all. You reject the recommendation; the government does, yet you say that you're doing it. Why wouldn't you accept it? The sad reality is that

more and more people are spending 40, 50, 60, 70 per cent of their income on accommodation. That's why they didn't want to accept the recommendation. Is that, in fact, the case, Mr. Minister?

2:10

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, precisely, with the forecast that we're going to get even worse into a housing crunch, why would the members from the ND want us to impose rent controls, which are shown to be a disaster in building new things? You know, after they get rent controls, then they can go to price controls, and then they can go to wage controls, and then they can control every little part of their lives, and that's a wonderful utopia. I also want to tell you about \$2.5 million to the Polish seniors for affordable housing here in Edmonton or the \$1.5 million to the Vietnamese senior affordable housing, 62-unit housing. Rather than sit and live and try and talk about what rent controls or price controls would do, get on with it.

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

Gasoline Prices

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Striking a balance between landlords and tenants is one area where the market needs to be monitored and, at times, regulated. Retail gasoline pricing is another. To the President of the Treasury Board. Alberta drivers are puzzled and angry at how gasoline prices keep going up for no apparent reason, and with the latest hikes they are particularly upset. Notwithstanding that this minister, myself, and all members of this House get our gas paid for by the taxpayers, does he have an explanation to give to those Albertans who actually do have to pay at the pump?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, when the price of gas goes up, the price goes up at the pumps. That's pretty simple. Gas is a commodity that is dealt with on a global basis. We are part of it. There's a danger in thinking that somehow we're isolated from the global economy. If the hon. member wishes to look on the Internet or go into the newspapers and see what the price of gas around the world is – across Canada, through the continental United States, or other areas – and look at what we get from gas in the way of taxes and the comparatives in the production and to the delivery and retail part of gas, he would see that even compared to the early '20s and '30s, when it was a far greater cost, we're still getting gas at a relatively . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The price of crude has not changed from 2001 till today. The price at the pump has changed. When the price of gasoline goes up, everything else gets more expensive, like food, for example. So this issue has implications. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has just released a study demonstrating that there seems to be no correlation whatsoever between the cost of crude – and then you add refining and marketing upcharges and then you add taxes and normal profit margins – on the one hand and then what we actually pay at the pump on the other. Every penny per litre adds more than \$1 million to the net bottom line of the oil and gas industry. What would the President of the Treasury Board's response be to these findings, and is he at all concerned that motorists are actually hurt at the pump?

Mr. Snelgrove: Absolutely. Mr. Speaker, if you were to go in and control the price of fuel, if this is another one of the good opposition

things – we've got to control the price of fuel so that people don't have to pay – then things like conservation efforts don't work. If we're going to reduce – and you need to agree that most of the people have said: if you let the price work, then conservation methods, which are truly the best way to control prices, work. When you artificially lower the price of gas, all of the efforts you use to conserve energy, which is ultimately what we're trying to do, fail.

The Speaker: There was a point of order raised there, which we'll deal with at the conclusion.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung. Third question.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The question here is investigating potential gouging. We're not asking for regulation of prices at the pump. When I introduced Bill 202 in this House earlier this session calling for better consumer protection, the President of the Treasury Board and many members of his own government caucus adamantly rejected the idea, claiming that consumers don't need any extra protection and that the market works just fine; thank you very much. One of their stock answers was that Service Alberta already has the mechanisms in place to monitor the marketplace. Can the minister tell us who in Service Alberta today is investigating potential gasoline price gouging at the pump, and if no one is, will he start an investigation?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, it's the gouge of the day. You know, it can be rents. It can be gasoline. It might be lettuce tomorrow. Whatever the Liberals feel is the important thing today, if it doesn't fit within their perfect little guidelines of how socialism works, it's gouging. The federal government competition bureau has investigated many, many times the price of gasoline. They have concluded that there is not collusion between them. It is a commodity that moves up and down. Is it difficult for business? Absolutely. Is it difficult on people that have to have gas to drive? Completely. That's why we need to make sure that we reflect the real price so that the conservation message we're trying to send gets through: that carpooling and LRT are all driven by something else.

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

Forest Industry Sustainability

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituency of Whitecourt-St. Anne has a strong forestry base. As such, it's largely dependent on the forest market globally. Other countries have significant competitive advantages, such as short growth cycles, much lower transportation costs, and companies with mills located right next to their plantations, just to name a few. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Given these competitive advantages in other jurisdictions, is Alberta's forest industry resilient enough to withstand the current down cycle?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had the opportunity last week to attend a PricewaterhouseCoopers conference in Vancouver on the Canadian forestry industry's place in the global economy. The message was not an encouraging one, as the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne indicates. In addition to the fierce competition from around the globe, we're looking at the problems with the pine beetle, higher costs, and also the export tax associated with the

softwood lumber agreement. However, I have met with Alberta forestry companies. We've consulted on a competitiveness project, and I expect to receive very shortly a report on competitiveness and look forward to implementing and working with the industry on those initiatives.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that answer, you know, communities that depend on the forest industry, such as the one that I live in, Whitecourt, are very concerned about this. With the answer that the minister has given, I'm really concerned about the prospects for the sustainability of forest-based communities and the industry within it. Can he comment on what those prospects are for our communities that host these large forest companies?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, again referring back to the PricewaterhouseCoopers conference that I was at in Vancouver last Thursday, I do believe that what I heard was that there is light at the end of the tunnel in the median sense. A number of speakers pointed out that our forestry industry is next to the largest market in the world. Right now that housing market is depressed, but they expect it to come back in the next two years, by 2009, so there is light at the end of the tunnel.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess I'd like some clarity from the minister and his department on what he's doing to encourage our Alberta companies to diversify or to alter their practices in order to remain competitive.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again referring back to the conference I attended in Vancouver last week, there were a number of speakers that emphasized that global warming and fuel shortages create some new opportunities, unique opportunities for our forestry industry. A speaker from Finland indicated that if the forestry industry takes advantage of technology, it can contribute to mitigating climate change, mitigate the cost of climate change, and also develop future profitable business in alternative fuels. So we're working with Alberta industries in a number of ways to facilitate those opportunities.

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

Affordable Housing

(continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. One of my constituents is a single parent who is renting in a building that the family considers unlivable, with mould, ants, and an unresponsive landlord. They believe there is a connection between their living conditions and repeated trips to the emergency room and doctor for respiratory problems. Although they've tried to find other subsidized housing, they're told that they face a two-year wait-list. My first question is to the minister of housing. What advice does the minister have for this family, who has to decide between unhealthy accommodations or being on the street?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, first of all, I want to say that we would very much ask that individual to either contact our office or contact the president of . . . [interjections] Anyway, what happens is that there are guidelines in the tenancy act that should ensure that there is a standard of quality, so it has to be brought forward.

Ms Blakeman: Indeed it does, Mr. Minister, but if they bring in public health and public health certifies that that's an unsafe condition, they're out on the street now with no place to go and a two-year wait-list. What advice does the minister give to this family when those are the conditions they're facing?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly why we have the opportunity for individuals to come to EII, and I'll let the minister continue.

2:20

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, at lunch I had the privilege of speaking to people from our west-end office, who are very pleased to intake any person just exactly like the hon. member has described, assess their situation. Without having a director make a decision, they can look to whether or not these folks need income as a temporary basis for emergencies, whether they need any other provision for a place to live, and if there is a health hazard, our staff are very equipped to contact the proper health authority.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. You guys do not get this.

To the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry: is this government going to increase benefit programs so that low-income Albertans and Albertans already on benefit programs – they're not going to qualify for anything more according to your criteria – can maintain homes in the exploding housing market that this government refuses to regulate with rent caps? You've got them coming and going.

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, the beauty of the programs offered by this government is that even if they are on an income support program that of itself does not increase, there are other programs available to supplement that program on an emergency and as-needed basis. Yes, we are prepared to look after people, vulnerable people, wherever we can help them to make sure that they don't face what the hon. member has described as homelessness or eviction. We have had meetings arranged with these people. There are not an overwhelming number of people coming forward, but those that are coming forward are being cared for.

The Speaker: Hon. members, during the QP we had 82 questions and answers and two points of order, which we'll get to momentarily.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of correspondence between myself and the Member for Edmonton-McClung. The correspondence relates to comments made in this House on March 21, 2007, in which the member referenced an alleged incident involving a disabled inmate in one of our correctional facilities.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. On behalf of my colleague the Leader of the Official Opposition, the MLA for Edmonton-Riverview, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Jason Rutledge, who is a young teacher in the second year in the profession: a very thoughtful letter expressing concerns about educational issues, the strains on funding and salaries, and the unfunded teachers' pension liability.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm tabling a letter from Kent Ashbey. Mr. Ashbey is currently a resident of Athabasca who is very concerned about rent gouging, impending increases, and homelessness because the government refuses to protect Albertans by introducing temporary rent guidelines.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Construction Sector Council recently published the Construction Looking Forward document. I'm tabling a graph from that document shown to about a thousand delegates at the Construction Owners conference yesterday showing the levelling of oil sands investment.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, do you have a tabling?

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I have the appropriate amount of copies of a letter from Gerry Brin, and he is expressing some difficulties that he's had with the police.

Thanks.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today: the first tabling, answers to questions raised in Committee of Supply by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on May 8, and a copy of a letter to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in response to a question that he raised in the House yesterday.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday evening I had the pleasure along with my colleague from Calgary-Varsity of attending the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers' gala stewardship dinner and awards ceremony. I'd be pleased to table the appropriate number of copies of the program outlining the 17 nominees for stewardship awards, including the four winners.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of an analysis advocating rent guidelines for Alberta prepared by Professor David Hulchanski, who is the director of the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Ms. Tarchuk, the Minister of Children's Services, responses to questions raised by Mrs. Mather on May 3, 2007, Department of Children's Services 2007-2008 main estimates debate.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Knight, Minister of Energy, responses to questions raised by Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Hinman on May 3, 2007, Department of Energy 2007-2008 main estimates debate.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms. Blakeman: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to Standing Order 7(6) I would like to request of the Government House Leader that he share with the Assembly the projected government business for the following week.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Next week being a constituency week, we will reconvene during the week of May 28. Of course, on Monday there is no government business, it being private members' day. In the evening the estimates in Committee of Supply for the Solicitor General and Public Security, Justice and Attorney General, and Advanced Education and Technology. The Liberal caucus will be on deck there.

On Tuesday, the 29th, after Orders of the Day, time permitting, we would proceed with Government Motion 21 and anticipating government motions 23 and 24, those three motions being referral motions referring bills 1, 2, and 31 to policy field committees; also available, should time permit, bills 26, 32, 33, 39 in second reading. Obviously, there won't be time for all of those, but one of those would proceed if time permitted. Commencing at approximately 2:45, Advanced Education and Technology and Education would be in Committee of Supply with the New Democrat caucus questioning. Time permitting, after Committee of Supply that afternoon the same order of business that I mentioned before Committee of Supply. In the evening in Committee of Supply the Finance, Service Alberta, and Environment departments.

On Wednesday, May 30, in the afternoon the same order of government business that I mentioned because, of course, with the limited amount of time only a portion of that would get done. In Committee of Supply in the afternoon Energy, Infrastructure and Transportation, Sustainable Resource Development, Environment, and the government business that I mentioned. In the evening in Committee of Supply Agriculture and Food, Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations, and Justice and Attorney General.

On Thursday, May 31, after Orders of the Day again the same government business that I mentioned in terms of motions and bills and in Committee of Supply Sustainable Resource Development, International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations, and Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture.

Mr. Speaker, one other government motion that may be on deck which is on the Order Paper is Motion 22 with respect to evening sittings. It's not in projected government business at the moment, but I thought I should mention that it could be brought forward as business should we determine that we'll need those evening sittings to deal with the pieces of government business that I mentioned. As I say, it's not on projected government business now because at the current time we don't anticipate needing it.

The Speaker: Hon. members, two purported points of order. On the point of order that will be raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, I provided to both the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford and the Minister of Education a copy of the draft of the *Blues* to this point in time.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Point of Order
Allegations against a Member

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon the Minister of Education in his response to a question from the Member for St. Albert I believe contravened our Standing Order 23(h) and 23(i). As you know, 23(h) involves making "allegations

against another Member,” and 23(i) involves imputing “false or unavowed motives to another Member.”

Mr. Speaker, I’ve had the opportunity, as you just pointed out, to review the draft copy of *Hansard*, and the exact quote that is represented there from the minister says, “Yesterday we had the hon. Member for Edmonton–Rutherford suggesting that we write a cheque for \$6 billion or \$7 billion to pay off the unfunded liability.” Well, that, in fact, is simply not the case. I would suggest that this is where he is making false allegations and imputing false or unavowed motives. In fact, yesterday afternoon the President of the Treasury Board did the same thing, and I should have called a point of order then. I didn’t, but I’m certainly more than . . .

2:30

The Speaker: Let’s stick with what we’re on now. Let’s not lead this astray, please.

Mr. R. Miller: Sure. Mr. Speaker, then I would like to draw your reference to the *Hansard* from yesterday afternoon. My question as it was presented to the Minister of the Treasury Board said, “My question is for the President of the Treasury Board. Will he admit that it’s a fiscally responsible thing to do to pay down this unfunded liability now . . .”

Mr. Speaker, I never suggested once, nor has the Official Opposition suggested at any time, that we pay off the unfunded liability in its entirety now. We have never at any point suggested that the government write a cheque for \$6 billion or \$7 billion. That’s not ever been a part of what we’ve said. Just to be clear, it was page 1185 of yesterday’s *Hansard*.

The Minister of Education went on to talk about the Official Opposition now having a total of \$16 billion or \$17 billion a year in our education budget. I would challenge him to show us where he gets that number because, again, that’s simply not the case, Mr. Speaker. He also goes on at the end of his reference today to suggest that we also want to put 30 per cent of nonrenewable resource revenue into the heritage savings trust fund. That again is not the case. If he would read the policy that has been tabled in this Legislature, he would see that, indeed, we do wish to save 30 per cent of nonrenewable resource revenues in a number of different funds, a percentage of which would certainly go into the heritage savings trust fund.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, he indicates that we would only increase spending by 2 per cent across the board. Again, this is simply not the case. It is very clear in the policy that was tabled in this Legislature that spending would increase by both the cost of inflation because those numbers are in 2005 dollars and also by the rate of growth of population.

Mr. Speaker, I would suggest to you that the minister has contravened 23(h) and (i) on several fronts but, most specifically, on my exact wording yesterday, which asked the government to pay down the unfunded liability, not to pay it off.

Thank you.

The Speaker: On this point of order, Hon. Minister of Education?

Mr. Liepert: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to quote yesterday from *Hansard* with the hon. Member for Edmonton–Rutherford. He does say, “My question is for the President of the Treasury Board. Will he admit that it’s a fiscally responsible thing to do to pay down this unfunded liability now, when we have money available to do so” – this is the important thing – “thereby saving taxpayers tens of billions of dollars in future payments?” Well, if

we’re going to pay down the unfunded liability by a couple of thousand bucks, we’re hardly going to save tens of billions of dollars. I’m suggesting in my answer today that if we’re going to save tens of billions of dollars, we’re writing a cheque for somewhere around \$6 billion or \$7 billion. I rest my case.

The Speaker: *Beauchesne’s*, page 151, has a very interesting section called Acceptance of the Word of a Member, section 494:

It has been formally ruled by Speakers that statements by Members respecting themselves and particularly within their own knowledge must be accepted. It is not unparliamentary temperately to criticize statements made by Members as being contrary to the facts; but no imputation of intentional falsehood is permissible. On rare occasions this may result in the House having to accept two contradictory accounts of the same incident.

This may very well be one of those rare occasions, and both members were given an opportunity to clarify their positions.

The hon. Member for Edmonton–McClung.

Point of Order Allegations against Members

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise on a point of order today referencing section 23(h) of the Standing Orders. It basically pertains to Oral Question Period today in an exchange between myself and the hon. Minister of Service Alberta, the President of the Treasury Board.

The questions that I was asking of the hon. minister were all pertaining to potential price gouging at the pump, gasoline price gouging. Section 23(h) basically talks about making allegations against another member. I would argue that it actually represents a case where the hon. minister made allegations not only against myself but against the entire Alberta Liberal caucus and the Official Opposition.

Unlike the point of order discussed earlier, I don’t have the Blues in front of me, Mr. Speaker, and I’m not sure if you yourself have them yet. However, the hon. minister alleged that one day we are asking for rent regulation or control and that today we’re asking for the same thing for gasoline. I would argue that the hon. minister did not correctly hear my questions. There seems to be a trend with this government where they don’t actually reply to what we actually said on the record. They reply to what they thought we would say. The question was about consumer protection and investigating potential price gouging. It wasn’t about ideology or where the Liberals are coming from or where the Conservatives are coming from.

Now, although I’m not terribly offended by the hon. minister’s response – and as a matter of fact, we on this side of the House have gotten accustomed to this tactic used by the government time and time again – I am more interested, Mr. Speaker, in the hon. minister retracting that comment in the interest of setting the record straight. This allegation is not founded. We didn’t raise it in question period today, nor was it ever mentioned in stated Alberta Liberal policy. Basically, the minister either did not hear the question because of the noise in the House or chose to reply to something that wasn’t part of my question and part of my preamble, particularly on the second part of my question.

Mr. Speaker, I humbly request that the hon. minister retract that comment. Thank you.

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I honestly have to tell you that I truly hoped and felt that the first time I would be called on a point of order it would be more spectacular than this. I am very disappointed that somehow this is a point of order. Honestly, after listening intently to his suggestions about what I may have done, I am very disappointed that it will go down in *Hansard* that that was my first,

probably not my last, point of order. I have no idea what he would really like me to apologize for.

The Speaker: I take it there are no further ones.

Earlier this week, May 15, 2007, at page 1139 of *Hansard*, I indicated – and the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung basically stated this in his statement – that the rules apply to members, not to caucuses. I do not have a copy of the Blues; they're not here right now. But this appears to be pretty much a disputation of some facts.

It also has something to do with the preambles that come with the questions as well that lead to a lot of increasing debate rather than questions. The members themselves have written the rules about 45 seconds/45 seconds, and the chair will enforce that, but it also leads to this kind of a dialogue and debate. I think we had some clarification here this afternoon, which is good work on behalf of all of the members.

head: **Orders of the Day**

Mr. Hancock: A brief point of order, if you'll permit me, Mr. Speaker. I made an error under Projected Government Business. The paper I was reading from was not accurate, and it may have to be corrected.

The Speaker: Well, okay. Might we have unanimous consent, then, to revert to the point of our Routine which allows the hon. Government House Leader to respond to a question from the hon. Official Opposition House Leader about the upcoming schedule?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

head: **Projected Government Business**
(*reversion*)

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My apologies to the House. I'll be more accurate in the future.

On the 28th in Committee of Supply in the evening it is the Solicitor General and Public Security, Justice and Attorney General, and Advanced Education and Technology, and it is the Liberals' day.

In the afternoon of the 29th Advanced Education and Technology and Education, and it is the New Democrats' afternoon. In the evening it is Finance, Service Alberta, and Environment, and that is the Liberals' evening.

I neglected to mention, I think, that on the 30th in the afternoon and the evening the departments are correct, but those are private government members' days.

On the 31st, again, the departments were correct, but it's a Liberal day.

Thank you.

head: 2:40 **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

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

head: **Main Estimates 2007-08**

Education

The Chair: Items for discussion today are the departments of Education and Agriculture and Foods, and I understand that it's an hour and a half allocated for each one, roughly. We'll start with the Minister of Education.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Today I am pleased to present the Education budget for the 2007-2008 fiscal year. Before I do, I should again introduce my deputy minister, Keray Henke. We did have the opportunity yesterday to answer a number of questions from our opposition members, and hopefully we'll get to answer the rest of them today.

This year's budget totals just over \$5.6 billion, which is an increase of \$195 million or 5.2 per cent more funds for the classroom over the previous year. Some specifics are: \$4.2 billion in operating support to school boards, \$357 million for the teachers' pension plan, \$144 million for accredited private schools, \$87 million for basic education programs that support school boards such as the learning resource centre, high-speed networking, technology, and provincial Microsoft licensing, those sorts of items.

There's \$86 million for program and ministry support – that, of course, being our department – and \$925 million for school facilities. I want to repeat that: almost a billion dollars for infrastructure, which includes \$417 million for plant operations and maintenance and \$508 million for the infrastructure portion of that expenditure.

All school authorities will receive a 3 per cent increase in operational grants for the 2007-2008 school year. In addition, other grant adjustments reflect the initial planning and development of strategies to address the three priorities in the Premier's mandate letter. Of course, they are explore early learning opportunities, improve high school completion rates, find a reasonable solution to the teacher's unfunded pension liability, and a fourth one that I've added, which is build schools where students live and learn.

Seven million dollars this year is going to be added to provide early learning opportunities for children as young as three and a half with English as a Second Language programming. Early childhood services programs for children aged three and a half to six years with mild or moderate special needs or as young as two and a half to six years with severe needs are available for children who are enrolled in a recognized program, whether at their local school or an accredited private ECS operator such as Head Start.

A \$2 million dollar increase is to extend English as a Second Language funding to accredited private schools; \$4.5 million is to support improvements toward existing career and technology studies, facilities, and equipment; a \$33 million increase for special-needs funding; an \$11 million increase in transportation funding and continuation of the 15 and a half million dollar fuel price contingency fund; \$6 million in new funding for technology initiatives, including more video conferencing suites; \$9 million for enhancing teachers' skills and abilities and the implementation of new curricula, which includes the third year of social studies implementation and the first year of math implementation.

Provincial support for the small class size initiative will increase by \$35 million, which is a 21.7 per cent increase, and that's for the retention of 2,500 new teachers who were hired under the initiative to maintain reduced class sizes. This brings funding to \$194.5 million this fiscal year, which will provide all school jurisdictions with a 3 per cent increase in their class size funding. The total government funding for CSI to date is about one-half billion dollars, almost \$500 million to reduce class sizes throughout Alberta schools.

In addition, the government continues its support for innovation and student learning through its \$73 million commitment to the Alberta initiative for school improvement, better known as AISI. Students and young children with special health needs will also benefit from the continued investment of more than \$44 million to the 17 student health partnerships across the province. These partnerships provide access to health care professionals and related support services. Under Budget 2007 funding for the student health

initiative will increase from \$41.7 million to \$44.2 million, an increase of two and a half million dollars, or some 6 per cent.

I'd like to deal briefly with school infrastructure. The government has provided significant funding for school infrastructure in the past and continues to do so. A total of nearly \$1.3 billion over the next three years has been allocated for previously announced projects. The 2007-2010 capital plan includes funding for 71 previously announced new or major modernization projects, including 12 schools to be opened in 2007-2008. An additional 8,226 new student spaces will be opening in this coming school year across the province. In the 2007-2008 budget a total of \$508 million is allocated for school facilities infrastructure, with \$96 million directed toward the infrastructure maintenance and renewal grants to school boards for school building upgrades or to improve school energy efficiency.

The capital plan also includes an additional \$300 million over the next three years, which has not yet been allocated to individual school projects. The government will examine alternative procurement methods to deliver school infrastructure, and this allocation of \$100 million per year over the next three years should help to drive some creative solutions for school construction. Treasury Board is taking a lead in planning on behalf of government.

I'd like to deal briefly with the teachers' unfunded pension liability. It's one of the priorities the Premier assigned to me. The teachers' contribution to their portion of the pre-1992 liability is and will continue to be a disincentive to teachers because just over half of the teachers in the system today did not have any role in its creation, and there is a feeling by those teachers that they should not be responsible for solving it. Paying off the past liability can be and is a barrier to the recruitment and retention of teachers.

In 1992 the government of Alberta agreed to pay two-thirds of the liability, which now stands at \$4.3 billion, while teachers accepted to pay for one-third, which is now \$2.1 billion. This totals \$6.4 billion and is increasing every day. At present contribution rates the liability will grow to about \$14 billion by 2044, and it won't be paid off until 2060. This means an increasing number of young teachers will pay for the pre-1992 liability for the next five decades.

I presented the ATA with an open and clear process for resolving this issue. A task force will be struck to research and consider options to address the teachers' share of the unfunded pre-1992 pension liability, and as a sign of good faith the government of Alberta will assume for one year 100 per cent of contributions for teachers with up to five years' experience, which equates to approximately \$1,400 on a salary of \$50,000 annually. Seventy-five per cent of the contributions will be paid for teachers with six to 10 years' experience, which equates to approximately \$1,300 on a salary of \$60,000 annually. For teachers with 11 to 15 years of experience the government will pick up 50 per cent of their contribution, again, approximately \$1,200 on a salary of \$75,000 annually. Finally, 25 per cent of the contributions for teachers with 16 to 20 years of experience will be accepted by government, and that equates to approximately \$650 on a salary of \$80,000 annually.

2:50

This approach addresses the fact that our youngest and newest teachers are the most disadvantaged by paying for a liability they did not create. This initiative is intended to create an environment that allows the task force to have a positive and constructive dialogue with the various stakeholders. This liability is the responsibility of both parties and needs to be addressed in an open and transparent manner. We're looking for fiscally responsible solutions that provide value to Alberta students, teachers, and taxpayers with specific attention to the recruitment and retention of new teachers.

I believe that Budget 2007 sustains our excellent education system and manages areas of growth. Our department business plan provides particular focus to the four priorities. Education is about innovation, outcomes, student success, and collaboration. Everyone has a role, and that's why I've listened and discussed education matters with a range of individuals and associations. All of our futures depend on what happens in the K to 12 system, so I intend to reach out beyond the usual education community and talk with business leaders and other decision-makers.

Since my appointment I have met with school board chairs, trustees, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Those meetings have been open and honest, and I've had some excellent discussions about school jurisdictions' local challenges as well as opportunities involving collaboration and innovation in delivering education. I'm impressed by the good work going on in our education community. I'm supportive of and strongly believe in locally elected officials and their ability and responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of their community.

In closing, I want to emphasize that this budget underlines government's commitment to manage growth and the need to have a plan for the future. I would entertain any comments or questions for the remainder of the estimates period.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll attempt to go at the budget. I thank the minister for his overview, and I'll try and go through some of the things that he raised and touch on them and bring some of my points clear.

First of all, operational grants to school boards will increase 3 per cent in September. Clearly, in the unique situation of Alberta and its overheated economy this increase in funding will frankly, Mr. Minister, not be enough. Several school boards have already told me that they aren't sure how they will be able to cover all their costs without making cuts. It reminds me a little bit of last year again, but anyway let's get into specifics.

I know that the minister likes to talk about 5 and even 10 per cent increases for his overall budget, but what it really comes to for the schools and teachers and students is the operational funding. The fact of the matter is that this budget only contains a 3 per cent increase in all existing operational grants to school boards. The thing that really interests me in this – and I'll raise these questions if it's all right with the minister, and he may want to write back to me or talk to me after I sit down – and my question is: how will school boards be able to ensure that the wages of their teachers keep pace with increases in the cost of living? Again, I'm just looking at this.

Earlier this week in question period the minister suggested that school boards should use any operating surpluses they might have to negotiate with teachers. I went out and looked at last year, 2005-2006 – and we're doing an analysis of this presently. For example, if you're using surpluses for funding teachers' salaries, I found it very interesting that the Calgary school district No. 19 – and, again, you can comment, Mr. Minister – has what I see here as a deficit position. I looked over at the Edmonton Catholic separate school district No. 7, and they have, let me just say, an \$8.8 million deficit position. I look at the Edmonton school district here, and they have a \$1.7 million deficit. I look to my constituency, which is the Greater St. Albert Catholic regional school district, where they have a \$1.3 million deficit. Will this be the policy of the minister, to instruct school boards to use operating surpluses to ensure teachers are given a fair wage increase? I don't know if that's the policy now, but I still want some clarification there.

The Minister of Education likes to emphasize that Alberta spends more money on education than any other province. While this may be true, it is important to remember that Alberta is not like every other province. In fact, when total education spending is seen as a percentage of total wealth, which is the more comparable measure used by economists, Alberta actually ranks last. How does this last-place ranking fit with the minister's overall vision of having the best education system in the world?

Now let me turn to maintenance and construction. School facilities operations and maintenance support will increase to \$417 million, a 3.2 per cent increase in the 2007-08 estimates, page 95, line 7.0.1. School facilities infrastructure has received \$508 million this year, which is a decrease, the way we look at it, of 13.8 per cent since last year. That's the estimates page 95, line 7.0.2. The question is: why is the department decreasing its school facilities infrastructure budget by over 13 per cent when need is severe and construction costs are only rising? Maybe you could explain that to me.

The city of Calgary, where the minister resides, and the municipalities all over this province are rapidly expanding. Premier Stelmach himself talks about that all the time. He notes that Alberta leads the country in area housing starts. Is this really the time to be cutting our school infrastructure budget? I don't think it is, but maybe there's something I'm missing there, and maybe the minister can straighten me out.

The estimates suggest that Calgary alone has a \$0.5 billion deficit in badly needed repairs to deferred infrastructure. I ask the question: what steps are being taken to prevent this situation from getting worse? I don't know. Maybe they're using decentralized budgeting, and maybe the money is going somewhere else down there. I'm not sure. We have heard from the Calgary education community that there are close to 40 subdivisions that need new schools. Can the minister confirm the size of the need in Calgary? Just clarify it for us.

Now, the minister talks about the whole thing of P3s. I talked to board members, you know. I talked to one of them that's in the construction business, and he said: maybe this is a great idea, Jack, and you're just being too negative. But why doesn't the minister come out with an operational framework, a rationale, and let the school districts know what he's planning to do? Why keep the thing a secret? If it's so good, tell us what it is, and then maybe we can get on the bandwagon and start promoting it. But we still wait and wait and wait. I'm expressing the frustration from some of our superintendents and some of our trustees that talk to me. I certainly don't talk to as many as the minister, though, so maybe I've a limited sample.

Anyway, school districts are hopeful that the infrastructure, maintenance, and renewal, IMR, funding that was announced in 2006 would be sustained over three years, and they're talking about a longer range period to do some planning and repairing, all that kind of thing. Rather, the 2007-08 IMR budget has been reduced from \$200 million to \$96 million. It is expected, therefore, that the allocations of school jurisdictions will be reduced by approximately 50 per cent. So my question is: why did this department decide to reduce funding for this year? Does it anticipate that the need for maintenance and renewal of existing facilities will be less? Maybe they do have something that they think is less. I don't know.

The unfunded liability. Let's just talk about that for a few minutes. The cost of financing the unfunded liability is \$156.7 million this year, an increase of 2.9 per cent from last year and 8.5 since the 2005-06 estimates, page 94, line 3.0.2. The minister proposed to take on a portion of the cost to teachers of the unfunded liability for one year at a cost of \$25 million. Now, during Premier

Stelmach's leadership campaign he promised teachers that he would . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, *Beauchesne* 484 . . .

Mr. Flaherty: Hon. Premier? Sorry.

The Chair: . . . allows a person to refer to himself by name, but it doesn't allow for a speaker to refer to other members of the House by name.

3:00

Mr. Flaherty: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Can I say the leader of the government? Is that appropriate?

The Chair: That would be fine. Or Premier.

Mr. Flaherty: Anyway, I'll go at it this way, Mr. Chairman. Thank you. You're always on guard. That's great.

The promise that was made to the teachers that the government would separate the teacher liability pension issue from salary negotiations and resolve the issue once and for all. That was said. My question is: do the provisions attached to the \$25 million in this budget – this is from the letter that the minister wrote to the teachers, and I probably had something like 25 letters and about 40 phone calls, and I know the ATA has had many more on this letter. "In the event of job action, the Government may direct the task force to discontinue its work and discontinue assuming the teachers' share of the annual unfunded liability." What I'm still wondering: how does this letter help teachers to reach a decision and help the minister on this? In fact, how does this accomplish what the minister wants to accomplish? I'd like to know what his motive is. Maybe he could tell me right now today: is the ATA involved in this thing now, or where are they at? Are they refusing to sit on this task force? In other words, where are we at with this whole business of the unfunded liability? It would be very interesting for us to know that. I think that would be very important.

I'm running out of time here, I think. I'll skip over private schools and come back. Maybe I can get back on schedule because I know my colleagues . . . [Mr. Flaherty's speaking time expired]

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll attempt to address the comments, as I made notes. First of all, let's talk about teacher negotiations that will take place over the summer and into the fall. The hon. member is correct that school boards received 3 per cent across-the-board operational grants. Funding to education, however, as I've mentioned many times, has our budget increase going to school boards in the range of 5.2 per cent. It's school boards' determination as to how they want to use those funds.

I would remind the hon. member that in the last couple of months we've had two settlements in the province that settled their retroactive – in other words, for the current year that we're in – wage settlements in Chinook's Edge and Wild Rose, that averaged somewhere around 3 per cent.

Now, a couple of other things need to be noted. One, as I've said many times, the schools boards' accumulated surpluses across the province total \$220 million. As the representative of some 2.5 million taxpayers in Alberta I have difficulty in advocating for higher funds for school boards when they're sitting on that kind of money. Yes, there are a couple of school boards that have prior deficits. They have presented to us a plan to pay down those debts and are doing so.

It should also be pointed out that every school board has the ability this fall to put a plebiscite to the voters as part of the municipal election requisitioning 3 per cent on the mill rate, and they could specify, if they so choose, what they wanted to use that for. If the hon. member is suggesting that maybe his St. Albert school board would like to put to the taxpayers of his constituency a vote this fall that says, "Would you be in favour, Mr. and Mrs. Taxpayer, of a 3 per cent mill rate increase specifically to pay for teachers' salaries?" I suggest that he make that suggestion to the school boards in St. Albert.

There were some comments made around infrastructure that I think need to be addressed. No one knows the infrastructure backlog more than I do. My particular constituency of Calgary-West happens to have, currently, two public schools – one public, one Catholic – and seven private schools, and I say that that is not giving choice to the residents of my constituency, and it's not giving them the choice, frankly, of a public school system, which is not acceptable. We need to do something about our backlog of infrastructure deficit. However, that deficit is some \$3 billion, and if the hon. member has a suggestion on how I can find the \$3 billion in our provincial budget somewhere, I encourage him to give me all of his suggestions.

It should be noted, however, that in this particular school year we will be opening some 12 new schools. We've opened 16 new schools in the current year that we're in, and we will be increasing the number of school spaces by over 8,000 across the province. This is at a time when our enrolment is relatively flat. Our question is not a matter of not enough spaces. The problem is that there aren't enough spaces where the kids live, in the right parts of the cities. So we're working on that.

As I said earlier, we've put a hundred million dollars into the budget. I know that the hon. member is quite anxious to hear about how we want to allocate that money. That decision is currently being discussed. The hon. member is getting quite frustrated because we haven't come forward with a proposal on P3s here on the 17th of May. I'd ask him to be patient. We will have that in the next few months, and then he can assess whether or not proceeding with some different financing methods to get schools built where kids live is the right approach.

I'll conclude for this portion on the unfunded liability. The hon. member talked about the Premier's commitment to separate negotiations from the discussions around resolving the unfunded liability. Well, that's exactly what we are doing. We as government will be dealing directly with the ATA on the unfunded liability issue. School boards, on the other hand, will be dealing with their ATA locals, and the ATA has made it fairly clear that the locals bargain at the local level. We are not involving the school boards in the discussion around the unfunded liability, the negotiations, so they are in fact separate.

Now, relative to the letter that was written, I would ask the hon. member – he was pretty close to this particular situation – to reflect back to when the teachers were on strike in Parkland and think about that situation for a moment. That created an awful lot of angst. It created a situation that was less than desirable to hold any kind of negotiations or any kind of discussions. I ask that hon. member if he would feel comfortable with this task force that is out meeting with stakeholders in some way being influenced by bad feelings that exist throughout the negotiating process if we have various locals on strike. What I have suggested in the letter is that the government has the prerogative that if a strike occurs, the work of the task force is pulled back until the labour situation is resolved. The task force then

resumes its work. I think that's fair. I don't want to see this task force unduly influenced by a cantankerous labour dispute, and I would hope the hon. member would not want to have that happen either.

The final question is: where is the ATA at? I'm afraid I would have to ask the hon. member to ask that question of the Alberta Teachers' Association. The offer stands that we would like the Alberta Teachers' Association to name a representative to our task force. The offer will be open for a few days, but if the ATA does not choose to have a representative on the task force, we will proceed.

3:10

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to enhance some of my comments from yesterday, and I thank the minister and his assistant for being here.

I'd like to start off by paraphrasing from an *Edmonton Journal* article in March of this year written by trustee Don Fleming, looking at the history of education and school boards in Alberta. This is something that is dear to my heart for a number of reasons. But I want to clarify my position. I think every person in the community has an opportunity to help determine the direction of their public school jurisdiction through the election of public representatives.

In 1994, the Alberta government changed the way local boards operate and took on the collective obligation to fund centrally and completely the provision of educational services to every student in Alberta. It was a one-size-fits-all approach that ignored the historical link of the community to its schools and set in motion a chain of events which left school boards with little flexibility.

It is my belief that almost every problem that we deal with in terms of the school districts can be traced to that limiting nature of that 1994 legislation. I appreciate the minister's faith in school boards to make good decisions; however, we must return a reasonable level of local autonomy to school boards. Doing so would enable elected boards to once again be accountable to the communities and show them that they've been elected to serve.

Schools need to be ensured of an adequate block of funding each year. Schools, unlike factories or other industrial business undertakings, cannot be treated as though they are producing products that can be made, shaped, moulded in an identical manner. Stable and adequate funding allows schools to function, whether they serve an academically elite population or a population comprised of less able students. Without stable and adequate funding we teach too many of our students, I believe, young people who may already be disillusioned with adult society and angry, that school is irrelevant, that adults are not caring, and that society has abandoned them. It's a high price for society to pay.

There are many things here to look at, and I will try not to repeat what my colleague from St. Albert has said, although I will emphasize some of those points. In terms of the operating budget the biggest part of the school boards' costs are staffing related, so we have to ask: why does the government increase the basic instructional grant by just 3 per cent when the index for increasing MLAs' salaries was closer to 4.9, I think? A 3 per cent increase to the budget – when you factor in yearly inflation and that teachers are waiting for contract resolutions, if you look at the 4.9 increase that we thought was okay for MLAs, how do we expect teachers to accept less? Schools will be budgeting for probably a 4.5 increase to cover anticipated expenses, and that means that without inflation's effect, they may possibly be 1.5 per cent poorer to do the same work. Money must come from staffing to work the budget.

The goal of 17 in division 1 and 23 in division 2 is just not possible with the current money. Then we look at the cost of aides. Sometimes we can do that by splitting two classes for half a day and try to keep the numbers lower with the help of the aide. With grades 5 and 6 we're trying for 25 and 26 in the class, and the goal was supposed to be 23. I'm talking to various principals in the district, and very few of them are able to meet the standard of 23 or less for division 2.

If the province is serious about making each child successful, let's consider tying assistance to families to attendance in school and fulfillment of reading or homework assignments and so on.

I want to emphasize again the strong position that we have for school nutrition programs. They have proven to be successful in increasing student achievement. It only makes sense that if a student is not hungry, he's going to feel more comfortable, more secure, and have a better sense of well-being and a better idea that they do have potential.

I want to mention the reading recovery program, which is an amazing program. One teacher to seven or eight students twice a year has had excellent results, I'm hearing from one school. But it's so costly that schools are not able to afford it, yet they believe that in the early years it's probably the best program to promote success. Teachers in that program would work daily with seven or eight children, 30 minutes of structured reading one-on-one. However, a teacher unit cost is about \$80,000, and most schools can't afford that.

Again, I talked a bit yesterday about the full funding for aides. School boards don't get enough money for special-needs students to fully fund their needs. As a result, they either don't hire what they need or take money away from something else to subsidize. I know that there's only so much money. However, I think we have to look at the priorities. Once again, if we can invest in these early years, we're going to have cost savings down the road. We all know that. So I think the number one way to ensure success is to give the students that need it the teacher ratio to support them so that they have the opportunity for success.

The other thing that I've talked about many times in here is the time frame for the Education budget. Based on the budgets schools have in April, they make plans for the following year, and by the beginning of May the students having concluded, generally, the registration process for the next year, they start making serious plans for the next year. So by the end of May they may be having to declare teachers surplus, and a process begins to place teachers for the next year. Teachers move, schools change, and maybe they'll lose a teacher that they really did not want to lose. This causes angst for everybody. Then sometimes suddenly there's money in August, and you find, "Well, we could have kept that teacher," but you can't get that teacher back. I just don't feel that the timing of the Education budget is as supportive as it could be to make the process one that's efficient and less of a guessing game.

The differences in budgeting timelines between the ministry and school boards can lead to inaccurate or incomplete information being submitted by boards. School boards need to be sure of their budgets because of staffing completion by May. The ministry can improve this by providing early feedback on the feasibility of the budgets submitted and information on grants as soon as possible. So I really encourage you to take a look at that factor.

Another thing that I'd like to ask is – you've heard the term "clawbacks," I'm sure, and this is dealing with high schools and credit funding. If \$250 million of education funding is dependent on high school credit completion and the completion rate around the province is 90 per cent, that would mean that \$25 million would be clawed back from the school boards, which could go, possibly, to

teachers' salaries, textbooks, support staff. It could have gone there. I would suggest that in many jurisdictions the completion rate is much lower than 90 per cent. Some schools continue to load 40 students in a class because they know that students are going to drop out and there's going to be less course completion. Those schools and jurisdictions with the lowest levels of funding often have the highest dropout rate. So that's a real concern to me.

I'm wondering about AISI. My experience with it was generally very positive. Have we got evidence to say that it actually improved high school completion rates, or has the money gone to expensive consultants, PD days, which teachers often don't even want? I'm wondering if a more suitable alternative would have been to put that money towards reading recovery programs. I think about five years ago teachers identified lack of reading skills as the main obstacle to success, yet the Department of Education and school boards have ignored their recommendations and have chosen other areas to concentrate funding. I'm wondering if this is the best use of taxpayer money.

Another concern is the provincial curriculum review that resulted in science and social studies. Schools will have to have an additional \$110,000 in some cases for textbooks in these two areas, and there's no extra funding allocated from the province to assist with these changes. I noticed when I was talking to a colleague who had just been to B.C. that that province awards additional funding for high-needs schools and students based on socioeconomics and demographics. Thus there are schools in our city of Edmonton that would get additional funding to assist with programing needs for their students.

3:20

Mr. Liepert: Well, first of all, let me address the issue around the pooling of taxes. The member raises a good point. I think it's probably about due for review whether or not at least the residential tax base should be something we should be considering returning to school boards. That would be something that we'll be discussing as a caucus over the course of the next year.

The member made a comment that I absolutely have to take – it was not correct. If I heard her right, she said: discussing with principals, very few were able to meet the class size guidelines. Those are not our numbers. With the exception of the 1 to 3 classes almost across the board school boards have managed to meet the class size initiative. Keep in mind that that was over a three-year period. The recommendations of the Learning Commission were over a five-year period, and they've done this over a three-year period. Now, there is some tweaking to be done around this. We've now funded it fully, and I think it's time to take a step back and say: what is working well, and what isn't?

The one area that the member discussed was the timing around notifying school boards of their budgets. I think we'll both be pleased to know that that problem should hopefully take care of itself in the future because of our own House reforms. Part of what we're doing, in my understanding: the budget will be delivered on the third Thursday of February every year going forward, and therefore schools will certainly know, compared to this year, considerably earlier how much their funding is going to be. I think that would take care of that.

There was some concern around CEU funding and high schools and clawbacks. The CEU funding has pros and cons, but clearly one of the pros is that we are not going to use taxpayers' dollars to pay for kids who don't go to school, and that's the reason why it's funded in that manner. We have pretty flexible guidelines around funding relative to attendance and classroom achievements.

Comments relative to the AISI program. In my travels through the province in the short time I've been in this portfolio, I don't

think that there is an initiative that this department has taken that is more well received at the local level than AISI. There is just some wonderful stuff being done with AISI money. It is project specific. There are some pretty – I wouldn't say tough guidelines. It simply is not money that's just handed out without any accountability to it, so it's one that I really think is a good project.

I guess that I would just like to make one comment, and it was part of what we discussed in question period today. I know that I'm supposed to be supplying the answers, and they're supposed to be asking the questions, but I'm going to ask a question of our learned friends across the way. I would like to know from them: which one of the big-spending departments – Health, Seniors and Community Supports, and Children's Services – have they recommended we cut back on so that we could spend more money on education? I challenge them. I haven't heard any suggestions on which one of those departments we should cut back funding on. This province spends – what was our budget this year? – 30-plus billion dollars. So to continue to make suggestions that this needs to be funded, that needs to be funded, and this is underfunded: it's great to make all those accusations and raise all those concerns, but I haven't heard many answers.

I look forward to suggestions on what part of my hon. colleague the Minister of Health's budget we should not approve this year so we can increase that operating grant from 3 to 6 per cent. Maybe we don't build the south Calgary hospital. Which part of the disabilities programs that we have in Seniors and Community Supports should we no longer fund? Maybe we shouldn't spend money on the child care spaces program that my hon. colleague has announced, which is just a terrific program. So I'd be open to any suggestions on which programs we cut in the big-funding departments so that we can spend more on education.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and join the debate on the estimates for the Ministry of Education. First of all, I want to thank the hon. Minister of Education and his staff for the preparation of the estimates. I'm going to ask a few questions on key issues. If you can answer my questions today, it would be nice. If you don't, any time within a week at least if you can answer my questions, I would really appreciate that.

The key issues. I think a few of them have already been addressed by my colleagues the MLA for St. Albert and the MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods, but I have few more. I want to talk a little bit on the school lunch program, operational funding, maintenance and construction – the unfunded liability was already discussed – private-school funding, transportation, special-needs students, and classroom size, as well as ESL.

First of all, I'll start with a few questions which concern my riding, Edmonton-Ellerslie. As we all know, not only Edmonton but all over Alberta the population is growing, especially in the new areas. My constituency, Edmonton-Ellerslie, is growing so fast. You know, when I was door-knocking last summer, most of the complaints I heard from that area were that they need a school and library in that area. Then I set up a meeting with the trustee in my riding – that was about 18 months ago – and he told me that the capital planning for the school in the Ellerslie area was 2007-2008, but recently he showed me another capital funding program. I'm not 100 per cent blaming the government, but when you talk to the trustees, they always blame the government because they say that they cannot operate without the money.

Money is important, and you have the chequebook, so here we are. This is another chance for me, and I would like to point out

those important issues, which are very important for my constituents. They desperately need a school. I actually had the opportunity to visit a few schools in my constituency. I mean, in one of the schools their library is carpeted, you know, and needs lots of renovations since five or six years. This is my personal feeling. They are so scared; they don't want to talk to the MLAs. I don't know why. You ask them: do you have any concerns? They hardly answer questions from the opposition side. They think that only members from the government side can help. I want to point this out because I think it's very important. Maybe next time I will take the minister with me to the schools and make sure that the minister will take care of that.

The trustee I met mentioned to me that, first of all, his concern was about the lobbyists' registry act. He said that all the trustees are elected representatives like MLAs, MPs, Senators. They read this act. I don't know which stage that bill is in, but they are concerned about that, that they are elected representatives like Senators, MPs, or MLAs, and they should be included. They don't need to register for the lobbyists' registry. I mean, naturally, they are complaining about why they were excluded, being elected representatives.

3:30

Another thing he mentioned to me, as other members also indicated: recently the government, you know, increased only 3 per cent, which is not sufficient. They called it operational funding. Operational grants to the school boards will increase 3 per cent in September. Clearly, in the unique situation of Alberta and its overheated economy this increase in funding will not be enough. This is exactly what he mentioned to me, that even MLAs got a raise, 4.9 per cent or something. He said: the MLAs can get a 4.9 per cent raise, and everybody else expects at least above the inflation rate. I think 3 per cent is even below the inflation rate, which is not reasonable, especially at this time. You know, the construction price, even the grocery prices have gone up, so this is one of his major concerns, and he asked me to pass on this message to the hon. Minister of Education. I think some other members already indicated on this particular issue.

I know that the Minister of Education likes to talk about a 5 and even a 10 per cent increase for his overall budget, but what it really comes down to for schoolteachers and students is operational funding. The fact of the matter is that this budget only contains a 3 per cent increase to all existing operational grants to school boards if you see the Education budget background. My question is: how will school boards be able to ensure that the wages of their teachers keep pace with the increases in the cost of living?

Earlier this week in question period the minister suggested that school boards should use any operating surpluses they might have to negotiate with the teachers. Another question: will this be a policy of the minister, to instruct school boards to use operating surpluses to ensure that teachers are given fair wage increases? If they are getting fair wage increases, when should they expect them?

The Ministry of Education likes to emphasize that Alberta spends more money on education than any other province. I heard this from many members from the other side of the floor again and again. While this may be true, it's important to remember that Alberta is not like other provinces. In fact, when total education spending is seen as a percentage of total wealth, which is the more comparable measure used by economists, Alberta actually ranks last. This is a shame. How does this last-place ranking fit with the ministry's overall vision of having the best education system in the world?

I want to touch a little bit on maintenance and construction because schools in Calgary and Edmonton – I'm not saying that all the schools need renovation, but most of them do. I receive so many

complaints in Edmonton, and I see a few e-mail letters from Calgary too. You know, the schools need some maintenance, but some schools have been looked after really very badly. Suppose they need some renovations today? If we don't spend money right away, the problem deteriorates. So if we don't look after that problem today, suppose today the cost is \$1 million, if the government approved in the capital . . . [Mr. Agnihotri's speaking time expired] That's it?

The Chair: That's it.

Mr. Liepert: Well, I had to slightly chuckle when the hon. member said that school trustees seem to be afraid to talk to the MLA. He must present a much more intimidating force than I do because, let me tell you, if there's one thing that I've encountered in the four or five months I've been fortunate enough to have this portfolio, it's that I haven't encountered any trustee who is afraid to tell me exactly what he or she thinks. So maybe I will have to take the hon. member with me one day out to south Edmonton and see if we can get the trustees to talk.

I am disappointed because I concluded my remarks a few minutes ago by suggesting that I would be more than open to suggestions as to which one of the high-spending departments the opposition would like us to take money from to add more money to Education. The member did not address that, so I await those suggestions.

The member used an interesting analogy: percentage of total wealth. Well, if I put that into my own personal perspective, that's like saying: the wealthier I get, the more I should spend whether it's necessary or not because you should be obligated to spend a certain percentage of your personal wealth. Well, I don't happen to agree with that, Mr. Chairman. I happen to believe that you do an assessment of need, and you fund it accordingly. I would suggest that no one could accuse this government of not funding education accordingly: \$30 million per school day. Let me repeat that: \$30 million per school day.

There was some mention made about maintenance of our schools. Yes, it is an issue. In previous years our infrastructure maintenance repair, more commonly called IMR, budget was \$48 million. Last year we did a one-year infusion where we increased it to \$200 million for last year. This year it's \$96 million. So you could either say that we doubled what we used to spend on IMR or you could say what I've just heard: we've cut it in half. Now, several school districts have told me that when we increased it from \$48 million to \$200 million, yes, they've got projects out there, but with the heated economy some of them are having trouble ensuring that all of those funds in that particular budget year are appropriately spent. I believe our school boards are very good managers of our money, and that's one of the reasons why we've got the accumulated surplus that I have mentioned on several occasions.

While we're dealing with maintenance, I think that's one of the real reasons why we need to look at some alternative funding mechanisms for schools. One of the mechanisms to look at is new construction or modernization that includes a 20-, 25-, 30-year maintenance contract with it, and at the end of that time frame if that school isn't returned to the school district or the government, whatever the arrangement is, in a condition that is set out at the beginning of the agreement, there's a penalty attached to it. I believe there are some great opportunities going forward so that those folks sitting in these chairs 25 years from now aren't going to be having the same discussion about deferred maintenance. That's one of our challenges.

3:40

The hon. member had some questions around infrastructure relative to new school construction. I think he's probably aware that

last fall we prepared a document called Schools for Tomorrow. It was, in fact, a compilation of the needs around the province, and we are now trying to address: okay, we've identified the need; how do we meet it? We only got halfway by the end of last year. Identifying the need is the easy part. Meeting that need and how to meet it is the tougher decision.

There were some comments around the lobbyist registry, and I completely agree with the hon. member. I have raised that issue with my caucus colleagues. I would encourage the hon. member in committee stage to propose an amendment to the bill which would exclude school boards from being listed as lobbyists. I think that's totally appropriate.

Those, I believe, were the notes that I made relative to the hon. member's questions.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a very important question. Some people are asking why in this budget the private schools receive a big increase this year. What is the main reason for this increase? Is it this government's plan to increase public funding for private schools? Why is the increase in operational funding for private schools larger than the increase for public schools?

Also, I want to talk about classroom size. Stats Canada's report released in 2004 confirmed that Alberta still had the highest student-to-teacher ratio. Could you tell me what the ratio was last year and how this funding increase will affect the ratio for 2007 and 2008?

[Mr. Pham in the chair]

Special needs is also, Mr. Chairman, a big concern. The overall special-needs per student funding for students with mild to moderate disability or delay increased by 3 per cent in the year 2007-08 funding manual for school authorities. Funding for students with severe disabilities also went up by only 3 per cent. Special-needs education remains critically underfunded.

Although I heard from several school jurisdictions that their severe-needs profiles may not reflect their actual need, most feel that in any case the decision of Alberta Education to review the integrity of the severe-needs profile assigned to each school jurisdiction will do very little to address the underfunding of special-needs education. One school division reported that the revenue it received per student was less than half of the actual division expenditure per student. In large part, this funding shortfall stems from coding issues.

We heard from the education community that the criteria of the severe-needs coding are too rigorous. There are a growing number of students with severe needs, but they do not satisfy the severe needs. The fact of the matter is that this budget only contains a 3 per cent increase to all existing operational grants to school boards. How will school boards be able to ensure that the wages of their teachers keep pace if they keep spending money on programs like this one? How can they spend money on ESL programs? How can they spend some money on classroom size?

And, especially, the transportation in my riding. I received a few letters recently, and the people were complaining that now they had to pay for their transportation. Sometimes they have to send their kids, you know. They spend an hour on the bus, and they were always worried. Transportationwise, there are some areas where they charge a small amount of fare for the buses, and the other areas are charging more than some areas. So that's my question.

I would really appreciate it if you answer those questions. Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, I repeat again, I did not hear any suggestions by the hon. member whether we should not fund child care spaces or take money out of the hon. minister of health's budget. It's great to stand there and talk about spending more money on this, that, and the next thing. I said in question period today: I think we're now up to – I don't know. I'm just running numbers in my head. But the Liberal plan would be – I don't know; pick a number – somewhere between \$10 billion and \$15 billion spent on education. I mean, where does it come from?

I need to make a correction regarding private school funding. This year, for the first time ever, we're funding ESL in private schools. It's the right thing to do. It's a \$2 million investment above and beyond the operational grants, and what that translated into was the fact that private schools appeared to get more money. Private schools continued to get 60 per cent of the base operational grant, and that hasn't changed. To say that somehow overall funding for private schools was out of whack with public schools is not correct. Really, what we've done is that we've caught up on the ESL side of it.

There was some mention made around coding. We are going to do a review of our coding of students during the next year. It's an issue that we discussed at some length yesterday with the two hon. members. I don't think it would be good use of House time to repeat what was discussed yesterday.

I think that's about it.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, it's a pleasure, again, to participate in the estimates briefing from the Department of Education. I must get on the record, hon. minister, that I have been involved in a few of these discussions and debates over the budgets this spring, and I must say that you have a very small contingent from the department with you. Your deputy minister certainly did very, very well in Public Accounts. I'm confident that if we have any questions, if you cannot answer them, he certainly can. I've seen other ministers come in here with six and eight staff, but I can see why you only come with one: you only need one. That's an ace you've got there.

The Department of Education. I've been listening to the debate, and I've been listening to the questions all spring from various members. Recently, in the last half an hour, I was listening to the hon. minister talk about the schools that we're building, and the ones that, unfortunately, are being unnecessarily and arbitrarily closed, particularly in mature neighbourhoods in the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary. I don't understand the rationale why good public schools in neighbourhoods are being suddenly closed. It seems to be poor planning. I don't know who's to blame. Is it the department, or is it the respective school boards? In the city here if we're not careful, we're going to have a doughnut effect, where in the central neighbourhoods we're going to have no schools, and in the fast-growing suburban areas where we do need schools – we need new ones, and they are being built – we're going to have a major planning problem.

3:50

We have seen not only in this latest round of school closures in Edmonton but in the last round where the parents felt so strongly that they were willing to take the school board to court. Not only in Edmonton but in Sangudo and Whitecourt parents also took the school boards to court over this issue. We have to be careful about

this. We have a utilization rate that's cumbersome. It's out of date. It's not reflective of the times. In five years, in 10 years we could need the same public school again.

If it has low enrolment now, and I can only talk – let's pick on Glenora. Just the other day there was a meeting in Glenora about a large housing complex that is proposed to be constructed. That will change the demographics of that neighbourhood. Strathearn over in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar: if even half of that redevelopment proposal is accepted, it's going to make a heck of a difference. There are other neighbourhoods throughout the city where we're talking about increasing the density in the central area of the city, and we're closing schools. It just does not make sense. We're closing schools to save \$260,000 on an annual basis. It just doesn't make sense to me.

Also, I would like to at this time express my gratitude to the minister. The minister was quite open about sharing some information that the department had accumulated, regarding a Sabrina's Law for this province. I really appreciated receiving this. In fact, Mr. Chairman, I sent a note to the hon. minister on March 13, 2007, and the next day – I must say on the record that I was very impressed – we got a report back from the minister on what the department was doing with students with severe allergies. This issue brief is the progress of the committee that was struck to deal with this issue. I think it's time that we have in this province a Sabrina's Law, similar to the one that was introduced in Ontario to protect children who have severe allergies.

Now, some of these allergies – we all think, Mr. Chairman, that they are restricted to peanuts or other nuts, but they are not. This anaphylaxis is life threatening. It's a life-threatening allergy. It could be to food; it could be to insect bites. We have to be careful because some people think it is the same as hay fever. Unfortunately – and there are tragic examples of this – children could die from exposure within seconds of contact with peanuts.

It is at this time that I would urge in this budget year for the department to take a good, long look at presenting before this Legislative Assembly a law similar to Sabrina's Law in Ontario so that we have minimum standards across the province for all these children who are affected by this condition. There seem to be more and more, and I don't know why children are affected by this. I don't think it's too much to ask. It's not too much for the school boards to administer or the local schools to administer. It would just be a standard so that everyone would know if there was an incident or an event how to deal with it, how to handle it, and how to save a life. I would plead with the department to again consider a Sabrina's Law for this province.

I have some questions in regard to this. Given the recent death of Carley Kohnen, a 13-year-old person from Victoria, B.C., another child that has passed away from this, is the government of Alberta now prepared to introduce legislation to safeguard all anaphylactic children within Alberta schools? Again, in this budget year why is the government supporting a policy approach when Alberta schools already have the Canadian School Boards Association's policy handbook, a handbook for school boards since 2001. How will this new approach differ?

In conclusion, if the government is not prepared, Mr. Chairman, to introduce legislation to protect anaphylactic school children, is the government at least prepared to admit that anaphylactic school children are special needs as defined in the School Act, and therefore to complement any policy, these children require teachers' aides to ensure that preventative measures are consistently and objectively undertaken in each classroom no matter the size of the classroom and, more importantly, no matter what the teacher or the principal's predisposition is to the issue of anaphylaxis.

Now, I appreciate – and I’m going to express it again – the information that the minister shared with me regarding this, but I think we can do something proactive here. We can introduce legislation very similar to what Ontario has passed and British Columbia, as I understand it, is currently discussing.

With those questions at this time, Mr. Chairman, I would like to move on to another part of the budget – and I’m going to apologize if this was already covered – certainly, the funding of private schools. Am I correct in observing and listening at Public Accounts that there has been a significant increase as a percentage of total spending going to private schools that public schools are not getting, or are they both getting an equal amount of an increase? There is some talk that private schools are being funded by this government.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: First of all, thank you for the kind words relative to the good work that our department does perform. I would just offer that going forward if a member of the opposition has an issue that he would like some help with in answering constituents’ concerns to ask, and we will be more than happy to try and provide the information for their constituents. It should also be noted that while I may only have one person sitting on the floor, we have some very capable people in the gallery that probably could give me various finger signs if I needed them.

Relative to Sabrina’s Law we have asked the Alberta School Boards Association to do a review around their policies, and that is, I would presume, soon to be completed. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has made comment in the House on a few occasions relative to us in government not supporting an initiative from the opposition. I would encourage the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to consider a private member’s bill on that area. You might be surprised whether we’d be supportive or not. So I’d leave that with him.

4:00

Just very briefly, to deal with the private schools. I did answer the question a little earlier. In essence, what it was is we committed \$2 million this year for ESL funding for private schools, and previously private schools did not get ESL funding. Their percentage of operating grants remains at 60 per cent of the public school funding on operating grants, but when you inject the \$2 million in there, the percentage goes up. I think that overall the funding that the private schools receive in total from government this year relative to last year is a 6 per cent increase, but it’s all because of that \$2 million injection into ESL.

I want to talk a bit about the closure of schools in more mature neighbourhoods. The hon. member sort of threw out the ask and said that he’s not sure who to blame. The answer to that is that I don’t think anybody is to blame. It’s a fact that in years gone by in a particular community we built more schools than we would build in a similar size community today. With some of these schools that are closing, there may be as many as three schools serving a community where, actually, all of the children could walk to one or two schools.

The other thing that has significantly impacted attendance at schools – it’s a good thing. The Edmonton public school board is probably the best example of offering a tremendous number of alternative programs. You may have Spanish over here. You may have an arts school over there. You may have a music school over there. What that means is that you have children from all over the city coming to that one particular music school or that one particular arts school, or it may be a charter school that has an all-girls school, as an example. What happens in a situation like that is you start to

pull children out of the community to go to schools elsewhere, and what happens is that, frankly, the numbers simply don’t warrant it.

It’s never easy to close a school, and I know that school boards don’t do it lightly, but I come back to the facts. The facts are that we’ll be opening 12 schools in the next school year. In this school year that we’re just wrapping up, we will have opened 16 schools. Well, there are 28 new schools, and our enrolment, in essence, across the province is flat. Those 8,200 spaces that we’re going to be opening up next year are going to be drawn from somewhere because currently they’re probably in the community where that new school is being opened. Those kids are currently bused into an older neighbourhood. So as soon as that new school opens, that school where they have been bused to is probably going to be underutilized.

It’s not an easy situation for school boards to deal with, but I believe they’re doing the best that they can under the circumstances. I think that for the most part, as I said earlier, it’s never easy when the school across the road from you is being closed. If I were a parent, absolutely I’d be trying to keep that school open, but the likelihood of those children having to go a great distance to go to school is not high.

I think that answers the questions, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You know how proud I am of my hometown, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I am even more proud because it has been named the cultural capital of Canada for 2007. So I would like to introduce two artists who work in Edmonton, who are helping to make Edmonton the cultural capital of Canada. Those individuals are joining us in the public gallery today. Mark Henderson is the artistic director of Theatre Prospero. With him today is Jennifer Spencer, and she is actually working for Theatre Prospero right now. They are currently touring Alberta schools with a production of *Hamlet*. I think Mark is actually from Edmonton, and we are very lucky to have had Jennifer move here to help us be the cultural capital. I would ask them both to please rise and accept the warm welcome and appreciation of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Could I introduce a guest, Mr. Chairman, first and then go on?

The Chair: Yes. You may.

Mr. Flaherty: I’d like to introduce, in the gallery, Frank Bruseker, the president of the Alberta Teachers’ Association. He’s here. We appreciate his attendance.

head: **Main Estimates 2007-08**

Education (*continued*)

Mr. Flaherty: We know that the minister is a wise politician. He used to be around Peter Lougheed. He threw out the hook, and I’m just going to bite into part of it. You should look back into the discussions I used to have with the former Minister of Education. I

challenged him. See, I don't want to attack other departments to get dollars; I want to look at your department to get some dollars.

One of the things that we talked about – and I think it's important to get this on the record – and one of the things that I got excited about when I heard about your background was that you really believed in prevention. I've talked very clearly in this House – and it's on record – that I think we should get rid of the achievement tests in grade 3.

We talked yesterday about PUF, making sure that we utilize that service, because I think it's a good program, I want to emphasize, in screening kids, so that all kids get it and that we look at that whole elementary area, laying the foundation for the school program and starting to identify where kids may be having some problems and do remedial education in the elementary school. That's what you can do with the dollars.

I even asked the minister last year if he would do a pilot in the province and try that. If you go over and talk to the people across the way here at the university, they're telling me that there are lots of kids leaving school, falling through the cracks because they can't read; they can't do their math.

You know, the other interesting thing about this, Mr. Education Minister, when I was on this panel with the ATA, was the question of – I hope I get this right or maybe Frank will kick me after – achievement testing. We don't do any of that with our aboriginal students. I was told by someone from the Fraser Institute in British Columbia – he said that we don't do anything. B.C. does, evidently, because they're not afraid to try and say: here are the problems with these kids; this is how we want to help them.

I think there are ways in your own system that you can develop some dollars or do some very exciting things. I think you're the kind of man that can do that. So I'd urge you to do that, and the money could be redirected.

We won't get into talking about the communications part of government. There are a lot of dollars there.

I just want to start touching on special needs. I think I'd better do this because I've got a lot of information from superintendents and districts here. Overall, special-needs funding increased. Funding students with a mild to moderate disability or delay increased 3 per cent in '07-08, and funding for students with severe disabilities also went up by 3 per cent. Special-needs education remains critically underfunded, Mr. Minister.

Although I heard from several school jurisdictions that their severe-needs profiles may not reflect their actual need, most feel that, in any case, the decision of Alberta Education to review the integrity of the severe-needs profile assigned to each school jurisdiction will do little to address the underfunding of special-needs education. One school division reported that the revenue it received per student was less than half of the actual division expenditure per student, and one of my school districts in St. Albert – and you know better than I do – has a massive debt in their special education program.

In large part this funding shortfall stems from coding issues, Mr. Minister. We heard from the education community that the criteria of the severe-needs coding is too rigorous. There are a growing number of students with severe needs, but given that they do not satisfy the severe-needs criteria, they are coded as mild and moderate, which has a much lower funding rate. The question is: why does this department not have any funding measure in place to address the needs of students that fall in between the mild category and the very rigorous severe-needs category? That's one question.

4:10

Learning disabilities can be magnified if children progress from grades 1 to 12 in the system without appropriate early programming.

For many students one year of ECS program funding is not enough. We talked about it yesterday. Why does this government refuse to extend the program unit funding until at least – and we talked about that – grade 3? You'll probably address that.

Strategy 1.7, which falls under goal 1, high-quality learning opportunities for all, states that the department will "continue to foster a safe and caring school environment through," among other things, "effective behavioural supports": Education business plan, page 104. I have heard from many teachers who teach behavioural improvement classes, BIC, that it's very difficult to secure funding for children that need extra attention. Is there any new money in this budget targeted for BIC children?

Now, the class size initiative you've talked on. Funding for the class size initiative is \$194.5 million, an increase of \$34.7 million, which is an increase of 17.8 per cent. A Statistics Canada report released in 2004 confirmed that Alberta still has the highest student to teacher ratio. Could you tell me, Mr. Minister, what the ratio was last year and how this funding increase will affect the ratio in '07 and '08? I think it would be interesting to know what that is at elementary, junior high, and senior high. Maybe you could clarify that for us.

ESL. Seven million dollars was added to the early childhood services program to provide children as young as three and a half with English as a Second Language programming in support of early learning opportunities; \$2 million was included to provide funding for children and students in private schools who require English as a Second Language programming. I guess the question is: is the minister confident that the budget increases for ESL will be adequate to support the full cost of putting in place an ESL infrastructure? Several school boards have told us that while they appreciate new funding for ESL, their need in this area is not really as large as needs in other areas. Did the decision to make English as a Second Language programming a priority come from school boards? That's another of the questions that we have there.

Now, we've talked about school closures. This came up in question period last week. Today I've learned to say the word properly relative to "Rockyford." I want to make sure that we get this on the record straight. Rockyford is very distressed by the announcement that their K to 9 school would be closing soon. The minister may remember that I raised this question in question period, and it was my fault that he didn't answer, not his fault. Although the minister denied knowledge of potential school closures in east Wheatland earlier this week, I believe he owes it to residents there to clarify his comments. Recently the Golden Hills school division announced that it would be closing the high school located in Hussar. In conjunction with that motion a second subsequent motion was approved to allow the school division to explore the option of a single, consolidated school to serve the east Wheatland sector. Is the minister aware of these motions? Probably he is by now. Certainly, I am sure he is right on top of it.

The second motion clearly demonstrates that the K to 9 school in Rockyford is at heightened risk of closure, as at three other east Wheatland schools. This motion also demonstrates that the minister is very aware that Rockyford school is facing a potential closure. At the meeting where the motion was adopted, Mrs. Christene Howard, chair, told the board that she had previously advised Hon. Ron Liepert, the Minister of Education, that the board would possibly be considering a second motion. Even better, the minister indicated to Mrs. Howard that he would support the board's request should one be forthcoming. Well, given all that, given that the minister is now clear where the Rockyford school is facing a potential school closure, can he please answer these questions from the village of Rockyford and the residents of east Wheatland? Maybe he can tell us today where they stand because they've asked us.

Schools are crucial to the health of communities everywhere, and this is especially true in rural areas. Strategic priority 8 in the Department of Education's business plan commits this government to keeping schools in places where people live and learn, business plan, page 103. Recent news of four potential school closures in rural areas of east Wheatland demonstrate that this government needs to look at this question.

The Chair: Just one more reminder, hon. member. You can't refer to members by their proper names.

Mr. Flaherty: Yeah. I got excited, you know. It's been a long day. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm learning, and you're doing a good job of helping. I'm in the disability class.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Liepert: Let me deal first with the fascination the member has with east Wheatland. I'll try and fill in some of the blanks. The Golden Hills school division met with myself and the MLA for the area, who happens to be the Minister of Finance. They've got a unique situation in east Wheatland, and that is that, frankly, all of their schools are not in good shape. There may be one of them that is in pretty good shape, and I think it's Rockyford actually.

The decision to close the Hussar high school program was proposed by the board, and it was done for the right reasons. Hussar is 25 miles from Drumheller. We are spending a significant amount of money on modernization of the Drumheller high school as we speak. The decision was made that the Hussar program could be transferred to Drumheller. However, in meeting with the MLA for the area and the school division, we decided that at some point in time in the not-too-distant future a couple of their schools in that area needed to be replaced. So until we can get our capital planning finalized, we agreed that we would not make any changes in the east Wheatland area.

There is no intention to close the Rockyford school. Down the road there may be consolidation if the board determines that that area would be better served by one new school for four communities. That will be their decision. But there is no imminent closure of the Rockyford school. The decision to not hold high school classes at Hussar this fall has been put on hold. In essence, going into the 2007-2008 school year, nothing will change in east Wheatland, so you can relax on that one.

The member raised the issue around grade 3 achievement tests. I know that this is a discussion point that has gone back and forth a number of times, and there are certain stakeholders in the education system who don't happen to agree with achievement tests, period. We fundamentally believe that the achievement testing that we've done gives us a baseline so that we can determine how well our students are performing.

4:20

The thing about the grade 3 level achievement testing is that it also helps us identify some of those very specific situations that the member refers to around identifying early learning difficulties. It may seem like an easy thing to do and would free up a tremendous amount of money. In essence, it wouldn't free up very much money, maybe a couple of million bucks, but what it would do is it would not allow us to actually test students until grade 6. The member himself has mentioned on several occasions that in order to ensure that these students are properly screened and identified, that is one method of doing it, through grade 3 achievement testing.

A number of comments around special needs and funding for special needs. It's always an issue that you could always do more on. There's no question about it. I know that I have nothing but the greatest of respect for the teachers and the aides who work with special-needs students on a daily basis in schools. They really are special people. It would be tremendous if we could commit, you know, significantly more money to special needs and early learning identification.

We took a look at a number of areas in this year's budget. We were told in many cases by the local school districts that their greatest challenge is identifying the early learning difficulties in students who don't speak English as a first language. That was one of the reasons we focused the majority of our funds on combining the early learning difficulties with English as a Second Language.

One other thing. The member was quoting some Stats Canada statistics relative to class size initiatives, and I believe the Stats Canada data that the member was using is quite outdated. First of all, I think it would make the most sense, rather than to use statistics from somewhere else, to take the recommendations from the Commission on Learning and say: let's match up and see how we're doing. So let's do that. Keep in mind that this is only year 3. We have implemented the recommendations of the Learning Commission in three years when it was recommended that it be done in five.

So guidelines that were proposed by the Commission on Learning for grade 10 plus – I may be off by one here; hopefully, not more than that – were 28. We're averaging 25. For grades 7 to 9 the guidelines recommended by the Learning Commission were 25; we're averaging 23. For grades 4 to 6 the recommendations were 20, and that's exactly where we are on average: 20. Now, as I mentioned earlier, the one area that we have not managed to meet the recommendations is in K to 3. The Learning Commission recommendations were 17, and we're somewhere in the range of 18 to 19.

As I said earlier, it's those kinds of tweaking that we need to do to ensure that over the course of the next year to two years we get those numbers totally in line with the recommendations. Keep in mind that these are averages. There are going to be situations that evolve. Whether they're because of infrastructure inability to meet certain numbers or maybe even the availability of teachers, there may be some of these on occasion where you'll get a particular class that doesn't quite meet the guideline. But on average those are the numbers.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, I would like in the time remaining to have a discussion with the hon. minister regarding the Auditor General's recommendations for the Education department. The Auditor General had a good look at the Department of Education in his annual report going back to 2005-2006, and when we discuss this budget year, we have to ensure that the department – and I'm certain they are – is taking a keen interest in the Auditor General's remarks and his recommendations.

Now, Mr. Chairman, recommendation 25 of the AG's report talks about an improved school budgeting process. To do this, they would like to see funding information as soon as it is available to ensure that school boards can prepare their budgets, grants, new funding. We always hear that from respective school boards across the province. The Auditor General is also recommending that we require school boards to use realistic assumptions for planned activities, costs to be disclosed to trustees and the ministry. The

recommendation also includes a suggestion that there be established a date for the school boards to turn in an approved revised budget with updated enrolment and results information and reassess when and how the ministry should act to prevent school boards from incurring an accumulated deficit position.

Certainly, in Public Accounts we had a very frank and robust discussion about which school boards had deficits and which ones did not. Some taxpayers are quite surprised when they find out that school boards have deficits and are carrying debt. They say: oh, but we thought the province was debt free. Unfortunately, that's not true. Not only do we have a debt carried by many of the boards, but in some cases it's a significant amount of money.

Now, the ministry is not providing, in our view, adequate guidance to school boards and trustees regarding interim financial statements to ensure that school boards fulfill their financial monitoring responsibilities. This can lead to poor financial decisions that affect the quality of public education. That being said, in light of some of the announcements in the last year where there was significant – I believe the same money was spent twice in the Edmonton separate school system. It was in the millions of dollars. I don't think we can blame it on this department, Mr. Chairman. It would be totally unfair. I think if there's a fault, it would lie with the auditing processes of the individual respective school boards. How this went on for two years if not three years is beyond me, but it did. The school board is making every effort to correct it.

When we look at the Auditor General's report, I don't think we can find fault with the department on some of these matters. Now, there certainly are differences in budgeting timelines between the ministry and the school boards, and this can lead to inaccurate or incomplete information being submitted by the boards. There's no doubt about that. School boards need to be sure of their budgets because of staffing completion by May. The ministry can improve this by providing early feedback on the feasibility of the budget submitted and information on grants as soon as it is available. The Auditor General specifically suggests providing assessments of school board budgets by February rather than May.

Again, out of the 75 school jurisdictions, Mr. Chairman, 28 school boards and two charter schools had annual operating deficits. Now, four school jurisdictions – that's up from three – had accumulated operating deficits as of August 31 of this year. Annual deficits are considered acceptable by the ministry. We have to have a good look at that now.

Also with this department, you know, we're talking in this budget about the price of prosperity. We look at the program spending on kindergarten through to grade 12, and we look at the grants for school capital projects. They'll reach \$5.6 billion. It's a lot of money.

Earlier today it was humbling to sit in here, Mr. Chairman, and see the teenagers from an inner-city high school coming in here, looking down on the floor of the Assembly, and think that some of those students may be hungry in school or before or after school through no fault of their own. We have an obligation and a duty to do something about that. We look at this enormous sum of money, well over \$5 billion, and I'm surprised that we can't find money to adequately fund on a yearly basis some lunch programs, again in the central areas of Edmonton, and I would assume that the same issue is occurring in Calgary.

4:30

We shouldn't have to point out, Mr. Chairman, the lavish grants that this government provides through the lottery funding to golf courses. Golf courses all over the province are using this money for everything from debt reduction to improving the paths to purchasing

new irrigation equipment to purchasing golf carts. It is quite ironic that if you look through the public accounts, you see this long list of grants to various golf courses. Some of these golf courses even charge membership fees in the thousands of dollars. You look at that and then you meet with officials who don't have enough money in their budgets. They're not asking for a lot. They're asking for less than \$2 per day per student to provide a hot lunch program.

These programs are really needed in some areas, Mr. Chairman, some areas more than others, and there are also other programs, I think, that we should have a second look at when we're spending our money and perhaps fund them so that the operators of these programs know that they can rely on this minister. In September they know that the funding is going to be there.

Another program would be for early kindergarten for some inner-city children. It makes a real difference for them when they get into kindergarten and go on through the elementary school system and get a good, solid foundation in the elementary school system to build an economic base for the rest of their life through a sound education. You know, we talk about the dollars, but we've got to be very careful about how we spend them and where we spend them.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, I would urge the minister and his staff and all members of the government to take a second look. Not only is it the Department of Education; it's also the minister of tourism, who is the minister in charge of lottery grants these days. If we can afford to be so generous to these golf courses for debt reduction, surely we can provide programs for young people residing in the inner cities of Edmonton and Calgary and give them help in getting a good, solid foundation in the elementary school system.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, as we've become accustomed to in this House, it's always interesting to listen to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar sort of cover the waterfront and link everything together. Whether it makes any sense or not, I'm not sure sometimes. I have no idea what he's talking about when he's talking about us funding golf courses. I can guarantee you that out of our budget we don't fund any golf courses, so he would have to take that up with the minister of tourism and parks when his budget comes before the House.

The member mentioned the school lunch program, and as I pointed out in question period today, 48 of 62 school boards offer some form of school lunch program. I guess it really comes down to the debate about: what is the responsibility of parents to children, and what is the responsibility of the state to children? I think we have a very solid Department of Children's Services. If in need, a child receives the attention and care that it needs. We have the Department of Employment, Immigration and Industry that also encompasses what used to be known as manpower and human resources. If someone is destitute enough that their children are going to school hungry, I'm sure there is a mechanism whereby there are other departments that can assist. But it is not the responsibility of this department to feed, shelter, clothe, and raise the children of Alberta. It is our job to educate the children of Alberta. I don't know how you institute a province-wide hot lunch program without feeding every kid. [interjection] Well, we are starting. Forty-eight out of 62 schools boards are already doing it. So why would we then go in and say: well, for the other 14 that aren't, we're going to come and provide free meals.

I get back to what I suggested earlier, that it's great to make these suggestions about how to spend more money, but I still haven't heard very many good ideas other than some cockamamie idea about golf courses that we're funding. I am not going to stand here and authorize that there's any authenticity to that claim. But we'll see.

Mr. MacDonald: I'll bring you the information.

Mr. Liepert: Yeah, I would like to see it.

The hon. member started off his comments about the Auditor General's report, and earlier in the debate we did cover that off. I met with the Auditor General early in the new year. We went over his concerns in his report as it applied to Education, and I believe that he was quite satisfied that going forward we should have no difficulty meeting some of his concerns. The major one revolves around when we actually deliver a budget. As we well know, this year our budget was significantly later than normal due to a whole bunch of things that happened last fall and earlier this year. The member would be aware that we have reformed the rules of the House, whereby under the new rules the budget will be presented on the third Thursday of February every year, and I see no reason why that budget presentation on a consistent basis wouldn't meet the concerns that were expressed by the Auditor General.

The member talked about school board debt and annual operating deficits. Again, we dealt with that question in question period a few weeks ago. It is correct that some school boards in the province now are running an annual operating deficit, but they in many cases, most cases in fact, have an accumulated surplus. In order for them to access that accumulated surplus, you have to run an annual deficit, or there's just no ability to access that accumulated surplus. As I commented earlier, I don't believe the taxpayers of Alberta want us to continue to see school boards build accumulated surpluses. It doesn't make any sense. I think we'll be dealing with that over the course of the next year or two.

I believe that answers the questions.

The Chair: Hon. members, there's about two minutes before the next item. Did you want to take the time for Education?

The hon. Member for St. Albert.

4:40

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank the hon. minister for the exchange that we had this afternoon and thank his staff. If he would take me to lunch some day with that expense account he has, maybe he and I could redesign the system in such a way that I could show him where he could do some wonderful things and still save some money right within his own budget. In fact, I had a section that I was just going to talk here about, his communications department, but we won't have time for that.

On a serious note, thank you very much. I appreciate it. Have a good two or three days with your family. I'll stop right now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Did the hon. minister wish to respond quickly?

Mr. Liepert: No.

The Chair: The time has elapsed for the discussion on the Department of Education. We will now start with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, discussing the budget estimates. I will ask the hon. minister to begin.

Agriculture and Food

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, and good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to speak today about the government's commitment to Alberta's agriculture and food industry and talk about the 2007-08 Agriculture and Food budget. Five months into my job as Ag and Food minister I can certainly say that the success of this ministry is due to the high calibre of staff that we have, who show real commitment and passion for the industry here.

Joining me here today are Rory Campbell, my deputy minister; Faye Rault, assistant deputy minister, organizational effectiveness and rural services; Jim Carter, our senior financial officer from Alberta Ag and Food; and Brad Klak, president and managing director of Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. Also, touring in the building here somewhere, keeping an eye on us, are Brian Rhiness, assistant deputy minister, industry development; Colin Jeffares, assistant deputy minister, planning and competitiveness; John Donner, assistant deputy minister, environment and food safety; Dr. Krish Krishnaswamy, vice-president, finance at AFSC; Jim Kiss, the Farmers' Advocate; Donna Babchishin, director of communications; and last but not least is my executive assistant, Michael Norris.

Mr. Chairman, agriculture has been at the centre of Alberta's history for a very long time. Homesteaders brought a strong work ethic, a sense of adventure, and a spirit of community to this province. This heritage is still part of our rural communities today. The agriculture and food industry is critical to maintaining diversity and resilience in the Alberta economy. With \$7.81 billion in farm cash receipts in 2006 Alberta is the second largest agricultural producing province in Canada, and the \$9.6 billion food and beverage industry generates 27,000 jobs in Alberta.

Today's farmers and producers still work the land to grow crops and raise the livestock that fill our food basket. On top of that, today we also see that sense of adventure in innovative entrepreneurs who are building our value-added sector. The producers will always be the heart of our sector, and they will continue to drive our reputation for the quality made-in-Alberta product that is needed for our value-added sector. Together with the growing value-added sector and so many new ventures, we have a recipe for success. This formula has resulted in tremendous growth over the years. In 2006 our agriculture and food industry generated \$5.8 billion in international exports, roughly one-fifth of the nation's agrifood products.

Like the rest of Alberta we know that the agriculture and food industry holds even greater potential, and we are focused on the future. This government is committed to ensuring that our agriculture and food industry continues to grow and thrive. Our current business plan takes into consideration the challenges facing our industry today and outlines how we're working with industry to take advantage of tomorrow's opportunities.

[Mrs. Ady in the chair]

Our current goals, core business, and strategies support the mandate set out by our Premier, but as a ministry we recognize that we are part of a bigger picture. Our objectives line up with the government-wide priorities set out by our new Premier. These priorities are reflected in our mission of enabling growth of a globally competitive, sustainable agriculture and food industry through essential policy, legislation, information, and services. Madam Chairman, that mission lines up with our ministry's vision of growing Alberta farms, processors, and all other agriculture businesses in support of a vibrant rural Alberta.

The work of the Ag and Food ministry directly or indirectly supports all the Premier's priorities. In particular, our programs are designed to manage growth, build a stronger Alberta, and improve our quality of life. We are strategically linked to the government of Alberta business plan, and we will continue to contribute to the goal of having a prosperous Alberta economy by enhancing industry competitiveness and growth.

Key initiatives such as the agriculture growth strategy and the agri-environment strategy will help provide direction. This also contributes to the goal of managing growth pressures. Managing

growth pressures means bringing challenges with opportunities, and that's something we do a lot of in the ag industry. We have been responding to some particular food safety issues, labour needs, and market influences. For example, BSE and several years of low commodity prices have presented some ongoing problems for our producers. However, in resolving issues, we have found ways to strengthen our industry, create greater stability, and capture untapped potential.

The Premier's mandate to me for the Ministry of Ag and Food builds on this desire to turn challenges into opportunities. I mentioned earlier that our mission statement speaks to sustainability and provided some examples. We are committed to building on the existing research as we lay the groundwork for an institute that would help us turn our concern for the environment into market opportunities. We already know that Alberta's farmers are good stewards of the land, so this is a natural fit for an industry that earns a living in partnership with Mother Nature.

Another mandate is to develop a transition program for agriculture to work within the boundaries of any World Trade Organization agreements. This work will be critical to our ability to compete internationally.

The success of our farmers also depends on ensuring that they have access to capital for their business. The Premier has asked that we work with our partners to improve agricultural financial services.

Madam Chairman, as a ministry we have been working diligently to address all these mandates, and we continue to move in the right direction. We need to work with our industry to ensure that they're ahead of the game and remain strong competitors in the changing global market. It is very clear how these mandates from the Premier fit with our three core business areas: facilitate sustainable industry growth, support and strengthen rural sustainability, and strengthen business risk management.

Within those areas we have identified the following priorities: developing traceability systems, which will help mitigate BSE risks and other food safety concerns; addressing labour shortages through a workforce strategy; expanding the value-added sector by capitalizing on innovation and untapped markets; and responding to evolving consumer interests as well as shaping and supporting our overall competitiveness.

At this point I'd like to talk about some of the specific areas of our budget that will help achieve these priorities. The total Agriculture and Food budget for 2007-2008 is \$1.026 billion. Together the ministry's leadership and spending reflect our support and commitment to the province's agriculture and food industry.

4:50

Our funding commitments overall have not changed dramatically, but I'd like to highlight some new funding. We have provided \$3.6 million in new funding to support our ministry's priority to enhance food chain traceability programs. This funding along with continued assistance to help industry respond to the enhanced feed ban will help keep us competitive. We have also allocated \$1.1 million to new workforce strategy funding. Alberta experienced extraordinary growth in 2006, but as you know, there is a price for this prosperity. Like other areas agriculture has experienced labour shortages. This funding will help address this impact on our success.

We have all seen some increases in funding to ongoing programs. We are directing \$5.7 million towards the Canada-Alberta farm water program. That's an increase of \$4.3 million. The extra funding will help farmers develop projects that promote efficient use and conservation of water in their farming operations.

That highlights some of our major programs provided for in this budget and those that have seen increases. I'd also like to point out

that many of our programs are demand driven and tied to our statutory commitments. We are influenced by what happens outside our provincial borders. Our needs vary from year to year. That's why you'll see some areas of funding go up or down slightly from year to year as we adjust to target resources where and when they are needed.

Our loan-based programs provide lending that is specific to agriculture at all levels, from value-added to stock start-up primary production. As I'm sure you're aware, our farmers routinely face some hefty cost pressures, such as fuel and fertilizer prices, which are dictated by the world market.

Madam Chairman, I quite look forward to continuing the discussion as we go on.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

I have first on my list the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. I again appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Agriculture and Food budget this afternoon. I'm still having difficulty getting around the fact that development is not at the end of this, and I think it was a mistake. I don't know what sort of politics were played there, but I still think of agriculture, food, and rural development together, and I hope that at some point the hon. minister gets rural development back where it belongs: in his department.

Now, I would like to first talk about the budget on page 46, the farm fuel distribution allowance. That's expense element 2.0.6. It's estimated to be 33 and a half million dollars. If one goes back 10 years, when the current Premier was minister of agriculture, the farm fuel distribution allowance was \$30,300,000. Actually, it was overexpended in that year, when the current Premier was minister of agriculture, by a little over \$2 million. So when you add that farm fuel allowance amount, \$32,427,000, roughly 10 years ago, to what we are today requesting in the budget, it's basically the same.

My first questions would be regarding the Auditor General's report. The Auditor General had a lot to say about how the farm fuel benefit program is working or not working in the department. I consider this to be scandalous over the last 10 years. The minister has to accept responsibility for all the inactivity that has gone on with the series of ministers in there over the last 10 years. The Alberta farm fuel benefit program is designed to offer fuel to Alberta farmers at prices competitive with those paid by farmers in other parts of North America, according to the Auditor General in his report, and there are 60,000 individuals registered in the program.

The Auditor goes on to state that the Fuel Tax Act and the fuel tax regulations authorize the program, which has two parts. It has an allowance part and a fuel tax exemption part. The allowance part of this benefit is costing us \$34 million. That's an annual direct cost, which I referred to, and we also have this fuel tax exemption for another \$72 million. This is an exemption that allows farmers to buy marked diesel fuel and gasoline without paying the provincial fuel tax of 9 cents a litre. The allowance gives you 6 cents a litre off the cost of diesel fuel. So in some cases here there is a significant saving, and there should be. Farmers are facing a lot of input costs these days.

No one in the province would have a problem, I don't think, with this farm fuel benefit allowance and the intent of the program, but when you consider that the Auditor General states that there are 60,000 individuals registered in the program, how does the program work when Stats Canada, in data that were released yesterday, indicates that the total number of farms in this province is only 49,431? We've got 60,000 people on the books with these cards to get fuel reductions, and there are only 49,000 farms.

That's not all, Madam Chairman. The Auditor General goes on about the eligibility criteria of these programs and indicates: anyone who has been "actively involved in farming in Alberta, with gross annual farm income of at least \$10,000." That's one of the criteria to be eligible. Now, the Stats Canada information that was provided yesterday – and I got it from the library today – indicates that there are a number of farms in Alberta where the total gross farm receipts are under 10 grand. So let's have a look at this. The total number of farms is 9,791 where the gross income is less than 10 grand. I have a lot of questions regarding these 60,000 individuals who are packing these cards in their pockets and how they're being used.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

I think this government and this department along with the Department of Finance, Mr. Chairman, have failed the taxpayers miserably in the administration of this program. Is the Stats Canada data wrong? How on earth does this work? Here's what the Auditor General found in his audit regarding this program.

The Department does not verify the information in application forms before issuing a certificate. Nor does it have any other processes to ensure that only eligible individuals get certificates – or to identify people who become ineligible.

The Auditor General goes on to say that the renewal process has not been completed since 1997, when the current Premier was in charge of the entire department.

Program application forms state that a registration renewal is completed every three years and registrants must submit confirmation of their continued program eligibility then. However, the Department has not completed a renewal process or requested confirmation of eligibility from registrants since 1997. The Farm Fuel Regulation gives the Minister authority to extend the expiry date on certificates. This is what the Department has done for the past nine years – instead of a renewal.

This is from the Auditor General.

This total program costs us \$109 million. In 2005-06 the entire amount collected in gas tax in this province was \$664 million, and it's anticipated, Mr. Chairman, now that we are going to collect \$720 million in gas tax. Now, this amount that we're giving back in these programs through these 60,000 cards is close to 15 per cent of what we're collecting in total gasoline or in fuel tax according to the annual report.

5:00

I have a number of questions now. Is the Minister of Agriculture and Food registered in the Alberta farm fuel benefit program? Why does this department not verify the information in application forms before issuing a certificate? Why does the department not have any other processes to ensure that only eligible individuals get certificates for what could amount to in some cases up to a 15-cent a litre break? I'm not saying that it happens in all cases. It could be 6 cents, it could be 9 cents, but whenever you look at the millions of dollars here, this is significant. Why is there no process to identify people who become ineligible? Why has the department not completed a renewal process? Why has the department not required confirmation of eligibility from registrants since 1997, when the current Premier was minister? Why has the department extended the expiry date on certificates?

We look at this and we look at the Auditor General's report, and we see that in 2006 there were 60,000 registered, packing these cards around in the province of Alberta. Statistics Canada the 2006 Census of Agriculture indicates that there are 49,431 total farms in Alberta. If we do a little bit of math on this, Mr. Chairman, we find out that on average these 60,000 individuals would get \$1,766 in

savings every year per cardholder. That's a lot of money. That's \$33.80 a week if we wanted to look at it that way. If 10,000 of these extra cardholders should have been deemed ineligible, that's over \$17 million in one fiscal year that went out in unauthorized use. [Mr. MacDonald's speaking time expired]

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, a long time to ask two questions, but I appreciate where the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is coming from.

I'll talk a little bit about rural development. Yes, we certainly have made some changes, and I was probably part of some of the discussions along the way. Of course, at one time we had moved ag societies, we'd moved 4-H and a few of the others and, of course, quickly realized, partially from the push back we got from the people out there, that they certainly belonged with agriculture, and they indeed came back to agriculture.

Rural development, I guess, hon. member, is a bit of a cat of its own. Yeah, it belongs with agriculture, but rural development certainly is more than agriculture. I know it's now in the camp of the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry. They have a special board that looks after administering the finances because I think we sent about seven people and a hundred million dollars over there. It's now in their camp, but I think that probably we still have that relationship where we discuss, you know, what we feel belongs with rural development, as do the other ministries as well. The truth of the matter is, I guess, that rural development is more than agriculture, so maybe it'll come back someday. We don't know that. However, it's where it's at now, and I think probably it will work out all right.

You know, government understands that our rural communities have unique needs, so we have to take a co-ordinated approach to economic growth, probably, and quality of life and infrastructure, health, learning, and skill development. It's been moved over there. It's going to stay there for a while, and we'll see how it goes. I guess that if agriculture feels that it's definitely in the wrong spot, we'll make our thoughts known in the process.

Farm fuel. It doesn't surprise me, hon. member, that you probably brought this up. In fact, I thought you would probably ask me in question period about this earlier in the game because of the fact that certainly the Auditor General has flagged this as something we probably should be dealing with and reviewing. That process, I think we probably might say, internally is happening, and desk audits are being completed as we go along. Certainly, we will have to take it further than that, you know.

A lot of this goes back to the crisis, I guess, we were in with the BSE and the drought that we were having, where we were absolutely almost devastated in the farming community in either the grains and oil seeds or the livestock side. It's kind of tough to get out there and really chop at that particular stage of the game. I know that's not an excuse. You indicate how many people probably are, you know, using this that don't qualify, and no doubt that's what we have to look into. That's what we have to ascertain. It's really difficult, and I know that the \$10,000 limit is, as you say, what they're trying to use.

In farming today it seems that we have the great, large farms with hundreds of thousands or indeed millions of dollars' worth of income, or we have the people that are in the niche markets now, in organic farming perhaps and what not, and a lot of off-farm work. Perhaps there are some wives or parts of the family doing this that probably don't fall below that \$10,000 range that you're talking about. Does the wife qualify to drive her half-ton to town or not? These are the types of things that we probably have to look at.

Am I a user of farm marked fuel? Yes, I am. On the weekend I do go home, and I slog around in the corrals. I pick up the list my son has left me: "Hey, you're in the cattle business with me. You better get to work." So I have to drive my half-ton. I honestly feel that I qualify driving my half-ton around with marked fuel in it.

These are some of the issues, I guess. Certainly, you know, like I said, reducing access to benefits while industry is recovering would almost be impossible, but we will have to go that route. The Auditor General has directed us, so we will.

There are renewals called for every four years. I think that probably the first renewal was called for at the time of the first severe drought that we had out there. I can see what happened. I wasn't there, but I can see, you know. I can get some logic to what happened.

I guess I'll go back a little bit to: who qualifies? Certainly, we know there are some out there that probably don't qualify, and that's just the nature of the beast. Also, the fuel distributors are somewhat under the gun on this in that they're supposed to keep an eye on what's happening, and indeed they do. We do sign – I don't know if we've done it for a while – a declaration, you know, so it's not just willy-nilly. You put your name on the line, and there can be repercussions if you get caught, other than the purple gas man sticking his little dipstick in your tank and checking, which, by the way, they don't do a whole lot of anymore. That probably compounds the problem as well. Having said that, I don't know if I've particularly answered your questions on that, but I certainly understand where you're coming from with the questions.

One of the other issues we want to talk about: on a particular farm more than one operator on that farm can qualify. They can't use the same fuel, but they can qualify because they are using it. So that skews the numbers a little bit when you try and justify, you know, a farm or how many farms are out there. There could be, particularly on a corporate farm, I guess, three or four operators that could qualify under the same scenario. Even Stats Canada tells us that we have more operators, 71,000, than farms, 49,000, which I think doesn't quite line up, probably, with the numbers that you have because you've got the most recent ones. I think you've probably picked off the ones that came out yesterday. I think it was yesterday.

5:10

Mr. MacDonald: I'd been waiting, yes.

Mr. Groeneveld: Yes. Right. Exactly.

We have started the renewal process in-house, and we definitely will take it to the next step. To be honest with you, the Auditor General probably put his finger on a few other things that we were doing that we felt maybe were a little bit more important. We have dealt with some of those others, and we're in that process.

Mr. Chairman, I hope that answers the hon. member's questions. He's probably got a few more tucked away in there someplace.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. I appreciate the responses from the hon. minister.

Certainly, I don't think we can relate this program to BSE or any of the other farm issues that we've dealt with over the last five years. I was waiting. I had read the report last fall, and I saw that 60,000 number, 60,000 individuals that had these cards, and I saw the fact that in 2001 we had roughly 53,000 farms. You can see that going down since 1976, I think, or 1977. You know, the hon. minister is absolutely right. There are less farms, and they seem to be getting bigger. But I was waiting. The librarians told me that this information would be available on May 16, and sure enough it was.

But there's no excuse for this. If these people are not farming, they should not be packing these cards around in their pockets getting a fuel break. It has nothing to do with the BSE crisis or any other issue that farmers faced. This is a simple case of a government dropping the ball not only for one year but for 10 years. I have sympathy for the hon. minister. He's been in this department for less than a year, but it's his predecessors that should be in here answering the questions on this because they did nothing. They did absolutely nothing to ensure that these programs were accurate.

Well, in the Stats Canada information the total number of farms in Alberta is 49,431, but over half the farms are sole proprietorships, so there should be only one individual with one of these cards. That's another point that I would like to make: 27,815 of our farms are sole proprietorships. There are another roughly 14,000 partnerships with and without a written agreement. There are 6,700 family corporations. The hon. minister is stating that, well, there could be more than one card with those outfits. You know, that's understandable, but the fact is that this doesn't add up. We've got 60,000 cards running around, and it's costing us megabucks. It's costing us year after year, in my opinion, a lot of money. If only 10,000 of these people were ineligible for one year and if we're going to average this, it means that the government is losing \$17 million. That's in one year, and that's if only 10,000 of them are ineligible.

Mr. Chairman, it's scandalous, and alarm bells should have gone off in this department with the overexpenditure on the farm fuel allowance in 1998, in the year ending March 31, 1998, when the Premier was the minister of agriculture. That's when people should have started paying attention to this. Obviously they did not because as the Auditor General points out, the department has not completed a renewal process or requested confirmation of eligibility from registrants since 1997. It's just a rubber stamp. I'm sorry, hon. minister; that is simply not good enough.

Now, what is the minister willing to do to investigate the abuse of this program over the past 10 years while the government of Alberta simply ignored its responsibility, in my opinion, to monitor? Mr. Chairman, I can only ask: what other programs under this ministry have gone unmonitored for so long? How does the hon. minister explain this department's failure to protect millions of dollars in taxpayer money over this time period? It's not unreasonable to ask – I don't know if there would be a privacy issue here – will the department produce a list of all the certificate holders? Surely, someone must know who the beneficiaries of this program are. Maybe there are 15,000 cards that are in the back of the wallet and never been used, and maybe others are racking up \$8,000 and \$9,000 in fuel savings in their operations in a year. Maybe it's all valid; maybe it's not. But who are all these people with these cards?

Alberta consumers right now, just before this long weekend, depending on which area of the province they're in are looking at well over \$1.10, \$1.12, \$1.14 a litre. And they're pulling up to the pump paying 9 cents a litre less for their gasoline. Taxpayers would love a break like this. They'd love to be able to whip out one of these cards. I'm sure if people had known that this program was not monitored – who knows? – the odd person may have applied for a card, but they didn't. This is completely unacceptable by this government that prides itself on fiscal management. Well, this is yet another example. It has failed. It has failed, Mr. Chairman.

Albertans will be outraged to hear that we've got this poorly administered program that's costing us millions and millions of dollars. The government has done nothing about it. Yet a consumer will roll up – hopefully, they won't have to push their car – to the pump this weekend and put \$50 or \$60 in it to top it up, and they'll pay the bill. They get no help. They get no help. This program should be set up for farmers and farmers only and farmers that need

it. I can only imagine what the bill has been since 1997 for people who are ineligible for these amounts. Now, when we look at the number of farms as reported by Stats Canada, there certainly have to be a lot of ineligible cardholders who are fleecing the taxpayer.

Mr. Chairman, hopefully, we're going to get some answers. I don't know how this is going to be investigated. I can see where the department has said that it accepted the Auditor General's recommendations in regard to this matter and plans and processes are well under way. This is good, but does that mean that the department is simply ignoring the fact that abuses may have been happening over the past 10 years? Are we just going to forget about this, hope that frustrated consumers forget about this, hope that taxpayers forget about this?

5:20

I just can't understand how this was allowed to continue to happen as the Auditor General has pointed out in his report. There are too many implications to this. Tax dollars, in my opinion, are being wasted, and I think we've got to have an immediate action plan from the government on this. Whoever was responsible for this omission – and it's not this minister; it's previous ministers – has to be held accountable. They have to explain why there is this complete lack of control over this program. Someone must have known. Someone must have known because in 2001 there were 53,652 farms registered by Stats Canada, yet this program just seemed to breeze through every year. The Legislative Assembly gave the money, Alberta Finance administered some of this, and the taxpayers year after year have lost millions and millions of dollars. Again, Mr. Chairman, it's scandalous. There's only one way to describe this.

Mr. Dunford: An outrage.

Mr. MacDonald: Taxpayers will be outraged, hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Mr. Groeneveld: Mr. Chairman, every farmer in Alberta is not a crook.

Mr. Cardinal: That's what the Liberals think.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, obviously.

Mr. MacDonald: No. We're not saying that, and you know it.

Mr. Groeneveld: I think you kind of give that impression when you start talking about millions and millions of dollars, you know. How do you know that particular figure?

Mr. Chairman, it takes resources to conduct an audit. We know that, so that's part of where we're at. We agree that the issue has to be addressed. You know, I can only assume in answering your questions where you kind of lay the blame on the previous ministers that they probably figured it was maybe better to focus our energies on dealing with the response to the drought and the BSE that was out there. I'm not going to make an excuse for anyone, but I know that life was not a lot of fun out there in the last few years. In fact, it's not all a bed of roses yet, or probably the hon. chairman and myself wouldn't be sitting in this House if it was so rosy out there. I don't know. That's only an assumption.

I would also add that the Auditor General reported that the minister did an outstanding job of administering the drought and BSE progress. We sent out \$1.7 billion worth of support in that process. Perhaps the hon. member disagrees, but the Auditor General has reviewed our process and issued his opinion. I already indicated that we are going to go ahead; we're going to look into

this. We don't do that overnight. We cannot under the FOIP rules, of course, list the names of the people that use the marked fuels.

You keep talking about cars, and I think that if you go out into rural Alberta and you start looking around and you see the amount of tractors out there that use marked fuels and half-tons that legitimately use marked fuels, I think that probably millions and millions of dollars being misdirected is a stretch. At least, I certainly hope it is. However, we are going to deal with this in the future. You know, we're not ignoring anyone in the process. The Auditor General has brought this up; we know in our department that we're going to deal with this.

Mr. Chairman, the hon. member talks about the Statistics Canada release that came out yesterday, you know, and just to mention a few things that have happened on the agricultural side of the industry. This consensus provides a profile of Canadian agricultural operation information on the number of farms, the crops that are out there, how the land is being used. They talk a little bit about the land management practices, which, of course, is something that we're dealing with very much now with SRD and their land-use framework. They talk about the livestock and poultry industry, which as the hon. member said: BSE, drought that's no reason to do what we did. It's not a pretty picture out there yet, particularly, and I think the hon. member has to understand that.

They talk about farm machinery: what's happened out in farm machinery where farmers are now paying up to \$400,000 for a combine or \$400,000 for a tractor, of what that's doing to the farm economy out there and how, of course, we see fewer farmers out there. But that doesn't mean that they're all corporate farms. In my own instance, my son and I run a corporate farm for various reasons, but it's still what I consider very much a family farm. Statistics can be a tad misleading on quite a bit of those issues.

They talk about the gross farm receipts, which is kind of interesting. In Alberta here they actually went up. So that part is encouraging, I guess you might say. Maybe there's a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

You know, there are profiles on farm operators, and they talk about one other issue that we hear from the opposition from time to time: farm-related injuries. That's a statistic that we in Alberta are not happy with. I think we're .4 of 1 per cent higher than the national average. I guess that we work on that .4 or try to get that down, but as you've heard us say many times in the process: one farm injury or one farm death is too many. I think these are the type of issues that we have to look at these statistics and come back and say: "Hey. We have to deal with these in a prudent manner as well because we can't always look at the dollars and cents sign that is out there."

Of course, as I said, the major highlight from the statistics was the decline of farms in Canada. Nationally our numbers fell 7 per cent from 2001, to 229,373 farms. This trend, you know, was evident here in Alberta as the number of farms decreased by 7.9 per cent since 2001, to just under 50,000 farms. Despite this drop, Mr. Chairman, Alberta still has the second-largest number of farms among all Canadian provinces. As well, farm size in terms of the area has increased since 2001. The shrinking farm numbers should not be mistaken as the death of the family farm because as people move into corporate farms, as I said before, we are still family farms. Indeed, yes, we have some large corporate farms out there. But when we look at Alberta, we have quite a few of the Hutterite brethren farms out there, which are corporate family farms, and you certainly can't say they're not a family-run organization. There are some pretty big corporate farms out there that way.

Alberta Ag and Food helps maintain and grow family farms through a number of different programs. It probably should be noted

that with newer technologies certainly more people can farm more land. I'll just go back to my own situation where my son does the grain farming and we work together on the cattle. When I'm up here, he gets up in the morning. He doesn't get up, like you might indicate, at 5 o'clock in the morning to milk the cows because those days are long gone, but he gets up at a reasonable time in the morning. He feeds 200 cows, and if he doesn't seed 200 to 250 acres a day, he figures he's had a pretty bad day. The life has changed out there so much, and it's changing ever so quickly as we move along in the last couple of years. Really, it results in, you know, fewer farmers running the farms. It's not all gloom and doom, I guess.

5:30

The consensus also noted that farmer input prices increased 9.6 per cent since 2001 – and that's a concern – while the prices received for their products dropped 2.6 per cent. Of course, the people at AFSC certainly see that happening as they go through the various programs that we have. I think that probably in Alberta we are so much farther ahead of the other provinces because of the fact that the people at AFSC come up with the Alberta-only programs to add to that. In Alberta here we don't like what's happening, but we're probably still head and shoulders above where the other provinces are going. Certainly, my department is concerned about the increase in input costs and the decreased prices recovered for the products. We've known all along that the input costs are rising, and it's not just the farming sector.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, I have a lot of issues to bring up with the department. I would like to state again for the record, to correct the minister: it's this government's total incompetence that we're pointing out. It has nothing to do with the farming community. It's the incompetence of this government – total incompetence – in administering this farm fuel program. I would advise the minister, clearly, to go over *Hansard* in the course of this debate, and I will expect an apology from him for his comments on the Monday that we resume discussions in this Assembly.

Now, Mr. Chairman, the Auditor General also has other recommendations for this department, but in the time we have, I would like to discuss some of the specific, again, line items in the budget, this element 2.0.3, regarding the Alberta Grain Commission. Now, the Alberta Grain Commission, from what I can see going over its website for the last five years, has been nothing more than a shell for the anti Wheat Board forces. Tax dollars going in here, increases all the time. The 2006-07 forecast for the Alberta Grain Commission is \$522,000, \$35,000, or 7 per cent, higher than what was budgeted last year, this respective fiscal year, Mr. Chairman.

The Grain Commission, again, does not publish an annual report. You're giving it megabucks, you're increasing the budget all the time, but there's no annual report, and there's really very little information to be found on the commission except its anti Wheat Board rhetoric. We've had to submit written questions, Mr. Chairman, just to get basic information about this organization. There's a serious lack of openness with the Alberta Grain Commission. Can the minister tell us why the commission overspent its budget last year? Why was this additional \$35,000 needed? Can the minister provide us with a detailed breakdown of how the Grain Commission uses its funding?

I know the Grain Commission played a big role, as I said earlier, in the campaign to discredit the Canadian Wheat Board in the past

number of years. Can the minister tell us where the commission will be focusing its attention this year? What initiatives will the Grain Commission, again, be focusing on? Will the department be providing public information regarding the Grain Commission's activities? In the spirit of openness and accountability, will the minister commit to having the Grain Commission publish an annual report so that taxpayers can see where the money has been spent? We shouldn't have to get a written question across to the department. They are tax dollars, and you should explain how they are being spent.

Now, the Auditor General had some concerns about the Alberta Financial Services Corporation. In the 2005-06 Auditor General's annual report, volume 2, page 43, the AG recommends that "the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation improve: employee information system security awareness." We all know that computer problems are rampant in the department, the use of computers at the wrong time. We've dealt with that issue, not to my satisfaction, but at least we've dealt with it.

The Auditor General also recommends that the AFSC monitor "employee compliance with its computer access policies and procedures," and we've seen what a lack of computer use policies can lead to in the case of the agricultural employee who had to be suspended for inappropriate behaviour. Can the minister tell us if he's dealt with the AG's recommendation as it relates to the AFSC? What, specifically, has the minister done to fix this problem?

Also, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to have a look at some of the major funding increases and decreases in the department. In the estimates on page 46, element 1.0.3, the Farmers' Advocate. The Farmers' Advocate is \$3,000 less than for the 2006-07 forecast year. The minister has been telling us about how tough times are. Can the minister tell us why he is reducing funding for the Farmers' Advocate if farmers are in as much trouble? And they are. I agree with him; it's tough these days. Given the important role that the advocate plays in assisting farmers, particularly with energy development issues on farmland, does the minister not agree that the advocate should be well funded to serve rural communities? Is it the minister's position that the advocate will need less resources this year than the office did last year, and if so, why?

Also on the same page in element 3.0.2, rural utilities. Electricity deregulation has cost Alberta farmers significantly, particularly when you compare farm electricity costs to other regions. I did a comparison with Stats Canada data, and it was shameful. If farmers are in a tough situation, it's even tougher when they walk to the mailbox or go to town and get their power bill. They've probably got to go right to the bank after that. Can the minister tell us if he supports electricity deregulation, in light of the fact that Alberta's farm electricity costs have risen by an unbelievable 38 per cent since 2000? Does the minister believe that farmers in Alberta should be paying more for their electricity than farmers in Saskatchewan, B.C., or Manitoba? How does the government of Alberta support farmers who are struggling to pay their electricity costs brought on by the failures of deregulation?

Also on page 46, line 3.0.3, rural community and leadership development. There's a very important item here, and I don't know if we're going to get time to discuss it. Maybe in question period we'll get the chance. Rural community and leadership development is \$412,000 more than was budgeted last year. This is a significant case of overspending. How does the minister justify spending more than \$400,000 more than was budgeted for this particular program? Can the minister tell us what this program does and how the additional \$412,000 was spent?

I think we'll go now, Mr. Chairman, to page 47 of the estimates, and we'll start with element 4.0.1, program support. In the 2007-08

estimate for program support there is a 38 per cent increase from '06-07. This is a significant increase in funding. Can the hon. minister tell us why this additional money is needed? How will this additional funding be utilized? Does the minister expect a significant increase in the level of support that industry development will require this year?

Element 4.0.5., bioindustrial technologies. The 2006-07 forecast for bioindustrial technologies is \$4.2 million, 60 per cent more than was budgeted for last year, an additional \$1.59 million. Can the minister please tell us where this additional funding was used? Why did the minister accept the need for additional funding? What kinds of bioindustrial technologies has the department been investing in? The 2007-08 estimate is more than \$1 million dollars less than the previous year. Will this be enough, or will we be overspending again this year?

5:40

Element 4.0.6, business expansion and commercialization. This is a 28 per cent increase. This is a significant increase. Can the minister explain where he would like to see this additional funding used? Is this additional funding going towards developing grain marketing options for Albertans in light of the recent CWB vote?

Line item 4.0.7, agriculture industry development and diversification. There's a 19 per cent increase in the 2006-07 forecast. Can the minister tell us if this funding will be focused on any organic food initiatives? In what areas would the minister like to see greater diversification? Will any of this funding go towards producer-owned marketing co-operatives? Will any of this funding go towards the development of agricultural tourism initiatives such as U-pick, farmers' markets, or value-added specialty products?

Element 4.0.8, the Growth Strategy Secretariat. Again, a 29 per cent increase from the previous year. Can the minister tell us what this additional funding will be used for?

Element 4.0.9, infrastructure assistance for municipal waste water. Oh, I've run out of time, Mr. Chairman, and I'm disappointed.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Food to respond.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. My first discussion I would like to have – his opening comment on the last round was the total incompetence of this government. I would like to comment that that's probably one person's opinion, unless the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East would like to jump up and express her opinion. Then I might have to say that it's two people's opinion, but I'm going to take that with a grain of salt. Coming from that side of the House, I guess that's a natural thing to say.

Alberta Grain Commission, something I certainly don't mind talking about. Their budget is \$495,000. Hon. member, the results are reported in the annual report of the ministry. I would be happy to provide copies of the contributions to the hon. member if he so desires. His allegations, perhaps, about the barley plebiscite and the grain commission: Mr. Chairman, could we stay here till about 10 o'clock? Because I would like to express my opinion on that one. But I think probably the hon. member, as he did in the previous ministry, kind of likes to bait people, whether it's with golf courses

or whatever the case may be, so I'll take that with a smile on my face.

At any rate, I would suggest that the Alberta Grain Commission's position on the barley plebiscite is probably somewhat a direct result of what myself and the department's position has been all along on the Canadian Wheat Board, so to speak. As you know, it's a federal initiative, and they chose to deal with the barley portion of it. It was all that they chose to deal with at this time, maybe a little bit to the chagrin of myself and my department.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the Minister of Agriculture and Food, but I will now invite officials to leave the Assembly so the committee may rise and report.

Mr. Groeneveld: Mr. Chairman, I would gladly supply to the member the answers that we didn't get to.

The Chair: Pursuant to Standing Order 59.02(9)(a) the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

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

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

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? That's carried. So ordered.

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

Bill 33
Town of Bashaw and Village of Ferintosh
Water Authorization Act

[Debate adjourned May 16: Dr. Pannu speaking]

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with regret that I move that we adjourn until 1 p.m. on Monday, May 28.

[Motion carried; at 5:48 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday, May 28, at 1 p.m.]

