

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, June 4, 2007**

1:00 p.m.

Date: 07/06/04

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

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

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

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the ambassador of Belgium to Canada, His Excellency Mr. Jean Lint. This is the first time His Excellency has travelled to Alberta. I'm pleased to say that Belgium and Alberta have always been strong trading partners. Since 2001 annual exports have increased from \$118 million to over \$213 million, including nickel, wheat, wood pulp, and cobalt. Between 2001 and 2005 Alberta imports from Belgium were worth approximately \$134 million a year, including diamonds, medications, blood products, and chocolate.

Mr. Speaker, Belgium has been at the forefront of international trade and diplomacy. It is one of the six founding countries of the European Union, and the headquarters of the EU as well as NATO headquarters are located in Belgium's capital city, Brussels. Not only do we share a strong trade relationship with Belgium; there are about 15,000 Albertans of Belgian descent who call our province home.

Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to welcome His Excellency to our province. May I ask that he please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some very special guests who are with us in the House this afternoon. I am honoured to welcome 47 ladies and gentlemen from my constituency

representing the communities of Innisfree, Islay, Clandonald, Marwayne, Dewberry, Blackfoot, Mannville, and Vermilion. Through the organizational efforts of Shirley McRobert, the seniors' co-ordinator for the county of Vermilion River in the town of Vermilion, these fine folks are visiting us here today to take part in the Alberta Legislature's celebrations for Seniors' Week 2007.

Alberta's seniors have contributed much to our province. Their vision, their personal sacrifice, and unfaltering resourcefulness shaped our province and laid the foundation for our current prosperity. They continue to remain active and viable in our communities. The theme of this year's Seniors' Week, Celebrate Seniors' Present and Future Contributions, accurately reflects the important role of our most experienced citizens.

I would now ask these very special guests of ours to rise and please accept the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly 19 bright and very well-behaved students from Eastwood school along with their teacher, Khery Wallace. I would ask that they now please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my great honour and pleasure to introduce to you and Members of the Legislative Assembly some 60 energetic students from the Edmonton Christian school northeast campus. They are accompanied by two teachers, Elaine Junk and Mr. Greg Gurnett. I might point out again that his brother Jim Gurnett served in this Legislature with me many years ago. They're also accompanied by parents Angela VanKooten, Mr. Mark Hennig, Mrs. Linda Ryks, Mrs. Edith Sinclair, Mrs. Rose VandenBoogard, Mrs. Fran Wolthius. I would now ask them to stand – I think they're in both sections – and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly a group of 17 industrious, hard-working employees from the Department of Sustainable Resource Development finance branch seated in the members' gallery. They're here on a public service orientation tour. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly representative students from the grade 9 class at Allendale school here in Edmonton. They are Maggie Boeske, Kira Dlusskaya, and Nikolai Semenenko along with their teacher, Robin Knight. They'll be joined by 22 of their peers at about 1:30, when room is opening up for them in the galleries.

Mr. Speaker, you may remember that a few weeks ago Dr. Richard Leakey was in Edmonton. One of the things that Dr. Leakey did was make a presentation to school students here in

Edmonton at the science centre. This particular class of students, as a class project, wrote individual letters to me, the Environment minister, about their impressions of what Dr. Leakey had to tell them. I was so impressed with the quality of those letters that I asked that those students come and join me here at the Legislature so that I could meet them face to face and answer their questions and deal with their concerns. We just had lunch in room 512. I'm here to say that this is an outstanding group of young Albertans that, I'm proud to say, will become, I'm sure, the leaders of our province in years to come.

I would ask that they stand and be recognized and receive the traditional warm welcome of all members of the House.

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

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Heather Massel, a public affairs officer in the Department of Justice and Attorney General. Heather is a fellow member of the Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force. We affectionately call her Princess. I'll ask her to rise and receive the warm welcome from the Assembly.

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

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two individuals from southern Alberta. The first is Gerard Gibbs, the executive director of the Empress Theatre Society. The Empress Theatre is that jewel on Main Street Fort Macleod.

An Hon. Member: Indeed.

Mr. Coutts: Absolutely.

It is Alberta's oldest working theatre. It started in June of 1912. Today it boasts about 12,000 patrons per year, and it is the unique cultural and historic resource in southern Alberta that stands, I believe, as the flagship today, as Gerard says, for performing arts in southern Alberta. Joining Mr. Gibbs is Lise Boutin. Lise is a Franco-Albertan artist, Mr. Speaker. She is an accomplished concert violinist. She is the concertmaster of the Calgary Bach orchestra, a member of the Pacific Baroque Orchestra of Vancouver. She has played with the Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary symphonies, but her favourite place is the Empress Theatre stage in Fort Macleod. They are seated in the members' gallery. I ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:10

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

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was my pleasure to take part today in what has become an annual luncheon meeting, almost a meeting of the minds, if you will, as today in the Legislature seven central and southern Alberta MLAs met with six central Alberta ATA presidents to discuss a number of very important issues. I'd ask the gentlemen to rise as I call their names and please remain standing until all are introduced. Today we met with Jere Geiger from Central West, Gary Hansen from Wetaskiwin, Scott Lewis from Wolf Creek, Brenton Baum from Timberline, Hans Huizing from Red Deer public, and Bob Worsfold from Chinook's Edge. Sending his regrets, also, was Chris McCullough from Red Deer separate. I see that the gentlemen are all standing, so I would ask my colleagues to please give them the warm traditional welcome.

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

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've been looking forward to this day for some time to introduce to you, to all members, and to all Albertans two of Alberta's brightest shining young stars. First, I'm very proud to announce that our STEP student for Calgary-Lougheed for the summer is Sandra Watson, who has spent time personally and professionally in Harbin, China, and speaks Mandarin Chinese. She has many, many other gifts and talents. She has two young boys, Austin and Zachary, and currently is in her final year of her bachelor of applied policy studies degree at Mount Royal College. She really enjoys dealing with people, does a great job of that, and she really loves politics.

Second, I'm proud to present a born and raised Calgarian named David Rothwell, who's always had a passion for public service. I can relate to him in a couple of other ways: an outdoor enthusiast who loves hiking and spending time in the mountains. This year David graduated with a bachelor of applied policy studies degree at Mount Royal College and recently completed a sport development policy framework on behalf of Sport Alberta.

So, Mr. Speaker, in the future if Alberta is in the hands of young people like this, we'll be just fine. I'd like to ask Sandra and David, who are behind me every step of the way, including today in the members' gallery, to please stand to accept the warm wishes of everyone in the Assembly.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group from the St. Albert Catholic teachers' local 23: Ms Viviane Pezer, president of the Greater St. Albert Catholic teachers; Sean Brown, vice-president of the Greater St. Albert Catholic teachers' local 23; Carryl Bennett, secretary of the Greater St. Albert Catholic teachers' local 23; Sun Ang, high school teacher; Janice McDonald, elementary teacher; Herman Weidle, elementary teacher; and Claude Dubé, elementary teacher. Would they please rise and receive the very warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As part of my ongoing celebration of Edmonton being named Canada's cultural capital for 2007 I'd like to introduce to you Robert Shannon. Now, Robert is one of the representatives from Canada who is going to the Prague Quadriennial. This is an exhibition of outstanding stage design from around the world. Over 60 countries are represented, and Robert is going to represent us here. His exhibit that is on display there is from Edmonton Opera's performance of *Weill in Weimar*. I think it was Robert's costume designs that were there. He is currently on faculty with the fine arts department here at the U of A in theatre design, specializing in costumes, lighting, and new media. I would ask Robert to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Florentino Yap, Juan Tamag, and Tania Wiest. They're on their 269th day of strike at the Palace Casino, due to this government's unwillingness to pass fair first contract legislation. Florentino has worked at the casino for five years. Originally he came from the Philippines, in 1992. He's a

husband and father of three. Juan has been at the Palace Casino for three years in the maintenance department. He's also from the Philippines and immigrated to Canada in 2002 with his wife of 43 years. Tania has been at the casino for three years in the food and beverage department. She enjoys sports and is looking forward to enjoying playing in the summer weather. Accompanying them is UFCW union representative Don Crisall. I would now ask my guests, who are sitting in the public gallery, to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Hon. members, today over 500 individuals will visit the Alberta Legislature Building. Just as a point of interest, the Alberta Legislature Building and Grounds are the third-largest destination point for visitors to the city of Edmonton on an annual basis.

head:

Members' Statements

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

International Aboriginal Film & Television Festival

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For 12 years Albertans and the international community have had the pleasure to be enlightened, entertained, and amused by the presentations at the International Aboriginal Film & Television Festival. Over the next six days the richness of aboriginal culture, life stories, and voyages will be highlighted for all to enjoy. Because Dreamspeakers is the only aboriginal film and TV festival in Alberta, it plays a vital role in allowing these stories to be told to the population as a whole, breaking barriers and facilitating cultural understanding.

It begins with a welcome reception tonight at the Citadel Theatre and will feature our Premier and the festival society's board chair as they welcome local, national, and international guests from as far away as New Zealand and Africa. In addition, the New Zealand movie *The Waimate Conspiracy* will be featured during the opening screening.

On Tuesday and Wednesday audiences will be challenged as they attend pitching workshops for TV and movies and will enjoy indigenous works of art and film. After all, Mr. Speaker, visual arts are a profound representation of the thoughts of our souls and allow us to express that which words alone cannot. When we celebrate and explore ecstatic joy, crushing pain, unbreakable connection with nature, our love and kinship, we are connected to our community and are filled with great freedom and strength.

Aboriginal youth are a key component in this year's festival. Over 20 youth workshops were held throughout Alberta, sponsored and facilitated by the Dreamspeakers' festival and resulting in evocative and moving films, each of which will be premiered to a broad audience on the featured Youth Day, Thursday, June 7. Programs like this build confidence and teach transferrable skills that can help our aboriginal youth cope and express their stories in positive ways, as well as create the next generation of filmmakers in Alberta.

Saturday, June 9, will be the wrap-up party. To one and all, come and join the Dreamspeakers' International Aboriginal Film & Television Festival as they party into the wee hours with the Jim Cuddy Band.

I commend the Dreamspeakers Festival Society and volunteers for making this unique cultural extravaganza possible. To the aboriginal talent brought alive on screen and in our hearts, your expression feeds our souls and gives us all great power. Enjoy a great week.

CFB Suffield

Mr. Mittel: Mr. Speaker, *eximius ordo* is Latin for "out of the ordinary." It is also the motto of Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield.

Last week I attended the change of command ceremony at the base, where Lieutenant-Colonel Dan Drew, who is headed for duty in Afghanistan, was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel Malcolm Bruce. Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce, in taking command of CFB Suffield, now holds the reins of a very important military base. It spans over 2,690 square kilometres and is one of the largest live-fire training areas in the western world.

To give you a little bit of history, Mr. Speaker, in 1941 the need for a combined British/Canadian experimental station for trials in biological and chemical warfare was satisfied by establishing one in Suffield. In 1971 CFB Suffield was officially named and was allocated to the army. That year the Canadian government also ratified a 10-year agreement permitting the British forces to use approximately three-quarters of the training area for armoured, infantry, and artillery training. Four years later the Alberta Energy Company, now EnCana, was given permission to develop natural gas deposits and heavy oil deposits underneath the base. Since June 2003 458 square kilometres of the base have been protected as part of the CFB Suffield national wildlife area, home to a number of unique plants and animals.

1:20

Today the base provides support services for a number of units, including the British Army Training Unit Suffield, or BATUS, and Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) Suffield. DRDC Suffield conducts research into areas such as artificial intelligence in robotic equipment and performs antiterrorism training for countries around the world. The BATUS battle groups, three to five per year, have between 800 and 1,800 soldiers who use this as their last training before deployment to places like Afghanistan. Prince Harry and his command are presently training out on the prairie.

A new Canadian/United Kingdom treaty and MOU to permit continued British Army training at the base was signed last year. The signing will ensure that the base remains viable well into the future.

Mr. Speaker, as you can tell from this extensive and quick history, CFB Suffield is, indeed, out of the ordinary. Thank you.

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

Sports Hall of Fame and Museum Inductees

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the weekend I had the pleasure of attending the 2007 induction ceremony for the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Museum in Red Deer. Among the group of 14 inductees at this year's ceremony were international athletes, Olympic champions, innovative business leaders, championship teams, and other men and women who have made their mark in sport not only here in Alberta and Canada but all over the world. In fact, the team that our own Lieutenant Governor played on for 10 seasons, the Edmonton Eskimos, was inducted into the Alberta Hall of Fame in the team category this weekend. His Honour and the Eskimos won three consecutive Grey Cups, between 1954 and 1956.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents and I recognize the importance of the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Museum to the city of Red Deer and to this province. It is a place for people of all ages to learn the history of sport in our province. From the amateur to the professional, Alberta's athletes, teams, and sports builders enshrined in the

Hall of Fame all contribute to the rich legacy of sport here in Alberta.

I would now like to ask the members of the House to join me in recognizing the 2007 Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Museum inductees. They are Cassie Campbell, Megan Delehanty, Earl Ingarfield Sr., Curtis Myden, Eldon C. Godfrey, Harley Hotchkiss, D.K. Seaman, B.J. Seaman, Lorna Snow, the 1954, '55, and '56 Edmonton Eskimos, the 1987 and '88 Medicine Hat Tigers, John F. Mayell, Robert MacDermott, and Wes Montgomery. Congratulations to all the inductees.

Thank you.

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

Government Report Card

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tories failing Albertans: the June report card. For 32 years of my professional life as a public schoolteacher I and my colleagues were very busy in June preparing students to write final exams, the results from which would be averaged into their June report cards. As the end of both this Legislative session and the reporting period of June are fast approaching, it is time to issue the Premier and his government their report card.

From the top Tory to the bottom of his backbench this government has been a disappointment to the majority of Albertans. Our current Premier wasn't crowned even by the members of his own party. He was the compromise candidate, the least feared, with the least baggage. He ran on a ticket of not rocking the boat, of offering transparency and accountability. To Albertans' dismay those promises have not been kept. His boat has never left dry dock. Secrecy and superficiality continue to dominate this government's market-driven dogma. Whether it's the Premier's failure to disclose the source of \$163,000 of his campaign donations, his choice of a primarily male, rural-dominated cabinet, which refuses to allow municipalities, school boards, or health regions the autonomy of budget decisions, or its interference in the outcomes of task forces, this government has failed to deliver on its promise of transparency and accountability. It has failed to find a balance between economic and environmental issues.

The government, through its lack of intervention and refusal to set aside a significant portion of surplus savings, recommended not only by our Alberta Liberal caucus but by the Canada West Foundation, the Chambers of Commerce, and the Canadian taxpayers association, has jumped on the boom train and will ride it through to its inevitable bust. This tired government has failed. It's time for a change, Mr. Speaker.

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

Councillor Terry Cavanagh

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to rise today to speak about a very well-known and respected member of the Edmonton-Gold Bar constituency, Councillor Terry Cavanagh.

Born in Edmonton, he was first elected to Edmonton city council in 1971 and served until 1975, when he was elected mayor by council after the death of Mayor William Hawrelak. Mr. Cavanagh was mayor from 1975 until 1977. He returned to council in 1983 as a councillor and served in this capacity until 1988, when he was again elected by council to serve as mayor. He served as mayor until 1989. Three years later he was once again elected councillor. He currently represents ward 6 and does it very well.

He was the first native-born mayor of Edmonton and is the

recipient of many awards, including the commemorative medal for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's golden jubilee in 2002, admission to the Order of St. John in 1999 in recognition of contributions to the city of Edmonton, the Alberta human rights and civil liberties association human rights award in 1996, and the Governor General's 125th anniversary commemorative medal in 1992 in recognition of significant contribution to compatriots, community, and Canada.

Both Mr. Cavanagh and his wife, June, have served diligently as councillors for the city of Edmonton. On May 15, 2007, Mr. Cavanagh decided to retire, after 27 years of service to the city of Edmonton and the citizens of ward 6. He will be greatly missed. I would like to thank him on behalf of all Edmontonians for his many years of dedicated service to Edmonton and its citizens. He is a proud Edmontonian. He is an avid promoter of this province. He is a patriotic Canadian. We wish him and his family all the very best in retirement, long life, and good health.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Brain Injury Awareness Week

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to speak about Brain Injury Awareness Week, which runs from June 1 to 8. This special week helps to increase awareness of the effects of brain injuries and the ways Albertans can prevent them. Over 10,000 Albertans acquire brain injury each year. Many of them are preventable. For every preventable injury there is needless cost to individuals and to society.

The Alberta brain injury initiative, supported by the government through Seniors and Community Supports, since the year 2000 has addressed the needs of adults with acquired brain injury. The initiative works to support Albertans with brain injuries and their families by connecting them with supports that assist with relearning daily living skills, including managing conflict, also through co-ordination of community services, including assistance in finding appropriate housing and re-entry into the community, through providing training to family caregivers and professionals, and through providing information and education on all areas of brain injury to the public. They also publish the brain injury survival guide, which contains a wealth of information resources, and also sponsor the brain injury conference. As well, there's consulting going on with Albertans at community meetings in over 26 different communities. More information about the initiative can be found at www.seniors.gov.ab.ca.

We need to remember, Mr. Speaker, that when the roads are clear and dry not to increase our driving speeds or pay less attention, which potentially leads to crashes that can cause brain injuries. As Albertans get back on their bikes and rollerblades and skateboards, they should remember that one of the best ways to prevent brain injuries is to wear a helmet.

During Brain Injury Awareness Week I encourage all Albertans to learn more about brain injuries and their effects. Thank you.

The Speaker: Members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House today two people who are vitally important in my professional life in that they keep me organized, on track, and are a constant source of ideas and challenges, which I think help to sharpen the saw around the constituency of Calgary-Currie. Evan Woolley is the manager of my constituency office and my executive assistant. He is here in the House today, as is Shannon Haggins, my STEP student for this summer, a student in the applied degree program of policy studies at Mount Royal College. They're up for the day to observe and learn and, perhaps, plot for the future. If they would stand, please, and receive the warm welcome of the House.

head: 1:30

Oral Question Period

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

Contributions to Premier's Leadership Campaign

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Liberal caucus has obtained minutes from the board meeting of the Beaver regional waste management commission from August 17, 2006, in which Mr. Tom Walter and Mr. Ron Gaida, with the support of a Mr. Rod Krips, solicited a donation for a Tory leadership candidate. The minutes read as follows: Mr. Walter "explained the reasons that the Commission should support Mr. Stelmach in his campaign for leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta." My question is to the Premier. Given that this commission is incorporated under the Municipal Government Act, can the Premier explain what reasons were given that the commission should donate to his leadership campaign?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, in fact, I could double-check, but upon receiving funds from this commission, I believe the committee that was responsible for fundraising sent the money back. But I could confirm that tomorrow to make sure that my information, what I believe is correct, is absolutely true.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That does not change the fact that the solicitation was made, and the cheque was issued. The minutes from the commission meeting continue as follows:

Mr. Walter, Mr. Gaida and Mr. Krips left the Council Chambers at 7:33 pm.

Administrator Wright recommended that the Commission should donate \$25,000 to the Stelmach campaign.

Moved by CM Hrabec to donate \$10,000 to the Ed Stelmach campaign for Leader . . . and to leave communication open for additional funds in the future.

Carried.

To the Premier: does the Premier condone government policy under which a commission specifically created under regulation of this government to manage a landfill can make a donation of \$10,000 to a leadership campaign?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I believe the same error was committed by a particular municipality that bought tickets in support of the Liberal leader for one of his dinners, and subsequently they asked the money to be returned. So, again, it's an infraction according to the law, but like I said, back to the first question: I'm sure that the money was sent back. We didn't accept any money.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier should know that the laws are actually different in these circumstances. This commission had a specific mandate under regulation 75/92 of this government to provide regional waste management services to its shareholders, which are the towns of Tofield and Viking, the villages of Ryley and Holden, and Beaver county. Waste management services, nothing else. Yet they gave away \$10,000 in about 31 minutes for a political campaign. To the Premier: how does the Premier justify a regional waste management commission regulated by his government donating to a political leadership campaign, which is completely outside its mandate?

Mr. Stelmach: Again, this is something that volunteers did during the leadership campaign. Upon realizing that – again, I'll clarify absolutely tomorrow in terms of the money going back.

An Hon. Member: Did St. Albert give the money back?

Mr. Stelmach: Well, maybe St. Albert did. I don't know. Maybe the hon. leader will tell us if he did or not give the money back to St. Albert. But this is an omission on behalf of the commission or a municipality. The rules are the same.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you Mr. Speaker. The Beaver regional waste management commission gets its mandate under regulation of this government, as do all similar commissions. The minutes of the commission board meeting from last August 17 state the following: Mr. Walters "stated that the campaign would need financial support, not only from the public sector but also from the business sector." This suggests a systematic approach by this campaign to solicit political funds from publicly regulated bodies. To the Premier: how many public agencies were solicited for the funds by his leadership campaign?

Mr. Stelmach: None by me. If there are any that were approached inappropriately by any volunteer, I'm not aware of it. In this particular case, when it became evident that there was actually money received – and, again, I'll confirm it tomorrow – the money was sent back.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Only a party in power for 36 years could think it's okay to dole out tens of thousands of dollars in taxpayer grants to a commission and then turn around and ask the same commission for a \$10,000 donation for partisan purposes. To the Premier: will this commission remain eligible for provincial grants?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, here's an opposition that's been in opposition since – what? – 1912. Well, you know the history. That's the last time they served in government. They know the rules as well. Some of their volunteers approached a municipality for funding. I believe that once they found out that it was against legislation, they returned the money.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the nature of this donation and the nature of this attempted cover-up will the Premier

do the right thing and disclose all the donors to his leadership campaign?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, obviously this was in the minutes, that are fully public. I don't know where the cover-up is or what you guys are talking about. It's getting really to the point that it's getting a little absurd. It's public minutes. They've been reviewed by the commission. Like I say, tomorrow I'll give further information in terms of the cheque.

The Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, the chair knows not if these documents have been filed before or tabled, but if they haven't been, you'll table them a little later in the afternoon, right?

Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Teachers' Unfunded Pension Liability

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're joined by a number of teachers in the gallery today. Similar to all Alberta taxpayers they're concerned about finding a solution to the unfunded teachers' pension liability. To the Minister of Education: will the minister please explain to these teachers why he's delivering a \$25 million wedge between experienced and less experienced teachers? Can you explain that, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, one of the directives in my mandate letter was to resolve the unfunded pension liability issue, and I intend to do that. In meeting with the Alberta Teachers' Association and many teachers prior to budget day, it was indicated to me that the 3 per cent of a new teacher's salary that is deducted to cover the unfunded pension liability is a huge deterrent to recruitment of new students into the teaching profession and retaining those young teachers in the profession. Our initiative is to assist those teachers so that we keep the best minds teaching in our province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and to the minister, thank you as well. To the Minister of Education: how do you expect Alberta teachers to trust their retirement savings to this task force when you've created a situation where their input is clearly not welcome?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we also did at the time of the budget was that we announced that we would be creating a task force. Let's make it clear what the role of the task force is. It is to meet with stakeholders throughout the province to come up with options that we can discuss with the Alberta Teachers' Association relative to what would be fair for Alberta taxpayers if Alberta taxpayers are asked to assume the \$2 billion liability that exists today. That'll be the role of the task force. The option to have a member from the Alberta Teachers' Association on that task force was rejected.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Nowhere in the minister's mandate letter from the Premier does it say that you should divide teachers, undermine the ATA, or link salary negotiations with the pension liability. Why does he continue to do all three in this process?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, there was no intention to undermine the ATA. The ATA was asked to participate in the task force and refused, so I don't understand what the hon. member is referring to. Relative to negotiations, those will commence over the next few months between ATA locals and various school boards across the province. In the meantime parallel to that will be the work of the task force, and at this stage they are not related.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

1:40

Keystone Pipeline Project

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The National Energy Board hearings into the Keystone pipeline are set for today in Calgary. If approved, this pipeline will export over 40,000 barrels of bitumen a day south of the border for processing. An estimated 18,000 jobs will be lost in the process, yet this government is willing to stand aside and watch as the sellout of our natural resources continues. When he was campaigning for the Tory leadership, the Premier promised to protect Alberta's jobs and resources, but now that he has the big job, that promise has been broken. To the Premier: will this government intervene in the NEB Keystone hearing to oppose the export of our bitumen and our jobs?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this question came up in the House the other day with respect to the amount of bitumen that's exported out of the province of Alberta. Today we process about 65 per cent of the bitumen in the province, looking to of course processing more. But there are a number of areas of further consultation: not only how do we build the kind of plants that are necessary to upgrade, the impact on the environment, our water and also work with various companies with respect to the labour situation. Just the other day the third party raised the issue of greenhouse gas emissions and how we minimize those and minimize the impact on the environment. Well, these are the considerations we're giving.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, consultation is a wonderful thing, Mr. Premier, but these decisions are being made by the National Energy Board today, and there are massive increases in the capacity to export unprocessed bitumen from this province that are currently being considered. Why is the government not intervening at the National Energy Board hearing about the Keystone pipeline?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we have the royalty review that's ongoing today and will be completed sometime in August. These are the kinds of questions and information that the royalty review will be bringing forward and answering in terms of how we get more upgrading in the province of Alberta but also, of course, looking at the environment and all of the other issues. Again, the other day this question came up, and I said that we're going to find that balance. The bitumen is leaving the province. It crosses a national boundary. That's why the NRCB is involved.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, the National Energy Board is considering these matters. It has nothing to do with the government's royalty review. So they can review the royalties all they want; it won't affect the decision about export of our bitumen out of this province. Why is it that the government is failing to stand up for Alberta jobs and failing to stand up for a petrochemical industry right here in this

province? Why won't you, Mr. Premier, go to the NEB and present the position of the government of Alberta that we are against the export of our jobs and our bitumen?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, in the first three months of this year more than 11,000 people moved to Alberta, migrated from other provinces. Just in speaking to the mayor of Calgary, 100 people a day come to the city of Calgary. They're coming here for jobs; there are many vacancies. That's why there's another balance to this, and that is available housing for the people that are all moving to the province of Alberta because there are job opportunities. That's why one of our priorities in this government is managing those growth pressures and making sure that we have the housing available and the infrastructure.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Economic Strategy

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through the weekend we had a warning sign that our revenue is going to go down in the province because of our strong dollar. In the past we've talked about failing to plan for growth. We failed to plan for the windfall, but the real question is: are we planning for a downturn in our economy as we did in the '80s? We don't know why it'll turn, but we know that it will. My question is to the Premier. What plan does this government have for cutbacks when the downturn to our economy comes, or do you not have one?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the province is well prepared to of course cushion any of the loss of revenue stream for any particular reason. It could be a drop in the oil and gas prices; it could be because of the dollar; it could be because of manufacturing issues tied to global competition. That's why a number of years ago we restructured our financial reporting so that we do have a sustainability fund in place to cushion, if it ever does happen. Again, conservative, prudent forecasting for revenues as well. And that's why we also have quarterly reports to all Albertans so that all Albertans know the direction the province is taking in terms of its revenue and expenses.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know that it's going to happen. It's just a matter of when. We don't know why. Our former Premier always said that we don't have a revenue problem; we have a spending problem. But that revenue problem will come. I ask the Premier: will you release the plan, which is a list, of how we would balance our budget or whether you're not going to balance the budget when that turns around on the next report to all Albertans that you continue to put out?

Mr. Stelmach: It's in the budget. It's part of the sustainability plan. It's part of the investment in various endowments. It's part of, of course, the money we put into our savings account. Without a doubt Alberta has always been identified – and that's nationally – as having the best books and being the best prepared to take any downturn in the economy. Mr. Speaker, we have the most volatile revenue stream in North America. We recognize that. That's why we plan and forecast our revenues very conservatively.

Mr. Hinman: It's obvious that they don't have a plan for a downturn.

An Hon. Member: He just told you.

Mr. Hinman: That isn't a plan, to say that we're going to do nothing.

The planning people and the elected representatives feel like they're buying a ticket when they apply for the different provincial grants. They don't know whether they're going to be accepted, the rules are always changing, and they sit on pins and needles on whether or not their next project is going to go forward. It's a real problem. The municipalities had to put forward a 10-year plan. This government has it. Obviously, they've looked at it. They must have prioritized it and what municipalities want. Will they release the plan and what order they're in so that they know that, yes, we're three years down the road or five years down the road? They wonder: when is it coming up, or is it just going to be a lottery? They need a plan on the funding.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm not quite sure if it's to do with the revenue stream or with the expenditure, but working with municipalities, we put on the table a commitment of \$1.4 billion ramped up in the 2010-2011 budget to support municipalities during this unbelievable growth period. We're working with them. We also increased – doubled – the amount of money in the Water for Life strategy to assist those municipalities that have to increase not only their potable water supplies but also the sewer treatment. So the plan is there. We're working very well with municipalities, and municipalities are applying to criteria that have been consistent. We don't change from year to year.

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

Affordable Housing

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry for providing at least temporary rent relief for fixed-income renters in the 297-suite Varsity apartment complex, where rent was raised by \$50,000. Of course, this is only one-month June reprieve, and the news came too late for some 30 individuals who were forced to move, but it is helpful. A 91-year-old pensioner on fixed income who has lived in the complex for the past 17 years called my office last Wednesday, wondering how long this assistance would last, fearing that come July or August or September this band-aid solution would be exposed. To the minister: what can the minister say to her?

Ms Evans: Well, like I've repeated several times in this House, Mr. Speaker, every case will be dealt with on an individual basis, looking at the family situation, the availability of alternative housing, whether that's a practical solution, whether it's a 91-year-old or whether it's somebody who has a truck, a job, and is having troubles because of rental difficulties. We have given out over half a million dollars to over 500 people in the last three weeks. We continue to listen to people on an individual basis. Although this individual likely didn't have an improvement in the set of circumstances over the last month, we'll continue to look after them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll also offer another nod to the minister on the quality of staff that I and my constituent, Jeff Stewart, encountered at the Fisher Road processing centre last Thursday. Cumulative construction injuries have meant Mr. Stewart

cannot get work and is having to live on \$425 of social assistance a month. The obvious problem that even the patient and compassionate help of the centre's staff, including Ken, Francesca, and Deidre, cannot overcome is that Mr. Stewart needs to find an apartment in a failed rental marketplace first. Furthermore, even when he gets one, his ability to pay rests entirely on fickle and unclear government housing subsidies. To the same minister: what guarantees of long-term rent payment can Mr. Stewart offer prospective landlords?

1:50

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I think this government has made it very clear that when people have a need, we will be there. We will work with them and counsel them and try to identify whether there are other opportunities available. We have had a diminished number of people coming that qualify for a rent supplement. There have been centres both in Calgary and Edmonton where we have been working with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing's staff. We're not getting too many that are coming that need a rent supplement. Many of them need some short-term fix. But we will be there as long as they need us, Mr. Speaker. We will not put them out on the street. We will help them find other alternatives, help make them as comfortable as possible, and continue to work as long as it takes.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Why is the government continuing to only provide patchwork solutions that reward the extortion of a few unscrupulous landlords at the expense of both taxpayers and Alberta's most vulnerable individuals rather than coming up with a longer term solution until sufficient affordable housing is built? Why didn't you just listen to your Affordable Housing Task Force's advice?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We did listen to the housing task force. One of the major challenges is to make sure that there is a continuing supply of units for individuals to rent. That is why this government has taken the position that it has in order not to have rent controls, which would definitely provide some uncertainty in the marketplace for those individuals who are building units. In that way, we would have some continuing future solution.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Nonresident Hunting Regulations

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Thursday a question was asked to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development regarding out-of-country hunters entering the province to hunt. Some of my constituents have expressed concerns with the answers provided by the minister, and I was hoping that the minister could provide some further clarification for this Assembly and Albertans. My first question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, and it's about the same issue. Are the six-day alien nonresident hunting licences he discussed renewable, or are the nonresident hunters limited to six days?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to report that these six-day permits for alien nonresidents are renewable. You have six days. If you want to buy another, you pay your \$77; you can buy a second permit. I'd also remind Albertans that nonresident Canadians,

nonresidents but people who are Canadian citizens, can buy a permit for \$33, and this is good for the entire season.

Mr. Prins: My next question to the same minister: is there a limit on how long or how many days nonresident hunters can stay in the province to hunt?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, there's no limit. They may stay and continue to hunt for as long as they please. Of course, nonresident alien and nonresident Canadian hunters are subject to the same daily limits and possession limits as residents. That probably explains why of the 4,500 nonresident aliens who came and hunted waterfowl in Alberta last year, 95 per cent only bought one six-day permit. In six days you can get all the ducks and geese you need in this province.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hunting tourism contributes a great deal to local economies and particularly to communities in rural Alberta. My last question to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: does the minister see an opportunity for enhanced hunting tourism in the province?

Dr. Morton: The answer, Mr. Speaker, is absolutely yes. Hunting tourism adds over a hundred million dollars to the Alberta economy every year, and much of this goes into our rural communities. In recent weeks I've met with Alberta Tourism to discuss greater promotion of hunting opportunities in Alberta for nonresidents. Our new fish and wildlife website, that will deal with licensing and that we expect to have online in about 18 months, will publicize these opportunities for both residents and nonresidents. I can assure the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka and all other members of the Assembly that I will work to add hunting tourism to our rural development strategy.

Thank you.

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

Lottery Retailer Practices

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Provinces across Canada have been uncovering irregularities with their lottery retailer practices. In response to these problems and given my interest in consumer protection I wrote the Solicitor General back in early April, and the minister thankfully responded on May 1. The minister wrote: "I am pleased to confirm that a special committee, led by the [Western Canada Lottery Corporation's] Internal Audit, has conducted an internal review." The minister did not share any of the report's findings with me but detailed the scope of that review. To the Solicitor General: did the WCLC internal audit, in fact, find any discrepancies with respect to lottery retailer practices? What did you learn, Mr. Minister?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Public Security and Solicitor General.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As indicated by the hon. member, the WCLC is reviewing lottery activities in the province of Alberta as well as those across the rest of western Canada. Because of their findings in other provinces, they have

decided to take a more in-depth look in Alberta. I haven't seen the report yet, unfortunately, and to the best of my knowledge they have not found anything unusual. A preliminary look indicated that the winnings by retailers were at a normal average in Alberta. So I believe it's a prudent thing for them to do, to take a more in-depth look, and we await the results.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the minister's reply letter he indicated that in addition to that internal review, Ernst & Young was commissioned to conduct another assessment, so now I need clarification whether the first one, the internal audit, is continuing and then Ernst & Young is doing another one. He said in his letter that both reports will be provided to the WCLC board in May. Now we're now into June, and I would like to ask if the other report has been finalized and if he saw that one in particular.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is that Ernst & Young is doing the review on behalf of WCLC. As I indicated earlier, I believe it's prudent that they do a more thorough look based on findings in other provinces, and I believe it's in the best interest of all Albertans that we do a thorough look. The wait is definitely going to be worth while.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would really appreciate the minister tabling these results when he gets them.

My third question to him is: in British Columbia and Ontario lottery retailer investigations were commissioned by offices of the Legislature, and then when you add the Atlantic Lottery Corporation, the reports for all three investigations are available for the public to see on the Internet. Your letter to me, Mr. Minister, did not mention making these reports public. Will these reports remain hidden, or are you going to release them? Basically, are you going to deny Alberta consumers the type of access to information that Canadians in other jurisdictions enjoy?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is very open and transparent, and the results that I get will be communicated to all Albertans in an appropriate manner.

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

Law Enforcement Review Board

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again the Law Enforcement Review Board is looking for a new chairperson. The current chair will step down on June 15 to accept a position as a Provincial Court judge. The board is dealing with a large number of cases that are being heard or have yet to be scheduled. This resignation has the potential to delay these cases even more. My questions are for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. Can the minister tell us what his department is doing to fill the vacancy as quickly as possible?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to reiterate that this government recognizes that the Law Enforcement Review Board plays an important role in the administration of justice in this province. Unfortunately, we do have a backlog of cases. The resignation of the current chair is a matter of unfortunate timing; however, we are moving as quickly as possible to replace that chair. An acting chair will be in place in the LERB as soon as possible, and the LERB will be able to continue to conduct timely and efficient hearings.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. You mentioned the backlog. How bad is the backlog, and can you tell us how many cases are currently before the board and how many are yet to be scheduled?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, to the hon. member: there are currently 69 hearings in progress, another 21 waiting to be scheduled, and we have seven previous hearings that we're still waiting for decisions on. So, yes, we are behind the eight ball here a little bit. But I want to say that in December 2005 we did amend the Police Act to allow the LERB to have two panels conduct hearings at the same time in different locations. These amendments also allowed the LERB to appoint one of its members to deal with preliminary and procedural matters to improve efficiencies in our system.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. The Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police recently passed a resolution calling for increased staff and funding for the LERB, the Law Enforcement Review Board. Can the minister tell us what else his department is doing to address the backlog of cases before the board?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we are certainly aware of the recommendations by the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police, and we are taking this matter very seriously. We will continue to work with all of our law enforcement partners to ensure an effective administration of justice. One thing we are doing is increasing the number of LERB members from seven to nine. We also are building a separate hearing room so that we can have more than one hearing at a time. So we are addressing these things in as expeditious a manner as we can.

Thank you.

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

Child Care Review

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are few fields where high quality and enforced safety standards are as important as they are in child care. Recognizing this, the Minister of Children's Services introduced a Child Care Licensing Act that will seek to increase the quality of child care available in Alberta. While this action is certainly important, many parents and child care providers

have raised concerns over the consultation process that accompanies the development of new standards. Staff retention is a chronic problem in Alberta's child care sector. To the Minister of Children's Services: how will proposed regulations to increase the number as well as the level of training of workers in each facility contribute to solving the staffing issues in this sector?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I'd like to say that our goal with going out with this consultation is to make sure that at the end of the day we create standards for quality child care in this province. We have just started a six-week process, and I haven't heard any concerns with regard to the process. I think what we're talking about is some questions and concerns with some of the proposals, but that's exactly what this is about. The proposals that have gone out are a result of what we heard over the last two years in consultations with the public. They are out there just as proposals. What I would encourage at this point is for as many people as possible who are interested in child care to get out there and get involved in the consultation and give us their feedback on the proposals, whether it's at one of the public meetings or whether it's online or through the discussion guide.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Ensuring that child care workers are providing the best possible care to children is only one part of a successful child care equation. The other half is ensuring that parents who rely on child care services are able to access them. This province could have the highest standards of care in the world, but they would be meaningless if no one could afford to use them. Improving the quality of child care will obviously make child care more expensive. To the Minister of Children's Services: how will you ensure that the costs of these new standards will not hurt accessibility?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this point I don't want to speculate as to what the end result of the consultations will be in terms of the standards that do come out. What I can say is that you're absolutely right: this portion of the consultation we're going through right now is a focus on the quality of care. That is not to take away from the huge number of initiatives that we've come out with in the last couple of months to deal with access for parents, to deal with the attraction and retaining of staff, and to deal with the affordability of child care.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many questions are on the minds of child care providers and parents as they head into this government's consultation process. I'm hearing them every day. Specifically, they worry that if they go ahead and welcome improved daycare standards, they may unknowingly be assuming costs they cannot afford. To the Minister of Children's Services: will you ensure that parents and providers are able to participate freely in the public consultations by assuring them today that they will not be responsible for bearing the costs of new government-mandated regulations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I would like to encourage at this point is that if anybody – parents, operators – has any concerns, whether or not it's specific to the proposals individually or that some of the proposals could impact costs of child care, please get out and take part in the consultation. Again, just to remind people, it can be online, or it can be through a discussion guide, or we still have meetings coming up in Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Whitecourt, Bonnyville, Red Deer, Calgary, Grande Prairie, Peace River, Lloydminster, and Fort McMurray. So I do hope that interested people do come out to participate.

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

Palace Casino Labour Dispute

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today marks the 269th day of the strike at the Palace Casino in West Edmonton Mall. The NDP has proudly introduced to this Assembly 70 workers from the picket line – and there are more here today – in the hope that the government might finally take notice and do something to help these workers. Six months ago the NDP along with the UFCW brought forward concerns about patrons drinking alcohol outside the casino. It's been over six months, and the minister still hasn't arranged for proper enforcement mechanisms. My question is to the Solicitor General. Why is the Solicitor General turning a blind eye to the ongoing violations of the gaming act taking place at the Palace Casino?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Public Security and Solicitor General.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, an example of allegations. If the hon. member opposite has proof of what he's suggesting, I would ask that he bring it forward. We are not turning a blind eye to any activities at any of our establishments, including the Palace Casino. I know that our inspectors are doing their due diligence and inspecting those on a regular basis. Again, if he has evidence otherwise, I would certainly appreciate having a look at it.

Thank you.

Mr. Martin: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is precisely the evidence that was sent over six months ago, pictures like this. Surely, that's come to the Solicitor General's attention. My question is, again, knowing that he has those pictures: why hasn't the minister taken immediate action to ensure that liquor and gaming rules are enforced? That's his job.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is that the pictures were delivered to the AGLC, and they have acted on them. They have increased their visits over there. Again, if it's still ongoing, I would like to see the evidence of it.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that it's probably getting worse over there rather than better. So when is the minister going to take responsibility and do something about these clear violations that continue to this day?

Mr. Lindsay: Again, to me it indicates probabilities, and the

probability and the facts are that we have increased our inspections there, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Mason: You're doing nothing.

Mr. Lindsay: I would like to see evidence of that, hon. member, because they are doing something, and they are doing a great job for Albertans in enforcing rules and regulations of the AGLC.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Flood Preparedness

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans don't have to look too far into the history books to recall the devastating impact flooding can have on a community, my constituents included. In June of 2005 the floods that swept through southern Alberta nearly wiped out Fish Creek provincial park. As we approach the two-year anniversary of flooding in southern Alberta, residents in my constituency are getting nervous of a repeat event. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. What is the current risk for flooding for communities across Alberta this summer?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, fortunately at this point in time Calgary and Fish Creek in particular are at a very low risk of flooding although the Bow and the Elbow rivers may appear to be high. Our flood forecasting team continues to monitor levels around the clock and works with Environment Canada weather services. The fact of the matter is that with the snow pack that we have, above normal, and above-normal temperatures, we do have some potential and have issued some advisories of potential flooding in Banff and Jasper. We're also closely monitoring Canmore, Hinton, and Grande Prairie. If the weather changes, there could be additional advisories issued.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How will your ministry ensure that Albertans are well informed of flood potential this summer?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, we work very closely with municipalities, and we issue advisories and warnings when conditions indicate the need. Municipalities are the first line of defence when it comes to dealing with an emergency situation. So municipalities do have within their emergency management plans the availability to actually one-on-one contact people who are at immediate risk from flooding. The important thing is that Albertans at this time of year should listen to the media, pay close attention to the media, and those that wish may consult with our website under Advisories, which are updated on a regular basis.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

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

2:10

Hospital-acquired Infections

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In March the Premier dismissed concerns about the government's risk of legal liability regarding negligence in monitoring and enforcing infection-control procedures. These are stemming from the problems in

Vegreville, Lloydminster, and other locations in Alberta. But now that testing for HIV and hepatitis B and C is currently under way for some 3,000 Albertans and the results will be released within weeks, does the minister of health still think that assessing the risk of lawsuits is unnecessary and premature?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, it would be unnecessary and premature to assess the risk of lawsuits. Essentially, the whole issue of health status is the most important issue in this. The testing needs to be done, but I said at the time and I'll say again: the risks were low. Nonetheless, it was incumbent on government to make sure that all of the appropriate screening and testing was done. It would be too early to even consider whether or not anyone might come forward with legal liability or to try and put any sort of quantification around that kind of liability.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. In March we also found out that it took the College of Physicians and Surgeons two years to notify patients about infection and sterilization concerns. To the minister of health again: what specific changes to reporting systems have been made since March?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, immediately upon finding out about the incident that happened, I addressed all of the professions with a letter asking them to ensure that they had their members report on infection-control issues and how they handled it. We've also had some talks with the health professions relative to ensuring that they know and understand that the Public Health Act takes priority over their act. I will be meeting with registrars and presidents of health professions tomorrow, in fact, with respect to the next steps in that regard.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Research shows that one out of every nine hospital patients in Canada gets an infection that may force a longer stay and further treatment. In order to understand the extent of the issue in Alberta and the cost to the health system, we need to be collecting the right information. My question again is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Does Alberta collect data on the frequency and cost of hospital-acquired infection?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the answer to that is: not at the appropriate level. We should. The Health Quality Council has been specifically put in place to ensure that we are able to monitor the right kinds of data, and that's certainly a priority for me as minister and for this government. The health authorities are collecting data, but what we need to do provincially is make sure that that data is collected on a consistent basis and then take the next step to see what data the public should have in order to know and understand the risks they take. Entering a hospital is not without its risks, but the public should be able to be aware of those risks. So that information is important information for the public, and we need to be able to collect it appropriately and make it public in an appropriate way.

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

Trade, Investment, and Labour Mobility Agreement

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend Calgary hosted the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to meet and explore how they can work better together. After many years of waiting for all Canadian provinces to agree to work together, Alberta and B.C. moved ahead with the Alberta/B.C. trade, investment, and labour mobility agreement, TILMA. It's an important interprovincial initiative. To the Minister of International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations: are municipalities being consulted on this important priority?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that my colleague the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, of course, this past weekend was in Calgary where they hosted thousands of municipalities. This was a very productive time. We had 2,200 delegates there. It was about consulting, getting advice from municipalities because they are important partners. We're doing that, and I might also add that we are consulting in the north, in the south, east, and west. We're up in Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie. We're down in Medicine Hat and Lethbridge and further south. We're actually in Lloydminster. We're over in Edson and further west. We are really, really moving forward.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Some critics predict that TILMA is hopelessly tying the hands of Alberta's elected municipal governments. My first supplemental is again to the same minister. Can he tell us exactly what the impact of TILMA is on municipalities?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, as you know, in front of this House right now is Bill 38. We are doing exactly what the Liberal government in British Columbia is doing: debating here in the Legislature. We are doing it because we are an open and transparent government. The opposition may not like what we're doing, but we're consulting because we want the best value for our taxpayers. The Liberals may not want the best value, but we do because we want to take a dollar and stretch it so that it can even do more. The Liberal opposition may not, but we do, and we will continue to. Even the New Democrats support some of the important principles of what we're doing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. Can he please clear up the confusion and explain how he can describe the TILMA as a trade agreement when some critics see it as more than that?

Mr. Boutilier: Well, there are, clearly, some critics. I can hear the hon. member across the way in the opposition saying that she doesn't like to be a free trader. We want our citizens to get the best value. That may be very much the case, and my view is that as we go forward . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Point of order.

Mr. Boutilier: This is so much fun today, Mr. Speaker. I haven't had so much fun in quite some time.

This really is about what we do to better serve Albertans and British Columbians. That's what we're doing today; we're doing it tomorrow. Regardless of what the Official Opposition doesn't want to do, we're going full speed ahead. It's damn the torpedoes.

The Speaker: We'll deal with the point of order at the conclusion of the Routine. The hon. minister might want to check the Blues to see where the hon. member, unidentified but presumed the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, said, quote, that she doesn't want to be a free trader. We need some clarification.

Now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And things were going so well today, weren't they?

Government Contract with Former MLA

Mr. Bonko: On April 16 the Premier promised the House that he'd undertake an internal audit about the contracts awarded to Bob Maskell, a former Tory MLA. Well, it's been more than 50 days since that promise, and we've heard nothing. Clearly, without our prompting, this government won't clean up its act. My questions are to the Minister of International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations. Where are the results of Mr. Maskell's appointment and contracts as promised by the Premier?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, I'm so pleased that the hon. member brought this up, in fact, and I'll tell you why. At the appropriate time I will show you the outcomes of the work that was done under this particular contract, referred to as the Alberta centennial project. It is a very detailed analysis of the work and the value that Albertans got for this excellent work with aboriginal communities.

Mr. Bonko: I'm assuming that he's going to table those as well, Mr. Speaker, since he's already shown them to us. We certainly don't want the spring sitting of the House to end before the results emerge. Usually they do it during the summertime, when most people are sleeping and enjoying their holidays. They need to come back to us during a relevant time, so we're hoping that they, in fact, get us the original questions. To the minister: does he think that the typical line, the way they answer the questions in this fashion, is appropriate with this government being transparent and accountable?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition may sleep, but this government does not sleep.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonko: A perfect example of sleeping: when he doesn't have the answer.

Thank you very much. We have to remember, Mr. Speaker, that the last time this government had names of members on the audit committee for public view, one was the vice-president of finance of the Progressive Conservative Party. Now, mysteriously, the names are no longer available on the government website. Again, no longer open or transparent. This is bad enough. Another situation: when it comes to the investigation of Tory insiders, patronage, and cronyism, Mr. Gary Campbell is in no position whatsoever to be able to give judgment on Maskell. To the minister: is Mr. Campbell on a committee investigating Mr. Maskell still? Yes or no?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, it's interesting to note that the hon.

member is making reference to, without question, a very valuable educator in this province and in this city. He has a reputation for what he has done over time. Rather than besmirching an Albertan's name, maybe we should be celebrating the successes of the aboriginal centennial initiative, which I am tabling, a very detailed outcome of the good work and good value that all Albertans got. Contrary to the comments and the assumptions that may be made and the sleeping that's going on across the way, we will continue to move forward in a productive way in helping all Albertans, including aboriginals.

The Speaker: Well, that was 88 questions and responses today.

head: 2:20 Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This House might be winding down, but this issue is not going away. I'm continuing with the tabling of petitions with respect to housing affordability, 104 signatures, and the petition reads:

Whereas the ongoing rent affordability crisis is contributing to Alberta's worsening homelessness situation, 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 and cope with the escalating and frequent increases in their monthly rental costs.

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a petition with 293 signatures, or approximately 15 per cent of the people of Magrath, as they were just hit with exorbitant property tax increases. They are petitioning the Legislative Assembly "not to grant additional taxation powers to municipalities."

head: Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Standing Order 59.04(3) indicates that "the Government House Leader shall give notice of the date for the vote on the main estimates not later than the completion of the 4th 15-hour cycle of estimates." Standing Order 59.04(4) says:

Notwithstanding suborders (1) and (3), for the 2007 Spring Sitting the vote on the main estimates may be scheduled with a minimum of one sitting day's notice to occur any time after the completion of the 4th rotation of the 15-hour cycle, unless otherwise ordered.

That time would be this Thursday, so I'd like to give oral notice today that pursuant to Standing Order 59.04 the vote on the main estimates shall be scheduled for Thursday, June 7, 2007, at 5:44 p.m.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie on behalf of the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and table on behalf of the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition the requisite number of copies of minutes of the regular meeting on Thursday, August 17, 2006, of the Beaver Regional Waste Management Services Commission.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first tabling. In response to a question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of a value-for-money report from PricewaterhouseCoopers. This shows the public-sector comparator of the Calgary northeast ring road project as well as the bids submitted by all three companies that bid on the project. The documents clearly show that the P3 project will result in a substantial saving to taxpayers, in the range of \$350 million to \$450 million, than if the government had built the project the conventional way.

My second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a letter from GGC Consultants providing the results of a fairness audit on the bidding process for the same project. The letter is signed by Gary Campbell, QC. It certifies that there are no issues with regard to any question of fairness in the northeast Stoney Trail bidding process.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to table the final report of the Alberta Centennial 2005: Aboriginal Centennial Initiative.

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

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of an information package from the Academy of Learning career and business college, which is celebrating its 20th year this year.

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

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table today the appropriate number of copies of 18 letters from Alberta teachers. They're writing to express their concern over both inadequate operational funding and the inability of this government to immediately resolve the outstanding issue of the unfunded pension liability.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is from Mr. John Younk, co-owner of Children's Academy Day Care Centre and out of school care, regarding the consultation program aimed at daycare centres and

proposing some very serious changes that will likely result in spaces being closed. The theme of the process is to improve care for children and the method being employed to reach this is to put a huge financial burden on owners of [daycares].

The second letter is from Blayne Rebinsky. "I am from Alberta. Why is Ontario getting cheaper gas than us? Do they even have oil! Explain."

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm tabling copies of photos taken by UFCW workers outside the Palace Casino. The photos show casino patrons drinking alcohol outside the facility.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter written by Mr. Noel Somerville, vice-chair, SALT, Seniors' Action and Liaison Team, to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. SALT, this group, is disappointed in the government's ineffective response to the housing crisis and calls for short-term rent guidelines to prevent exorbitant rent increases.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Ms Evans, Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry: a report entitled A Workforce Strategy for Alberta's Tourism and Hospitality Industry.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to the introduction of guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Visitors**
(continued)

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

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly Her Excellency Evadne Coyle, Jamaican High Commissioner to Canada; Mr. Art Clarke, honorary consul of Jamaica in Edmonton; and Ms Coleen Neita, president of the Jamaica Association of Northern Alberta. Her Excellency is in Alberta to explore trade and business opportunities between Alberta and Jamaica and to reconnect with the expatriate Jamaican community. This member is very proud to be part of this community. Our guests are seated in your gallery, and I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on a purported point of order.

Point of Order
False Allegations

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is referring to something uttered by the Minister of International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations during an exchange between himself and the Member for Calgary-Bow earlier. I'm citing 23(h), (i), and (j). The minister has made a statement that I said something which I have not, not today and not previously. In doing so, he has violated 23(h) in making a false allegation, he has violated 23(i) in imputing a false and an unavowed motive, and he certainly violated 23(j) in creating some pretty rowdy disorder.

Mr. Speaker, I realize that he needs to fabricate support for the TILMA agreement, but I think he doesn't need to be making something up about me in order to do it. I have asked very clearly that the entire TILMA agreement be brought before this House for a fulsome debate, not just a bill which allows payment of fines which may be assessed against the government if they lose any cases brought against them by industry under TILMA. That's quite a different thing.

I ask at this point that the minister withdraw his statements and apologize to me for saying in this House that I made them.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Anyone else want to participate on this point of order? Go ahead, hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say first of all that I did not utter but actually specifically said, to be very clear. At no time and in no shape or form did I direct the comment to this hon. member.

The Speaker: Others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill on this point.

2:30

Dr. Brown: Well, Mr. Speaker, today was no exception to the fact that during question period there's often a lot of loud heckling from the opposition benches, and to me it's no surprise that occasionally there is a retort to some of that heckling. I don't see this as a point of order at all. I think it's a natural outcome of what is sometimes very boisterous heckling on the other side.

The Speaker: Well, here's what was said by the hon. Minister of International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations: "Well, there are clearly some critics. I can hear the hon. member across the way in the opposition saying that she doesn't like to be a free trader. We want our citizens to get the best value." Actually, I could go on quite a bit, but I'll stop right there.

The reality is that the chair made an assumption that it was the certain member who raised the point of order, but that is an assumption. There is certainly more than one she across the way. The minister is absolutely correct; he did not identify the member. This allowed the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to rise on a point of clarification, which was very important, to clarify her position. So this really amounted to a difference of opinion, not a point of order. We will move on.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

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

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I likewise move that motions for returns standing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

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

Bill 210
Gaming Planning Act

[Debate adjourned May 28: Ms DeLong speaking]

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

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise to address Bill 211, Planning for the Future of . . .

The Speaker: Actually, we're on Bill 210.

Ms DeLong: Bill 210?

The Speaker: Yes. The hon. member adjourned the debate. She has three minutes left if she chooses.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has not participated yet. Please proceed.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to speak to this bill. I feel that it's addressing a very important issue in Alberta. Bill 210 would allow for a sweeping public review of how gaming is conducted in Alberta and ask Albertans what future they see for gambling in this province. Bill 210 establishes a committee to plan the future role of gaming in Alberta. Part of the mandate of the committee is to consider re-establishing community lottery boards for distributing gaming revenues. In other words, Bill 210 addresses gambling planning in Alberta.

It's quite straightforward. The Gaming Planning Act calls for the creation of a nine-member all-party committee whose mandate is to investigate and report on the gaming industry in Alberta. This committee will conduct the first fully public investigation of all aspects of gaming in this province. The committee will assess the amount of gaming revenue that is allocated to charities and how it is distributed, examine whether we should re-establish the community lottery boards, evaluate the role of charitable organizations in gaming activities, address the social impact of gaming, and examine the role of gaming in Alberta in the future in regard to the number of casinos and gaming machines in the province. In short, Bill 210 will allow for a sweeping public review of how gaming is conducted in Alberta and ask Albertans what future they see for gambling in the province of Alberta. I believe this is very important. This is an issue that is significant to many volunteer organizations, many schools, many public facilities who are dependent on revenues from gaming.

It's important to note that Alberta has the widest variety of legal gambling options available of any jurisdiction in North America. The bottom-line figure of profit for 2005-2006 was \$1.4 billion. According to the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission's annual report of '05-06 Albertans poured more than \$11 billion into slot machines and more than \$10 billion into VLTs, for a total of more than \$21 billion into gaming machines alone. There are more than 8,600 gaming machines in casinos in Alberta and another 6,000 VLTs in bars, for a total of more than 14,000 gambling machines. There are now 17 casinos in Alberta and nine others in the final stages of the approval process. Little by little gambling is becoming very big in Alberta. It's a very important industry in this province, but it's also a social issue and an industry worthy of scrutiny.

So what is the future of gaming in Alberta? Is it an industry that we should grow, or should we rein it in? I don't know whether the gaming minister has long-range plans for gambling in Alberta. We need to find out. Is there any upper limit on the number of casinos or slot machines that would be allowed in Alberta? The public's opinion on gaming should be heard. I hear questions such as: is the government addicted to gaming revenue; is it morally correct for the government to profit from gambling; is it necessary to have volunteers work long hours for casino funds; is the division of revenue equitable? The questions are there everywhere I go where people are working casinos trying to support good causes. The province reaps the benefits of a hugely profitable industry, but, you know, we

also know that there are moral implications to the whole issue of the government profiting from what is considered by many people still to be a vice.

I know that there was a major review of gambling in Alberta as recently as 2001. I think this review was called *Achieving a Balance*. It was a gaming licensing policy review and was quite wide ranging, but it differs significantly from the committee that is suggested by Bill 210. The objective of the 2001 review was to "address issues of growth in gaming and continue to ensure the effective regulation and socially-responsible delivery of gaming activities in the province." However, the 2001 review did not hold public hearings into gambling and did not include the all-party element. The gaming licensing policy review of 2001 also did not include a widely distributed report. In fact, the final report was not even tabled with the Clerk of the Legislature.

It's time for a more all-encompassing review that will set the course for the gaming industry and the administration of the charity model for the next decade. There has been significant growth in gaming since the 2001 report. In the fiscal year 2001 gaming activities in Alberta generated gross sales, that is before prizes, of \$14.6 billion from all forms of gambling in Alberta. In '05-06 the gross revenue in gaming came in at more than \$22 billion.

It is apparent that public opinion has changed dramatically when it comes to the question of gaming and gambling. While once considered a vice that had to be curtailed at all costs, it seems that gambling has now almost gone mainstream. The public's attitude towards gambling has changed so much that today Albertans might even welcome the growth in gaming. So should we look upon gambling as an actual growth industry and tourist attraction?

Many charitable groups who have concerns about the volunteer aspect of casino gambling and the tremendous pressures it puts on volunteers need to be listened to. Also questions about who qualifies as a charity. Should one minor sports team with limited financial needs get the same revenue as an agency that's serving homeless youth or that serves the needs of hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged people?

Bill 210 would ask Albertans in the most open way possible exactly how they feel about gaming and where we should take the charitable model in the future.

2:40

I'd like to see some of the questions raised in Bill 210 actually discussed because, as I remember my colleague from Edmonton-Centre saying, how much is enough? We need to have that answered. How much revenue generated by gambling activities is enough for this province? Is it limitless? Do citizens in Alberta really want to just keep going: more casinos, more bingos, more VLTs, more slots, more whatever, ad infinitum? I think the answer is no, but I don't know where the threshold is reached. I think that Bill 210 will offer us a reasonable consultation process to get some of these answers.

What are the consequences of having our funding for the voluntary, charitable sector primarily coming from gambling dollars? What are the consequences for the volunteer sector? You know, these are individuals that want to work, that want to do something good for the community, that want to help. However, we see many of them as parents working a bingo or a casino so that they can raise money for their children to participate in special activities. That's one thing. Those are extraordinary expenses, perhaps. But, at the same time, I hear about shelters with volunteers working casinos and bingos to help provide the basic essentials for those programs, like hiring staff, providing food. Shouldn't these things be funded through regular sources? Why is it that in Alberta we are dependent on volunteer help working the gaming industry?

I'm concerned about the fragility of our volunteer sector. More and more we're asking them to do more, and it's a concern. They're having to raise the number of dollars that they have by subsidizing the services that they're offering to the province to make it a better place. In a number of cases they're actually contracted by the government to provide services, and they're still having to go and raise charitable dollars to subsidize what the government is giving for programs that the government is very proud of.

I think we need an extensive review. I believe that Bill 210 speaks to that and offers that, and I ask you all to vote for Bill 210.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair will try and find a rotation to allow government members to participate if they wish, but none has been identified. Is there a government member who wishes or a third-party member who wishes?

Then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and make some brief observations on Bill 210, Gaming Planning Act. Gaming certainly is a very extensive activity in this province. It has become a critical source of public revenues, so it does need close scrutiny as does any activity that generates public revenues requires the regular and quite thorough scrutiny of this House. In general, I think a review such as the one proposed here of gaming in the province and also looking at the role of these gaming revenues with respect to the way current activities undertaken by voluntary or nonprofit or charitable organizations are funded through the allocation of funds generated from gambling and gaming activities – all of these are important issues and deserve a sober and thorough and careful scrutiny and discussion and public debate.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

With respect to the functions or the terms of reference a committee will be set up by way of the motion that's proposed in this bill that will come from the minister responsible for gaming to this House, and if that motion is passed, then by virtue of that decision by this House, a committee will come into being, and that will then address the functions proposed here. I think the issue of whether this list of functions are terms of reference exhaustive is an open one. I presume that the five or six or seven items indicated here could be some of the functions, but there could be more. So there's a need for more thorough consideration, and I would think that perhaps a different kind of action taken by this House to in fact look at the terms of reference themselves before they're legislated into existence would be a good idea.

Another question, Mr. Speaker, that arises in my mind has to do with the composition of the committee proposed here. The proposed bill fails to recognize the existence of the three recognized parties in this province. For some reason – I suppose it's the sponsoring member's judgment – here is a decision not to make a reference to all the recognized parties on the committee, and the necessity of those parties to be represented on this committee is a curious omission, in my view.

The third question, Mr. Speaker, that I have is that this bill might have been drafted before the coming into being of policy field committees in this Legislature. The committees were established by the decision of the Legislature through negotiations among the three House leaders, and perhaps the independent member was consulted in the process as well, but those committees are now in place, and I think that it would be perhaps more appropriate, given the fact that those committees, in fact, are more representative of the House as

they're presently constituted than the committee being proposed here, to have this matter referred to the appropriate committee, whether it's the committee that deals with services or community activities. I don't know which committee would be most appropriate, but that's easy to identify. So I would think that one of the existing policy field committees would be a more appropriate vehicle to undertake a review and propose a legislation if in the committee's judgment such a legislation is needed in order to proceed with a review by the committee.

Given, Mr. Speaker, in particular the unrepresentative nature of the proposal with respect to the composition of the proposed committee, I simply cannot see how I can support this bill in its present form. Second, I am concerned that this may lead to duplication of the committee structure. We have committees in place. As I said, those committees are in fact representative. Those committees are based on the consensus across this House, across party lines that those are the right kinds of committees, and we need to put those committees to use to see if they need improvement or if they can work.

In fact, they can show in practice what they promise in theory; that is, they are a way of democratizing the activities of this House. They will broaden the participation in policy-making by all members and all parties represented in this House, particularly parties that are recognized parties, rather than creating yet one more committee, which to me, on the face of it, seems to fail to address the issue of proper representation of parties that are in this House and are appropriately recognized according to the rules of this House.

So, with that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat and let other members speak to the bill.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just in response to my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona, rather than rejecting the bill outright on the basis of the potential of duplication or the failure to include by definition who the other member who is not a member of the governing party might be – I realize that we do have a member of the Alliance; we have an independent member as well as four members of the NDP – I would suggest that the hon. member offer during Committee of the Whole an amendment to this particular bill.

2:50

The second objection the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona brought up was the idea that the committees might take on this particular responsibility. I know that the committee structure is kind of a wide-open vehicle at this point. But one thing – and I think we'll agree on this – we could never accuse the government of is too much planning because to date that planning has not occurred. It may seem a bit of a juxtaposition of the terms "gaming" and "planning" in the title. Putting the two together might appear as a bit of an oxymoron because gaming suggests a free, open-wide chance circumstance where planning suggests that there is a series of events; there's an evaluation process; there's some thought that goes into it. I would suggest to not have planning would be moronic, and that's, unfortunately, what has occurred.

This government is so short on its ability to come up with diversifying methods of strengthening our economy that its sole dependence on the basically one-trick pony of oil and gas, nonrenewable resources, has placed gaming as its backup. So we have one sort of God-given quantity below our earth, and then we have the creation of a false economy through the gaming procedures. There is no doubt, as a former colleague from Edmonton-Mill

Woods indicated, of the amount of revenue that is brought into this province through gaming. My question has to do with the ethics and the morality of that type of process where people's lives are lost and their fortunes and families are broken up because of this particular pursuit.

When it comes to how the money is distributed – and this is what the Gaming Planning Act calls upon – let's look at the fact that AADAC receives approximately 3 per cent of the entire revenue of the lotteries, of the VLTs, of the slots, of the casinos to try and deal with those individuals who are most vulnerable to its effects. The government encourages the gambling process by sprucing up its VLTs and slots. In fact, it went so far as to put out \$120 million – it might be slightly larger – to get those bells and whistles to the point where they would be appealing, for lack of a better word.

An Hon. Member: Hypnotic.

Mr. Chase: Hypnotic. There's the word that I'm looking for. Thank you.

For a province as resourceful as this province not to tap into other methods of generating revenue such as, instead of our dependency on oil and gas, considering wind power, considering solar power, considering the power of the rivers without having to dam them, the river-run-through-it concept, putting money into Alberta's research and innovation, putting money into our postsecondary colleges because we know that those types of investments in education will bring a threefold return without the negativity associated with gambling, that community leaders in Calgary such as Bishop Henry have stood up and challenged – and I know that Bishop Henry received a bit of a backlash initially from members of his church and the school board because this government doesn't properly fund education. As a result, the Catholic board along with the public board were in such a state of desperation that they felt that the only way to get the large amounts of money necessary to run their education programs was through this casino, slots, VLT process. Well, I'm pleased to see that members of the Catholic faith, of which I am not, were the first to see the light and have supported their bishop in his strive to reduce, eliminate the dependency of his parishioners on gambling.

We have tourism in this province. We have all kinds of opportunities. We could have, if this government saw it as an investment, a thriving arts community. We could have as part of that thriving arts community a thriving film industry. But, unfortunately, this government doesn't put in the seed money, whether it's in the form of tourism in terms of looking after parks and protected areas, encouraging people to come and see them, protecting the landscape that serves as the backdrop for the various movies that have previously been shot, primarily of a western heritage nature. But we don't need to just reduce ourselves to our historical western past. We could be looking into the future in the areas of science and innovation. This government has to get off its lazy – and you can fill in whatever posterior form you want to use – and get on to using the brain part, the other end of its body, to come up with diversification ideas.

Bill 210 doesn't say: let's just get rid of gambling. It doesn't say: let's just get rid of lotteries. It says: let's look at the pros and cons. Let's weigh the issue. Let's consider how lottery funds could impact our province. I don't have the same difficulties with lotteries as I do with VLTs. They don't seem to have the same disastrous effect on individuals and families that the VLTs, slots, and casinos have. But this bill is saying: let's pause for some intellectual reflection; let's take a moment; let's actually steer the ship of state instead of, as I alluded to earlier, leaving it in dry dock.

We have an opportunity. We have good minds. There are the good minds. They're not limited to the opposition. There are good minds throughout this House. But, unfortunately, too much time is spent with the easy out. Sure, some sucker is going to continue putting money into the slot machines, and because of the underfunding of this government, people have become so dependent on casinos that they're an easy mark. That easy mark is not just the addict. That easy mark becomes the sporting communities. The easy mark becomes the schools. The easy mark becomes the arts associations because they are not properly funded in the beginning; therefore, they resort to holding their nose and participating.

A story from one of my constituents brought forth the fact that she had to withdraw her son and her daughter from a variety of choir activities that they had enjoyed for a series of years because the choir required parents to either fund the total amount of the tuition up front or participate in casinos. She made the choice based on her family's ethical and moral beliefs that it was better not to participate in these activities, although the children had enjoyed them for several years, rather than succumb to the casino gambling addiction.

We have all kinds of money in this province. We have surpluses. We don't need to have such a tremendous emphasis on gaming, but if it's going to continue to be acceptable to the majority of this House, then at least let's plan for it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to join debate on Bill 210, the Gaming Planning Act. This piece of legislation aims to establish an all-party gaming review committee. This committee will focus on current revenue-sharing policies for charities, the role of volunteers in casinos, social impacts of gaming, and the future role and scope of gaming in Alberta. Now, because of the efforts of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, or the AGLC, our province already has an excellent gaming framework, which is continuously monitored and improving gaming in this province. As a result of the ongoing research and monitoring of the gaming industry by the AGLC and other affiliated agencies, Alberta has one of the most comprehensive and appropriately regulated frameworks in the country.

3:00

Mr. Speaker, gaming in Alberta has undergone extensive change and development in previous years in response to this government's priority to ensure accountability, solid regulation, community benefit, and social responsibility. Since the inception of gaming in our province our government has been consistently monitoring Alberta's gaming industry in order to stay on top of evolving trends, effectively managing growth, while daily ensuring social responsibility of all liquor and gaming.

Now, Mr. Speaker, to be honest, I don't really want to stand up and defend gaming in Alberta today because I don't particularly like it. I don't particularly think it's the greatest way for us to go as a province. Although if it's going to happen – and obviously it is – it needs to be properly regulated by our government, and I believe that it is. I wasn't even going to speak on this subject today, but after listening to the opposition, I felt compelled to get up and to try to set the record straight.

Mr. Speaker, in 2002 the MLA Review Committee on Charitable Gaming Licensing Eligibility and Use of Proceeds was established to consolidate licensing eligibility policies, to review the use of AGLC proceeds, and to evaluate charitable gaming policies. In

April 2003 the committee came out with a report and produced 42 recommendations, the majority of which were adopted by our government. As a result of our government's ongoing research and concern for the public, Alberta has the most comprehensive and well-maintained gaming framework in the country. The charitable gaming model, which allows all four major gaming streams – bingo, casino table games, pull tickets, and raffles – to be directly managed by religious and charitable organizations, provides organizations with the opportunity to directly raise funds while managing their own charitable gaming activities. This is an excellent example of our government's dedication to effective, innovative, and socially responsible gaming initiatives.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, for the fiscal year ended March 2006 charities in Alberta earned over \$252 million . . .

Mr. Rodney: How much?

Rev. Abbott: Two hundred and fifty-two million dollars, hon. member.

. . . to support their programs and activities, while British Columbia, by solely allowing charities to conduct and manage raffles and small-scale bingos, minimized the proceeds earned directly by charities to just over \$27 million.

Mr. Speaker, as a person who is sitting on the new community spirit committee, I've heard from charities. They need more. It's no different than health or education or infrastructure or anything else. They need more. They're asking for more. They would like more. They can do more with more. They can do more good in the community. They can do more good for the citizens of Alberta. The Alberta government empowers our charitable organizations, allowing them more freedom to act in their own best interests as well as giving them the potential to earn more money through our charitable gaming model.

Now, although this bill is focusing on gaming, another model unique to Alberta, mandated under the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, is the retail liquor model. This model is distinct from other provinces in that it continues to allow the provincial government or the AGLC to license and regulate the liquor industry while leaving the warehousing and distributing and retailing of liquor to the private sector. According to a recent poll, when asked to rate the overall satisfaction with the way the liquor business is conducted in our province, 78 per cent of Albertans indicated a high level of satisfaction. Again, this shows our government's strong commitment to responsibly and equitably regulating these sorts of entertainment industries.

The Ministry of Public Security and Solicitor General is currently responsible for regulating Alberta's gaming industry. It is committed to ensuring that Alberta's gaming industry continues to be progressive while operating with social responsibility, Mr. Speaker. Currently gaming research is conducted by the Alberta Gaming Research Council, or the AGRC, a broad-based advisory group to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. The Alberta Gaming Research Council helps direct the research activities of the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, a consortium of educational institutions supporting and promoting research into gaming and gambling in the province. The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission prides itself on its ability to conduct ongoing research to continuously improve its programs to better the industry and, in turn, Albertans' way of life.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has the most progressive well-researched and well-regulated gaming industry in the country. I am confident with the AGLC, that it will continue to secure integrity, social responsibility for the best interests of Albertans; hence, I do

not believe that establishing an all-party review committee would be effective at this time. In fact, I believe it would be a complete waste of taxpayers' dollars. So I ask all members to carefully weigh the arguments for and against Bill 210, and I urge my colleagues to vote against it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was a very impressive off-the-cuff few minutes of remarks from my hon. colleague from Drayton Valley-Calmar, who said himself that he wasn't even going to get up and speak until he heard some members on this side of the House. Then he got up and spoke so eloquently that it sounded like he'd been up all night preparing those notes, or perhaps somebody from the Public Affairs Bureau had. I don't know.

You know, every once in a while the world of rock and roll provides us with a saying that has great wisdom and timeless value in it. In 1974 the Doobie Brothers came out with an album titled *What Were Once Vices Are Now Habits*, and that describes the state of gaming in the province of Alberta and, frankly, Mr. Speaker, throughout most of North America now. It is for that reason, if no other, that beyond the work of the AGLC, this Legislature, this House should periodically, regularly, on a regular schedule, review gaming in the province of Alberta because it was a vice and now it's a habit. Of all Albertans the Albertan with the biggest gambling habit is this government because it produces \$1.4 billion in revenue every year – \$1.4 billion – an amazing amount.

I know that you'll find it hard to believe, but 1974 was practically back in my childhood. Another saying from my childhood was that the house always wins, and, boy, is that ever true, Mr. Speaker. The government scoops up one-third of all revenues from racetrack slots, 70 per cent of all revenues from casino slots, 85 per cent of all revenues from video and lottery terminals. Nobody needs gaming more and nobody does better by gaming in this province than the province of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I wish I could say that over the years since 1974, when the Doobie Brothers first came out with an album called *What Were Once Vices Are Now Habits*, that in fact the quality of life of Alberta and all its citizens has dramatically improved because of our increased reliance on gaming revenues, our increased acceptance of gaming in all its forms, but frankly I don't see the evidence of it. Oh, the tennis courts in my community a couple of years ago got resurfaced using community facility enhancement program funds, which ultimately trace back to lottery revenues. You can look at all kinds of specific examples like that: schools that have been able to buy biology textbooks that they didn't have enough of a supply of because the parent council went out and had a casino night, something like that. But, really, are we better off as a society?

Are we better off as a society when we ask our school parent councils and our PTAs to hold casino nights, to raise money to fill in all the gaps caused by the chronic underfunding? I know that the Education minister right now probably wants to leap to his feet and say, "How can you say that the system in Alberta is underfunded?" because that's what he says every time you use the word.

3:10

So even for the sake of argument I'll allow that maybe the Education minister, maybe, just possibly, is right that the system is not underfunded. If it's not, then the only other conclusion is that the money, the billions that we spend on education in this province, is badly spent. Because how in 2007, in the middle of a boom, can 40 communities in the city of Calgary be going without a public

elementary school? How can parent councils still have to raise money for textbooks? Previous education and learning ministers have denied that that was ever the case, but talk to almost any parent council and they'll tell you what the real fact of the matter is. You know, increasingly elementary school parent councils rely on casino nights to raise the money they need to fill in the gaps caused by this government's mismanagement of the education file.

And there are so many, many other examples of that. Since 1993 the Conservatives have been downloading the responsibility for looking after people and looking after quality of life issues onto communities and volunteer groups who have nowhere else to turn for the money but casinos and gaming revenues because this province won't properly fund any of that, yet we suck from the people of Alberta \$1.4 billion a year. It's a voluntary tax. It's a tax on the poor. Sometimes people say that it's a tax on the stupid. I'm not going to go there because I don't think you have to be stupid to play the ponies or buy lottery tickets or go to a casino or whatever.

In fact, I'm not in any way really qualified to judge who goes to those sorts of places because gambling has never in any form held any interest for me whatsoever. I've been to the track a grand total of four times in my life. The only times I've been in casinos have been when I've been volunteering with my community association on our casino nights, that sort of thing. I think the last time I bought a lottery ticket they were still called Olympic lottery tickets. It was a long, long time ago. A long time ago. It doesn't turn my crank.

Clearly, it turns a lot of Albertans' cranks. Clearly, it has been deemed a legal undertaking. Clearly, it's better that the government should be the house than the mob. Clearly. However, it's also clear that while the vast majority of people who choose to gamble can do so responsibly, I guess, for lack of a better word, do so without getting themselves into a jackpot situation – oh, bad choice of words – without putting their family finances in the rhubarb, if you will, a study done in Ontario in 2003 clearly indicates that 4.8 per cent of problem gamblers in that province accounted for approximately 36 per cent of Ontario gambling revenue. Mr. Speaker, I hammer away at the government members opposite because that's part of my job as an opposition member, no doubt, but this is not a problem that by any stretch of the imagination is exclusive to the province of Alberta. It's not.

There are social problems attached to gaming. There are policy problems attached to gaming whenever a government makes as much money off other people's vices, other people's habits, as we make off gaming. There are significant issues that need to be monitored and studied and revisited, and decisions need to be made about those things. That's why I think it's essential that we not only have a plan for gaming, but that periodically we conduct sweeping public reviews of how gaming is conducted in this province and ask the people of this province what future they see for gambling in the province and to establish a committee to plan the future role of gaming in Alberta, and to ask the committee as part of its mandate to consider re-establishing community lottery boards for distributing gaming revenues is absolutely fair and on and justifiable.

This is not to take away from the ongoing work that the AGLC does. This is to enhance that. It's to add to it. It's to make sure that what we're doing around gaming is, in fact, in the public interest of the people of Alberta and to give the people of Alberta an opportunity to speak to that as well.

I would urge passage of Bill 210. I would urge everyone in the House to vote in favour of it. Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your time.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta and President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When we make decisions in government, we normally make them for financial reasons because we are put here to tax people's money and then spend it appropriately. It shouldn't be a government's position to tax their morals or to tell them where they should or shouldn't go. I've heard about the people that are protesting outside the casino. They should probably watch to see how many people are dragged off the street and thrown into the casino to spend their own money. I'm presuming most of them do it of their own free choice, whether it's good or bad or otherwise. I, too, like most of the members have very little interest in playing at the casinos although I do occasionally travel to some of the sunnier spots south and do that. That's a choice I make, and in most cases I fully intend to lose some money. That's what it's all about.

The intent of this bill is good. Unfortunately or fortunately, it's being done. The government is far ahead of the recommendations here, with the exception of trying to put MLAs in a position of deciding what to do within that department, the money. I think the administrative details of the gaming industry and the regulatory approvals and supervision need to be done by people – to say professionals may not be it – who are involved in the business, who arbitrarily deal with the policies of the government to make sure that gaming is open and transparent and that it's done under the rules of the Solicitor General's department.

Another thing that one of the hon. members over there suggested was that, you know, it might be better if they spent their money on people's important initiatives. I'm not sure if some of the pages were left out of the budget documents they got or if they just chose not to look. When you look at what the lottery fund spends, whether it's on the Alberta film development program – one of them said that we should spend some on that; we do – or assistance to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts or the Wild Rose Foundation or the major community facilities program or the community facility enhancement program or the community initiatives program or the major fairs and exhibitions or the bingos or the First Nations development fund or the centennial initiative or the assistance to the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation or the human rights, citizenship and multiculturalism education fund, the recreational sports facilities, these dollars are going back into communities where people are living, raising their families, and contributing greatly to the quality of life.

There is a downside; there's no question. When you lose your paycheque, that was to buy the diapers or pay the rent, that has a cost to society. This government has taken that responsibility very seriously through AADAC and through the department itself and the responsible gaming initiatives, addictions. Mr. Speaker, you can't have it both ways. You can't simply say that gaming is all bad, all good, or that if we were to study it longer, all of the ills that are related to it would go away. In fact, what this bill is purporting to do is being done even better, more efficiently, more effectively, not politically. Practically it's being delivered. There are about eight or 10 departments that receive hundreds of millions of dollars from the gaming fund. Clearly, the Premier has made it a major initiative.

We recognize how important it is to diversify the income streams to this province, and we are. Mr. Speaker, the nanotechnology sector, that we're supporting, expects in 15 years to be a \$20 billion to \$22 billion industry. We have some of the most innovative approaches in medical research. We're providing health care to people at a level that is seen in very few places in the world by using innovative ideas, by accessing the total dollars that come to government, and they all contribute to the pie.

We're working with the energy sector to develop different and alternative forms of energy. We're working in the agriculture sector

to try and diversify, try and value-add to make sure that we have a good, safe, secure supply of food. The forestry industry has faced challenges for years, and we're working with research, development, and marketing to make sure that their products can be sold around the world and are of utmost quality.

We're working with arts and culture. In Lloydminster about 10 days ago, Mr. Speaker, I was actually pleasantly surprised by how glowingly the artists receiving the awards spoke of being in Alberta, where they had the opportunity to live the life they dreamed of in the arts and become writers or actors and to promote the things that the Alberta government and the people of Alberta supported. I was surprised and happy that they felt so blessed to live in this province, as I do, as many people do.

3:20

Mr. Speaker, most of us in Alberta can see the positive side of what we've got here. Most of us can see the opportunities for our children. Most of us know that our parents and our grandparents will be looked after by a decent, caring government in this province. Most of us in this province realize that the environment is critically important to all of us. None of us live in a vacuum. It's a balance, and it's all brought together. It's been 36 very successful years, and unfortunately for many on the other side I have a tendency to think it'll be many more years, particularly with the approach they've taken: everything in Alberta is bad; we're just a polluting, homeless bunch of people who just can't do much; we gamble too much; we don't have roads; we don't have schools; hardly anybody learns anything. If you listen to them, it'd be a terrible place to come to.

Actually, I think it's a darn good place to live. There's a good balance between responsibility yet giving people the rights they cherish: to do what they want to do and in some cases the right to make bad decisions. Mr. Speaker, it can come from gambling. It can come from buying lottery tickets. It can come from buying a car that doesn't work from a guy in a back lot or buying a house with a leaky basement or tying yourself to a mortgage at 16 per cent. There are a lot of decisions that we let you do because that's what makes it work in this country. The responsibility you have comes from you and your family and the people around you.

So I find it not surprising that the Liberals there know what's best for everyone morally. They magically won't collect money from gaming. They'll lower taxes. They'll spend more on education. They'll spend more on everything, and they won't collect much. I'd love to have a piece of the fantasy world they live in. The hon. member continues to talk about the '70s. I guess we should have saved a bag of what they were smoking then because it might come in handy now to try and understand the way their approach is.

Mr. Speaker, I would certainly hope that the reasonably intelligent members of this Assembly would vote this down, give a vote of thanks to the Solicitor General and his department for the great job they do, and move on.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise on this topic. I wasn't around like the Member for Calgary-Currie in the '60s, so I'm not sure whether there were any songs about sucking and blowing at the same time, but if there were, I'm sure this member had a 45 spinning all the time.

It was really a relief to hear that he finally for the first time admitted that there is a possibility that public education is adequately funded in this province. That's the first time I've ever heard a member from Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition admit that there is

that possibility that public education may be sufficiently funded.

But that in itself would be too positive. They just couldn't have it that way. So then he goes on to say and argue, Mr. Speaker, that even though public education may be well enough funded, the money is not properly spent. Well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out, then, that obviously this member has issues with school boards. I would challenge the Member for Calgary-Currie to have the fortitude – maybe he can find a song from the '60s that he can use as a vehicle by which to deliver that message.

An Hon. Member: *I Can't Get No Satisfaction.*

Mr. Lukaszuk: *I Can't Get No Satisfaction:* there is a song that you can use.

Go to all the school boards within the province of Alberta and tell them: you're getting enough money, but you're not spending it well, and that's why teachers have to fund raise. There is no other way of interpreting what this member is saying. Hence, Mr. Speaker, lottery . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, but under Standing Order 8(7)(a)(i), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a private member's public bill to close debate, I'll now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark to close debate on Bill 210.

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I would like to thank all hon. members . . .

Mr. Rodney: Really?

Mr. Tougas: Yes, even you.

. . . for participating in Bill 210 over the last couple of days. I knew, of course, from the outset that Bill 210 would go down to defeat.

An Hon. Member: You're prejudging.

Mr. Tougas: I'm prejudging? Would you like to prove me wrong? It's quiet all of a sudden, isn't it. Yeah, I knew that was going to happen.

Mr. Lougheed: Wait for the vote.

Mr. Tougas: Oh, wait for the vote. Fine. The Member for Strathcona says that we should wait for the vote to see how this is going to go. That would be quite surprising, Mr. Speaker.

To be honest, I'm disappointed by the arguments that we've heard from the government side and quite often by the calibre of debate. When we hear terms like "sucking and blowing at the same time," that we heard from the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, it doesn't exactly elevate the level of discourse in this House.

Mr. Speaker, during the debate we heard a laundry list of all the wonderful things that come from various lottery programs. Now, there's no argument here, but none of what was said is relevant to the debate on Bill 210. We heard about how much lottery money went into the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation, the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, the Wild Rose Foundation. Again, no arguments here, but again not relevant. Nothing in Bill 210 would limit or restrict the distribution of money to these organizations.

Now, there were some comments that Bill 210 would duplicate reviews that are done on a regular basis by the government. There

may be some truth to this, but the difference between the performance reviews by the government and the all-party committee proposed in Bill 210 is that there would be full, open, public reviews of all aspects of gaming policy that would invite the public to help formulate gaming policy. To date gambling policy is established entirely behind closed government doors, with only the barest minimum of consultation with the people. The heart of Bill 210 is the public consultation aspect of the bill. The so-called monitoring of satisfaction with gaming policies that we've heard from government members just doesn't cut it. The questions are simply measurements of satisfaction and don't really delve deep enough to come up with a true picture of gaming in Alberta. I'm not entirely sure why the government is so worried about bringing these issues to the public, unless they're afraid of what they might hear.

Gambling is a growth industry in this province, but like with so many other industries there are moral and ethical questions attached to this growth, that would have been addressed in Bill 210. The thousands of volunteers who provide millions of hours of their time to working casinos would have had their voices heard. Again, prove me wrong.

Bill 210 might have forced the government to outline its plans for the future of gaming in Alberta. We have heard much about the government's buzzwords this year of transparency and openness. Unfortunately, faced with a chance to act with genuine transparency and openness, this government has chosen to do what it does best: make decisions behind closed doors.

Despite the impending demise of Bill 210 – and, again, if you want to prove me wrong, please do – it has been an honour to have had the opportunity to present a bill to this Legislature. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for second reading of Bill 210 lost]

Bill 211

Planning for the Future of Communities Act

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to rise in the House today and speak to open second reading debate on Bill 211, the Planning for the Future of Communities Act. I think that this has the potential to be an extremely important piece of legislation that governs the direction that we take in high-growth, rapid-growth areas and gives the people of those areas a significant stake in planning their own destiny five years out, 10 years out, 50 years out. It gives us the opportunity to design the communities we want in the Alberta that we need.

The objective of this legislation is to ensure that a long-term vision and long-term goals guide the decision-making dealing with growth in the province of Alberta, and it provides for co-ordination of growth policies among all levels of government. What the bill would do is designate specific geographical regions of Alberta as growth-plan areas. Within these areas a regional planning commission would be established, consisting of representatives of the provincial government, all the municipal governments within the region, stakeholders, and public representation as well, and those commissions would develop appropriate growth plans for the specific regions.

3:30

So what this bill is about, in short, is a return to regional planning. It is about land use. It is about environmental considerations. It is about human health and well-being. It is about quality of life and sustainability of that quality of life. It is about continued economic

growth. It is about creating a predictable, sustainable framework within which that economic growth can occur, and it is about livable, sustainable communities, the communities that we want in the Alberta that we need.

Now, there are many already who are on record as supporting legislation very much like this, as supporting the concepts and the principles behind this legislation. The current Premier during the leadership campaign said, and I quote: without a regional plan we'll have a disjointed patchwork that will create additional problems in the future. To help municipalities facing significant growth pressures, I believe government must provide new, predictable, and long-term funding. I believe this will be welcomed in places like Fort McMurray where the infrastructure needs cannot keep up with the population growth.

This bill, of course, is a private member's bill. It cannot be about funding. It cannot be about money, so it's not. Money, funding, from time to time, if this bill is adopted, may have to follow some of the decisions made by the regional growth planning commissions, the regional advisory committees, and that will be dealt with in the fullness of time, Mr. Speaker. But one of things that is needed is to bring some order to chaos, and we've been in a rather chaotic situation. It wasn't too noticeable for the first few years since 1995 because we weren't growing as wildly as we are today. But since growth took off like a rocket, it's been rather chaotic, and it's, rather, not an every man but an every municipality for themselves approach to trying to grab at the brass ring, if you will.

That pits counties and cities, towns and municipal districts against one another. It has caused an untold amount of conflict between the city of Edmonton and the other 22 municipalities that are part of the Alberta Capital Region Alliance. There is conflict between the city of Calgary and the municipal district of Rocky View. There has been conflict, which seems to have been resolved to an extent I'm happy to say – and I hope that the resolution holds – between the city of Red Deer and the county of Red Deer. There's dispute between the city of Grande Prairie and the county of Grande Prairie. There are disputes almost everywhere you look, where urban and rural areas come into conflict and sometimes collision over what should be common interests.

The situation here is that there's a challenge that all this growth pressure presents to municipalities, a challenge that has implications beyond each municipality's borders. Bill 211, if passed, will allow us to make rational – and by us I mean all the people of Alberta, and I'll come back to that point in a minute – and balanced decisions about the way that we grow in the future, decisions that will strengthen our economy, decisions that will promote a healthy and sustainable environment and 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 regions' further development.

I want to come back to that notion that it would allow us to make rational and balanced decisions about the way we grow in the future and to reiterate that when I say us, I mean all people in Alberta; I don't just mean the provincial government. Bill 211 will provide the province with a flexible mechanism to facilitate intermunicipal planning. In periods and areas of rapid growth I don't think planning is an option; it's a required element. This bill balances our respect for municipal autonomy with the clear need for a provincial role in supportive integrated intermunicipal planning. The province has a clear role in ensuring that planning occurs, but we believe those plans are best developed by the local people: local citizens, local leaders. The outcomes of better, more integrated planning, we believe, will include more cost-effective delivery of services, stronger economic prospects, a certainty that the infrastructure is

located where it's needed and is in place when it's needed, a sustained high quality of life, whether that's in terms of community design, transportation, environmental protection, whatever.

As the bill itself says: a growth plan may contain policies, goals, and criteria in relation to intensification and density, land supply for residential, employment and other uses, the location of industry and commerce, conservation of energy, infrastructure development and location of infrastructure and institutions, transportation planning, municipal waste management planning, growth-related capital spending and financing, affordable housing – this bill would allow affordable housing now to become a planning priority – community design, including the heritage character of neighbourhoods and buildings and community historical resources. And as you have seen, because I know that everybody in the House has done their homework on this bill, a host of other possibilities as well.

The idea is to create growth plans that will govern future growth and development decisions in the growth area so that plans, bylaws, actions, developments must be consistent with the plan. The plan is the overarching design. So we enter municipal disputes over the application of the plan that get referred to the Municipal Government Board. Growth plans prevail over other regulatory approvals by the NRCB or the EUB. There are a growing number of people in Alberta affected by those decisions who do not believe that they have sufficient input into those decisions, sufficient influence over the process of making decisions, and they're certainly not happy with the outcome of those decisions.

Conflicts between growth plans and other plans and policies will always be resolved in favour of the one that provides the greatest protection for the environment and human health. Very good reason for that. We can make oodles and oodles of money over the next couple of years by continuing on in the current context, but we can only do that while creating great damage to the environment and to the social environment if we continue on the path we're on. We don't want to end up there. When this boom is over, as booms always end, we want to end up ensuring that the places where we live and the places where we grow provide an ongoing sustainable quality of life that in and of itself encourages future and ongoing economic growth and development. So this is important. It puts people first, but it puts people first in concert with continued, orderly economic growth.

There's really a great deal more that I could say about this, but I know that my colleagues want to join the debate. I would simply urge you to review Bill 211 carefully, see the wisdom in it, and hopefully this House will support it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta and President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you. The idea around planning and that is good. You bet. The municipalities all talked about it: the bigger centres that are infringing on the smaller big centres. There's no question that it's in the best interests of municipal governments to develop a framework where they can deal with the issues on a regional basis or on an issue basis.

The big difference from this government or this bill is that we want to work co-operatively with the municipalities. They want to maintain their identity within a bigger planning framework. This bill, Mr. Speaker, in my opinion, is code for forced amalgamation. There is no way that you can give a regional planning group the responsibilities left out here in section 4, everything from capital spending and financing to waste management, transportation planning, location. That is creating another level of government that

most municipalities don't want. They want to be included in a planning process. They don't want to be told by a committee that only answers to the Lieutenant Governor that: "We have a plan that's being forced on you. You can like it or lump it, but we're going to do what we want."

3:40

A bill in this growth plan that says that the growth plan prevails over any licence, permit, approval, or other authorization granted by the NRCB and that – Mr. Speaker, one of the most contentious issues in this province is going to be water licence and water rights. If the hon. member thinks that you can just create a bill that will roll over or supersede water rights which were established long before the province was, then, while his intentions may be good, his understanding of the legal opportunity there is not.

Mr. Speaker, there are, as they say, many ways to skin a cat. I think the way our Premier and our minister have approached regional planning is that that is an opportunity out there. It shouldn't become another bureaucratic step in the way of development. Many municipalities – Wood Buffalo, for example – have done this, where they have developed a regional concept and they're moving forward, yet their problems are still there because of the tremendous growth. A plan or another group around a regional planning committee is not the be-all and end-all, the answer to all.

I don't believe that setting up a committee with the broad, broad tremendous scope as proposed here in Bill 211 would be accepted by municipalities in any way. I believe they would see it for what it is, which is forced amalgamation. Mr. Speaker, that is not where this government has come from. I certainly don't think as a former municipal councillor that I want to have a group appointed that has the opportunity to rule over all aspects of our communities. I like the approach of one of co-operation, done from a practical point of view with the municipalities involved. It is certainly far better in the long run. It certainly respects the right of individual municipalities and the tremendous opportunity that the municipal councillors and all of them bring to the table to work in this.

I wouldn't support Bill 211, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and join the debate and speak in support of Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act. I want to thank the sponsor, my colleague, the MLA for Calgary-Currie. The impact of this bill would mandate complete growth plans for specific regions. The rationale is that in order to accommodate future population growth, continue to support economic prosperity, and achieve a high quality of life for Albertans, planning must occur in a rational and strategic way that recognizes that an integrated and co-ordinated approach that determines future growth requirements must occur regionally to ensure that long-term vision and long-term goals guide decision-making, dealing with the growth in Alberta, and provide for the co-ordination of growth policies among all levels of government.

To provide for an appropriate range of housing types and densities required to meet the projected requirement of current and future residents of regional municipalities or regions facing unprecedented growth, Mr. Speaker, this legislation would allow for the provincial government to designate specific geographical areas of Alberta as growth plan areas. Within these areas a regional planning commission would be established, consisting of representatives of the provincial government, municipal governments within the region, stakeholders, and public representatives who would develop appropriate growth plans for the specific regions. These plans would

then be used to focus and guide the region's future development. This growth planning process would encourage broader, more comprehensive planning that links land-use planning decisions to future infrastructure needs.

Mr. Speaker, this would create a new mechanism to deal effectively with the broader planning issues that go beyond both the boundaries and the interest of individual municipalities. Elements contained within these integrated growth plans could be population projections and allocations; policies, goals, and criteria relating to issues such as intensification and density; location and the density of industry, commerce; protection of sensitive and significant lands, including agricultural lands and water resources; infrastructure development; and community design. In other words, a truly integrated system of planning completed regionally to guide present and future development of the region.

This type of legislation would require individual municipalities to bring their municipal development plans into conformity with the regional growth plan. This is essentially a provincial land-use strategy but could encompass much more. I would protect agricultural land; preserve watersheds, forests, and rivers; and address air quality issues; promote healthier Albertans by encouraging open spaces and parklands; set limits on where urban boundaries can expand and cannot expand; provide for affordable housing; more importantly, guide the development of Alberta well into the future. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Calgary-Currie already explained, you know, how this Bill 211 provides the province with a flexible mechanism to facilitate intermunicipal planning.

Mr. Speaker, we need to take a different approach to planning, and we want to start planning for the future of Alberta in a balanced and co-ordinated fashion. Bill 211, this proposed legislation, would ensure that whatever planning decisions we make, we would always ensure the protection of the environment, of prime agricultural lands and natural resources that drive Alberta's economy. We will ensure the future sustainability of our communities.

Alberta is growing at a rate that is unprecedented. Every day people move to Alberta in search of a better quality of life. Those numbers will continue to increase. We must plan right now for that growth. We must plan in a way that integrates and brings together under one focused plan everything required to build vibrant communities and a vigorous economy while at the same time protecting our natural environment and our health.

We cannot continue to make planning decisions in isolation. Alberta's future cannot be planned like that, so this legislation will allow us to co-ordinate growth for geographic-specific areas of the province. It will allow the integration of infrastructure requirements of roads, of affordable housing, of community design, of the location of industry and commerce, of the population projections and allocations. In short, it will guide planning and development across all sectors to ensure our future prosperity.

3:50

The purpose of this bill is very clear. We want our communities to be places where everyone has access to a place to live, to hospitals, jobs, and recreational facilities. We want our communities to be places where families can live and work and participate in vibrant communities. These are the communities we want and the Alberta we need.

Bill 211 allows not only for continued economic success, but it ensures that economic growth is sensible and sustainable. As Alberta's economy continues to grow, our environment and our quality of life must continue to be great. This legislation is all about helping the people of Alberta and the government make better choices for a better future. We want our communities of the future

to be places where all Albertans can enjoy clean air, clean water, and sustainable and vibrant communities. It's up to us right here in this Legislature to make that happen, to take these necessary steps so that we can leave the legacy for future generations.

These are goals deserving of this Legislature, and Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act, will allow us to achieve them, so I urge all the members sitting in this House to support this bill. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your indulgence and with the indulgence of the Assembly I would seek unanimous consent to allow us to be able to take off our jackets.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Deputy Speaker: Just a reminder to members that permission is not granted to assume the normal rules of committee, so you must remain in your seats. Just remove your jackets.

I assume that you didn't wish to speak in the debate.

The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to stand and talk to Bill 211.

Bill 211 proposes to establish growth plan areas that would be designated to oversee the development of municipalities in Alberta. As I understand it, each growth plan area would have to establish an advisory committee, including representatives from municipalities within that growth plan area, the government of Alberta, and the general public.

Improved municipal planning could alleviate concerns about the pace of growth, but Bill 211 is not the way to achieve it. Bill 211 proposes a significant change in municipal planning as it usurps planning responsibilities from municipalities and shifts them to the government of Alberta. Bill 211 does not recognize the cost of funding advisory committees and does not provide guidance on which level of government would bear this cost. Mr. Speaker, there is no indication of whether advisory committees are permanent planning bodies or are in place to address growth issues for temporary periods.

I want to emphasize that municipalities need some predictability and sustainability for the future, which very much involves regional discussion. Bill 211 would place this government in direct control of addressing regional planning issues as opposed to an open and co-operative approach to dealing with municipal issues. Mr. Speaker, this bill falls outside the planning framework laid out in the Municipal Government Act since there are consultations ongoing with municipalities on municipal planning. It would be more appropriate to include any changes within the MGA once consultations are complete. We have talked in question period many times about the consultation that is happening with municipalities, with the municipal associations, with the minister's council. I think it would be more appropriate to have consultation with those groups and those association and go from there.

The bill does not include any guidelines with respect to determining the representation of municipalities. Larger municipalities may feel that they are underrepresented due to the growth pressures brought on by rapidly growing populations. The municipal sustainability initiative is providing funding in 2007-08 for intermunicipal co-operative initiatives and co-operative projects. Mr. Speaker, additionally the Minister of Sustainable Resource

Development is developing a land-use framework which will provide a vision for an integrated, sustainable land-use approach that balances, if I can say, economic, environmental, and social concerns.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, this bill does not identify emergency prevention and preparation as an issue to consider within a growth plan. Advisory committees would be unable to conduct regional emergency planning without including that provision.

For those reasons, Mr. Speaker, I am not supporting Bill 211.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act. I think that as we look at the purpose of this bill, it's important to understand the background. As Alberta continues to grow at an accelerated rate, there's a tremendous potential to enjoy lucrative economic benefits. However, this potential is seriously jeopardized in certain high-growth areas where the lack of a mechanism under the Municipal Government Act, the MGA, to mandate regional planning is affecting the future growth potential of municipalities and leading to serious land-use complications.

The current MGA was introduced in 1995, and it's main principle was to ensure that municipalities could act with natural person powers, essentially as individual corporations making decisions in isolation. The MGA does not prescribe intermunicipal co-operation on land-use planning but, rather, is permissive in this regard. The effect of this is that municipalities make land-use planning decisions in isolation that quite often are not in the best interests of the region or the province.

This is the 21st century. I think that in most cases we understand that with 21st leadership there is a need for co-operation and collaboration and greater understanding of community, but we have a failure with this MGA. An example of this is the failure of the Alberta Capital Region Alliance, ACRA, as noted recently by the mayor of Edmonton. The inability of Edmonton and its regional partners to pull together is our biggest challenge. Working in silos is not just silly; it's destructive.

We have report after report indicating that there is a greater need, a huge need, for regional planning. The government's own Radke report clearly indicates that the lack of regional planning in the capital region in terms of infrastructure, transportation, environmental considerations, water use by the proposed upgraders, lack of knowledge of groundwater quality and the government's lack of involvement in regional planning could have serious implications for the future of the capital region.

4:00

The purpose of Bill 211 is to provide a mechanism to plan for future sustainable communities where growth pressures are presenting challenges to municipalities that have implications beyond their own borders. This legislation will allow the province 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 a certain geographical area as a growth plan area and the development of plans to focus and guide the region's future development. It's in the spirit of co-operation and collaboration and understanding of community and the recognition that one area's benefiting means that the province benefits. If one area loses, we all lose.

Bill 211's approach is to be collaborative with municipalities as

partners in this process. Instead of the minister preparing proposed growth plans for designated areas as well as defining specific growth areas, this act has that responsibility passed to an advisory committee for the preparation of growth plans, with the Lieutenant Governor in Council approving the designation of growth plan areas and growth plans. So this legislation would mandate complete growth plans for specific regions. The rationale is that in order to accommodate future population growth, continue to support economic prosperity, and achieve a high quality of life for Albertans, planning must occur in a rational and strategic way that recognizes that an integrated and co-ordinated approach that determines future growth requirements must occur regionally. We must work together. To me it seems like common sense to ensure that a long-term vision and long-term goals guide decision-making dealing with growth in Alberta and provide for co-ordination of growth policies among all levels of government.

Local autonomy is crucial and important as decisions are made with continued orderly growth that benefits the entire province. This legislation would allow for the provincial government to designate specific regional or geographical areas of growth of Alberta as growth plan areas. Within these areas a regional planning commission would be established consisting of representatives of the provincial government, municipal governments within the region, stakeholders, and public representation who could develop appropriate growth plans for the specific regions.

These plans would then be used to focus and guide the region's future development, and these plans would have been made with collaboration and co-operation, with discussion, and lead to consensus, something that I hope in the 21st century is going to be more common. This growth planning process would encourage broader, more comprehensive planning that links land-use planning decisions to future infrastructure needs. This would create a new mechanism to deal effectively with broader planning issues that go beyond both the boundaries and the interests of individual municipalities. This type of legislation would require individual municipalities to bring their municipal development plans into conformity with the regional growth plan. Again, I emphasize that it's a matter of co-operation and a sense of community, that we really are one. What benefits one can benefit all. At the same time, what harms one can harm all.

This is essentially a provincial land-use strategy, which is sorely needed, but it could also encompass much more. It would protect agricultural lands, preserve watersheds, forests, and rivers, and address air quality issues, promote healthier Albertans by encouraging open spaces and parklands, set limits on where urban boundaries can expand and cannot expand, provide for affordable housing, and, most importantly, guide the development of Alberta well into the future.

Bill 211 provides the province with a flexible mechanism to facilitate intermunicipal planning. There is no doubt that we must have intermunicipal planning. In periods and areas of rapid growth planning is not an option. This bill balances a respect for municipal autonomy and the clear need for a provincial role in support of integrated intermunicipal planning. The province has a role in ensuring that planning occurs, but we believe these plans are best developed by local leaders and citizens. The outcomes of better, more integrated planning may include, for example, more cost-effective delivery of services, stronger economic prospects, sustaining a high quality of life, community design, transportation, environmental protection, et cetera.

I grew up in the Crownsnest Pass at a time when there was a great, I guess, desire not to amalgamate and not to work together. It's interesting to go back now after a number of years to see the benefits

of actually working together and the cost reductions, the co-operation that's going on to produce better opportunities for schooling and so forth.

I think that in order to accommodate the tremendous rate of growth in certain geographical areas and to accommodate the future growth potential of communities and to ensure their economic prosperity, to guarantee a high quality of life for all Albertans, and to maintain a sustainable and vibrant environment, planning must occur in a co-ordinated and strategic manner. We can look all over to find examples where planning and working together has benefited the people.

Bill 211 provides a mechanism to deal effectively with those broader planning issues, which all too often transcend both the boundaries and the interests of individual municipalities. We cannot, especially in key high-growth areas, continue to make decisions in isolation. It doesn't make any sense. We will all lose if we do that. The proposed Planning for the Future of Communities Act will ensure that our choices about the future are guided by a long-term vision of the kind of strong and healthy communities that Albertans want to see.

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

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do have before us Bill 211, the Planning for the Future of Communities Act. It proposes new co-ordination and planning requirements for municipalities. This is a complex subject and in many ways extends beyond the capacity of a private member's bill. However, I do appreciate the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie bringing this bill forward so that we may bring all members up to speed on this government's municipal initiatives.

It has been refreshing to hear once again how our government is actively working on addressing municipal growth concerns either through the new municipal sustainability funding or through the consideration of the report from the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability, which I know, Mr. Speaker, is vigorously working its way through the process. Clearly, when considering the work that is already being undertaken, the government is carrying its weight on handling municipal development.

I think the other speakers have adequately covered topics relating to municipal planning and development, so this afternoon I want to focus specifically on one element of the business of a municipality, and that would be the element of housing and community infrastructure. As Bill 211 recognizes, part of developing a productive municipality is addressing social and cultural concerns. The bill correctly identifies both these issues as critical to sustainable municipal growth. However, here, just as in most circumstances, the Liberal opposition fails to recognize the work this government is accomplishing in relation to housing and community infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, housing has been a significant issue facing every single member of this Assembly. It's an issue that confronts urban and rural centres in the four corners of this province. Or should I say five corners? There is no question that every Albertan needs some form of roof over their head. However, before I address the government response to the need for additional housing, we need to consider the housing construction that is going on in this province.

In the last three years, Mr. Speaker, housing starts have exceeded 40,000 per year and were over 50,000 in 2006. This represents 25 per cent of home construction in Canada. It is a reflection of the thousands of individuals that move to Alberta every month. Twenty-five per cent of construction, yet only 10 per cent, roughly, of the national population. This tells me something. It tells me of the great

desire of people to own their own home, which is really one of the greatest sources of independence for an individual. We must also bear in mind that this level of construction has sustained employment and supported many businesses and communities throughout the province.

4:10

Mr. Speaker, as I think of my own community of Drayton Valley and Calmar and surrounding area, I think of all the new homes going up as well as all the new businesses going in. What does this do? It creates jobs. It creates long-term sustainability. This level of construction and the eagerness of individuals to own their own home is a great Alberta success story despite the fog of rhetoric generated by members opposite.

In Alberta there are situations where individuals are unable to own their own home or unable to afford the rent for an apartment. This government opted to address the problem by supporting the construction of affordable housing and supporting individuals through income supplements. To support the construction of affordable housing units, our government announced a municipal sustainability housing program. This program has a \$100 million per year budget available over the next three years. Now, that's \$300 million, Mr. Speaker. This initiative is part of the new municipal sustainability program and will specifically address housing concerns in high-growth and high-need municipalities such as Drayton Valley. It is intended that this funding be available on a consistent and a sustainable basis for the next 10 years, and I believe that'll happen. I believe that our boom is going to continue and that we will be able to address these growth issues over the coming years.

Funding for affordable housing extends to capital enhancement of \$96 million in 2007-2008. By working with other levels of government and the private and nonprofit sectors, it is expected that 11,000 new housing units will be built over the next five years. Combined, both programs represent nearly \$400 million over the next three years for affordable housing units. The critical element to this funding is that it is given to municipalities to address their own unique issues. There is no cookie-cutter template to add affordable housing units. If it were available, I have no doubt that the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing would have found it by now and would have informed the Assembly of its existence. The approach of this government is preferable because it recognizes that municipalities each have unique issues. They're all different. They all have ideas. They all have plans, their own municipal plans, as to how to address this important issue.

I also want to address what I'm going to term community infrastructure. I'm talking about libraries, cultural and community centres, swimming pools, arenas, concert halls, art galleries, and museums. All of these facilities enhance quality of life and, perhaps most importantly, make communities attractive places to live, work, and prosper. To address the need for community infrastructure, the municipal sustainability initiative has allocated \$75 million in 2007-08 through a community capital envelope.

Now, community infrastructure is not only needed in new communities and neighbourhoods, but there are many facilities needing to be replaced and refurbished. We know that. Alberta just celebrated 100 years last year, and some of these facilities are getting old. Recognizing the demand for such facilities, Budget 2007 announced funding for community facilities above the community capital funding in the municipal sustainability initiative.

The Department of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture is responsible for two new programs supporting community infrastructure. The first program – I think it was mentioned earlier – is the major community facilities program. Over the next two years, Mr.

Speaker, \$280 million is available to support significant public-use facilities in our province. It's intended that the program will allow municipalities to build recreational and cultural facilities that will enhance the well-being of Albertans. That is the singular focus of this initiative, and as such it is an outstanding legacy for future generations.

The second program will provide \$90 million through a recreation and sport facilities grant program. While it is specifically targeted to sports, I'm sure that the hockey and soccer moms and dads in my constituency will be appreciative of support for new fields and new arenas in addition to the other recreation and sport facilities that are needed in this province.

Overall there's sizable support for community infrastructure, which is part of a rather sizable capital plan for this province. In fact, it is an unprecedented investment in our communities. Our municipalities stand to build and enhance communities which will make every Albertan and every newcomer to this province proud to call this wonderful place their home. Mr. Speaker, this government is addressing the very concerns of municipalities, including housing and community infrastructure. Both items cover the so-called social issues that are very important in maintaining sustainable economic growth.

Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act, is an interesting document. However, I wonder when considering the initiatives of this government in relation to municipal growth – that is, the municipal sustainability program and the land-use framework – if this legislation was formed within some sort of vacuum. Now, there are growth pressures, and there is a need to address municipal co-operation, and this bill may help to provide the answer, but as I said, this is a complex issue. As legislators we cannot pretend that this issue would be dealt with after only two hours of debate.

Mr. Speaker, there will be positive results arising from the municipal sustainability program. It's already happening around Alberta. There's also the need to allow the land-use framework consultation to complete its work as the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has said in his comments on this bill.

When I weigh all of this together, Mr. Speaker, I have difficulty supporting Bill 211, considering that there is work already being done in relation to supporting strong communities. So I guess my answer is no. No, I will not be supporting Bill 211, and I encourage my colleagues to do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. It is my hope that at some point within the legislative session this year or next the value of a variety of ideas and the wisdom of a number of sources will be taken into consideration. It seems that frequently in this House we're at the knuckle-dragging, chest-thumping state of mantra and chanting: government good, opposition bad.

We have the legislative democratic process. It's called amendment. So if there's something you don't like, may I suggest you use your intellect to amend and change and fix as opposed to just simply tossing it out because you don't like the source from which the information came or the party or the individual? We have to get past that. I had hoped that within this legislative session the all-party policy committees, the field committees, would be actually under way. This is the one change that I looked most forward to, the idea of combined, collaborative thinking. This is the type of thinking that Bill 211 is calling for.

Bill 211 sees the role of the government as a funder, as a facilitator,

as a collaborator, not a dictator, not a forced amalgamator, nor a micromanager. Right now this government has got its tendrils so far into municipal governments' planning that with the exception of, I believe, the \$127 million, for example, that was offered to Calgary as part of the eventual \$1.4 billion portion, this government feels that it needs to micromanage every last decision. It doesn't matter that municipal leaders and councillors were elected. It doesn't matter that school boards once had control over half of their own budget, which this government took away.

This notion, this nonsensical idea of: "We know best; we've done it for 36 years. Things must be just wonderful, so just leave them the way they are. Let the market decide. If the market needs a little bit of a tune-up, let's throw money at it, such as the millions and millions of dollars that were quoted by the member, as justification." Money does not equal planning, and that's what Bill 211 is trying to address. You know, we're accused of doomsday attitudes, of always seeing the darkness and refusing to see the light, but we don't accept that what we currently have in Alberta is the most illuminated circumstance that we could possibly have, that everything is fine; let it continue. What we as Alberta Liberals and other parties have tried to do is suggest alternatives.

4:20

The previous member spoke of the housing solutions, and he spoke in terms of dollars. Well, let me suggest that it's a lot more expensive to correct a mistake than to prevent it in the first place. You can't just hope to buy your way back to a just and genuine progress form of lifestyle for Albertans. If we could solve Alberta's problems strictly with money and we didn't have to plan and we just sort of tuned into the market – "What are the shares today? Okay. That's good. Let's buy a few of those" – then governing would be absolutely easy. It would be just a matter of reading the stocks and tuning into the market. But that's not the case. We need at times to intervene.

Right now the government is very content to provide emergency funding for vulnerable individuals. Far be it from me to say that they shouldn't do that, but how long do you keep plugging dollars into that leaky dike of taxpayers' dollars before you get your first affordable house built? Once you've got that first affordable house built, what kind of support mechanisms are there for the people who would potentially inhabit that house? You sort of see the beginning, you see the end, and unfortunately you frequently ignore the middle, and we're in that interim middle when it comes to affordable housing. The government has no balance. The boom is on, and we need people to fill the jobs, but we don't have accommodations for them. We're always playing catch-up, and playing catch-up is a very expensive, nonproductive game to play.

One thing that I believe all members in this House can accept – and it's based on the fact that it comes from a neutral source – is Dr. Brad Stelfox's presentations. Dr. Brad Stelfox has done a series of presentations on a variety of issues, but they all deal with the growth. They take a historical perspective, and then they provide a little bit of future suggestions as to: if we continue along this particular line, this is where we'll end up; if we continue along that line, here is where our projections say we'll finally end up.

Anyone who has seen Dr. Brad Stelfox's presentations, whether it was in Canmore in the spring of 2005 at the parks and protected areas or whether it was with the PNWER presentation in the summer of 2006, regardless of where they saw it, what Brad Stelfox does is show the growth that has occurred in this province since 1900. He indicates that growth by a series of dots, and what you start to see as the years progress is a series of dots of different colours that indicate agricultural land use, industrial well sites, and so on. It shows the

growth and footprints of the cities. It shows the current rate of loss of farmland. It shows the depleting nature of our water resources.

What Brad Stelfox doesn't do is exactly what I wish the government wouldn't do, and that's come up with the ultimate end answer. Brad Stelfox says: here's the information, people; let's get our collective heads around this and come up with a solution. Because of that Brad has been welcomed in numerous government presentations, and I thank the government for having the wisdom to have Dr. Stelfox take on these explanations and PowerPoint presentations. The last presentation that I saw from Dr. Stelfox had to do with the last five miles, the area in the southeast Rockies that the Nature Conservancy is so concerned about protecting.

If we don't get it right now, we leave no legacy for our children and their children and generations to come. What we don't have right now is any kind of a balance between our environmental requirements for a quality of life: breathable air, water that will continue to be available. All this government appears to be doing at this point is letting the market decide. Put that money into your pocket as fast as you can. Put it into your right pocket, and then transfer it to your left pocket. Overspend by \$2,000 per Albertan what you take in in general revenue. Dip into what should be going into the heritage trust fund. Dip into the surpluses. Just get that money out there. Why? Because the government failed to plan back in 1994. The preoccupation with paying down the debt has resulted in tremendous extra expense. [Mr. Chase's speaking time expired]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, I have to remind you that we're not in the committee stage of the bill. We're in second reading.

An Hon. Member: Hey, George, get back in your seat.

Mr. VanderBurg: I apologize.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity to make some comments today on Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act. This bill hopes to establish a new planning and co-ordination requirement to support municipal development and intermunicipal or regional co-operation. In other words, it's a shotgun marriage. The contents of the growth plans as proposed in Bill 211 would include population projections, growth strategies and policies, goals and criteria related to land supply, location of industry, and conservation of energy, among others.

This province has long recognized the critical importance of strong local government and has developed a tradition of visionary local government systems. This is reflected in the Municipal Government Act, which places a focus on the autonomy and the accountability of municipalities while empowering them to take more action on local planning and development. Most municipalities want to retain their ability to address planning and growth issues, allowing them to adapt to the unique challenges and needs of their particular region. For many areas of Alberta the broad enabling provisions within the current planning framework continue to work very well. Municipalities are able to develop plans and intermunicipal agreements to achieve high levels of co-ordination and co-operation, creating solutions beneficial to all parties.

By allowing municipalities to manage their own endeavours, we allow municipalities to grow to their fullest potential by giving them autonomy and empowering them rather than imposing restrictions.

The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing strongly believes that each municipality must grow according to the desires of its citizens and own the right to realize economic development and prosperity. As a result, it encourages intermunicipal partnerships and facilitates common resource sharing, regional partnership initiatives, and various joint planning initiatives.

The regional municipality of Wood Buffalo is a prime example of a flourishing and successful model of intermunicipal co-operation. The municipality of Wood Buffalo has been able to work effectively by liaising with other stakeholders and surrounding municipalities to attain the region's goals and mutual benefit to all. For example, because of its flourishing economy and effective intermunicipal co-operation, it is predicted that by 2011 the municipality of Wood Buffalo will have created some 17,000 new jobs for our province. The creation of jobs in the municipality has a significant relationship to its increase in population. Between 2001 and 2006 Wood Buffalo's population increased by some 24.3 per cent, showing to be a benefit not only to the municipality and the region but also having a direct, positive contribution to our province's economic growth.

4:30

By creating a forum where municipalities must deal with one another by means of intermunicipal co-operation, we have strived to create stronger and more effective municipalities, resulting in tighter knit, municipally responsible communities which look out for each other's best interests. A great example of this is Lac La Biche in Lakeland county, approximately 220 kilometres northeast of Edmonton. Over the years the area has flourished into a stable economic climate and thriving business community. As Lac La Biche is conveniently located between two major oil sands producing areas, Fort McMurray and Cold Lake, seismic drilling and pipeline construction have become an issue among its citizens, but due to successful intermunicipal co-operation the region has benefited from the industries, turning the area into a vibrant and growing community.

Lac La Biche and its surrounding municipalities have learned to effectively work together on regional matters such as information sharing and networking, advocating regional interests, providing research on regional issues, providing a forum for stakeholders, facilitating implementation of regional initiatives, and working as a team to meet the economic and environmental and social goals of the region.

I'd like to talk a bit about the benefits that we are currently seeing in the Rocky Mountain House constituency. The county of Clearwater, the town of Rocky Mountain House, and Caroline have for years worked as a unit. As a matter of fact, there are a number of joint municipal plans and agencies working with the waste management system, fire and ambulance, joint planning around those urban centres. As a matter of fact, when I was still there, we initiated a program where we were actually cost sharing. We were giving to Rocky Mountain House and Caroline a portion of the taxes that we collected from the large gas plants in the county. This has enabled us to work with those urban municipalities, and I would just hate to see the provincial government force onto that area a new planning system.

It's now happening in the county of Mountain View with the town of Sundre, which is in the Rocky constituency, and I understand it's also happening with some of the other towns within the county of Mountain View. They have a joint ambulance service, joint planning around the municipality. In the county of Lacombe: in the town of Eckville an emergency building was paid for by the town of Eckville plus the county, with county money coming into recreation facilities within the town. So it's working. Let's leave it alone. Don't impose a new level.

Municipal Affairs and Housing understands the divergent benefits from well-functioning intermunicipal relationships and has for years shown dedication by means of providing long-term funding. Initiatives such as the targeted investment initiative provide grants to certain municipalities with limited financial resources. This has enabled many municipalities to cope with priority spending pressures, thus helping ensure long-term sustainability. As well, a partnership established in 2001 between Alberta and the federal government created the Canada/Alberta municipal rural infrastructure fund, which responds to local needs and priorities of municipalities by helping to provide clean water, better sewage systems, upgraded waste management processes, and safe roads and bridges. Also under the Canada/Alberta municipal rural infrastructure fund there exists a municipal capacity building special projects fund established to help municipalities to implement modern and innovative life cycle management plans for their infrastructure assets.

Furthermore, as a result of our government's dedication to providing strong, sustainable municipalities, the 2007 budget introduced the municipal sustainability initiative, which will provide some 1.4 billion dollars to Alberta municipalities, phased in over the next four years. This new funding will include incentives to encourage collaboration and co-operation between municipalities and provide needed financial support for critical core and community infrastructure projects. This will enable high-growth municipalities around the province to be better able to anticipate and meet growth-related challenges.

Through the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability our government received further recommendations on how to enhance the long-term sustainability of municipal governments and fully capitalize on the opportunity presented by Alberta's strong economic climate. Ideas such as further negotiating intermunicipal development plans and helping to establish more complex intermunicipal relations are all ideas our government is considering to strengthen intermunicipal co-operation while keeping power at the local level.

[The Speaker in the chair]

In order to achieve success in Alberta's growing economy, it is paramount that we support each municipality in its own endeavours. Strong municipalities provide critical and visible services at the local level while instilling accountability and responsibility through the region, helping to contribute to a great and strong and unified province . . . [Mr. Lund's speaking time expired]

Mr. Speaker, I remember years back, when we had the regional planning commissions . . .

The Speaker: I think it was time there, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Tougas: It's a good thing you got that last plug in there. That was very important. We weren't sure where you were going with that, so thank you for clarifying that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and say a few brief words about Bill 211, the Planning for the Future of Communities Act. I'd like to thank my colleague and friend from Calgary-Currie for bringing forward this bill. I hope he has a little bit better luck with his than I had with mine, but I'm not getting that vibe here this afternoon, so I think his is going to meet the same fate as mine. But we shall carry on. [interjection] Yes, vibe.

Mr. Speaker, one of the most amazing statements ever uttered by a politician in Alberta came from the former Premier, Ralph Klein. Now, when Ralph Klein was Premier, he made a lot of quite

amazing statements, but perhaps his crowning achievement was his admission that the government had no plan to deal with Alberta's explosive growth. That was really one for the history books. While it has been apparent for years that the government really had no plans for the future, the fact that the man in charge of the government would admit that the government was without a plan was quite astonishing, even by Premier Klein's standards.

With the government's well-known aversion to planning, Bill 211 is needed now more than ever. 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. The legislation would allow the designation of certain geographical areas as growth areas and the development of plans to focus and guide the regions' future development.

Bill 211 would be collaborative, treating municipalities as equal partners rather than junior partners in the Alberta family business. Mr. Speaker, the importance of planning cannot be overstated. Businesses around the world depend on planning for their long-term survival. Indeed, in the business world many very successful companies have foundered when they failed to plan properly. Alberta's current state reminds me of a number of companies in business history who expanded during boom times only to find that they had expanded too far and too fast, resulting in their demise. This legislation would mandate that the growth areas would produce complete growth plans. Planning must occur in a rational and strategic way that recognizes that an integrated and co-ordinated approach that determines future growth can only be accomplished with all parties at the table planning for the future.

4:40

Perhaps nowhere is the need for planning more evident than in the capital region. Edmonton is faced with an untenable situation of having 23 municipalities in the Alberta Capital Region Alliance. The mayor of Edmonton, Stephen Mandel, quite correctly described it as working in silos. Report after report indicates the need for regional planning. The Hemson report states that the capital region's inefficiencies will erode competitiveness. The Percy report clearly advocated for regional collaboration. The McNally royal commission, which is a 50-year-old report, reported that regional co-operation was necessary to deal with future growth issues. That's a 50-year old report, Mr. Speaker. The government's own Radke report clearly indicates that the lack of regional planning in the capital region in terms of infrastructure, transportation, environmental considerations, and the government's lack of involvement in regional planning could have serious implications for the future of the capital region.

The evidence indicating the need to establish a regional planning mechanism for high-growth areas that has the authority to make binding decisions on land-use matters is undeniable. Failure to implement such mechanisms and processes jeopardizes the future growth potential of not only the capital region but also high-growth areas such as Grande Prairie and Cold Lake.

We need, Mr. Speaker, to take a different approach to planning. We want to start planning for the future of Alberta in a balanced and co-ordinated fashion. Bill 211 would ensure that whatever planning decisions we make, we would always ensure the protection of the environment, our prime agricultural lands, and natural resources that drive Alberta's economy. We will ensure the future sustainability of our communities.

The purpose of the bill is clear: we want our communities to be places where everyone has access to a place to live, hospitals, jobs, and recreational facilities. This legislation is all about helping the

people of Alberta and the government make better choices for a better future.

I believe that earlier the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar said that it was too complicated an issue – [some applause] he applauds himself – to deal with in just two hours, which is a wonderful reason to vote for the bill, so that we can send it to committee and discuss it even further.

I encourage all members to vote in favour of this bill. Thank you very much.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to join debate on Bill 211, Planning for the Future of Communities Act. The debate to this point has been most interesting. We've been going back and forth, but the debate essentially is about the recognition of the need for planning or defence of the status quo, that it's okay to keep on doing things the way we are doing. Clearly, I think one must recognize the absence of any regional planning mechanisms. They were in place at one time in this province. All of that arrangement was trashed by this government many years ago. The consequences of the lack of regional planning in terms of intermunicipal tensions and inability to co-operate are evident to all of us.

Urban sprawl as an issue is a huge one and the problems that it generates in terms of absence of any public transportation plans for the region. Take the capital region here. They're all so very evident. In addition, Mr. Speaker, the absence of any ability to regionally plan and to encourage and generate co-operation and collaboration between neighbouring municipal entities and areas creates absolutely huge problems.

There was a comment made earlier on by one of the members on the government side with respect to: what about the costs of establishing these advisory committees? Mr. Speaker, my question is: imagine the costs of not having any planning arrangements in place, costs in terms of transportation, costs in terms of urban sprawl, costs in terms of having no plans for population density, costs in environmental terms, social terms. They're huge costs when there is no attempt to in fact engage different municipal authorities/entities into co-operating and planning co-operatively for the future. Particularly in the context of rapid population growth and in the context of very, very rapid economic growth to refuse to acknowledge the need for some sort of co-ordinated planning arrangements is asking for trouble in the future. Costs, I think, of not planning are huge, much greater than it will cost to fund a regional commission or an advisory committee as proposed in this act.

At this point, of course, we are speaking more in terms of the principles entailed in this act, and I think the principle of some sort of need for co-operative and future-oriented planning is a principle that I support. I think it's an important principle and needs the support of this House. With respect to the details, or the substance of the bill, I think we should allow the bill to move to the next stage so that we can look at the details of the bill in terms of what it proposes to do substantively, clause by clause.

At that stage, issues such as the concern that I think one of the members on the government side expressed with respect to the centralization concern, that the bill, in fact, centralizes too much power with respect to municipal planning and interregional, intermunicipal planning into the hands of the Executive Council – I think that's a valid argument. We can certainly examine this, debate it, and ask ourselves whether or not that centralizing element of the bill can be mitigated by making some changes if some of the other provisions of the bill meet the approval of the House.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For example, I have a concern with respect to the role of this Legislature beyond it voting on this bill. I think there should be some provision in this bill with respect to the advisory committee's planning report when it comes before, for example, the Executive Council. Before the Executive Council ratifies it in the final stages, it should perhaps be referred to one of the policy field committees. I'm very concerned about us not paying attention to the presence of these policy field committees, which represent this House, which represent the province.

I think we could make those changes in a bill such as this one by suggesting how the centralizing elements of this bill perhaps could be mitigated by enhancing the role of this Legislature before this bill or another bill such as this one could finally get the approval of the House. So there are positive and constructive ways in which we need to engage ourselves with respect to the whole issue of the need for regional planning and the costs of not paying attention to the need for planning.

Land use policies. Fertile land around the province is disappearing without anyone asking questions about the long-term consequences of it. There are ecological microsystems in existence all over the regions in which these kinds of developments are taking place, and no one is paying attention to what happens to the loss of those microsystems, which represent very, very important ecological treasures. Once they're gone, they're gone forever.

We do need to pay some attention to the issue of how to address environmental issues, how to address issues of urban sprawl, issues of providing economical transportation for the future, how to deal with issues of greenhouse gas emissions which result from the excessive use of individual means of transportation in the absence of affordable and effective public transportation. Plans for the regions around big urban areas are developing as we speak.

There are a huge number of issues. There's the issue of leaving some sort of legacy for the future generations. That's where planning comes in, thinking about the future in the long term and making provisions and, in fact, being able to forecast and see some risks and dangers. In failing to plan, failing to forecast, we are failing to develop plans to deal with possible difficulties that will arise if we do not plan beyond existing municipal boundaries.

4:50

Existing municipal boundaries are there. They are a reality. Surely, the whole issue of regional planning, having a plan for a whole region, is complex. It's made more difficult, certainly, by the political realities that are there, but that doesn't mean that we should throw our hands up in the air and say in frustration that nothing can be done. Something has to be done. I'm sure municipally elected officials are as much sensitive to these concerns as we are, and simply saying that they will not listen, that they will be absolutely outraged if we raise some of these questions in this Assembly and encourage them to think in the long term, think beyond existing municipal boundaries, I think, is ludicrous. I don't think that's an argument that holds.

I think Albertans increasingly, whether they are elected municipal officials, whether they are provincial elected representatives, whether they are regular, ordinary citizens, parents raising their children and families, you know, looking to the future, all are concerned about the lack of planning. They would like to see this government take some leadership role in moving in the direction of developing regional plans which will address issues of potential water scarcity in the coming years, water conservation, issues of greenhouse gas emissions and how we deal with those through regional planning, urban planning, municipal planning.

They would certainly like to see the land use rationalized. Currently, in this free-for-all sort of development strategy that's happening all over the place, we are losing a most valuable natural resource called land. Very, very fertile agricultural land is disappearing without any thought being given to what will happen in the next 20, 30, 40 years, when this land is no longer there and our population base has changed, our environmental conditions have changed. What will we do under those circumstances? We're not here temporarily. We're not here just to exploit the resources for a while and then move on to the moon or some other place. It's a place that we need to carefully plan for, use, enhance, and leave something for our children to enjoy and further develop based on what we have done.

So, Mr. Speaker, at this stage I, certainly, support the principles underlying this bill and hope the House will do the same.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise to address Bill 211, the Planning for the Future of Communities Act. This bill attempts to deal with a very timely issue, but fortunately land planning in Alberta is already being thoroughly addressed in many ways. The Member for Calgary-Currie calls for the enhancement of municipal development intermunicipal co-operation, and this bill aims to achieve that through new planning and co-ordination requirements. As I will explain, this act is very simplistic when it's compared to the steps that the Alberta government has taken and continues to take to co-ordinate land use in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, as our province's population is increasing, more infrastructure facilities and parks are needed. In the last 25 years our population has grown almost 50 per cent. New communities are being formed across Alberta at an incredible rate. Economic development is also unprecedented in Alberta. Over the last 10 years our economy has grown at an average rate of 4.3 per cent a year.

Mr. Rodney: How much is that?

Ms DeLong: 4.3 per cent a year.

More land is required to accommodate the industrial and residential growth that is occurring, and it's important that these needs are met in a co-ordinated and co-operative fashion. At a time of growth, planning activity is of the utmost importance. Almost every industrial sector requires an increasing amount of land while our increasing citizenry populates more areas across the province. Agriculture, forestry, parks, tourism, wildlife, and watersheds must be minded. Growth has taken competition over land use to new heights. These development plans can naturally co-exist, but sometimes land uses are conflicting. Different groups want access to the same area, and sometimes there is a need to exercise caution when . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, but the time consideration for this item of business has concluded.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Skilled Worker Immigration Program

509. Mr. Agnihotri moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to immediately enter into negotiations with the federal

government to expand the provincial nominee program into a reliable and permanent source of skilled labour for Alberta, thereby reducing the demand for temporary foreign workers.

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

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When this motion was originally tabled, there was no movement on an immigration deal, so we are going to amend this motion later on.

The provincial nominee program is a core strategy for ensuring that Alberta has enough workers 10, 20, 30 years down the road. We cannot afford to be unprepared again. If we are inviting workers to this province because we have a legitimate and desperate need for them, sending them back home in two or three years is not going to alleviate that need in the long run. Immigration has to be part of the solution. The temporary foreign worker program is not enough.

This province does not just have a skilled labour shortage; it has a worker shortage in general. The provincial nominee program must be extended further to include the lower skilled and semiskilled labour that small businesses rely on. If there's a long-term need for one type of worker, we have to address that with a long-term solution.

Temporary foreign workers are being exploited in Alberta, and government cannot do anything to stop it even though we have an Alberta trades act in place to protect them. Government has no control over the temporary foreign worker program, especially regulating overseas. They don't even know how many workers are in this province, much less where they are located. Add into consideration the heightened vulnerability of these workers, and you have a recipe for abuse.

The overall thrust of this motion is to strengthen the provincial nominee program. There are several motivating factors for this: sustainability, strength of the provincial program. There is really no valid reason for opposing the provincial nominee program in this province. The PNP is an important part of a long-term sustainable solution for addressing Alberta's labour shortage. By allowing skilled workers to permanently immigrate to Alberta, PNP can work in the long term to reduce further labour shortages.

This program also treats workers who would like to permanently immigrate to Canada more fairly than the temporary foreign worker. Under the provincial nominee program skilled and some semiskilled workers are able to enter Canada permanently. All other workers may only stay here temporarily.

It is also important to recognize that we do not only have a skilled labour shortage; we have a people shortage in general. This will not be going away any time soon. Expanding the PNP to include more types of workers can address long-term labour shortages across many industry sectors which are badly in need of people.

The provincial nominee program also allows Alberta more flexibility in determining what types of immigrants are best suited for this province. For example, according to the Alberta director of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 91 per cent of small businesses say that they need immigrants in the low-skilled or medium-skilled categories – that is, jobs that require high school, on the job, or some college or apprenticeship training – yet the permanent immigration system brings in only 25 per cent immigration in this category. While only 7 per cent of small business say that they need workers in the professional category, jobs that require a university degree, 65 per cent of permanent immigrants are in that category. We need to strengthen our commitment to the provincial nominee program.

5:00

By calling for the expansion of the PNP, this motion also recog-

nizes the need to strengthen the program and address existing weaknesses. Stakeholders like the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers have pointed to the weaknesses of immigrant settlement services in the province. Alberta has one of the lowest immigrant retention rates in the country. It's not just a matter of bringing immigrants here; we also need to keep them here.

The website for the provincial nominee program and the temporary foreign worker program is only in English. I think it should be in some other languages, too, to attract foreigners to Alberta.

An expanded PNP would do more for small businesses. Allowing more semi- and lower skilled workers would help small businesses. Making the program easier would also increase the participation of small businesses in the program.

The temporary foreign worker program has many flaws. This program has an unsustainable solution to the long-term labour shortage in this province. By definition, these people are temporary. They are here, and they are gone. Expansion of immigration is the best long-term solution we have. The temporary foreign worker is not immigration. Many stakeholders have indicated to us that they think businesses misuse the temporary foreign worker as a way to cut costs and undermine unions. We have heard many stories about the temporary foreign worker program by both employers and brokers.

Current weaknesses of the provincial nominee program. The difficulty with the provincial nominee program is that it's not user friendly for the small- to medium-sized businesses that require unskilled or semiskilled labour. Moreover, businesses with the hard-to-fill positions and no local labour market to accept the positions do not have the resources to recruit nationally or internationally. The nature of the program discourages industry from bringing in foreign workers for those which are in high demand, such as the construction industry, retail, and agriculture, to name but a few. The result is that many industries have a hard time filling the positions in the short term and long term. Unfortunately, with the PNP there is often a large responsibility upon small businesses that have less than 10 employees and only need to recruit one immigrant worker. Furthermore, it's not always possible to fast-track the immigrants under the provincial nominee program.

The key to ensuring Canada's economic growth involves an efficient and accessible provincial nominee program. It's recognized that as the Canadian population ages, over the next five, 10 years immigration will be required in every corner of the country to help ensure that our economy remains vibrant and strong. The provincial nominee program is a good example of using immigration to address the current and growing labour shortages in our province. The labour shortage in Alberta is already critical and getting worse. We need aggressive action to ensure that highly skilled workers are entering Alberta and staying here. Albertans want sustainable solutions, not short-term ones. The labour shortage is a long-term problem, and we need long-term solutions to solve it. Expanding the scope and strengthening the effectiveness of the provincial nominee program is an important part of finding a long-term solution to Alberta's labour shortage.

This measure should be coupled with an emphasis on the training of Albertans who want to become skilled tradespeople. Mr. Speaker, we should provide better training opportunities and improve assistance for Albertans and Canadians first and then foreigners.

Let us adopt this motion, expand the provincial nominee program further, and thereby reduce reliance on the temporary foreign workers. Thank you very much.

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

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since we recognize that the government has entered into an agreement with the federal government on improving the provincial nominee program, we want to change the motion to reflect that. I propose an amendment to this motion.

The Deputy Speaker: We'll give the pages a moment for distribution to the members.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, I believe you can continue on the amendment.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Motion 509 be amended as follows: (a) by striking out "immediately enter into negotiations" and substituting "continue negotiating" and (b) by striking out "reducing the demand" and substituting "further reducing the demand." The amended motion would read as follows:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to continue negotiating with the federal government to expand the provincial nominee program into a reliable and permanent source of skilled labour for Alberta, thereby further reducing the demand for temporary foreign workers.

Mr. Speaker, I think this amendment acknowledges the good work that the government has already done in negotiating with the federal government. There's a lot of progress that has been made. We're a bit behind, because provinces like Manitoba seem to be way ahead of us in managing to draw permanent immigrant people to their province. Still, we acknowledge the work that has been done. It's a question of continuing to negotiate to improve this provincial nominee program, which the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has so well described, and then changing the last part to further reduce the demand for temporary foreign workers.

I could speak at length about the motion, but I would rather come back and speak about the motion as amended later. I'm not allowed to? This is the only time I get to speak?

The Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Dr. B. Miller: But this is on the amendment.

The Deputy Speaker: If you sit down now, your time is deemed to be given up.

Dr. B. Miller: Okay. The rules, I thought, were that you could speak to an amendment, and then later, after the motion is amended, you could speak again on the motion as amended. But I will take the Speaker's rule as the rule.

Well, then, let me just say a few words about it. In my questions to the minister in this House I've been very critical of the temporary foreign worker program because I think that it is fraught with all kinds of problems. Even an organization such as the Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada has said, in advice to employers, that such a program is not without risk. "If it is not done properly, hiring temporary foreign workers can create its own set of problems and challenges." They're suggesting to employers that they have to count the costs. They may think that they're moving ahead by supplying needed labour by hiring temporary foreign workers, but they have to consider the costs. This advice from the Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada says that the costs include recruiting costs, government fees to pay for immigration documents, passports, medical exams, and, of course, relocation costs, paying for trips for foreign workers to Canada and back home, also accommodation costs, and all kinds of other costs that they have to take into consideration.

5:10

It's obvious that some employers are not prepared to pay these costs and that, because there seems to be inadequate oversight, there are some cases of abuse. We have one example of a foreign worker who came to Canada from Mexico to work on a farm in southern Alberta. The employer did not cover his medical expenses, did not provide adequate accommodation. That worker actually came and appealed to us here in the Legislature and has since returned to Mexico. There is more and more evidence among temporary foreign workers of isolation, discrimination, fear, exploitation, and limited access to health services and social services.

It's much, much better to focus on permanent immigration when we can, through a provincial nominee program that's effective, identify the occupations that we need to fill and bring people with their families to Alberta as permanent residents. That is always the better way. I mean, if we look at it historically, we brought Chinese workers here to Alberta at the end of the 19th century to work on the railroads. That was not a particularly good example of what should be done. There was much suffering and many deaths, and there's the matter of the Chinese head tax. Mr. Speaker, I think we have to be careful and move forward in a better way.

I'm always in fear through the temporary foreign worker program that we're actually creating a kind of underclass of workers, guest workers who are here without the same rights as Canadians. They work here for a while, and they go back. They work longer, get paid less, live worse, and then they leave. Many temporary foreign workers come to fill jobs that no one else seems to want, and we create thereby an underclass of workers.

It's much better to put all of our focus into permanent immigration, something that's sustainable over the long run, not just a solution for the moment. That has been the policy on this side of the House, that the foreign temporary worker program is an unsustainable solution to the long-term labour shortage of this province. An expansion of immigration is the best long-term solution we have.

Those are my remarks, Mr. Speaker. I hope that this amendment is satisfactory to all members of the House.

The Deputy Speaker: Others on the amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on the amendment to the motion.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. In speaking to the amendment, I'd like to first thank the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie for bringing forward Motion 509, to which the mover of the amendment, my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora, responded. I don't want to cover a whole lot of territory that's already been referred to, but what it does, for potentially a change in pace and place, is recognize the wisdom of the government. Initially, when this motion was designed, we were concerned that the program would not be extended and would not serve as the sort of secondary source – I know that it sounds funny to say primary secondary source. Our primary source of employment has to be within Alberta, within Canada, but this recognizes the importance of a predictable and sustainable workforce.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora referred to the history of the head tax and the fact that temporary foreign workers at that point and temporary foreign workers today, you know, over 140 years later, are facing the same type of discrimination in the sense that they are not allowed to bring their family members with them. Therefore, they're in a foreign country without the family support and with a sense of isolation. We have seen the abuse that has happened to temporary foreign workers who have basically been preyed upon by unscrupulous travel agents or business promoters, and then they're left here to make their own way back if they can escape these conditions.

There is no doubt that our first commitment should be to providing the best employment for Alberta-born individuals. The most rapidly growing population in Alberta is our First Nations population, so we want to make sure that they have the training and the support possible. What we have noticed in general, except for little birth rate bubbles that are, for example, currently happening in Calgary, is that we don't have the home-born population to sustain and provide predictability into the future.

I have had first-hand experience, as I'm sure other members who have been in teaching have had, with English as a second language immigrants. When they have the stability of their family and the supports of their ethnic communities, they tend to thrive. The beauty of the immigrant community is that they have a built-in support system that enables the individuals who are seeking Canadian citizenship to have the language support, the cultural support, the support that is necessary to see them become Canadian citizens. The way that Canada and in this case Alberta benefits is the fact that we have the sustainable, educated individuals that take on the highly skilled jobs, and we also have a variety of people who for occupational reasons are able to fill other areas that are more of a menial or a manual area. But regardless of whether it's importing a surgeon or importing a person to, you know, serve coffee, Alberta benefits.

Again, what the amendment to Motion 509 brings forward is: government, you're doing a good job; government, please continue to do that good job and consider the permanency and the sustainability and the predictability of having a workforce that not only lives in Alberta for the long term but has the rights of Canadian citizenship to promote and protect.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Mr. Renner: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I would just like to briefly address the amendment that's at hand. I think that as the member that made the amendment indicated, it is an amendment that reflects the fact that there has been some action taken on this motion perhaps since it was originally put onto the Order Paper and that the amendment really does truly reflect a little bit more, in fact virtually everything more, of what is in fact happening at this point in time. My suggestion would be that members may want to vote and accept this amendment now if they so choose, and then we could revert to debating the amended motion that more clearly reflects the intent.

The Deputy Speaker: Ready for the question on the amendment?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Motion on amendment carried]

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

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to join in debate on this Motion 509 to expand the provincial nominee program in an effort to reduce the demand for temporary foreign workers, and I would like to commend the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie for putting forth this motion before the Assembly today. I certainly appreciate that the hon. member has chosen to support our government's initiative. Alberta's unprecedented economic growth has increased the demand for skilled workers, and our government is developing a made-in-Alberta immigration strategy which will help businesses to alleviate their labour pressures. Part of the strategy focuses on assisting businesses to manage their labour shortages by effectively utilizing Alberta's provincial

nominee program. The skilled worker immigration program is employer driven. It expedites permanent resident applications and allows a provincial or territorial government, for that matter, to nominate a person for an immigrant visa on the grounds that the individual's labour market skills are particularly in demand in that province or territory.

5:20

Now, Alberta is the fourth-largest immigrant-receiving province, approximately 7.4 per cent of immigrants to Canada in 2005. Preliminary data indicates that Alberta received over 20,000 immigrants in 2006, exactly 20,561, compared to 19,403 in 2005 and 16,473 in 2004. The Department of Employment, Immigration and Industry has received another \$9 million, an increase in funding for immigration, bringing the total budget to \$68 million in 2007-2008. A portion of the funding will help to expand the number of nominees under the provincial nominee program to 2,500 nominations in 2007-2008, up again to 5,000 in 2008-2009, and 8,000 in 2009-2010.

In addition to the funding increases our government successfully negotiated an agreement, as we all know, with the federal government for Canada/Alberta co-operation on immigration, an agreement that removed the limit on the number of immigrants that the province can nominate for permanent residence in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, I was on hand for that announcement, and I can tell you that it was very, very well received. I'd like to note that the changes to Alberta's provincial nominee program will continue indefinitely, allowing the program an opportunity to optimize its potential.

Some members are aware that Manitoba has a similar provincial nominee program, and it provides an excellent example of how effective this type of strategy can be when it is used to its full capacity. Manitoba was the first province with a provincial nominee program, and its program has been significant and very successful. Since 1998 economic immigration rose 311 per cent in Manitoba in contrast to an increase of only 56 per cent for the rest of the country. In 2005 Manitoba welcomed 4,617 immigrants through the provincial nominee program, and in 2006 the province very narrowly met its goal of attracting 10,000 immigrants of whom 6,600 were provincial nominees.

Our province will continue to address the labour shortage by facilitating several initiatives that will assist employers to adequately staff their businesses. The Alberta government will continue to support employers who use the federal temporary foreign worker program and the federal skilled worker immigrant program as a means for addressing labour demands. In 2006 the federal government reviewed applications for about 20,000 positions and issued an estimated 10,000 temporary foreign work permits for Alberta. For 2007 it expects to review applications for 40,000 positions.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's provincial nominee program is an excellent mechanism for employers to recruit competent, skilled, and knowledgeable employees to immigrate to Alberta. Our government has made a commitment to the businesses of this province to support them in finding qualified personnel in Alberta, and we're also improving our current immigration programs, which will assist businesses in reducing staffing shortages. I'd urge members of the Assembly to support our government's current immigration strategy, and I again want to thank the hon. member for supporting the government of Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I'm pleased to be

able to rise today and join in the debate on amended Motion 509, regarding the continued expansion of Alberta's provincial nominee program. I do appreciate the hon. member's interest in a cause that has long been a high priority for this government.

Mr. Speaker, every year over 90,000 foreign workers enter Canada temporarily to work in order to help Canadian employers address skill shortages. Although temporarily bringing in workers helps address labour shortages, Alberta also offers skilled workers fast-tracked, permanent residency opportunities. Immigration has accounted for over 15,000 individuals coming to live and work in our province last year alone.

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta provincial nominee program is an employer-driven, skilled worker immigration program that is offered by the government of Alberta in association with Citizenship and Immigration Canada to facilitate permanent residency for skilled immigrants. The provincial nominee program is a commendable plan that considers skilled and educated workers in a variety of occupational descriptions relative to their potential role in Alberta's workforce. Given our vibrant economy there is great potential for both this province and individual immigrants and their families to benefit from the provincial nominee program. Thirty-five per cent of immigrants over the age of 20 currently coming into this province have a bachelor's degree. There is no denying that there is great potential in utilizing those resources in our economy when the opportunity presents itself.

Unfortunately, there seems to be some confusion in the wording of this motion. It is unclear whether this motion encourages the government to broaden the categories associated with the provincial nominee program or to expand the number of positions available. Mr. Speaker, I want to make it clear to hon. members that the provincial nominee program is one of the preferred approaches to immigration in the province of Alberta, and we are committed to continuing to examine all opportunities.

As Alberta's labour force develops both in quantity and variety of positions available, it will be important to source employees from outside of Canada. This government is developing a made-in-Alberta immigration strategy that ensures that there are mutual benefits for all parties involved. This includes (a) continuing to support the provincial nominee program by expanding the spaces available from 2,500 this year to 8,000 per year by 2009-10, (b) developing a new immigration agreement with the federal government, (c) increasing settlement services, (d) improving recruitment and attraction initiatives, and finally, supporting the strategy with an additional \$9 million as per Budget 2007. While the program has always facilitated permanent residency for immigrants in occupations requiring postsecondary education such as physicians, nurses, educators, and tradespeople, the made-in-Alberta thrust of the program will now also support jobs in manufacturing, tourism, and trucking.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, success in attracting, placing, and supporting new immigrants in Alberta requires balancing between the social, cultural, and economic needs of immigrants. Alberta will continue to attract potential immigrants through programs such as the provincial nominee program. I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie for supporting the government of Alberta in seeking to maximize the benefits associated with the provincial nominee program, thus I will support this motion on behalf of the people of Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. Mather: Thank you very much. I, too, want to congratulate my colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie for bringing this motion forward, a motion that urges government to continue negotiating with the federal government to expand the provincial nominee program and end reliance on the temporary foreign worker program. I think that reducing the demand for temporary foreign workers is also an issue that needs to be addressed, and when we look at the Alberta provincial nominee program, I understand that it's designed to meet the needs of Alberta employers who are unable to fill skilled labour positions with Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada.

In the latest developments in May 2007 the agreement for Canada/Alberta co-operation on immigration is that Alberta will be able to nominate more immigrants possessing skills needed in the province for quicker processing by the federal government, and that range of occupations eligible for nomination has been expanded. Any limit on the number of immigrants brought to the province by the nominee program has been lifted, and this year alone the government has set a target of 2,500 nominees. This target grows to 8,000 nominees by 2009-10. This number would ensure that Alberta receives the same proportion of all immigration to Canada, 10 per cent, as its proportion of the total Canadian population, which is 10 per cent.

5:30

Another new focus will be on applications from international student graduates who are being offered permanent full-time employment from Alberta companies. As we are looking at the current situation, there are 23,000 foreign temporary workers in the province. The foreign worker program allows temporary foreign workers to enter Canada if employers can demonstrate that they cannot find Canadian workers to fill job openings. Employers must be able to prove that they have made every effort to find and train willing and available workers in Alberta and Canada. Temporary foreign workers generally require far less labour skills or experience than immigrants under the provincial nominee program. Unskilled workers are only able to come to Alberta through the temporary foreign worker program.

Over a six-year span, from 2000 to 2006, the number of foreign workers has grown by 260 per cent, which means it's a program that we need to look at carefully. I appreciate the efforts with this motion because the overall thrust of this motion is to strengthen the provincial nominee program at the expense of the temporary foreign worker program.

There are several motivating factors for this. There really is no valid reason for opposing the provincial nominee program in this province. The provincial nominee program is an important part of a long-term, sustainable solution for addressing Alberta's labour shortage. By allowing skilled workers to permanently immigrate to Alberta, the provincial nominee program can work in the long term to reduce future labour shortages.

This program also treats workers who would like to permanently immigrate to Canada more fairly than under the temporary foreign worker program. Under the provincial nominee program skilled and some semiskilled workers are able to enter Canada permanently. All other workers may only stay here temporarily.

I think the need to strengthen our commitment to the provincial nominee program is evident because we recognize that there are existing weaknesses. Stakeholders like the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers have pointed to the weakness of the immigrant settlement services in this province. Alberta has one of the lowest immigration retention rates in the country. It's not just a matter of bringing immigrants here; we also need to keep them here.

A Canadian Chamber of Commerce brief recently provided an excellent overview of the potential of an expanded provincial nominee program for small business. Allowing more semiskilled and lower skilled workers would help small businesses find the labour that they need, and making the program easier to use for small business would also, obviously, increase the participation of small businesses in the program. Expanding the scope and strengthening the effectiveness of the provincial nominee program is an important part of finding a long-term solution to Alberta's labour shortage.

This measure should be coupled with an emphasis on training Albertans who want to become skilled tradespeople. Foreign temporary workers are pouring into this province while we have Albertans lining up overnight to fight for a spot at NAIT. We need to look at a long-term solution here. Again, the Edmonton Mennonite centre suggests that the immigration policy needs to address longer terms than five years because five-year quick fixes will lead to more problems.

We need a clearer provincial policy about temporary foreign workers and a general discouragement of employers to use this alternative rather than employing landed immigrants in this province. The Alberta Federation of Labour, AFL, statement in May 2006 states that the concern

does not lie with immigration or individual newcomers to Canada. Instead, we are concerned about the way our federal and provincial governments have designed and how they operate . . . the Foreign Temporary Worker program.

Again, the real solution to all of this is to

improve our post-secondary and apprenticeship systems to make sure that Canadians are properly trained for the jobs we will need in the future.

However, this motion addresses the need right now, and I'm happy to support it.

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

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Motion 509. It proposes the expansion of the provincial nominee program. This debate has become moot in my mind because our hon. Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry recently announced an agreement with Canada about our co-operation on immigration. It is great news for Alberta, and I'm glad to have the opportunity to speak about the agreement.

One of the critical elements of the agreement is a permanent provincial nominee program for Alberta. Under this arrangement there is no cap on the number of people Alberta can nominate in any given year. The provincial nominee program allows Alberta to nominate potential immigrants to the federal government. This allows the province to select people to fill positions that are in demand. Furthermore, individuals nominated under the program are expected to be permanent residents. As such, it can expedite the permanent residency process, which is of benefit when there is a labour shortage.

To facilitate this new arrangement, funding was available in Budget 2007 to increase Alberta's nominations to 2,500 this year. Funding will increase to support 8,000 nominations in 2009-2010. This funding is part of a total \$68 million in support for immigration in Budget 2007. This is a significant amount and represents a 15 per cent increase over the last fiscal year. Both the new immigration arrangement and additional provincial nominee program funding are supporting this government's commitment to attracting newcomers to Alberta.

There is no doubt there is a need for more people to come to Alberta. Over the next 10 years Alberta may have a shortage of up

to 100,000 workers. Maintaining a steady supply of skilled labour is critical to sustaining economic development over the long term. Our prosperity is linked to the availability of labour, and businesses are loud and clear on the need for more workers.

Increasing immigration in Alberta is a priority of the hon. Premier and has led to the signing of the immigration agreement with the federal government. This agreement will improve Alberta's ability to attract immigrants to Alberta and assist them in settling in this province. It is a landmark agreement, and our Premier has said that this deal represents an increase in autonomy like Alberta's securing ownership of its natural resources in the 1930s.

The new immigration agreement also provides for co-operation on promotion and recruitment abilities abroad. It is critical for Alberta to attract the best and most qualified nominees to this province from wherever they may be in the world. Further, the agreement will establish a pilot program to facilitate the entry of health professionals wanting to come to Alberta. There is also a commitment from the federal government for ongoing, predictable, and, perhaps most importantly, equitable settlement funding for this province.

Mr. Speaker, before I close, I want to note a critical flaw in Motion 509, in that it links the provincial nominee program and the temporary foreign worker program. Their goals and objectives are unrelated. The temporary foreign worker program acts as a stopgap solution if no workers are available or able to be trained in the Canadian job market. The provincial nominee program is a permanent program which facilitates permanent residencies.

Mr. Speaker, I'm thankful that the hon. member gave me the opportunity to set the record straight on the government record on immigration. Looking at our new immigration agreement with the federal government and the expansion of the provincial nominee program, our government is on the right track. I support the continued efforts of the government in addressing the needs of a dynamic labour force.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others who wish to participate?
The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

5:40

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to join the debate on Motion 509, which urges the government to expand the provincial nominee program into a reliable, permanent source of skilled labour for Alberta, thereby reducing the demand for temporary foreign workers. Like another hon. member who already spoke on the subject matter, these provincial nominee programs are an excellent tool to help in the economic development of Alberta. We have been doing it in the last, as far as I know, probably two or three years now. The government of Alberta is working on training our internal Albertan workforce in trades and also recently signed an agreement with the federal government to expedite the entry of foreign workers into Alberta. We also learned that the government of Alberta and the government of British Columbia have an agreement in terms of workforce and skills and all the other aspects of agreement on that. This has been going on and doing very well.

I had the privilege of attending the signing of the agreement between the Alberta government and the federal government on this immigration agreement. I was there and very pleased to see our Premier and Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry work with their federal counterparts in this matter.

Now there are two points in my interest in supporting this motion. One is: in my area there is a big industrial park and a lot of manufacturing companies, and they export to the world our products and earn wealth for Alberta. They need people. They need production

workers. They need assembly workers, not just highly skilled tradespeople but also people who just work on the production line. In this kind of direction I support the movement in this provincial nominee program, but I also encourage looking beyond the provincial nominee in the aspect of getting people here to do the assembly production work.

Many Alberta unions support immigration and feel that immigration is a key to building a strong and diverse society and are very proud that many of their members are new immigrants. They advocate for a compassionate immigration policy that addresses both the concerns of immigrants and the needs of the economy by allowing for a broader range of skilled workers to enter the country, to enter our province.

Now, the temporary foreign worker program, as it says, is temporary. In fact, people are allowed to get into the country with visa work permits. That is run by our federal government, and they are the ones who screen the permits to get into the country. Once people get into the country – let's say they come to Alberta – we have to have some programs that help those people to work, and we have employment standards that we should apply to all the people who come from any part of the world to come here to work. The provincial nominee program allows for workers to come to Alberta and remain here permanently if they desire. When the employee's application has been approved, they receive expedited processing, but it takes six to 12 months, and I wish that the federal government and the province worked together and reduced that time so that employers in my constituency can deal with that in an efficient manner.

I just want to point out that this is a great program. It's supported federally, by the province, the employers. Some of the employees have relatives overseas, and they know their skills, so the companies already has some connection here. I have talked to some companies in my area, and they'd love to see this program extended. I was very pleased to learn at the ceremony of the agreement between Canada and Alberta that the limit on the number of nominees has been lifted. This is a great initiative.

Going back to this motion, I commend the member for having presented this motion and bringing up this high-profile issue. With that, I urge everybody in this Assembly to support this made-in-Alberta solution. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others who wish to participate?
The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I rise to speak very briefly on Motion 509, put before the House by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. I rise to speak in support of the amended motion. Knowing what we know about the problems attendant upon temporary foreign workers who have been brought into this province – the kind of shabby treatment that they have received, the kinds of risks that they face, the kinds of ordinary rights of the workplace that they're deprived of – we know that there's need for a more rational, more just, more stable, more acceptable policy to address the needs of the labour force in Alberta. Someone listening from the outside, one who also understands the talk about labour shortages in this province and the need to have more people out there in the labour market, would probably see the whole debate as a no-brainer. This is a sane and decent and appropriate way of addressing the very obvious need of having more people available to work in the Alberta economy. Therefore, I'm not going to engage in detailed defence or support of the motion. I think it makes sense to me that the province needs to move in this direction.

I just want to make one observation, Mr. Speaker. As we call for

a more rational, more updated, more modernized nominee program to bring in more workers who are, in fact, immigrants, when people come here as landed immigrants, they automatically are entitled to certain rights and protections under our Constitution, under our provincial and federal laws. That's why it makes sense to bolster our labour force numbers through what I call this socially just and humane way of bringing in people if you need more workers in the labour market and in the workplace.

One cautionary note here, Mr. Speaker. I meet with my constituents on Fridays, and over the last two weeks, two successive Fridays, I had the opportunity to meet with one foreign medical graduate, a foreign-trained doctor. She's having enormous difficulty, in spite of the fact that she has passed all the exams that she's required to pass, finding a placement. We are short of doctors in this province, yet she's unable to find a placement within our health care system. We proclaim that we are short of appropriately trained medical personnel. We are desperately looking for them, yet we have people here, and they don't get the help and the support that they need in order for them to become part of the health care labour force.

5:50

The next week I met an engineer, a foreign-trained mechanical engineer, who was smart enough and bright enough or deemed so by the University of Alberta to be admitted to a master's program in the field of mechanical engineering. He passed with flying colours and has been struggling since his graduation two years ago to find a job. We are told that we're short of engineers and technologists and technicians and plumbers and others, yet we have people in Alberta who are not getting the positions which, ostensibly, are available all over the place.

So that's a caution that as we try to address the issue of shortage of labour by way of updating and upgrading our nominee program in co-operation with the federal government, we must also pay equal attention to those who are already here and are having difficulty finding an appropriate place in our labour market, in our workplaces in spite of the fact that they have credentials and work experience which should qualify them easily to find these jobs.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, just to conclude, I want to again say that so long as we have these temporary foreign workers in our midst, they deserve absolutely the same protection, the same rights, the same opportunities as Albertans who are part of the labour force.

All these three issues are interlinked, and in this debate they should be seen as integral, complex, not just individual, isolated issues. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others that wish to participate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Motion 509 urges the government to expand the provincial nominee program into a reliable and permanent source of skilled labour for Alberta. Alberta's employers can attest to how important it is to be able to recruit and retain skilled workers. Our current prosperity means that skilled workers are highly sought after, so employers need all the tools to find employees who meet their needs.

Employers who are seeking persons with work experience in management occupations, occupations usually requiring a university education, or occupations usually requiring a college education or apprenticeship training can benefit from Alberta's provincial nominee program. In Alberta health professionals, administrators, nurses, senior managers, teachers, and professors all have unemployment of 1.6 per cent or less. This program has helped employers bring in qualified staff from outside the country since its inception in 2002.

The proportion of immigrants arriving in Alberta with postsecondary education continues to rise. In 2006 about half of the immigrants to Alberta had a university degree, roughly 12 per cent arrived with a non-university diploma, and just under 5 per cent held a trade certificate. The majority of immigrants to Alberta in 2006 were of working age, with almost 70 per cent between the ages of 20 and 64.

The provincial nominee program expedites the immigration process for workers with sought-after skills. Employers can seek out workers who have the qualifications, work experience, and certification that they need. Employers benefit from the reduced immigration wait-times this program offers because it allows them to have skilled workers on the job sooner. Because the provincial nominee program helps Alberta's employers fill permanent positions with immigrants who qualify for permanent resident status, those employers can meet their labour needs on a long-term basis.

About 550 people came to Alberta through the program in 2005-06, and another 650 made Alberta their home this past year. Due to the obvious advantages of the provincial nominee program the Alberta government has already committed to expanding it in coming years. In '07-08 the number of nominees will grow to 2,500, and in '09-10 this number will grow to 8,000. The government's made-in-Alberta immigration strategy is improving initiatives like the provincial nominee program so that employers in Alberta will be able to find the skilled labour they need when they need it. Welcoming new immigrants to our province will help ensure that Alberta's prosperity continues.

One recent improvement to the provincial nominee program will have a clear benefit to all Albertans. The recent signing of the agreement for Canada/Alberta co-operation on immigration includes a pilot project to speed the processing of health care professionals entering Alberta. This process will identify health care professionals who have already applied for entry into Canada and who intend to live in Alberta.

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, but under Standing Order 8(4), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close debate, I would now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close debate on Motion 509.

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to thank all the members who participated in debate on Motion 509. During the debate we heard so many good points. Some members mentioned a few bad points on the temporary foreign workers such as the immigrants who come here as temporary foreign workers are facing some serious problems like medical facilities, accommodation problems, and such. Most of the members mentioned the problem with abuse in the system, especially from both sides, employers and the brokers.

I think most of us have heard from constituents that this temporary foreign worker program is not immigration. I think the majority of the people are in favour of immigration. We should increase the nominations in the provincial nominee program rather than temporary foreign workers. That's the reason we sponsored this motion. Mr. Speaker, as I said before, when this motion was tabled, there was no movement in the immigration deal. Now we have a deal already in place. When the new immigration agreement was announced last month, we were encouraged, but we felt that it didn't go that far. We want to see a long-term, sustainable plan, like a 10-, 20-, 30-year plan, not what we have in the new deal, just for only five years.

I request the minister to consider that one because Alberta is booming. We are fortunate. If we have a long-term plan, a

sustainable plan, it will be good for all of us. The new deal does not eliminate this province's reliance on temporary foreign workers as a long-term solution. We are looking for a long-term solution. The new deal, Mr. Speaker, promises negotiation to speed up the process. The new deal may have a more provincial say in immigration, which is good, but I want to see this program where we can lead the nation. Other provinces had very similar programs a long time ago. Manitoba had this provincial nominee program about 11 years ago, and some six or seven other provinces had a very similar program about six or seven years before. Although we are a little late, we are never too late. I think I appreciate the minister who initiated this provincial nominee program recently.

To make the provincial nominee program the best, we must have

the provision for ending our dependency on the temporary foreign workers. I request all the members to support this motion. Thank you very much.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 509 as amended carried]

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

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to point out that it's 6 o'clock and move that we adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

