



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature  
First Session

# Alberta Hansard

Thursday afternoon, May 1, 2008

Issue 12a

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

# Legislative Assembly of Alberta

## The 27th Legislature

First Session

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[Errata, if any, appear inside back cover]

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, May 1, 2008

[The Speaker in the chair]

### Prayers

**The Speaker:** Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Let us keep ever mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work let us find strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

### Introduction of Visitors

**The Speaker:** The hon. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Cao:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly the Indonesian Consul General, Mr. Bunyan Saptomo. The Consul General is joined by the officials from the consulate, Consul Susilawati Bakrie, Consul Wibanarto Eugenius, and Ms Yanthie Indrakusuma, and by Mr. Nevin French from our government department. I would like to ask our guests to rise and be recognized.

Earlier today the Consul General presented handcrafted Indonesian wooden chairs to the Honourable Norman Kwong, our Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, and the Hon. Ken Kowalski, the Speaker of the House. The chairs, made in Indonesia, are for the celebration of multiculturalism and Indonesia's cultural connection to the province. Indonesia has a strong connection with Alberta in the energy sector. I would again thank you for your visit to our Assembly.

### Introduction of Guests

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

**Mr. Jacobs:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly the grade 9 class from Glenwood school from Glenwood, Alberta. They're here today on their annual grade 9 trip. Many of these students have been working hard since grades 3 and 4 to earn money for this trip. They chose to come to Edmonton to spend some time watching the Legislature and learning about government, so I would urge my colleagues to be on their best behaviour today because they're being watched. They are accompanied today by their teachers, Mr. Kelly Thomas and Mrs. Debra Johnson, and their spouses, Mrs. Kathy Thomas and Mr. Kevin Johnson. I would ask these students and their teachers to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

**Mr. Horner:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every so often we have the opportunity to introduce to you and through some of the fine members of our public service, who do great work for the citizens of Alberta, and today is one of those occasions. We have in our galleries four members of the advanced education department and three members of the Education department. It's my pleasure to introduce Ms Nancy King, Mrs. Delena Lobitz, Ms Avis Moes, Mr. Noe Cordeiro, Ms Orrice Harron, Ms Gwen May, and Ms Peggy

Lipinski. They're on a tour of the Leg. and also to see what we're doing in this Assembly. I'd ask that they now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislature.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly members of the Department of Education staff who are here in the House today on a public service tour. All three are from the contracted and project management services branch in the strategic services division. I would ask Noe Cordeiro, Delena Lobitz, and Avis Moes to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

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

**Mr. Mason:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Today being May Day, it's with great pleasure that I introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Winston Gereluk and Jack Hubler from the Alberta Labour History Institute. Winston is a representative for several international bodies concerning environment and trade union issues, including the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development and the International Labour Organization, based in Geneva. Also with Winston is Jack Hubler, who has been a member of the plumbers and pipefitters union local 488 for nearly 50 years. Jack was awarded the Jim Shewchuk award by the capital region United Way for his volunteer work in the community.

The Alberta Labour History Institute was formed in 1999 by trade unionists, community activists, archivists, and academic historians to preserve and tell the story of working people and their organizations in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my constituents and all working Albertans I would like to recognize the Alberta Labour History Institute for their ongoing efforts and thank these two individuals for their tremendous efforts. I would now ask that Winston and Jack please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

**Mr. Rodney:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am bursting with pride today as I introduce the two most important people in my life, who are sitting in your gallery today. My wife, Jennifer, is truly my hero. Since her youth she has been amazing with animals, and I suppose that was great training for her to be my personal, professional, and political manager. She also runs our Top of the World Society for Children, and 22 days ago she laboured for 32 hours and gave birth to what we think is the most beautiful baby boy in the world, our first born, Dawson Logan Rodney.

Now, Dawson means "David's son." It's rooted in "beloved precious one." Logan refers to a hollow in the woods, and we have a little forest below our home. Rodney refers to an island in the stream near the clearing, and you can find that close to our humble abode that we call Summit Dance Stables. So Dawson Logan Rodney not only refers to who he is but also where he's from. I will now ask the House to give a warm welcome to my favourite people, Jennifer and Dawson.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister for Tourism, Parks, and Recreation.

**Mrs. Ady:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's pretty hard to top.

Yesterday I had the honour to announce this government's commitment to assist Alberta's high-performance athletes, and it's great if you can meet some of those athletes that we're supporting. So I'm pleased to be able to introduce to you and through you six local high-performance athletes and the coaches that will proudly represent Alberta and Canada at the Olympic and Paralympic Games and in other competitions. I would ask them to rise as I introduce them.

The first two are Bryan Barnett and Neville Wright. These are both sprinters, Mr. Speaker, hoping to qualify for the Beijing Olympics. They were almost late, and they had to run from their car. I can tell you they're fast, and we're really pleased with their speed. Next is David Bissett. He is from the national men's bobsled team. He's actually running on the Pierre Lueders sled, which is one of Canada's best. He was just married this week to one of my oldest son's friends. Her name is Jenni, Jenni Bissett now, if she would rise. As well, we have Quin Sekulich. He is the coach for the national men's bobsled team. He's joining us. As well, Ross Norton from the national Paralympic men's wheelchair basketball team is also in the gallery.

On behalf of the members I would like to wish each and every one of these our very best in your quest for athletic excellence. We know you'll make us proud. I'd ask the House to give them their traditional warm welcome.

1:40

### Ministerial Statements

#### Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute

**Mr. Liepert:** Mr. Speaker, in the spirit of all that good news, I'm pleased to rise today to say to the House that a number of our members in this Assembly today joined the Prime Minister of Canada and our Premier at the opening of the Mazankowski Heart Institute in Edmonton.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that I speak for all members of this 27th Legislature when I say thank you to former Premier Klein and colleagues of the past Legislatures who had the foresight and the vision and committed the dollars to provide for this world-class centre of excellence for cardiac care in Alberta. Not only does this facility provide 124 beds today – there's more to come in the future – to treat cardiac care, but it also partners with the University of Alberta, and leading researchers from around the world will now practise in our province.

Mr. Speaker, just over 50 years ago the first open-heart surgery was performed in Edmonton. Today one person in Canada dies of heart-related problems every seven minutes, so this institute is needed today more than ever.

The institute was designed in consultation with cardiac specialists and architects from the world's best centres. It will attract and retain leaders in cardiac research and treatment as well as talented health professionals from all disciplines to the province of Alberta.

The institute will operate in tandem with existing cardiac programs at the Glenrose hospital and the Stollery children's hospital. Design for medical practice is the focus of the facility, but there's also a healing environment and a place for respite.

Mr. Speaker, on this historic day I would like to congratulate all of the partners in this project: Capital health, the University of Alberta, and the University Hospital Foundation, which, by the way, led by Edmonton businessman Bill Comrie, raised \$45 million from across the country for this facility.

I would be remiss if I did not say that we wish all of the best to the staff who will serve Albertans at this institute.

Mr. Speaker, finally, Don Mazankowski is a great Canadian and a committed champion of future sustainable health care in our

country. It is most appropriate today that we celebrate the opening of this world-class facility in Alberta which will forever bear his name.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. Taylor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is indeed an exciting day, and I'd like to echo the minister's congratulations to Capital health, the University of Alberta, and the University Hospital Foundation. They should be commended for their good work.

I think we must also congratulate the everyday people who actually put this facility together: Alberta's construction workers and the families who support them. This is, after all, May Day, and labour is a vital part of the foundation for this province's prosperity. We should also offer a shout-out to the Edmonton businesses surrounding the new institute. After all, they kept our guys fuelled up with coffee for the last four years of building that place.

And, finally, I want to congratulate and thank the doctors and heart specialists who will work at the Mazankowski Heart Institute. To date, they have saved lives, improved quality of life, and brought comfort and help to countless families. These medical professionals are really going to soar once the Mazankowski institute is fully operational.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, this institute won't be working at full capacity for another three or four or five years because there aren't enough nurses to allow the Mazankowski to do everything it was designed to do. Capital health needs to hire a thousand nurses a year for the foreseeable future to staff the health region's facilities, including this new heart institute.

Now, this goes beyond Alberta's system-wide shortage of health care professionals. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, that excuse won't fly, because the Mazankowski institute is a specialized facility meant to serve patients from across half the country with specific staffing needs that were known years ago. The ministries of health and advanced education should have been planning from day one to ensure that there would be enough nurses to make the place fully functional on this opening day. Instead, what we have now is a new, state-of-the-art building that won't actually live up to its full potential for years yet.

Let it never be said, though, even by the rabble on the backbenches, that I'm anything less than a glass-half-full kind of guy. Alberta and the west need this facility, and thousands of Albertans worked hard to make it a reality, including the project's namesake, Don Mazankowski. We owe these people our gratitude and our promise that we will work hard to bring the institute up to speed, make it fully functional as quickly as possible. That should be, if you will pardon the pun, Mr. Speaker, our heart's desire.

Thank you.

### Members' Statements

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

#### Calgary Olympic Development Association Centre of Sport Excellence

**Ms DeLong:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to talk about a very exciting project that will deliver a standard of sports excellence for future generations of Albertans and Canadians. Yesterday in the constituency of Calgary-Bow the government announced \$20 million to fulfill the second year of its three-year commitment to renew the facilities of the 1988 Olympic Winter Games and support the Calgary Olympic Development Association,

CODA, Centre of Sport Excellence. Not only will Alberta have world-class facilities, but our high-performance athletes will receive support by way of Podium Alberta's \$1.5 million annual program to assist them with training and expenses. Put this together, and we are well on our way to establishing a competitive culture of excellence, where athletes have access to the facilities and resources that they need to produce results at all competitive levels. Whether athletes achieve gold or a personal best, their hard work would not be possible without the fine facilities that we have here in Alberta.

It will also help to attract and keep passionate athletes here in Alberta, who one day will serve as mentors and teachers for our younger generation in both sport and in life. The centre will also play a role with the newly created Olympic and Paralympic secretariat, which will co-ordinate Alberta's 2010 activities in the areas of sport, tourism, and culture.

With CODA's Centre of Sport Excellence Canada's road to Olympic success for 2010 and beyond travels through Alberta and will raise the bar on sport development for other countries to emulate.

Thank you very much.

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

#### Search and Rescue Day

**Mr. Johnston:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Saturday, May 3, is Alberta's Search and Rescue Day. I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the thousands of volunteers and career search and rescue individuals from across Alberta who give so freely of their time. About 300 search and rescue operations are conducted in the province every year on land, in the air, and in water. Some volunteers search with dogs, while others use planes, helicopters, snowmobiles, or all-terrain vehicles. These volunteers are often the unsung heroes among emergency responders. It is important to recognize their hard work and dedication to keeping our communities safe and to increase awareness about the outstanding contributions they have made.

The Alberta government through the Alberta Emergency Management Agency provides search and rescue groups with \$150,000 annually to train volunteers in courses such as first aid and CPR, ground search and rescue fundamentals, and managing search and rescue operations. Staff from the Alberta Emergency Management Agency also liaise with search and rescue groups in their communities to provide advice and assistance. Local groups across the province have organized many different activities for the public to help raise awareness and recruit new search and rescue volunteers. In Alberta there are 36 organizations with over 2,500 volunteer members who reach out in very challenging situations to rescue others while conducting complex searches to help local police.

Mr. Speaker, I invite all members to join me in recognizing Alberta's volunteer and career search and rescue individuals for their achievements and efforts that help keep our community safe. Thank you.

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

#### Sustainable Oil Sands Development

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's vanishing hinterland who's who: a water-fouling history. The tar sands piper, crys wolfus, along with other predatory aviary species of the raptor family, including the snail-grooved sniper, the right-winged Knight bird, and the blue-gold crested sapslinger, are raising havoc in what remains of the rapidly depleting boreal forests north of Fort

McMurray. The bilingual, bespectacled tar sands piper changes its tune when threatened from a shrill "victime, victime, victime" while hopping on one leg with a feigned broken wing outstretched to a grouse-like, breast-swelling "mine, mine, mine" when expanding its territory or feathering its nest at other species' expense. Unlike the majority of its winged cousins it not only fouls its own expanding, easily identified, black-holed nest; it fouls the nesting grounds of others with its toxic tailings waste, whose enormous, ever expanding, putrid ponds can be viewed from space.

In addition to its easily identified bespectacled beak and plaintive bilingual cries, its large, distinctive footprints can be seen cutting across vast swaths of what was once boreal forest. Like its distant relative the dodo it is rapidly approaching extinction due to its poor migratory navigation system coupled with its preference to fly at night or in the fog. When combined with its inability to slow down and its beak-to-tail lowercase "l" flock formation, it frequently strikes unforeseen obstacles in its flight path. Audubon ornithologists have counted as many as 72 birds skewered beak to butt in a feathered phalanx, having flown unwittingly into domed structures. Ducks Limited have issued alerts due to the toxic toll taken on unsuspecting flocks landing in the tar sands piper's polluted ponds.

This has been another in the series of Alberta's vanishing hinterland who's who.

Mr. Speaker, in all seriousness, sustainable development of the oil sands is possible but not at this frantic, sacrificial pace.

1:50

#### Oral Question Period

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

#### Waterfowl Deaths in Oil Sands Tailings Pond

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Environment confirmed yesterday that this government has photos of the death scene and the cleanup site of the hundreds of birds that perished in an oil sands tailings pond on Monday. He refused to release the photos. To the Minister of Environment: why the cover-up?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, the member is well aware, as I've stated on numerous occasions, that an investigation is under way. Part of that investigation, obviously, would involve photographs. They are part of any evidence that would be required for us to take forward should we find it necessary.

**Dr. Taft:** Well, it's not the minister's job to decide what evidence to show Albertans and what evidence to conceal. He's not the judge in this case; he's the one being judged. Again, why won't he just release these photos?

**Mr. Renner:** Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is perfectly accurate. I am not the judge. However, I am responsible for the organization that provides the evidence for the judge to make an impartial decision. Anything that I would do that would compromise our ability to have an impartial decision pursued in the courts is my responsibility.

**Dr. Taft:** Just to be clear here, is this minister saying he won't release these photos because they could become court evidence?

**Mr. Renner:** Yes, Mr. Speaker.

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

### Monitoring of Oil Sands Tailings Ponds

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The tailings ponds of the oil sands are larger than many Alberta lakes. They cover about 50 square kilometres and are roughly the volume of Sylvan Lake and rapidly expanding. They're extremely toxic, and many are at the edge of one of Alberta's major rivers, yet this government allows companies to self-monitor and self-report on tailings ponds conditions, deterioration, and problems. To the Minister of Environment: will the minister do the right thing and bring an end to the hands-off approach of companies self-monitoring and self-reporting on tailings pond issues?

**Mr. Renner:** Well, Mr. Speaker, we had quite a discussion on this matter during the discussion of my estimates last night. The actual issue here is not the self-monitoring, because that's quite a common practice in the way not only Alberta Environment but every environment department around the world operates. The issue is: do we audit, and do we have in place the necessary checks and balances to ensure that that self-reporting is accurate? It's no different than the way self-reporting of income tax is done with taxpayers in Canada and other jurisdictions.

**Dr. Taft:** Well, to the same minister: I'm sure the minister agrees that bringing in self-reporting for speeding on our streets wouldn't work, so why does he think letting industry self-report on something this toxic and on this scale actually works?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, I just indicated that we have the ability to conduct audits. If as a result of the audits we find that there have been inaccuracies, if we find that incidents that should have been reported were not reported, we consider those to be more serious an offence than anything that would have been reported. We take this responsibility very seriously, and we expect industry to do the same.

**The Speaker:** The hon. leader.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that Syncrude is now effectively operated by Exxon Mobil, is the minister confident in Exxon Mobil's record of corporate transparency?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, Syncrude, Exxon Mobil, or any other company that chooses to do business in the province of Alberta is required to abide by our laws, our rules, and we will ensure that we enforce them to the full extent.

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

### Whistle-blower Protection

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is no whistle-blower protection law in Alberta for people who tell the government or the public that their company is breaking the law on environmental standards. Yet this government clearly relies on whistle-blowers to report incidents like the one on Monday. To the Minister of Justice. If people in Alberta report wrongdoing by their employer, they can be fired. There is no law to protect them. Why is this?

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

**Ms Redford:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this under advisement. I think that this is something that has become part of public policy debate in the last couple of years in Canada.

It's certainly a serious matter, and I'll provide more information when I can.

**Dr. Taft:** Again to the same minister: will this minister and her government follow the lead of other jurisdictions and bring in whistle-blower protection laws?

**Mr. Snelgrove:** Mr. Speaker, we are currently working on a policy within the framework that all of our government employees operate under to ensure that people who want to bring to our attention any matter would never be held in jeopardy of any kind. If hon. members ever have any instances of someone in the government being held up to either job action or any other effect from reporting an indiscretion to us, please bring it forward.

**Dr. Taft:** This minister is missing out on an example of somebody who sits in this Assembly, our own Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

To the Minister of Justice, again: since we would all agree in this Assembly, I'm sure, that whoever blew the whistle on Monday did the honourable thing, will this government protect the individual from retributions related to making this incident public?

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

**Ms Redford:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Referring to the comments of my colleague the President of the Treasury Board, I understand this is something the government is committed to, and we'll follow through with that as best we can.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

### Transmission Line Application Process

**Mr. Mason:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, on the heels of international embarrassment over the environmental mess caused by the tar sands, the Conservatives look to public relations solutions to real environmental problems. Instead of accepting the fact that they have to change their ways, the Minister of Environment has decided to end the requirement for 500 kV power lines to have a full environmental impact assessment prior to approval. This is clearly an attempt to give a green light to a very controversial line that will run through central Alberta. Given the Conservative government's obsession with spinning its lousy environmental record, can the minister tell us why he is removing environmental protections in this widely opposed project?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, I'm doing nothing of the kind. What we're doing is standardizing the process for dealing with transmission line applications. You'll have to agree with me, as I'm sure most right-thinking Albertans would, that the environmental impact from a 100 kVa line or a 250 kVa line or a 500 kVa line is essentially the same. They're carried on towers that have wires on them.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Mason:** Well, thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister's own published documents state that environmental impact assessments are the most comprehensive tools at their disposal, will the minister admit that he is abandoning environmental responsibility in order to fast-track a power line facing strong public opposition.

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, the issues related to the locating of power lines are not environmental. The issues relate to land planning; they relate to routing; they relate to dealing with public concern. There is nothing that is involved in dealing with all of those issues – nothing will impair the commission from instigating public meetings. Nothing will change apart from the fact that instead of the environmental impact coming back and reporting that there are minimal environmental impacts to be dealt with, we'll say that past experience will indicate there are minimal environmental impacts to be dealt with.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

2:00

**Mr. Mason:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the minister is saying to the House that there is minimal environmental impact, is he not prejudging what an environmental impact assessment would say, and what qualifies him to do this?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, the impact is that we have cement foundations that are poured in the ground to support the towers. That's the minimal environmental impact that I was referring to. At the end of the useful life of that transmission line those cement foundations would need to be removed.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

#### Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute

**Mr. Rogers:** Now for some good news, Mr. Speaker. The world-class Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute opened today right here in the capital city, housing not only Canada's largest heart transplant program, but it's one of the world's foremost facilities in cardiac care. Capital health, the U of A, and the philanthropy of Albertans and Canadians is to be commended. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What role did the provincial government play in bringing this innovative facility to Alberta?

**Mr. Liepert:** Mr. Speaker, this Legislature actually played a significant role in the past by contributing some \$170 million out of the \$217 million facility costs. However, I think what is more important, probably, is the fact that it was a collaborative effort, and even more important is the fact that individual Canadians contributed some \$45 million towards this facility. One other issue is an example of the community participation in this, which includes the Sikh community, who funded a \$2 million indoor healing garden that we're going hear more about next week.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Rogers:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental is to the same minister. Aside from integrating adult and children's heart care and research under one roof, what other innovations are contained in this wonderful centre?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr Speaker, you know, it is interesting to hear the moaning and the groaning over there from these folks. We have a situation where we have one of the best places in the world to live, and these guys are going around the world telling how bad it is in this province. I want to talk about how good it is in this province. This particular facility is going to draw world-class researchers. They're going to move to Alberta because of facilities like this, not because of the negative stuff we hear every day from across the way.

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

#### Calgary Health Region Funding

**Mr. Taylor:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government, that minister, is trying to hoodwink Albertans into thinking the only people who believe there's a health crisis in Calgary are five opposition MLAs and half a dozen health reporters. This crisis is about real people, real Calgarians who experience Third World conditions when they go to the hospital. This is about the 1,500 beds this government took out of Calgary along with the people who staff them, and now that there are new beds to open, it refuses to find \$25 million to make it so. Will the Minister of Health and Wellness stop blaming others for the health crisis in Calgary and take some responsibility for the patients who are being treated in the hallways?

**Mr. Liepert:** Mr. Speaker, this is one reason why these guys have half the number of seats they had before the last election, because they're still back 15 years ago, talking about issues that we dealt with 15 years ago, and Albertans basically said: we've had enough of that negative stuff from these guys; we don't want any more of that. I'll tell you right now, in this budget when my estimates are up two weeks from last Tuesday night, we're going to talk about an 8.7 per cent increase in funding for the Calgary health region. That's pretty darn good.

**Mr. Taylor:** Mr. Speaker, if this minister can stop pointing, because we all know that's impolite, will he explain to the people who work hard every single day to keep this province rolling in the dough why his government can't or won't find \$25 million from the \$37 billion budget it is proposing this year to get them the health services they deserve?

**Mr. Liepert:** Mr. Speaker, it may be impolite, but it's true.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? I just mentioned we're going to have budget estimates here in a couple of weeks, and I'd be happy to debate with the hon. member. As I say, our health care budget spending this year will go up in excess of \$1 billion, and that is an 8.7 per cent increase for the Calgary health region.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Taylor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the demand for health care that Calgary faces is part of a symptom of unprecedented and completely unmanaged growth, how can the minister say it's the health region's fault when this government perpetrated this situation in the first place?

**Mr. Liepert:** Mr. Speaker, I would challenge the hon. member to show me where I said in this House that it's the health region's fault. That is not what I've ever said. I've said that we have spoken with the chair of the Calgary health region. We have agreed that we are going to continue to deliver services to the residents of the Calgary health region. Employees are going to get paid. We will see when the audited financial statements come in what the real deficit numbers are.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

#### Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute

*(continued)*

**Mr. Elniski:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Minister of Health

and Wellness spoke about the impressive attributes of the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute. He also mentioned the research functions of this facility. Can the minister provide more detail on the research that will be done and the benefits to Albertans?

**Mr. Liepert:** Mr. Speaker, there's no question that this facility will be attracting some of the world's leading researchers in cardiovascular research. The Mazankowski institute is also involved with the Cardiovascular and Stroke Research Centre and includes state-of-the-art imaging technology, which those of us who are interested in really good news saw examples of this morning. We weren't reading newspapers about horror stories that somebody is writing for CNN in the U.S.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Elniski:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister. Many of my constituents are having trouble finding a family physician or getting a bed for their aging parents in long-term care. Can the minister explain how investments in state-of-the-art and specialized facilities like the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute will benefit the average Albertan?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr. Speaker, you had to be there this morning to hear the young lady who had several heart operations and, frankly, owed her life to some of the tremendous work of our doctors, as the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie mentioned, and our medical staff. This just gives an opportunity now for even more of that great work to happen. As I said in my earlier remarks, one person in Canada dies every seven minutes from heart disease.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member?

**Mr. Elniski:** No.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

#### Transmission Line Application Process

*(continued)*

**Ms Pastoor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's approach to transmission line issues is dismal. The undemocratic Bill 46 dramatically weakened Albertans' ability to challenge transmission line development. Then just yesterday the government pushed through an order in council that eliminates the environmental impact assessment required for these lines. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Why is this government consistently weakening Albertans' control over transmission line development and their impacts rather than strengthening them?

**Mr. Renner:** Well, Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that the issues related to the locating and approvals of transmission lines are a myriad of issues, but the issues related to the environment are not in question. The issues that approval mechanisms and public hearings focus on are those related to land-use issues, those related to compensation of landowners, those related to issues around planning. None of those are impacted by the results that come from the environmental impact assessment.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Ms Pastoor:** Thank you. Given that for two and a half years I've heard serious concerns from residents of Lethbridge and district

about the proposed Montana tie-line – and poles in the ground are the least of their concerns – how will cutting environmental impact assessments address these concerns?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, the concerns that the hon. member refers to are precisely the concerns that I was referring to. The process that we have in place is designed to address those kinds of concerns. Whether or not there's an environmental impact assessment conducted does not in any way abrogate the responsibility of the approval authority to take into account the concerns of citizens that are raised through public meetings to address just that type of concern.

2:10

**Ms Pastoor:** Well, Bill 46 has managed to cut some of those.

At a time when the world is watching Alberta and when these assessments require greater resources than currently provided, why is the government cutting the assessment rather than simply providing the necessary resources and letting them go forward?

**Mr. Renner:** Well, Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out, previous to the change that was initiated yesterday, there were no EIAs required for a 100-kVa line. It was optional as to whether or not one would be required for a 250-kVa line, and the requirement applied only to a 500. The reality is, as I've pointed out to you, the environmental impact from a 100, 250, or 500 is the same.

#### Health Care Workforce Supply

**Mr. Vandermeer:** Mr. Speaker, the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute is indeed an impressive facility. I was able to see it first-hand this morning. However, concerns have been raised about the ability of Capital health to staff the facilities given the shortages of physicians, nurses, and other health professionals across this entire province. My question is to the minister of health. What is the Alberta government doing to address these health workforce shortages to ensure that Albertans have access to the cardiac care that they need?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr. Speaker, it is good to see that some of our Edmonton area MLAs are proud of what's being built in this city unlike the cackling that we . . .

**Ms Blakeman:** Point of order, Mr. Speaker..

**Mr. Liepert:** You know, I would really think that the Member for Edmonton-Centre might be a little more impressed with what's going on in this city, Mr. Speaker.

But there's no question; the challenges Capital health will have with the workforce issues are, as I said in this House yesterday, not unlike anywhere else, and we are working with them to meet the needs of this new facility.

**The Speaker:** The point of order will be dealt with at the conclusion.

**Mr. Vandermeer:** Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: can the minister assure Albertans that a state-of-the-art facility like this will not take staff from other facilities across the province that are already struggling to maintain services given the staff shortages?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, I don't know that any guarantees can be put on that, Mr. Speaker, but there's no question that the existing cardiac staff within Capital health will be moved to this facility.



I think, also, it's important to reiterate in this House that a significant shift happened in the last couple of weeks with the college of registered nurses. Again at the ceremony this morning I had the opportunity to talk to a representative from the college. They will, starting June 1, start issuing restricted nursing licences to our foreign-trained nurses while they upgrade their skills.

**Mr. Vandermeer:** Good news.

No other questions. Thanks.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

### Public-private Partnerships

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A report from the Ontario Health Coalition lists several dozen examples from the United Kingdom and Australia where P3s have failed or were seriously problematic. The U.K. Treasury has published a report from which I quote: "[These] deals were supposed to give us certainty about the long-term costs of providing public services. The reality is different." My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. Can the minister please explain what evidence this government has that shows that the P3 model is more cost-effective and transparent than public financing?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hayden:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, not all projects are perfect candidates for P3s, but the selection process that we have undertaken is very thorough. It takes into consideration comparable costs under conventional construction. We do in fact have examples already where it's given the certainty that people need for infrastructure that they require for many years to come.

**Ms Blakeman:** Can the minister explain how this government plans to keep the bidding competitive and cost-effective when similar examples from the U.K. forced that government to cut public programs to keep up with the high interest charges of the P3 arrangements?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hayden:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The P3 model that we use is not based on models that are being referred to in other areas. In fact, it's based on an Alberta model that ensures that the people that come and bid on our projects for P3s are checked out well ahead of time, and comparisons are made to ensure that the value for Albertans is there not only today but into the future because we're building for more than just today.

**Ms Blakeman:** If Alberta is not looking at the examples of P3s elsewhere, then why did the President of the Treasury Board use them as examples the other day?

Given the failures of several Canadian P3 programs, most notably the debacle in Nova Scotia, why is the government stubbornly committed to a financing model that has shown disastrous results in other jurisdictions and uncertain long-term debt for future generations?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hayden:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we do look very closely at things that fail in other areas, and we avoid using them.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

### Waterfowl Mortality Rates in Tailings Ponds

**Ms Notley:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the wake of the discovery of the deaths of 500 ducks in the Syncrude tailings lakes, the government and Syncrude engaged in a rather bizarre attempt at damage control. According to media reports both the government and Syncrude admit that wildlife deaths are actually quite common and that the recent deaths just happened to be a larger than usual example. My question to the Minister of Environment: did the government find out about these other incidents of wildfowl deaths in the midst of their damage control efforts of the last few days, or were they properly advised by industry at the time that they occurred?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, my understanding of the requirements that are part of the conditions of the operations of these tailings ponds is that there be reporting of incidents like this not necessarily at the exact time that it happens but a requirement that we be informed of when incidents have happened, and that's where we have the numbers that the Premier was referring to in response to questions that members had brought forward. I'm advised that it varies from approximately three to 20 incidents annually.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Ms Notley:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, then, to the minister: will the government commit today to releasing copies of any audits, inspections, or investigations conducted by the ministry as a result of these reports?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, if such reports are available, I'll be pleased to make them available to the members.

**Ms Notley:** Well, finally, again to the minister: given that the government's wildlife and environmental protection relies primarily on industrial reporting and we know that it was not Syncrude that reported last week, how can Albertans have any assurance that some oil companies are not engaging in their own version of shoot, shovel, and shut up?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, I've explained on a number of occasions that Albertans have a great deal of pride in this place that we call home. We all care about the wildlife in this province. We have really a three-tiered approach to ensuring that our regulatory environmental laws are adhered to. We have an audit, that I discussed earlier; we have a reporting requirement of industry; and we also have a very important component, and that is the tip line that all Albertans are encouraged to use.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

### Pipeline Oil Spill

**Ms Calahasen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The constituency of Lesser Slave Lake is once again experiencing a pipeline break, with approximately 125 barrels of oil leaking into the Otawau River. We care about our lake, we care about the wildlife, and we care that lives could be affected. Would the Minister of Environment please explain the magnitude of the environmental impact of this oil leak in my constituency?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, this incident like any other environmental incident is something that we take very seriously, and that's why we have a mechanism in place to respond quickly and appropriately. In this particular case that was just the case. Our ASERT team was alerted and was on the scene immediately. I'm advised that municipalities potentially affected were notified. Their drinking water sources were protected. As of today sampling of water is under way, the source of the leak has been stopped, and there is no risk to human health, to the best of my knowledge.

**Ms Calahasen:** As this is the second oil leak in a few years that's happened in my constituency, Mr. Speaker, I'm glad that there's been notification to all those who are affected, but it is a concern to my constituents.

My second question is to the Minister of Energy. What plans do you have to ensure that these types of leaks do not happen again?

2:20

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Knight:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, all the pipeline facilities that are currently in operation in the province of Alberta are required to have emergency response plans in place, and many of the major pipelines would have monitoring and detection equipment to indicate if there is any loss of pressure or loss of fluid from those lines. We have in place a rapid response spill co-op, and they are able to contain and control releases as quickly as possible.

**Ms Calahasen:** The people in the municipal district of Lesser Slave River, especially in the community of Smith, are very concerned about this emergency. Could the Minister of Municipal Affairs explain what processes are being used to deal with these emergencies which could affect the people in my constituency?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Danyluk:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, the role of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency is to coordinate responses to emergencies. All municipalities in Alberta must have a municipal emergency plan in place, and it is up to those municipalities to respond. The Alberta Emergency Management Agency of course is there to support those municipalities if needed. In the Otawau River incident . . .

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

#### Efficiency of Government Vehicle Fleet

**Mr. Kang:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In March 2007 the President of the Treasury Board discussed deploying hybrid vehicles in our fleet, and I quote: I would love to see where other provinces are and then make sure that we are just ahead of them. End quote. Can the Minister of Service Alberta tell the Assembly if her department has studied the progress that other provinces have made?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mrs. Klimchuk:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to greening Alberta's fleet, we will be purchasing hybrid environmentally friendly vehicles to replace about 300 vehicles in the current fleet. As I've said previously, we are moving in that direction, and we're going to look to purchase more in the years as technology improves.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Kang:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again. On Tuesday the minister noted that many of our fleet vehicles are SUVs and are required to work in all parts of Alberta. Is the minister aware that Manitoba deployed six Ford SUV hybrids last November?

**Mrs. Klimchuk:** Mr. Speaker, with respect to the vehicles that are deployed all over Alberta, we do have a number of light- and medium-duty trucks and vans with efficient gasoline or diesel engines appropriate to the type of work being performed. I know that technology is improving on some of the larger vehicles, and when those hybrid options are available for trucks and are suitable to meet the needs of our ministries, we'll certainly be purchasing those.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Kang:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again. Manitoba has 31 hybrids; British Columbia has 459. Does this minister feel that we are just ahead of the other provinces? If not, what is the timeline?

**Mrs. Klimchuk:** Mr. Speaker, it's always very useful to hear what's happening in other provinces. I'm aware that there's some good work being done across Canada. Most certainly, Alberta is moving in that direction, and I am pleased to answer that.

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

#### Utility Costs for Low-income Albertans

**Dr. Sherman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In this booming economy the cost of living is going up. One challenge for many low-income Albertans is the rising cost of utilities. Some of the hardest working Albertans are these low-income Albertans, and many of them live in my constituency of Edmonton-Meadowlark. My first question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. What is your department doing to help low-income Albertans who are facing these high utility costs?

**Mr. Goudreau:** Mr. Speaker, from April 2007 to February 2008 my department provided approximately \$96 million to Albertans receiving income supports for costs relating to shelter, such as rent, mortgage, or utility payments. If low-income Albertans have their utilities disconnected due to late payments or arrears, my department can pay the arrears or a utility deposit. We will also pay for the reconnection of utilities as long as the client signs a repayment agreement.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Dr. Sherman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is for the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. What is being done to help those who have built the society and world we live in, many of whom are now low-income seniors who are also having the same problems in paying their increasing electrical, gas, and utility bills?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mrs. Jablonski:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta seniors'

benefit program provides low-income seniors with a monthly cash supplement to assist with daily living expenses, including utilities. The ASB program has one of the highest income thresholds and monthly provincial payments in Canada. We also check to see if the special-needs assistance program can free up some of the money of the seniors by covering other allowable expenses such as prescription dispensing fees. When seniors in need contact us, we check to ensure that they receive all the benefits they are entitled to.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Dr. Sherman:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is for the same minister. The most vulnerable Albertans, those with disabilities, are also facing increased living expenses. What kind of help can someone on AISH expect to get if they can't pay their bills?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mrs. Jablonski:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In addition to their monthly financial benefit many AISH clients are eligible for personal benefits, which can help with utility arrears. Each AISH client has unique circumstances and needs, and we work with them to ensure that they are receiving the supports and services they need. If an AISH client is having trouble making ends meet, we can help them budget and even set up third-party payments.

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

#### Environmentally Friendly Packaging

**Mr. Hehr:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Several days ago I proposed that the Minister of Environment pursue an Alberta-based solution to protect our ecosystem through a ban or levy on plastic bags. The minister went on to dismiss this proactive measure as "simplistic." Given that many other jurisdictions have adopted this model, can the Minister of Environment agree that sometimes simple solutions are the most appropriate?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, I didn't dismiss the idea as being simplistic because I thought it was a bad idea. I dismissed it as being simplistic because it will only address a tiny fraction of the problem. The issue that we have to deal with is how we are going to reduce the per capita amount of waste that this province generates. It is an award that, as I've said before, we're not proud of, and we need to tackle it in a significant way.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Hehr:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the same minister. As Israel, Ireland, and many other jurisdictions have implemented this simple solution, why not follow their lead instead of using the \$25 million to greenwash Alberta?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, as I indicated before, we are committed to working with environment ministers across the entire country to deal with the whole issue of packaging, not just plastic bags but packaging in general. The countries that the member refers to in many cases deal not only with plastic bags in isolation, but they have an overall policy that applies to all forms of packaging, and that, I think, is the direction that we need to be heading in.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Hehr:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad the minister brought up – I believe he is referring to the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment. They're also in the process of reviewing their packaging procedures. That said, this organization has been reviewing packaging procedures since as far back as 1989. Could the Minister of Environment tell Albertans why they should wait for this organization to recommend placing a ban or levy on plastic bags when Albertans already know that this is the right thing to do?

**Mr. Renner:** Mr. Speaker, the reason is that it's very, very difficult for us in Alberta to deal with something like packaging when the fact of the matter is that we are dealing on a national and international market. We have to have a co-ordinated effort among provinces across the entire country if we're going to have a program that will have some success and will actually be achievable.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

2:30

#### Citizenship Education

**Mr. Horne:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question is for the Minister of Education. We continue to see concerns raised in the media and in the community with respect to low voter turnout and the general lack of engagement in the democratic process. Some have called for our students to participate in a mandatory citizenship course. Can the Minister of Education please tell the Assembly what steps his ministry has taken to ensure that all students in Alberta are fully aware of their responsibilities and privileges as citizens within an increasingly diverse province and country?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think this is a very important question. As an individual who has spent most of his adult life encouraging people to be involved in the political process and governance and citizenship, I think it's extremely important that we add to the education process in that area. Alberta Education has examined the program of studies in Alberta schools, and I'm pleased to advise the House that the new social studies program, which is mandatory for all students from kindergarten to grade 12, has at its core the concept of citizenship in each grade. In fact, each of the outcomes that address citizenship is clearly identified within the program to ensure that these outcomes are not overlooked.

**Mr. Horne:** First supplementary, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: are there any initiatives beyond the social studies program that the minister can point to that directly address citizenship for Alberta students?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The new program that I'm talking about will be fully implemented by 2009, and it will make a tremendous difference in the way that teachers and students address the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge surrounding what it means to be an active and responsible citizen in Alberta. Alberta Education has also produced an excellent print resource called *The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta Schools*. Developed in conjunction with our other education stakeholders, it provides teachers with teaching strategies to expand instruction in the area.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Horne:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Moving from schools to the community, my final supplementary is for the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit. I'd like to know if his ministry is willing to provide financial support to communities that want to develop their own educational programs to address citizenship.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Blackett:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to say that our ministry is definitely willing. The human rights, citizenship, and multiculturalism education fund is already in place to do this. In fact, the goal of the education fund is to help ensure that all Albertans have the opportunity to be involved in and benefit from all aspects of society without encountering discrimination. The education fund is currently supporting a variety of initiatives that are encouraging civic participation and citizenship engagement.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, it is not often that I would make a comment during question period, but as a follow-up to that last series of questions all members should be advised that there will be a Youth Parliament in this Assembly this weekend. All members are invited to attend on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday and join with the Parlement jeunesse de l'Alberta, which is one of a dozen or so youth parliaments that we have.

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

#### Children and Youth Initiative

**Mrs. Sarich:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The province has a long-standing program called the Alberta children and youth initiative. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Could the minister tell this House how the program is making a difference to children's health in the province?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is correct. Some nine ministries of government are involved in the children and youth initiative to ensure that our children are safe, well cared for, healthy, and successful at learning. Obviously, Health and Wellness is involved right from birth with newborn metabolic screening and later with immunization services and children's mental health services. I think it's important that all of these initiatives, quite frankly, lead nicely into one of the mandates of my colleague the Minister of Education, detection of early learning difficulty.

**Mrs. Sarich:** Mr. Speaker, my first supplementary is also to the Minister of Health and Wellness. If the program spans many ages, infants right up to young adults, could the minister tell us how these health initiatives are benefiting Alberta young people and what impact they'll have in communities?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that my two colleagues the ministers of Children and Youth Services and Education and I have been discussing is the fact that some of our young children are assessed up to three times by individual government departments prior to entering school. Health and Wellness, for obvious reasons, checks at birth. If a child is presenting special needs, Children and Youth Services might get involved. Finally, for Education purposes. I guess what we've been discussing is how we can do a better job at ensuring that the data is shared and that there isn't a duplication of services and an unnecessary burden on our parents.

**Mrs. Sarich:** Mr. Speaker, my last question is to the Minister of Children and Youth Services. What cross-ministry initiatives do you have that support children and youth in Alberta?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Ms Tarchuk:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have several cross-ministry initiatives, but one that I'd like to mention – and it was just referenced – is one where we're working with Education and Health and Wellness on finding the best way that we can deliver integrated learning programs and services to children. We have a cross-ministry working group that is taking a look at whether we have any barriers in place, whether they be legislation, policy, or funding, that prevent local groups from working together and looking at ways that families can get services all in one place.

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

#### Special-needs Student Funding

**Mrs. McQueen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question is for the Minister of Education. I noted in last week's debate of the Education estimates that an additional \$30 million has been allocated to support students with special needs. That money is certainly very welcome, but I've heard from several constituents that these students are seriously underserved and are not getting the support they need. I am wondering what the Minister of Education is doing to rectify the deficiencies in services and funding to special-needs students.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Special-needs funding is a very, very important area. Ensuring that we have the right resources in place so that every child can succeed is extremely important. A review was done over the course of last year, essentially an information gathering process where all the special-needs files in the province were reviewed to make sure that we had the information, knew essentially what the individual circumstances and the demographics were. We'll be using that information to develop a new policy and funding framework for Alberta.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mrs. McQueen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is to the same minister. Will the minister include the costs of an educational assistant or consulting fees in the funding that's provided to students with special needs?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, Mr. Speaker, the renewed funding framework essentially provides global funding to school boards, and school boards have the job of allocating that funding in appropriate ways to the schools where special-needs students exist to support them with the needs that they have. We do have complaints that the amount of special-needs funding doesn't deal with issues specific to full-time aides and those sorts of circumstances, so that will be part of the whole review of the policy and the funding formula.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mrs. McQueen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since teachers cannot reasonably provide all the supports required by many special-needs

students, what is the minister doing to ensure that students have access to services provided by other government departments?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This, again, is an important question because we do need to be collaborative and bring together the cross-ministry initiatives of Health and Children and Youth Services and community organizations, including the health authorities and some of the nongovernmental organizations that are available in the community to support students. Often these are called wraparound services. We need to do a much better job of coordinating those services through the schools so that we can support teachers in the classroom to give those children the best opportunity.

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

### High School Completion

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Education. Every year we hear about how well Alberta students score on a number of achievement tests. While the minister talks about these results, there's another kind of achievement test that we're failing. Alberta's high school completion rates are nothing to be proud of, and many students who do complete high school don't pursue any form of postsecondary schooling. When will the government learn the value of higher education and fix it?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, this is a very important question. I absolutely agree with the member about the value of higher education and higher learning. We know that in a knowledge-based economy 80 per cent of the new jobs are going to require some form of postsecondary education, and it's important that our students complete high school, be ready to take that high school education. We are making progress on the postsecondary transition rates, which have increased from 51 per cent in 2001-2002 to nearly 60 per cent in 2005-06 for grade 10 students tracked over six years. We want to continue to improve high school completion and postsecondary transition, and we're targeting efforts to do just that.

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Six years is a big gap between starting high school and starting postsecondary studies. Since our labour market is in desperate need of skilled workers, why isn't the minister doing more to encourage students to make the transition sooner?

**Mr. Mason:** We have lots of room back here.

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member opposite says there's lots of room back there, and there's a very good reason for that. The good reason for that is because this government is working so hard to make it possible for students to be successful, to transition into that knowledge-based economy. It's not just the six-year rate that's improved. The four-year rate has improved, from 32 per cent to nearly 40 per cent in 2005-2006 and getting better. There are challenges with the hot economy, but it's very clear that we need

to inspire our children to finish their high school education, transition to a postsecondary education.

2:40

**The Speaker:** The hon. member.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplement to the same minister. For the past 18 years I taught automotives, a skill set which is now in high demand and which offers a lucrative job right out of high school. It's easy for these students to be blinded by money. Is the minister doing anything to make sure they see the value of continuing education?

**The Speaker:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Tuesday the Premier and I attended at St. Joseph's high school here in Edmonton, where we announced funding of \$79 million for CTS. Much of that money is going to improve the equipment that's available so that our students can have hands-on experience on up-to-date equipment. A lot of it is also going to make sure we have the curriculum and the supports necessary to make it possible for every student to find an area in which they can be successful and to be able to be successful in that area so that they can transition to a job or future education.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, this was another productive day with respect to questions and the number of responses as well.

We'll now continue the Routine in 30 seconds from now.

### Members' Statements

*(continued)*

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

#### River Valley Alliance

**Mr. Horne:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to acknowledge today on behalf of all members the incredible vision and collaboration demonstrated by members of the River Valley Alliance. What started out 12 years ago as a bold concept to develop a world-class park system along our capital region's river valley is now becoming a reality thanks in large part to the imagination and hard work of River Valley Alliance chair Sol Rolinger and seven capital region municipalities.

The proposed capital region river valley park, with an area over two times the size of New York City's Central Park, will run from Devon to Fort Saskatchewan, creating one of the largest metropolitan river valley parks in the world, and its benefits will extend even further. With current visitation levels of over 14 million visits per year the park has the potential to enhance the quality of life of nearly a third of Alberta's population. It also has the potential to become a defining symbol of our capital region.

The vision for the park, Mr. Speaker, is about preservation, protection, and providing outdoor recreational opportunities for Albertans. It's also a shining example of what can be accomplished when municipalities and all stakeholders collaborate to achieve a common goal.

Mr. Speaker, I and my capital region colleagues are very proud that the government of Alberta is supporting the vision for this regional park by allocating \$50 million in Budget 2008. I ask the members of the Assembly to join me in congratulating the River Valley Alliance on this tremendous project. It is truly a testament to our mutual commitment to stewardship of the natural environment.

The vision of this group will benefit Albertans and, indeed, residents of the capital region for generations to come.

Thank you.

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

### May Day

**Mr. Mason:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today is May Day, or International Workers' Day, which has its origins in an 1886 protest in Chicago which lasted three days as workers and their unions fought for and won an eight-hour workday. The eight-hour day along with other workplace improvements are benefits we can thank labour unions for. Unions have historically fought for and won many victories for working families. The labour movement led the fight for public health care, free education, the 40-hour work-week, and the end to child labour.

Opponents of unions argue that these are old battles and that unions have outlived their usefulness, but that is simply not true. It was unions who pioneered the fight for pensions, and in order to have a pension today, it helps to belong to a union. According to Statistics Canada 83 per cent of unionized employees are covered by a pension plan or a group RRSP, compared to just 33 per cent of non-unionized workers. Seventy-seven per cent of union members in Canada have dental benefits compared to 45 per cent of non-union members. Eighty-four per cent of unionized workers have supplemental health benefits compared to just 45 per cent of non-union members.

Health and safety continues to be a major concern for working families, particularly in Alberta, where the rate of workplace fatalities has risen to its highest level in 25 years. A 1996 study showed that 79 per cent of unionized workplaces reported high compliance with health and safety regulations compared to just 54 per cent of non-unionized sites. And, of course, there's the wage gap. Unionized employees earn on average \$3 an hour more than non-union workers.

On this May Day let us recognize the role unions have played and continue to play in improving the standard of living and quality of life for Alberta workers and their families.

Thank you.

### Presenting Petitions

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

**Mr. Taylor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Alberta:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to commission an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta Government's administration of or involvement with the Local Authorities Pension Plan, the Public Service Pension Plan, and the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund.

It is signed by 20 residents of Calgary.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two petitions to present today, the first one from a number of Calgary residents, including those living in Calgary-Elbow, Calgary-Bow, and Calgary-Montrose. All of these individuals are desirous of a

commission for an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta government's administration of or involvement with the LAPP, the public service pension plan, and the Alberta teachers' retirement fund.

As well, on behalf of my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, Leader of the Official Opposition, I'd like to table a petition, again, signed by quite a few people who are living in Calgary and a number of places south of Calgary. They, as well, are looking for an independent and public inquiry into the local authorities pension plan, public service pension plan, and the Alberta teachers' retirement fund.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two petitions. The first contains 36 signatures, and it's calling upon the Assembly to "pass legislation that will prohibit emotional bullying and psychological harassment in the workplace."

The second, along the lines of former members', calls upon the government to establish "an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta Government's administration of or involvement with the Local Authorities Pension Plan, the Public Service Pension Plan, and the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund."

Thank you.

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

**Ms Pastoor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, also, have a petition signed by 40 people from Rocky Mountain House, Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, and Rimbey who are asking for exactly the same commission that has just been mentioned, looking into the LAPP, the public service pension plan, and the Alberta teachers' retirement fund.

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two petitions today. The first one I would like to present reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, hereby petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to take measures that will require school boards and schools to eliminate all fees for instructional supplies and materials and general school services, including textbooks, musical instruments, physical education programs, locker rentals, lunch hour supervision and required field trips, and to ensure that schools are not deprived of the resources necessary to offer these programs and services without additional charges to parents or guardians.

The citizens who have signed this petition are from Barnwell, Taber, Lethbridge, and various places in southern Alberta.

The second petition I have this afternoon to present to the Legislative Assembly reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Edmonton, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to take immediate steps to prevent the 43-hectare Qualico gravel pit operation proposed for southwest Edmonton from going ahead as it will have significant adverse effects, such as lower property values and a decline in quality of life due to noise, pollution and heavy truck traffic.

This petition is signed by citizens from Edmonton.

Thank you.

2:50

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

**Mr. Kang:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too have a petition signed by 20 concerned Calgary citizens, and it reads:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to commission an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta Government's administration of or involvement with the Local Authorities Pension Plan, the Public Service Pension Plan, and the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund.

Thank you.

### Introduction of Bills

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

#### Bill 205 Traffic Safety (Used Vehicle Inspection) Amendment Act, 2008

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 205, the Traffic Safety (Used Vehicle Inspection) Amendment Act, 2008.

Vehicle safety is of utmost concern on Alberta's highways, and the goal of the proposed legislation is to ensure that standards continue to be enhanced.

[Motion carried; Bill 205 read a first time]

### Tabling Returns and Reports

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to table two documents, both being responses to questions raised in Committee of Supply last Thursday. In tabling a response to the Member for Calgary-North Hill and a response to the Member for Calgary-Varsity I hope to set an example for all of my cabinet colleagues in responding to questions on a timely basis as we commit to doing so.

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

**Ms Notley:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table two documents today. First, I'd like to table a document from the Alberta Labour History Institute describing its work in preserving the history of working people in Alberta. It also describes the institute's work in preparation for the centennial of the Alberta Federation of Labour in 2012.

The second document that I'd like to table is the appropriate number of copies of an Alberta Environment document dated February 2001 which states that an environmental impact assessment is "the most comprehensive information-gathering tool Alberta Environment has at its disposal."

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

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a letter from a constituent who's very frustrated with the lack of movement on the WCB. He feels very strongly that this should be a number one issue with the government and doesn't see that happening and feels, in addition, that the old claims should be settled rather than the government fighting so hard not to pay. He spent seven years on a case that's worth less than \$15,000.

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

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have five letters this afternoon to table from five constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar. They are all concerned and want to see Alberta's labour laws changed. These individuals are James Magill, Brenda Swift, Stirling Perry, James Requino, and Sean Carter.

Thank you.

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

**Ms Pastoor:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of a letter from a constituent, Larry Elford, who is asking for a public inquiry into the fact that banks, investment dealers, and investment sponsors can go to provincial securities commissions and apply for an exemption to existing laws. There is a website which includes exceptions passed in Alberta, exceptions that protect companies from questionable predatory practices and don't protect the general public. The federal justice minister has advised that this is also a provincial jurisdiction.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings, both are letters with regard to the cellphone bill, Bill 204, Traffic Safety (Hand-Held Communication Devices) Amendment Act, 2008. They're both from Calgary residents. The first is from Gail Rivard, who writes, "I stand with the Calgary Health Region and Calgary Police Chief who urged the province to implement a cellphone ban for motorists."

Another resident, Philip Carson, supports the idea of a cellphone ban, although he would like it to stop at the hand-held and not proceed, as my amendment suggests, to hands-free as well.

**The Speaker:** Hon. members, it's my pleasure today to table with the Assembly and to provide to all members a little booklet that we put together on the biographies of the various pages we have. Our page program is a very successful one in the province of Alberta. Our pages are in grade 10, grade 11, grade 12, and first-year university. It's quite amazing to see what they've already accomplished at their tender ages and also quite amazing to see how many of them want to go on and do incredible things like being in medicine and law, travelling the world, saving the world, and becoming involved in federal politics. Not one, however, identified that their clear aspiration is provincial politics, so all of you are quite safe.

### Tablings to the Clerk

**The Clerk:** I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Liepert, Minister of Health and Wellness, pursuant to the Health Facilities Review Committee Act the Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee annual report 2006-2007; pursuant to the Health Professions Act the Alberta College of Social Workers 2007 annual report, the Alberta Dental Association and College 2007 annual report, the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta annual report 2006-2007 with attached financial statements for the year ended September 30, 2007; pursuant to the Physical Therapy Profession Act the College of Physical Therapists of Alberta annual report 2007; pursuant to the Public Health Act the Public Health Appeal Board annual report 2007; pursuant to the Regional Health Authorities Act the Peace Country Health annual report 2006-2007; the Health Quality Council of Alberta 2006-2007 annual report.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Blackett, Minister of Culture and Community Spirit, the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission annual review April 1, 2006, to March 31, 2007.

### Projected Government Business

**The Speaker:** The Official Opposition House Leader.

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would ask at this point that according to Standing Order 7(6) the Government House Leader share with us the projected government House business for the week commencing May 5.

Thank you.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the House is aware from the Order Paper, we will again be in Committee of Supply for most of the next week, followed where time permits by certain bills.

On Monday, May 5, at 8:30 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders we'll be in Committee of Supply for the main estimates of Service Alberta and then, time permitting, Committee of the Whole for Bill 6 and second reading of Bill 1 or Bill 2.

On Tuesday, May 6, in the afternoon in Committee of Supply the main estimates of Culture and Community Spirit and then, time permitting, third reading of Bill 6 or second reading of Bill 1 or Bill 2 and as per the Order Paper. In the evening at 7:30 in Committee of Supply the estimates of Infrastructure and third reading of Bill 6, second reading of bills 1 and 2 and as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, May 7, in the afternoon in Committee of Supply the main estimates of Tourism, Parks and Recreation and second reading, if time permits, of bills 1 and 2. In the evening at 7:30 in Committee of Supply the main estimates of Justice and Attorney General and second reading of bills 1 and 2 and as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, May 8, in the afternoon in Committee of Supply the main estimates of Advanced Education and Technology and, time permitting, bills 1 and 2.

**The Speaker:** The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre and Official Opposition House Leader on a point of order.

### Point of Order

#### Inflammatory Language

**Ms Blakeman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today during question period in an exchange between the minister of health and I believe it was the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, the minister contravened standing orders 23(h), (i), and (j) and also *Beauchesne* 409(7). He made a statement – and I'm sorry; I don't have the benefit of the Blues for the exact word – to the effect that only the government MLAs were proud or appreciative of the new Mazankowski heart centre.

Frankly, Mr. Speaker, I don't think this is behaviour or commentary worthy of a minister. At no point has any member of the Official Opposition said they did not support the Mazankowski heart centre or that they weren't equally proud and supportive of it. To infer otherwise is offensive and, I think, abusive. As a matter of fact, earlier today in an exchange in response to a ministerial statement we did say things like that we were echoing the hon. minister's congratulations – and then a number of people were listed, including the health region, University Hospital Foundation, a number of others; the workers that helped build the particular institute were commended, as were the surrounding businesses, the

health staff that worked in it – and that we wanted to see the institute up to speed and open and servicing people as soon as possible.

3:00

That kind of commentary is not helpful to the tone of this House, Mr. Speaker. We all know that the government got 72 seats – fair enough – and the opposition has nine. All right. That's reality. But to hear a government minister get up and harangue a smaller opposition member and get pointed about that certain members from Edmonton were not equally supportive when there is nothing on the record to support that is, frankly, childish, and it is not worthy of a minister of this government.

In *Beauchesne* 409(7) we should “adhere to the proprieties of the House, in terms of inferences, imputing motives or casting aspersions upon persons within the House or out of it,” and 23(h), (i), and (j), as we're all very familiar, is to discourage or prohibit imputing false or unavowed motives, to not use abusive or insulting language likely to create disorder – that certainly happened in this case – and (h) is to make allegations against other members.

There's absolutely nothing to back that up, and frankly it's an invention meant to be insulting. It was meant to be, and I don't think that should be accepted in this House. We've managed to get through three weeks without that kind of language and tone from the government front bench, and I don't think it should start now.

I'm asking the Speaker to find that the member has contravened the citations that I've mentioned, and I believe that the member should withdraw his remarks and apologize to the House. Thank you.

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I would say that actions speak louder than words. We have three members from Edmonton who sit in the front bench of the opposition, and who responds to the ministerial statement but a member from Calgary. Now, I'll tell you: if I sat on that side of the House as the Member for Calgary-West and I was either the leader or the deputy leader and somebody from Edmonton stood up to talk about such a significant event in Calgary, I'll be darned if I'd let that happen. So actions speak louder than words.

I would also say, you know, that we have the opportunity for members' statements in this House, and – you know what? – members' statements give a great opportunity for people to talk about the city they live in and the constituency they represent. We heard today from the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, who talked about the River Valley Alliance. Haven't heard that from these folks. What have I heard from them? You know what I've heard? I heard poetry from the Member for Calgary-Varsity; I haven't yet heard, but it's going to be coming soon, a member's statement on Enron from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar; and I'm sure there's one on coal-bed methane from the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, who the last time I checked didn't have any farmland in his constituency.

Mr. Speaker, you know, we just went through an election campaign, and when I was door-knocking, there was one thing I heard a lot of, and it was this. In my particular constituency I have a lot of people who have made a very good living in the oil and gas industry. There were many of them who weren't happy with our royalty review, and you know what they told me? They told me: if I ever heard one positive thing from the Liberals, I might be prepared to vote for them. That's what they said, not what I said.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think actions are louder than words. I haven't seen any action from these opposition members that tells me that they individually are proud of what we've just had happen in Edmonton today with this outstanding, world-class facility. So let them stand up and say they are.



**The Speaker:** Well, okay. We're on a point of order here, a very, very focused point of order.

**Dr. Taft:** I will respond to that diatribe from the Minister of Health and Wellness. There's a clear and obvious response. Just as he is an MLA from Calgary and delivered the ministerial statement on the Mazankowski centre, which is a wonderful centre and happens to be in my constituency, the shadow minister for Health and Wellness, the Member for Calgary-Currie, who is an MLA from Calgary who is also our deputy leader, delivered the response to the minister. So the comments from the Member for Calgary-West are completely off base, dishonest, and irrelevant.

Thank you.

**The Speaker:** Are you on this point of order, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, or on a separate point of order?

**Mr. Mason:** I can do them together, Mr. Speaker.

**The Speaker:** Well, no. Sorry.

**Mr. Mason:** Then I'll be on this one.

**The Speaker:** On this point of order?

**Mr. Mason:** Yes.

**The Speaker:** Okay. This is getting way beyond where we should be. Go ahead.

**Mr. Mason:** Yes, Mr. Speaker. I certainly, under 23(h), (i), and (j), agree with the hon. House leader of the Official Opposition with respect to this. I just want to indicate that in his response the minister continued with his inflammatory, highly partisan comments under the guise of a response to a point of order and did not deal in any way with the point of order but simply used the opportunity to continue unwarranted partisan attacks. It's not for that minister to determine which member of the Official Opposition or of our opposition responds to ministerial statements. That does not constitute a response to the point of order, which specifically is that he imputed false or unavowed motives to other members, he used abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder, and he made allegations against other members.

Mr. Speaker, the disrespect which this hon. minister has shown for this House and for the rules is unacceptable, and I believe he needs to apologize to the House for his complete lack of respect for other members and for the House rules.

**The Speaker:** Anybody else? The hon. Government House Leader.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would simply rise to say that what we've heard significantly overstates the case, as is often the case. What we heard during question period, which is really the issue, was heckling during commentary that was being made, and as a result of that heckling the minister of health made a comment about who was heckling and perhaps why they were heckling. If there wasn't the heckling, there probably wouldn't be the response. You've admonished us a number of times on that basis. I think that's the appropriate resolution of this particular point of order.

**The Speaker:** Well, I take it that's enough debate with respect to this matter. Interestingly enough, the word "heckling" doesn't come into the *Hansard* of the day. Now, we keep track, *Hansard* is there,

and here's what was said. The Speaker was very attentive to what was being said at the time. First of all, we have the Minister of Health and Wellness: "Well, Mr. Speaker, it is good to see that some of our Edmonton area MLAs are proud of what's being built in this city, unlike the cackling that we . . ." And then *Hansard* stops. At that point the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre jumped up and said, "Point of order." That's where *Hansard* would cut over to point of order. Then the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness says: "You know, I would really think that the Member for Edmonton-Centre might be a little more impressed with what's going on in this city, Mr. Speaker. But there's no question, the challenges Capital health . . ." and then goes on to something entirely different.

There's absolutely no doubt at all in my mind that the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness today was quite enthusiastic. He was quite animated, and arguably he might have been provocative in body and tone. The words, however, are what really are in here. The word "cackling" didn't seem to be directed to anyone because *Hansard* ends there. The hon. minister may have said something, but it certainly wasn't picked up because as soon as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre rose, the microphones went to her. But I don't like words like cackling, particularly if they're directed to an hon. member. In this case it's not clear that they were, but one can assume they were intended to be.

3:10

I just want to remind all members again of some of the guidelines we have with respect to parliamentary language. The word "cackling," by the way, has never been ruled out of order that I'm aware of in the 103-year history of the province of Alberta. *Marleau & Montpetit* says the following: "The use of offensive, provocative or threatening language in the House is strictly forbidden." Okay. That's one of the guidelines. Number 2, *Erskine May* at page 440: "Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language." *Marleau and Montpetit* at page 525: "The proceedings of the House are based on a long-standing tradition of respect for the integrity of all Members."

One thing I do know as well is that actually the conduct and decorum in this House since we started two Wednesdays ago, I guess, has been very good. Very good. I also do know that on certain Thursdays, it seems – and I'm not sure if it's associated with the full moon or the part of the moon or the end of the fourth day of the week – there tends to be a more enthusiastic response from members in the House. I don't like that exuberance, particularly when other members may be insulted by it. I do know that the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness was very, very animated today. Maybe he thought that he was having a good day in his own way, and he was firing bullets across the way. But we can all elevate our act just a little.

## Statement by the Speaker

### House Procedure

**The Speaker:** On that point, just a brief statement with respect to a little tweaking of where we are with respect to the standing orders and the like. First of all, to those members who sent me a note – did I send a note to the Deputy Speaker for mentioning a member's name in the Assembly today? – the answer is yes. You're not supposed to mention members' names. In this case the Deputy Speaker mentioned the name of a member. That was a no-no.

Secondly, in light of the decorum that's been displayed in the House during Oral Question Period and, quite frankly, the unprecedented number of questions and answers that are occurring on a daily basis, I revisited the ruling that I gave on April 16, 2008, and

I wish to advise that effective Monday, because of the large number of questions and large number of responses, the 17th question will now be given to the Official Opposition if they choose to use it. That means that there will be one additional question that will be afforded to the Official Opposition.

When I originally mapped this strategy out, I calculated the amount of time it would take to do a question and answer and then inflated it by just a couple of seconds in the event that there might be, you know, a little bit of enthusiasm in the House, divided into 50, and came out with 15. The 15th was the last question that I thought would go to the Official Opposition. I basically made the statement, then, that each question thereafter would go to a private government members.

Well, the fact is that we're doing 17, 18, and 19 questions. The intent was always to maximize the fairness. In essence, if we get to 17 questions, the Official Opposition would have nine, the members of the government caucus would have six, and the third party would have two. That will start effective Monday. So that means that there are nine questions for the Official Opposition, and it means that each of their members can raise a question, or if one member wants to raise all nine, that's their right as well. They can determine that order.

The third matter. I'm pleased that three House leaders – the government, the Official Opposition, and the third representation – had a discussion with respect to Standing Order 61(3) with respect to Committee of Supply, which we'll go into very, very shortly. Essentially, since 2001 Standing Order 61(3) has indicated that the opposition would have the first hour in estimates. In 2007, as the result of a temporary standing order, that read that the Official Opposition would have the first hour. So there has been some discussion, I understand, in the House in committee with respect to how this has been applied. I've looked at the standing order, and the standing order basically says:

The Committee of Supply shall consider estimates in the following manner:

- (a) the Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, and Members of the opposition may speak during the first hour, and
- (b) any Member may speak thereafter.

I'd ask both the Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees and the Deputy Chair of Committees to start reviewing that interpretation as of today's estimates to read that it is the Official Opposition that will have the first hour in the estimates, and then a member of another grouping would have their time thereafter. Like all agreements the success of this will depend on the goodwill of all parties. This should be another matter, as a result of the motion that was passed not too long ago sending this whole review to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing, in reviewing all of these temporary standing orders when they have to report back to the Assembly later in the year.

### **Orders of the Day Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

**The Chair:** I would like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

### **Main Estimates 2008-09**

#### **Agriculture and Rural Development**

**The Chair:** I would like to call on the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give a comment.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Well, thank you and good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. I'm sure agriculture will generate some interest today. Maybe not as much as you've already had – I wasn't here – but we will deal with that.

Sir, I'm certainly pleased to speak today about this government's ongoing commitment to Alberta's agriculture and food industry and our dedication to rural development. In particular, I'm pleased to highlight how in 2008-2009 the budget for the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development will support that commitment.

I would also like to recognize that this commitment is demonstrated every day by dedicated ministry staff working across the province. Having acknowledged that, I would now like to introduce the key staff that I have with me today. Sitting immediately beside me is assistant deputy minister Faye Rault; beside her is our senior financial officer, Jim Carter; immediately behind me is my deputy minister, John Knapp; and over here is AFSC vice-president of finance and corporate affairs, Krish Krishnaswamy.

Mr. Chairman, agriculture is one of our province's most valued industries. It played a key role, of course, in helping us build this province. Hard-working families braved harsh conditions and physically gruelling work to settle the land and establish our communities. That work ethic and community spirit can be felt throughout this province's rural areas. The agriculture and food industry is critical to Alberta's economic diversity. Each year we see its important contribution. In 2007 Alberta's farm cash receipts were \$8.7 billion, and we continue to be Canada's second-largest agricultural producing province. In addition, last year the value of Alberta's food and beverage sector was \$10.8 billion and was responsible for generating 23,300 jobs. The industry also generated a record \$6.6 billion in international exports, just over one-fifth of Canada's agrifood exports. With those recent benchmarks I'm sure it is clear why Albertans continue to value their agriculture industry and why it remains a priority for this government.

**3:20**

I am pleased to note that the new provincial budget demonstrates this commitment with just over \$1 billion directed to Agriculture and Rural Development. This budget, Mr. Chairman, provides the financial foundation for a solid business plan and provides ongoing support to a wide range of programs and services. You will see that we are strategically linked to the government of Alberta's business plan, and our work supports the Premier's priorities on many levels. The ARD business plan builds on the government's goals to have a prosperous economy and to stand strong at the national and international levels. The plan is also focused on the priority of enhancing value-added activity and increasing innovation while building a skilled workforce.

Our ministry vision is clear. We are growing Alberta farms, processors, and all other agriculture businesses in support of a vibrant rural Alberta. To achieve that vision, we must enable the growth of a globally competitive, sustainable agriculture and food industry through essential policy, legislation, information, and services. I know that we are making significant progress on that mission. Beyond what has already been achieved, we recognize that this industry has an even greater potential.

But like the early homesteaders we know it is sometimes a hard row to hoe. Agriculture is a unique industry. It is often impacted by outside influences much beyond our control. The industry has to contend with market fluctuations, change in commodity production, and of course even the weather has a significant impact. Although this industry continues to advance and grow in economic strength, these external influences are having a devastating effect on individual producers and businesses.

It is these influences that account for an increase in this year's budget. Compared to last year's forecast, the ARD budget increased by about \$146 million. This is in response to projections on our business risk management programs. Production insurance premiums fluctuate from year to year. Although last year producers fared a bit better, they continue to struggle with their bottom line. These insurance programs need to be able to respond to this important ongoing need, and we are pleased to be able to make that adjustment.

The current business plan takes into consideration that agriculture is facing significant changes and pressures. As the global market continues to grow, so does our list of competitors. While we have a long-standing relationship with many international partners, we must continue to fight for our share of the marketplace. Consumer expectation, food safety assurances, and trade barriers all have an impact. Here at home, of course, the strong Canadian dollar, the high cost of fuel, fertilizer, and feed are affecting the bottom line. However, I am confident that by being more strategic and innovative, the agriculture and food industry can continue to advance.

Alberta's beef and pork sectors are working on developing strategic long-term plans, and the latest business plan outlines how we intend to work with industry to overcome challenges and take advantage of some of our opportunities. The work on the competitive initiative continues, and the government looks forward to the steering group's recommendations. In fact, we have set aside \$61 million in this budget so that we are financially ready to respond and support our decisions.

Another initiative that continues to take shape is the Institute for Agriculture, Forestry and the Environment. The institute will help us go in a new, innovative direction. The goal is to identify market-based solutions that create a competitive advantage that benefits the environment, consumers, and the industry. Over the coming year \$1.8 million will go to support that work.

The link between environmental stewardship and sustainability is also evident in our support of effective irrigation. This budget provides an extra \$4 million in funding to help Alberta's irrigation districts maintain and improve infrastructure that serves agriculture, other industries, and rural communities as well as fulfilling recreation and wildlife needs.

One of our four key partners in agriculture is the federal government. A major focus in '08-09 will be transitioning the old agricultural policy framework to Growing Forward. During this transition period we plan to build on the momentum of previous programs to achieve our agricultural goals and the outcomes identified in Growing Forward. In particular, the business risk management programs are of prime importance to agriculture producers and processors.

Through the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, the AFSC, we'll continue to work with the federal government to respond to industry needs. We have redesigned and improved the AgriStability and AgriInsurance programs. We will collaborate with our federal counterparts to deliver the AgriRecovery and AgriInvest programs as they develop.

As a ministry we're committed to ensuring the agriculture industry has access to effective, responsible financial services. That is why we are in the process of increasing the AFSC loan limits from \$2 million to \$5 million. The overall borrowing limit has increased from \$1.2 billion to \$1.4 billion. These changes are expected to result in increased lending to agriculture and other value-added sectors. ARD's budget and business plan also reflect the renewed responsibility for rural development. Although our efforts to enhance rural development have been ongoing and firmly connected through cross-ministry work, we will benefit from a closer alignment

between industry and community. The momentum will help as we implement the next phase of A Place to Grow, which defines Alberta's rural development strategy. The effective collaboration between government, agriculture, and community is evident in our work to advance farm safety.

**The Chair:** The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the chance to rise to discuss the estimates for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I was listening to the minister's comments, and I look forward to a happy and constructive and informative period of time discussing the estimates. That would be terrific. I have to note that we got started late on this. It was about 3:17. I'm sure *Hansard* will indicate. Under standing orders I believe there are two and a half hours for the department's estimates, so we may need to come back another time to pick up the last 15 minutes. In any case, I'll begin just with some general comments.

The minister has made it clear a number of times in the Assembly that our caucus is a bit short on rural representation. Fair enough. I understand that and openly admit it, and I regret it. I myself am not, you know, a farm boy. I grew up in the city. I have the great honour to be married to a farmer's daughter and, as a result, do have some very limited exposure to farming and agriculture.

**Mr. Ouellette:** Poor girl.

**Dr. Taft:** Despite the Minister of Transportation's comments I think she'd consider herself a lucky girl. At least I like to think she does.

Anyways, I fully, fully recognize, as do all members of our caucus and undoubtedly all members of the Assembly, the important, important role to the economy and the culture and the politics of Alberta of Alberta's farm and rural community and also recognize the many particular challenges that that community faces that are out of their control: world prices for their products for grain or beef, disease, input costs, the weather, all kinds of other things. We're glad to support a government and a department and a budget that takes steps to put some underpinnings under the industry. My comments will focus by and large on trying to get some detailed information about those particular underpinnings. Now, as I have the opportunity, I'll actually try to refer to specific pages and items in the various budget documents that we've got here.

3:30

I think I'll start with the business plan, Mr. Chairman. I'll put three or four questions to the minister if that's okay, and then I'll sit down. I understand these are coming at him from many different directions, so if he can do the best he can with his officials to respond here. If that's not possible, then perhaps they can follow up with written responses. That would be terrific.

I'm looking here at page 37 of the ministry business plans. Goal 1 for the department is to facilitate sustainable industry growth, which I'm sure we'd all agree is very important, and I don't need to read what it means. But just down the page, on page 37, strategy 1.1 is to "encourage innovation and diversification by facilitating the development of new business models, value-added products and agricultural services that respond to market opportunities." Again, nobody is going to dispute that.

When we go to the budgeting, however, and look at the connection between the business goals and the resources allocated to them, it looks like total funding for industry development has dropped a fair bit, and I'd have to scramble here to find the page. But, for example, on page 59 now of the government estimates there are two

items there for industry development. One is under Expense, and we see a drop from last year to this year. Last year was \$93 million. This year is \$52 million. I'm on page 59 of the estimates.

Then down under Equipment/Inventory, under Industry Development, there are very significant swings over the last four years. There's a real surge from last year to this year under Equipment/Inventory Purchases. It goes from \$1.451 million up to \$2.116 million. Those are some significant shifts.

Has the minister been able to follow my kind of convoluted explanations?

**Mr. Groeneveld:** We're with you.

**Dr. Taft:** Okay. What I'm looking for, actually, is an explanation of: first of all, how do the budget numbers relate to the business goal, and then why are we seeing significant peaks and valleys in those line items? Do you want to respond now, or do you want a minute? I can carry on.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** I'll just take a minute. I quite enjoyed your opening comments, hon. member. I think everyone has a connection to farming, and though I tended to talk about your rural caucus kind of facetiously, I now have a new respect for your knowledge. If you're married to someone from a farm, you've probably got some of the best advice you could possibly get, if you listen to your wife by the way. I'm sure it's something that you've found, as I did myself, being a farmer and coming into this position, getting the ag portfolio, how diversified that portfolio or that ministry is. It's kind of overwhelming, and I'm sure, not being from the farm, that it's probably just that much more overwhelming, I would think.

**An Hon. Member:** Did you have to marry into it to become one, too?

**Mr. Groeneveld:** No, I didn't marry into it.

Anyway, to answer your question – apparently, we're coming up with some of the answers to that. Some of the funding from the APF, the agricultural policy framework, is in conjunction with the federal government. A lot of this is done in conjunction with federal funding. There's some greenhouse investment that comes along. I guess that's where the peaks and valleys come along because as we get these agreements put back together with the federal government for some of this funding – as some of them expire, it takes a while for them to renegotiate if we do at all.

The particular line that you're talking about for that occasion, you know, is the greenhouse plant research, I think probably, basically, more than the capital costs. Of course, you get into, you know, the plant research and how the dollars can fluctuate so quickly, I guess. The particular facility I'm talking about is the one that we now have at Brooks. So that's where that fluctuation comes from in that particular line.

**Dr. Taft:** Okay. Thank you. Just so I'm clear. I'm on page 59 of the estimates, and I mentioned the two lines. Line 4 under Expense, Industry Development, where there was a real peak last year and then a drop this year. The peak last year was \$93 million, and it drops back into more historical lines this year, \$52 million. Then in the same line number, number 4, under Equipment/Inventory Purchases, there are ups and downs there. So that, if I understand the minister's comments, relates to a facility in Brooks. You know what? Can you tell me about that facility in Brooks and what it does?

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Yes. Just to get it on the record, it is the facility

in Brooks that we're talking about. It is a joint facility that we have with the federal government. We may have to get you the exact plants that are in there.

**Dr. Taft:** Okay. Fine. I'll ask a few more questions. Sorry; for some reason I think of Brooks as having a big pheasant hatchery. I don't know if that's what this is or not or if my information is even correct but anyways. Okay. I was just looking for straightforward information on what that line and those millions of dollars related to.

If we move ahead just a page on the estimates and turn to page 61, there are 20 lines or so of budget in there totalling over half a billion dollars, so there are a lot of numbers on page 61. First of all, just working down for some detail on the budget on industry development on page 61, there's a fairly significant, in terms of percentage, increase in funding to program support. I notice as I go back that that number has gone up and down a bit over the years. Actually, it has mostly gone up. In '06-07 it was \$1.463 million. I'm on line 4.0.1 on page 61. Then we're looking at almost \$1.8 million last year and now \$2.4 million. So in two years it has gone from \$1.4 million to \$2.4 million. That's a pretty significant increase for program support. I'll give the minister and his staff a second, maybe, to think that one through.

The next line, 4.0.2, marketing council, really very stable. I think that's commendable.

3:40

Research funding. The forecast for last year looks like the department went over budget some on that one. The minister is trying to contain the budget there, I see, but I'm wondering why there was the budget overrun last year and why you think you're going to have more success staying on budget this year. That's under Agriculture Research, 4.0.3, on page 61.

Food processing development. We don't have any particular questions about that.

Bioindustrial technologies. The minister may well be aware from our comments generally that we're cautious in this caucus about biofuels and particularly about ethanol development from grain. We've been cautious about that for some time. I'm not sure if there's any of that in there or not or if it's completely different aspects of biotechnologies, but I would be interested in a little bit of explanation on the bioindustrial technologies.

Again, going down to agriculture industry development and diversification, 4.0.7. In the minister's opening comments I believe he spoke directly to the desire for diversification, but we see a fair drop there in 4.0.7, in agriculture industry development and diversification. In '06-07 it was \$10 million, it's forecast last year to be \$9.7 million, and the budget for this year is almost exactly \$7 million. So we're looking at a 30 per cent drop in the budget, which I'm not saying I have any problems with, but I would look for an explanation because the line is agriculture industry development and diversification, and I believe that is actually a department priority. Maybe the difference is being picked up by industry. Maybe a project has come to a conclusion. Maybe the federal government stepped in. For the purposes of public accountability that would be useful information.

I'm just going to carry it down three more lines here, Mr. Chairman, and then give the minister an opportunity to respond to this, under vote 4 on page 61. The Growth Strategy Secretariat in the last two years has had a very significant increase in budget, and I'm wondering what the minister is hoping to get out of that for such a significant increase.

Then any details that the minister might be able to provide on 4.0.9, infrastructure assistance for municipal waste water. Very interested in that. We're curious to know why that's in here and not

in the Infrastructure budget, where I think most waste water infrastructure funding would be, and if there's a specific project. Last year it looked like \$5 million was planned to be spent, nothing was spent, and \$5 million is back now on the books this year. What happened to that project? I'm assuming the \$5 million is tied to something very specific that didn't occur, and I'm sure the public would like to know the details of that.

Tossing the ball here to the minister and just asking for some explanations on all those lines under vote 4, from 4.0.1 through to 4.0.10 on page 61. Mr. Minister, thank you.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. You have some pretty tough questions in there, don't you? I appreciate that.

The research portion, of course, I think is probably where you started, and you see a slight decline for the estimate. Once again, it's the dedicated revenues we have with industry and the federal government that kind of make the variation work from year to year. The other part of it, I think, where you see some of that went down is that it's part of our dedicated effort to avoid some of the overlap we perhaps have on some of the research not only within our own department but some of the overlap that we see happening with Advanced Education and Sustainable Resource research. As you probably realize, agriculture and forestry are not necessarily tied that closely together, but they track on a very similar path of what's happening out there right now.

On the bioenergy part of it, you know, it's an interesting conversation that we always have with the bioenergy. Of course, you realize that bioenergy development has pretty much slid over to Energy, into that ministry. However, having said that, we're still a big part of the biofuels because agriculture supplies the feed for the biofuels.

On ethanol and your comments there. I think that we could probably spend a lot of time talking about ethanol and whether it really is green or whether it's not green. It depends on who you talk to. We talk a little bit and try and encourage Energy, where we can, to maybe tie in the ethanol industry with some of the biodigester, biogas facilities, to try to develop close to some of the large feedlots. It would certainly make it greener, I guess, because you could use the biogas to offset some of the costs of the process, and in the end you would also have a feedstock for the cattle industry. It doesn't work so good for the pork industry. I guess, you know, we could have I don't think an argument about that; I think it would just be an open discussion because some looks good, some doesn't.

Industry diversification. Once again, these ag opportunity fund programs are funded in partnership with industry, so there are some timing differences there as we go from year to year. Sometimes we can advance funding or reallocate funds as the case may be.

Infrastructure assistance for municipal waste water. I'd be very surprised if you hadn't picked up that all of a sudden there was nothing there for the one year. To be honest with you, the uptake of that program wasn't there last year, so we shifted that money within the department, with the blessing of the Treasury Board, to make up some of the shortfalls that some of the ag societies out there were feeling. That's where that money went. I think there are 285 small ag societies. This was not Calgary or Edmonton or the seven that are quite large and don't qualify as the small ones. We divided that funding and sent that funding out to the ag societies. Because of the age of when we kind of started the ag society thing – I wasn't here, but I suspect you were here when all of a sudden there were ag societies formed and monies made available to rural Alberta that way. We got everything from hockey arenas to rodeo grounds to curling rinks to community halls. That infrastructure is like everything else: when you get close to 30 years, it's in need of

repair. So we tried to help them along. We had to put it back in the budget. Our thoughts are, you know, that the municipal waste water is probably going to have to be a line item because there's going to be an uptake there.

Did I miss a glaring one there?

3:50

**Dr. Taft:** That's fine. You covered quite a few. Thank you. I appreciate the comments from the minister.

Since we're focusing on that particular page, page 61 of the estimates, I think we might as well just continue down there. I'm now under vote 5, environment and food safety; 5.0.1, program support. It's a pretty significant increase. That's almost a doubling over two years, from just over \$1.5 million to over \$2.8 million. Of course, I have no idea and anybody reading this document would have no idea what programs are being supported and how they're being supported. Some description on that would be good.

Food chain traceability, which is line 5.0.2. From what little I know, I think that's potentially a very, very important line in this budget. I'll be looking for the minister to confirm or correct my thinking and my speculations here. I'm going to guess that that's largely aimed at tracing livestock from beginning to end, from conception to the slaughterhouse and on through the food chain, so that we can more efficiently address issues like BSE or other food safety issues.

I'm also wondering if this isn't going to support efforts to niche market our agriculture products. I've often thought of other products. The one that comes to mind is coffee. You know, a couple of winters ago I spent a bit of time on the Kona coast of Hawaii. Everybody around the world knows Kona coffee, it seems, and they pay a premium for it. You go to these coffee farms in Hawaii. They're not very big. They're, like, 20 acres, each one – I'm not sure if the largest is even 100 acres – and there are not even very many of them. I don't know if their coffee is really that great or not, but somehow they've managed to stamp a brand on their coffee products and sell them at a premium around the world.

There are lots of examples of coffees or wines or other products. I know that the industry is hoping to achieve that kind of premium branding for Alberta's agriculture products. If the minister could confirm whether that food chain traceability expenditure, which in the overall scheme of things isn't all that much, is in support of that kind of initiative. Or am I completely off base here? I only have three words to go on. Any information or elaboration that the minister might be able to provide on that would be very helpful.

I'm wondering how this \$3.868 million fits into expenditures by partners like the federal government or industry. I know ranchers spend a lot of money on tagging and tracing individual animals. So I'd really appreciate some elaboration on that expenditure.

I'm going down a couple of lines. I'm just going to step over agriculture stewardship and go straight down to food safety, where we're seeing a very dramatic increase in the budget over the last two years, from \$18.8 million all the way up to \$32 million. Again, I don't think anybody's going to argue with spending money on food safety. It's undoubtedly a good expenditure. But that is a very rapid rate of increase in two years. Frankly, I'm sure the people of Alberta would like to know what's behind that rate of increase, what's the value we're getting in going from \$18.8 million to \$32 million in two years, and if that in any way, shape, or form relates to food chain traceability.

Is the minister prepared to make some comments on my questions, or should I just keep rolling along?

**Mr. Groeneveld:** I think we could have a little visit about what you've brought up.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** You've got some excellent questions there, and you're pretty much on the money on some of the comments that you've made.

I'll just talk a little bit about food traceability. The big one coming at us is certainly the livestock traceability from farm gate to the store shelves. But it's more than that. It's also the whole food industry. It doesn't matter whether it's perogies or whatever; we are now into that traceability. We're trying to even get to the farm. I think the potato people are doing this right now, showing the farm where the potatoes come from. So it's much more than just the livestock industry.

You know, it goes into your next comment about the food safety issue that we're facing right now. That's a big part of it. The CFIA, Canadian Food Inspection Agency, is coming up with new rules and regulations. Of course, we all know what happens. It drives up the end product. Now, I'm not criticizing the food safety part of it because that's just a given. It doesn't matter whether we go south of the border, east, west in Canada, food safety is the hot topic of the day right now, as well it should be. It's something we have to really work at.

In particular on the cattle side of it, the other part of it: you're probably familiar with the SRM, the removal right now of material out of a carcass. That's costing us. It's close to a \$40 million project, of which Alberta is picking up half of that cost, and that's going to continue.

Really, with the regulations that are out there, you hear the livestock, the whole food industry talking about the regulatory burden. I think the federal government is hearing about this big time. They're talking about it somewhat. It's very interesting with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which sets the parameters and the rules. When you kind of disagree with some of those and you try and see where you can go to make a difference or complain about them, no one really seems to know who controls the CFIA. They seem to be an entity of their own, which causes great consternation. They've also entered into the marketing of products. Maybe I'm getting off the subject just a little here. I don't think that's their job. It should be food safety and food safety only. That is one of the issues we've been raising with the federal government and with whoever will listen to us, to be quite honest with you.

The regulatory burden on the livestock industry. We'll just take cattle, for instance. I think it's 60-plus dollars per head. If we could reduce some of that or maybe, you know, rather than ad hoc programs, if the federal government could pick that up. It's GATT-green. That's one thing that would qualify. We wouldn't have to worry about countervail in going that route. That's one area we're pursuing. As you know, the livestock industry is in dire straits right now, but we have to be very careful so that we help them without having some kind of a countervail come back at us along the way.

4:00

**Dr. Taft:** The big increase from \$18 million to \$32 million in food safety: what are we getting for that big increase over two years? Line 5.0.4 on page 61.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** It's pretty much, I guess, the regulatory burden that we're facing with the technologies that are there now, the testing we have to do. I guess there's a cost to everything. These technologies are very expensive, and I sometimes wonder, when they're imposed on us – I know it's important – where we're driving ourselves to when we get there.

The other thing is that the disposal of these SRMs is costing us money right now. There are two places in Alberta, I think – is it

two? – that take the products that we don't know what to do with. It has to be rendered, and then it just goes into a landfill. There's a disposal on it, what they call a tipping fee, which takes us right back to what we talked about a little while ago. If we had some kind of biodigester, you know, that would handle that material, could we turn it into a profit? Maybe not, but maybe we might at least go to a break-even position, where it isn't costing us this vast amount that you're seeing on the board to deal with that.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Minister. I appreciate your comments.

There are one or two other specifics on page 61. Actually, I missed a very significant one up a little higher on the page, line 4.0.10, industry science and innovation. You don't see that kind of a line in a government budget too often. The '06-07 actual, zero; '07-08 budget, zero; '07-08 forecast, \$41 million; and then '08-09 estimate, zero. There was a big, unexpected expenditure of \$41 million last fiscal year. It's down to zero in this budget. It would be great to get an explanation of why that \$41 million was there last year and not this year and not two years ago. It wasn't budgeted last year either. I'd be very curious to know what that was.

I now look further down the page here. Under 6, Agriculture Insurance and Lending Assistance, lending assistance is considerably down in this budget from previous ones. It's actually down by more than half compared to two years ago. It's line 6.0.1. That kind of dramatic change makes one ask questions. What's going on there?

Crop insurance. I see that you've budgeted \$161 million this year for crop insurance. It looks like last year was a pretty good year for crop insurance – I'm guessing that that's why the forecast figure is considerably less than the budgeted figure – whereas two years ago there was a \$178 million expenditure. If the minister could confirm or correct my perspective that basically the budgeted amount this year of \$161 million for crop insurance is simply assuming that historic norms are going to be what they are and that last year just happened to be a good year. I could be wrong on that, but information from the minister on that would be very helpful.

I didn't quite catch it in detail – and I could dig it up elsewhere – but the minister I believe made reference to AgriStability funding in his opening comments. There's a bit of an unusual pattern in the budget, where last year there was \$139 million budgeted, way down from '06-07 but still a lot of money. It looks like that didn't get spent at all. Now, this year there's \$131 million. I'm assuming that there's some triggering from perhaps the federal government or from some other funding that's causing this erratic pattern in the budget. Again, I would appreciate the minister filling us in on that and explaining why you get this very odd pattern.

The same with the farm recovery plan. I'm going to guess that on lines 6.0.4 and 6.0.5 the patterns there sort of offset each other, one going dramatically down and one going dramatically up and then reversing themselves. If the minister is able to explain what's going on in 6.0.4, the AgriStability program, and 6.0.5, the farm recovery plan, that would be very, very helpful.

Again, just to review and give officials a moment to pull their information together. In vote 6 on page 61 there's been a significant drop in lending assistance funding over the last two years. Why? There's an unusual pattern with crop insurance from last year compared to this year. Why? On the AgriStability and farm recovery plan, if the minister could just explain what's going on there. It's got to be difficult to budget when you're clearly in a situation where something that I'm going to guess is completely out of your control is affecting well over a hundred million dollars in expenditures.

I hope the minister might be able to fill us in on those questions. Thank you.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You've got us scrambling here to keep them in order.

I think regarding 4.0.10, the fluctuation there, apparently in conjunction with the policy framework, which is a federal program, we did some prion research investment at that time. That was science and innovation funding, and it was one-time funding only on that one.

On to the next one. I think that you had a comment in there about the AFSC. Yes, we did have a good year last year. That's why that shows the way it does. I think you probably mentioned it, you know: are we going to go back to normal conditions out there? I guess we would automatically do that because we know we can't control the weather, particularly here in Alberta. The budget is \$161 million on the average for 6.0.2, and it's based on premiums, of course. The premiums this year are going to be much higher because of the fact that the commodities are higher, so it's going to cost more to insure the commodities. As I understand from talking to people, the uptake this year has been quite phenomenal. It probably set records for the amount of crop insurance that's going to be taken out, which is good. I'd certainly sooner see it go that way than the producers getting into a problem, where they're looking for some kind of ad hoc help. Having said that, these are crop insurance premiums.

**4:10**

Something that you're probably going to see in this House this fall is to get some livestock insurance going as well. I think that's a necessity. That's a route that we want to pursue as well because I think people can then take some of the risk out of what they're doing. The agriprograms that we have, the four we have going, are certainly there as a business risk management. They were never designed to make anyone profitable. I think people falsely read into it that they should probably never lose any money. It would be a wonderful world if we could do it that way, but it doesn't quite work that way.

The other issue is on some of the variations. I stand to be corrected on this. This is a federal-provincial program where the feds are 60 per cent into the program. We advise and try and work it as best we can for Alberta. Of course, we in Alberta are very, very fortunate because we have the funding. When we do get into a situation where we have to help, we sometimes do it on our own, so then we get fluctuations in there.

It's very interesting that when we go to the fed-prov and talk about this business risk management, they always ask Alberta to lead. In most cases we do, to the best of our ability. But then when we do lead and we come out with our own program, they're not very happy with us for doing that. That's just the way it works. Of course, you know, their producers aren't all that pleased when we come up with our own programs.

I suspect that somewhere along the way you're going to talk a little bit about CAIS or ask about CAIS. It would be a natural thing for you to do. Of course, it's now called AgriStability. I'm talking about Alberta taking the lead. CAIS is a program with the feds, and it's a program I've never liked, personally. As we move along and try and fix the program and keep adding to it, we inadvertently make the thing more complicated, to the point where only your accountant knows for sure what's kind of happening there.

We are on the road right now, and AFSC has developed a new plan. We've taken it to the feds and across Canada at this point. If I said to you or any other producer in here that there's a plan that's transparent enough that at the beginning of the year you could see what you were going to get at the end of the year and that you didn't

need an accountant and you didn't need last year's tax form, you know, I think you would find that most producers would probably embrace you with a big bear hug.

With the CAIS program, although it has helped an awful lot of people in the process, if you have enough lean years back to back, it's a self-defeating program because your reference margin keeps going down all the time. We've gotten to the point now that – I don't know what percentage – almost 40 per cent don't even qualify for the program anymore.

We're hoping to sell that to the federal government, and of course they're trying to push us back a little bit, like feds do. We're even going as far as trying to have a pilot project here in Alberta next year if we can. We're going to meet at the end of May and discuss that program and see if we can at least get a pilot project going. As I said, we've run it across the country, and Saskatchewan, particularly, has said: now, wait just a minute here; if you want to run a pilot project, we'd probably want to be part of the pilot project. So I'm hoping this thing will work with our legal beagles, as Luc would probably say, and the feds to make sure that this thing stays as green as we possibly can get it so we don't trigger some countervail duties in the process. I probably haven't answered some of your questions here.

The loan limits have gone up of course because the demand for loans is growing. My mandate from the Premier last year was to make more money available to the agriculture industry. About the only avenue I have to do that directly is through AFSC, and they have seen a significant increase in loan applications at this time, so we had to raise those limits. I think that last year alone we had – what? – \$280 million in lending. Of course, chartered banks are quite reluctant to take on agricultural loans; they feel they're quite high risk. AFSC takes some of them on themselves but in conjunction with the other banks at times. AFSC has an exceptionally great recovery rate. They've had, I think, less than 1 per cent loan defaults in that process, so obviously they're doing a pretty good job down there.

You know, it's an avenue for the producers to pursue. We have some very low interest rates for beginning farmer loans to try and encourage our young people to stay in the game until we get the game back on its feet again and they get started. We're continually monitoring these and trying to help these business suite programs that we have going out there. I think we're making headway, but, you know, we'd always like it to go faster, and we'd always like to cover people a little better insurance-wise or whatever the case may be. That's where we are focusing a lot of our efforts right now.

**The Chair:** Perfect timing; the first hour has passed.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

**Ms Notley:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to ask some questions of the minister. I, too, as many of the members on the other side pointed out, originate, these days anyway, from the heart of the city, so I'm reaching somewhat in terms of being able to come up with some helpful and/or insightful questions. [interjections] There you go.

Beyond that, in fact, notwithstanding that I represent an urban riding, I do actually have a remarkable number of farmers that still get in touch with me. Can't imagine why. So there are a few of those questions that I'm going to put forward. In particular, just to give you a heads-up – it probably won't surprise you a great deal – the minister himself was provided with some fairly involved briefing documents from the National Farmers Union over the course of the last few months, and as a result a lot of my questions are going to sort of be related to that in as organized a fashion as I can.

I'd like to go to – I think it's under section 2 in the estimates – Planning and Competitiveness, and I wanted to just start with item 2.0.3, which is the Alberta Grain Commission. My understanding is that – am I correct? You can just answer me when I finish this little excerpt. Am I correct that that is where the funding is for the government's involvement in the, you know, nonpromotion of the Canadian Wheat Board? Is that where that funding resides? If so, why is it that we needed to increase that amount of funding again? That's my first question, and I'll just make a couple of comments about that.

4:20

Our view is that we need to find a way to deal with pricing in the agriculture sector. The Canadian Wheat Board plays that role in many respects. Of course, we've been contacted by a number of farmers who appreciate the role that it plays in that respect.

I think that if the minister looks at the livestock industry – and he's made that point, that there are a number of problems in that industry and that it's very delicate and it's under a great deal of pressure right now. It seems to me that a big problem in that industry is that we have no floor price for beef or for pork. Instead, what we're dealing with is whatever price the two or three monopolized packing plants in the province choose to set it at. So I'm not entirely sure why it is, in terms of the Canadian Wheat Board, we would be trying to spend money on removing a mechanism through which there is a floor price set. Nonetheless, that's my comment on that and my question as to why that amount has gone up.

With respect to 2.0.4, economics and competitiveness, my question was just simply whether the agriculture workforce strategy – is that where we find that program? I'm wondering if I could hear from the minister what, in fact, the full amount is that's allotted to the agriculture workforce strategy and what exactly that money is used for. Obviously, the focus there is on recruitment and retention, and you've heard a lot from people on this side that, of course, one way to recruit and retain workers is to keep them uninjured and alive. Nonetheless, if I could find out a little bit more about what that particular line item is about.

I believe also that somewhere in the planning and competitiveness area also resides the money that's being spent by the ministry to promote freer trade and more globalized opportunities as it relates to the minister's announcement earlier this month about advocating with the WTO. I'd like to know where exactly that money is found and how much is spent on that and then, of course, just get on the record, not surprisingly, our party's concern around that approach as it appears in the strategic objectives of your business plan.

I'm sure you've run across this, but nonetheless I'll throw these statistics out – why not? – for the record in the debate today. If you look at some key statistics in the agriculture industry in Canada from 1988 to 2007 – of course, the relevance of those years is that 1988 was pre free trade, pre NAFTA, and pre World Trade Organization agreement on agriculture. If you look at that, you'll see that the victory of that initiative was that, without question, our exports have gone up. Without accounting for inflation, they've gone up three or four times. At the same time the realized net farm income across the country has come down by more than one-half. At the same time as well farm debt has doubled since then, the number of individual farmers in Canada has come down by about 15 to 20 per cent, and the number of young farmers who are farming has dropped since 1991 by over one-half.

So I would suggest that, generally speaking, resources that are devoted to the idea of promoting more globalization and freer trade may not be ones that are well used when it comes to promoting the best interests of farmers and the family farm in Alberta.

Anyway, those are my first comments. I look forward to hearing your response.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Some interesting questions, to be sure, I guess, the fact that you feel that you're having to stretch to talk about farming.

Farming is a pretty big industry, I'll tell you. It still is a lifestyle, you know, but it's gone beyond a lifestyle. It's a business, and it has to be a business or probably very few are going to survive. Certainly, some of them that have been there for generations and generations probably will. You know, you talk about less farmers, which certainly is happening, and young farmers, which is certainly a concern for us on this side of the House, as it is for any side of the House or any other part of Canada.

I guess I'd flinch a little if you are deriving most of your questions from what the NFU would come up with. I would think you would probably even agree with me that the NFU is farther to the left than even the NDP in Alberta is, so I would hope you would take that in thought when you ask some of your questions. Some of them are pretty tough for us on the prairies to adhere to, I guess. We just don't see it that way even in Manitoba, where they have an ND government.

To answer your questions, the Grains Institute certainly has a position on the Canadian Wheat Board, but that money that we've put out there does not come from the Grains Institute. We take advice from them on what their position is and discuss that with our own caucus, probably more so with the rural caucus, about where we'd like to be here in Alberta.

We'll talk about the Canadian Wheat Board a little bit. When 78 or 79 per cent of the people tell you they would like marketing choice, and they're not saying to get rid of the Wheat Board – we're talking about barley now, of course – I think probably we have to take a look at that and try and do what 79 per cent of our producers out there feel they'd like. I think that if you took that poll today, you'd find that that number would be higher yet, much higher because of the position that the Wheat Board has taken, which is virtually going to drive our brewing and malting industry right out of business here in Canada. That's why I think, as we speak, there's so much concern out there from the barley growers of western Canada, particularly in Alberta and Saskatchewan, about losing that segment of the industry.

The maltsters have told us directly that they are not going to put one more penny of capital money into Canada as long as they have to buy their barley from the Canadian Wheat Board, which they have to by law right now. These are the issues that we're facing. It's a matter of saving that industry as well. But we're still not saying: get rid of the Wheat Board. We're just saying: give us the marketing choice to sell our grain to who we want to sell it to.

When we talk about floor price, basically what you have to do to get a floor price is form a marketing board. That's about the only way that would work. As you know, particularly in the beef and pork sector we export 60 per cent, I think, of our product. To get to a floor price and go to a marketing board, then we have to shut the border so we can control what goes out or control what goes in.

4:30

I'm not sure who in this day and age would like to go out there and confront the producer and say: I'm sorry; we have to cut down 60 per cent, so you're out of business. Whether we would try and buy them out or whatever the case may be, I don't know. But we just can't go that route as an exporting province; at least I don't think



we can. It would be mayhem. We're just an exporting province for our product.

When I talk about exporting or what we're doing, I concern myself – and you're going the opposite direction than me – with export markets. I'm very concerned how we market our commodities here in Canada even. I don't think we're very good. This is where we really have to work. We have to find new markets. We always will have the American market, which is the biggest market. It always will be the biggest market, but if it's our only market, we're at their whim, where they'll use us when they want to use us, but they have no qualms about shutting that border for protectionist reasons or for other reasons. So to say that our money isn't very well spent trying to pursue offshore markets particularly, I would even confine that a little more. I think we do a poor marketing job right here in Canada. I don't think we do a very good job.

If country of origin labelling comes along, you would be surprised how much American beef and pork you're buying over the store counters today. It's quite amazing. Why is that, and why aren't we competitive with our own neighbours? Part of that's our own problem. We talked a little bit with the hon. member of the opposition there, you know, about some of the regulatory burdens that we've placed upon ourselves.

The workforce strategy. That's a big part of our industry development sector. We certainly are working in partnership with the Employment and Immigration minister to develop some strategies to bring in new labour. At any rate, I don't know how you really feel about that. I know we get criticized for bringing people in as well. But, you know, we have such a labour shortage in this country. It affects all sectors, particularly agriculture and the slaughter plants and the feedlots. They can't compete with the going wage out there, so we have some real concerns about that.

Farm safety. Certainly, I expected it to come up. I expected it to come up before it has now. I think, probably, it's pretty well documented what our position on this side of the House is. If I thought legislating farm safety would save lives, I would be the first person to do it. As I've said, I've got kids; I've got grandkids out there. But, you know, there just isn't an ask for it. I don't know if you managed to go to the red meat deal last night. People there say: please, please, don't be going for legislation. They brought it up. I suspect my colleagues who were there last night were hearing that same story. We just have to stay out there. We have to educate, and we have to train to the best of our ability. We've been doing that, but can we do better? Sure, we can probably do better through the 4-H, through the ag societies, ag service boards. They're all out there promoting the safety issues. So we're not totally ignoring it.

**The Chair:** Now I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes. Thank you very much. [interjection] The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona wants a confirmation, Mr. Chairman. Was that her 20 minutes?

**Ms Notley:** I don't believe that was 20 minutes, Mr. Chairman. My timer still has three minutes left.

**The Chair:** You wanted 20 minutes?

**Ms Notley:** Absolutely.

**The Chair:** You didn't say that at the beginning.

**Ms Notley:** No. That was what was understood from the House leaders' agreement, the 20 minutes back and forth.

**The Chair:** Okay. You have three minutes left.

**Ms Notley:** Thank you. Just to follow up on those questions. I'm not surprised at all that at your event last night you didn't have a lot of the people in the red meat industry, who would actually have been putting on that event, advocating for worker health and safety laws. I'm pretty sure very few of their employees were at that event, so it's no surprise. And it's no surprise that people who function in an employment relationship are going to do whatever they can to avoid regulation. But it's not a question of whether it's a surprise or not a surprise; it's a question of: what's the right thing to do?

You've just indicated that the agriculture workforce strategy is about bringing in new workers and workers from other countries. I would just make the obvious point that when you bring in a bunch of Mexican workers, the odds are really good that they have not been exposed to 4-H safety programs. So someone is going to have to do better to make sure that they're kept alive. It, frankly, is quite disturbing that the government is the only government in the country that does not see that.

Just a couple more points really quickly because I'm getting to the end of my time. I'm just wondering if there's any place in the budget where the ministry is looking at dealing with the issue of urban sprawl and saving farmland. That's one thing.

The second thing is with respect to developing local marketing initiatives to market food grown in Alberta to people in Alberta as part of the whole environmental movement and not driving very far, all that kind of stuff, the hundred mile diet, just whatever efforts are happening within the agriculture ministry with respect to that.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would suspect that most of the people at the red meat reception last night that we talked to don't have employees, for one thing. Most of them are independent operators, and they're strictly family farms. [A timer sounded] I take it that's her bell, is it?

**The Chair:** No. You have 40 seconds.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Oh, boy. Okay. The land-use framework, of course, is in here. We're part of that. We've got a lot of staff involved. You're absolutely right: growing Alberta is something that we – and I couldn't tell you where it's at in our budget, but it is a huge, growing industry here in Alberta. That's one thing we really want to cultivate as well. I certainly agree with you on that one.

**The Chair:** The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

**Dr. Taft:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have one question about the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. I'm wondering if that corporation has any relationship with ATB, if there's any coordinating, if there are any policies or strategies at all that coordinate ATB with AFSC. Of course, we all know the wonderful heritage of the ATB going back an entire lifetime now, really, and the important role ATB plays particularly in small, small centres in Alberta and how ATB offices are part of the core of services that can keep a small town going. I'm wondering if there's any relationship. If there is, what's the nature of the relationship between the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation and ATB?

4:40

I'm going to take up one other set of questions. I don't want to change the tone of this very constructive conversation, but my

questions are about farm safety. The minister and I have had some heated exchanges in question period over that. I thought they were important exchanges. Maybe I got overheated, but in my mind, in all our minds these are very important issues.

We weren't able to find in the budget a line item specific to money directed to farm safety programs. It may be in here, and I'd like to see it pointed out if it is. How much exactly does go in this budget towards farm safety programs? The minister has stressed how important education is. I don't dispute that education is very important. I just think it needs to be accompanied by legislation.

In any case, if the minister were able to then address those two questions. One is any relation between the AFSC and ATB, and the other: how much is spent on farm safety programs in this budget?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. ATB. You ask about if there was any relationship between the two. Basically, no, there isn't. AFSC, although it's under Agriculture, also actually works at arm's length. They have the board that controls what they do. For me to fulfill the Premier's mandate, I guess I was a little bit surprised that the only avenue I had was AFSC. I thought probably ATB, but they're pretty much like a regular lending bank. I suspect AFSC sends people over there like any chartered bank as well in conjunction with some stuff, but there's no direct working about that.

I guess the other thing to fill that mandate, you know, we're looking for other opportunities for people to get into the business of farms. Perhaps credit unions might be an option. The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House quite often brings that up, but we haven't done anything in particular about that yet.

Farm safety. I do have an exact answer for you on that one because I would really have been surprised if that hadn't come up. Last year our direct expenditures were \$288,708.49. Direct allocations to farms are hard to quantify because of the way we do it through the other various organizations. I think that maybe you were absent when I talked a little bit about 4-H and ag societies and ag service awards and, indeed, the school programs that we work through. You know, for us to come up with that exact figure is exactly what we put out. There are more costs to it, no doubt, that are picked up by some of the groups or societies that I've mentioned. I suspect that answers those questions. I suspect there could be more coming.

**The Chair:** Hon. Leader of the Opposition, have you finished your time?

**Dr. Taft:** The 10-minute exchange, do you mean? Yes, I'm okay.

**The Chair:** Okay.

I will recognize the next member on my list, the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

**Mr. Lund:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to compliment the minister and his department on the fine work they're doing. There are so many people in that department, and they have tremendous support for the minister. His position on farm safety is right on. If legislation is in fact the answer, then I don't know why we have so many accidents in industry. Education is the way to go.

I really appreciate, too, Mr. Minister, your stand on the Canadian Wheat Board. We're not talking about getting rid of it; we're simply giving farmers choice. The issue that you mentioned about the

maltsters is a good one because I know they have commented that if – if – they could buy directly and contract directly from the farmer without going through the Canadian Wheat Board, they would in fact spend a lot of money on research. We have to all remember that they have very specialized markets. That means specialized crops. They would certainly spend the money to make sure that happens because it's in their own best interest. So we've got to continue to work on that one.

We have a number of very good rural programs, and I would just ask the minister a bit about a couple of the flagship programs. I see that we do have money in for the ag service boards and the ag societies, albeit it's a pretty flat line. Particularly, I'm looking at page 60, line 3.0.5, the ag service boards, \$10,600,000. I guess my only comment there would be that since we changed the way a lot of things are delivered that used to go through the ag offices we had around the province, of course, the role of the ag service boards has increased to some extent, although I know there's more being done electronically all the time. I just point that issue out.

The ag societies. I realize that the \$13,670,000 was, I understand, a one-time top-up, so we're back to the \$8.67 million. Now, they do a lot of very good things, so if there's an opportunity to make some adjustments there, again, I would really encourage that.

The other, though, that I want to mention – and I'm not sure what it's funded through – is the 4-H program because that's a tremendous program. Of course, it's not just in Alberta; it's an international program. I find that it does a lot of good in our communities. I'm hearing from particularly our beef club – I don't know if it's regional – that there was some talk about making some major changes, and it had to do with some pooling of the funds. Apparently, there was some talk about, in fact, marketing the animals through one or both of the major packing plants. I would urge that we don't go down that road. In Rocky Mountain House, anyway, and in Eckville they have tremendous sales. It's the oil and gas industry, contractors, businesspeople that come out and support those sales, and it's really working well.

4:50

Page 61, line 6.0.3, wildlife damage. Mr. Minister, I would hope that you would do a bit of arm-twisting with the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development because the problem with elk particularly is getting extremely frustrating for many of us, especially along the eastern slopes and, I suspect, even in your own constituency. They're the ones that do the most damage. There are people that have quite a lot of damage from deer. I know that at home, at my farm, moose can be quite a problem, although they're not as wasteful. Elk are the ones that cause huge problems. As a matter of fact, I know some folks that were trying to go into swath grazing for their livestock and had to quit because the elk would always beat the cattle to it. When you think about it, the reason that they do so well on agricultural land is because they have no natural predators. If a wolf dare wander into the area; it's a dead wolf, a good wolf real quick. That's what takes care of that problem.

One of the things that I think is really important is that somehow we get more farmers taking crop insurance. I know that you've made some changes now that, in fact, it's going to be on an individual basis. I think that is just an excellent move. I know that in our own situation we've been in crop insurance all along, but up until this particular year we never collected on it. It was really frustrating that the reason we weren't is because the risk management areas were so large. When you really looked at who was taking it, it usually wasn't the farmers that produced the good crops; it was the poorer ones. Of course, that keeps the average down. The only reason we stayed in the program was because of the hail rider that is reasonably priced.

I look at your goal 5, “effective risk management.” The annual crops target is only 65 per cent participation and perennials is 25 per cent. I would hope that those numbers would pick up. That’s really quite a low number. If there were more taking crop insurance, I would hope that would lessen the danger of having to have ad hoc programs to cover off.

The take-up on the AgriStability program – of course, this is a new one – 70, 75 per cent. In the CAIS program was it that high? With the new program are we going to see an increase in participation? I would like to get some answers to that.

There’s another area that I am curious about. On page 70 of your estimates you’ve got reinsurance at \$7,666,000. In ’07-08 it was \$14 million. What exactly is that? Is that the overinsurance, or where is that coming from? Then we have this crop reinsurance fund of Canada for Alberta. That reminded me of something. I’m aware that we felt we had a credit in that fund back a number of years ago. I don’t remember the total dollars, but it was quite substantial. For some silly reason \$70 million is what keeps bouncing around in my mind. I wonder, did we ever collect on any of that? Of course, there was a Liberal federal government at the time, and somehow they decided that it was their money, not ours, even though it came from here. I wonder if we ever did collect on it. But are we back into that, or are we buying reinsurance on the market? I know that the premiums got very high because of our big loss and collecting on that reinsurance that we bought from the private sector.

With those comments that would be all that I have in mind right now. Thanks.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Some good observations and comments from the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House. Gosh, he could be sitting across the way there. He’s doing a better job than is coming from over there, but I don’t know if that’s palatable or not.

I appreciate some of the comments that you’ve made, particularly when we talk about the Canadian Wheat Board and the barley and marketing choice because you’re absolutely right. The maltsters are not, as I said, into the capital building right now. They’ve dropped research big time. I think we all know the cost of research in developing these varieties that we need. You know, some of our best research is done by private companies, and that it going to really hurt because it’s become so expensive that in Alberta we don’t do much malt research. But we’re partnering with Saskatchewan and Manitoba so that we’re not having so much overlap anymore with research, which is good. It’s a concern because keeping up is tough enough without losing our research aspect of it.

The ag service boards. Certainly, some interesting comments there, you know, because they’re doing a great job with weed control and pest management and whatnot. They’re an integral part and probably the last people we have on the front between the department and the producers out there right now.

It’s interesting that you didn’t talk about the district offices, or DAs. I just happened to hear my deputy and the president of AFSC talking a little bit about that, that maybe through some of the AFSC offices and the ag service board offices we could get a little more focus out there into rural Alberta. Probably the largest complaint I hear is that we don’t have enough representation out there right now and that they really miss those district offices we closed. I totally understand where you’re coming from on that. As you mentioned, the ag service boards that we have do a commendable job, if we can keep them funded.

The ag societies. Of course, as we talked about, we gave them the one-time funding to get them back on track. Also, I think probably we’re going to undertake in the department to kind of look at the ag societies out there right now. I’m talking about the 285 small ones again. Is that the right number? Have we got too many? Do we not have enough? Can some of them be consolidated? Some of them are pretty close together in small towns. I’ve only got three ag societies in my constituency myself, but my understanding is that there are constituencies that have up to 20 ag societies in one constituency. I understand that the constituencies, of course, are much bigger than we have. You know, they have to be funded properly. What is the fair funding? We have the seven major ones that will receive additional funding. If you look closely, particularly around the cities, there are some pretty big ag societies that we still call small ag societies. I think we have to look at that whole program and the funding and how we do that, so I appreciate that you brought that up.

5:00

4-H program. Absolutely. It’s a program that I’m hoping will go on forever because it’s a wonderful program, not only for rural Alberta but for the different clubs. Of course, we used to be mostly grain clubs and beef clubs, and now we’ve got a 4-H club for virtually everything. The public speaking aspect of the 4-H is just second to none. I always cringe a little bit when I’m at a function and the provincial leader or even the local leader speaks before me. I feel very, very threatened by their ability to speak the way they do. It’s just great.

I haven’t heard anything, to be honest with you, about the changes in the livestock, probably steers in this case, going straight to the processors. I think that would be a real mistake. I agree with you. In most cases they go out there and promote their animals and sell their animals. They find buyers for their own animals. You know, if we could all market our animals like that, we wouldn’t have the problems we have out there right now. It’s pretty amazing what they come up with.

Wildlife damage. I think it’s something that we struggle with. It works pretty well, and producers are very appreciative of what we’ve got, but I know that AFSC struggles with the different categories. I think swath grazing probably is one of them that we haven’t dealt with at this stage of the game. You’re right that if we don’t, we will not have swath grazing in those areas. In my area you probably wouldn’t think that is a problem with my constituency. I think everyone is familiar with Spruce Meadows, just outside of Calgary. They have a problem right next door, a herd of 1,500 elk in that area. Of course with all the acreages and whatnot, it’s pretty hard. They don’t go back to the foothills. They stay there year-round.

I know sustainable resources managed to get a hunt in there last year, by permit, of course, and well supervised. The percentage of elk they took out of there was dismal. They didn’t gain hardly a thing. By the time the calving season is over, they’re probably still way behind. We really do have a problem with the herds, particularly elk, and I’m hearing it from all over Alberta. In northern Alberta, of course, we have bear problems, and on and on it goes. Most of that can be covered through the AgriStability program, and I think a lot of it is. Pretty much any farm commodity project is covered under that. There’s the odd one that isn’t. But we certainly know it’s a problem.

Reinsurance. Now you’ve kind of got me. I’m going to have to read off the paper here because I’m not too darned familiar with that one myself. I see here that it’s extra insurance to reduce the risk in the event of a major disaster, and it’s reduced this year to support

other priorities. I guess we get a little braver and do that every once in a while. For the crop reinsurance fund the AFSC and the producers contributed, and it was fully drawn down with the drought in 2001-02. The formula is based on the contribution process, obviously, so I understand it's pretty much fully funded again now.

Now, they didn't write me an answer to your other question about the Liberal government of the day that came into power, but I kind of had a quick nod from my helper behind me here. I may not be so far off the mark of what happened there.

**The Chair:** I would like to recognize the hon. Government House Leader.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If I can beg the Chair's indulgence on a matter of procedure. I understand that we started approximately 17 minutes late and, therefore, potentially need a further 17 minutes in this Committee of Supply. It would be my intention, with the indulgence of the House, to work with other House leaders as to when we might schedule that 17 minutes, probably at the end of another Committee of Supply in an evening. Or with their indulgence we may see whether that 17 minutes might be attached to some other Committee of Supply. That option might be available. I'll work that out with the House leaders, and we'll advise the House in due course.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I would now like to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a lot of questions this afternoon regarding Agriculture and Rural Development's budget. The first one we had a little discussion on the other night, and I didn't get a satisfactory answer. We've had this sort of turf war between respective ministries in the past regarding the \$100 million rural development fund. It left agriculture. It was in employment and immigration and industry. Now it's back in agriculture. How much did that cabinet wrangling cost taxpayers? That would be my first question regarding the \$100 million rural development fund.

I have questions in regard to the farm fuel benefit program. The hon. minister was talking about people doing a better job. Well, it would be my suggestion, hon. minister of agriculture, that you could do a lot better job with this particular program that's costing the taxpayers above and beyond \$100 million annually in its true program streams. We all know from your own audits that, certainly, it hasn't worked. You told us last year in this House that there were desk audits, whatever they are, being done. My first question in regard to the farm fuel benefit program would be: how many auditors are now working on that program to ensure that only those that are eligible are receiving benefits? We could have significant cost savings here and use those cost savings to improve the amount of benefit we can provide to real farmers, farmers that meet the criteria. More farmers contacting us – there are a lot, by the way, on this side of the House – indicates to me their greater dissatisfaction in the government's delivery of their programs.

The Auditor General going back a number of years, 2005-06, had some key recommendations. He wanted to see an improvement in the Alberta farm fuel benefit program by verifying information on completed program application forms and requiring applicants to regularly renew their registration in the program. Now, as I said earlier, this program offers fuel to farmers. It shouldn't provide fuel at subsidized rates to commercial truckers or to acreage owners, but apparently, according to your own documents, it does. You've done nothing about it, absolutely nothing, and I think it's shameful. Can

the minister tell us what the department has done to address the concerns of the Auditor General? Can the minister also confirm that all the 60,000 individuals – in fact, it's gone up. If you look in detail through the last annual report of the department, you'll see that there's even another thousand-plus individuals registered in that.

**5:10**

Now, Stats Canada information that was made public last year indicates that there are only 49,431 farms in Alberta, and that's unfortunately going down. Farms are getting bigger, and the number of farms is actually going down. There are another 9,700-plus of these farms making less than \$10,000 per year, therefore making them ineligible for the program, yet we see 60,000-plus individuals registered. Can the minister account for this difference? If there is a problem with ineligible registrants, will he please clean up the program once and for all and increase the benefits for real farmers, who are actually eligible and need the money to fuel their operations?

If we look at the department's own information, some farmers with transport trucks may be involved in other trucking that is not related to their own farm and is not related to their own farm using low-cost fuel. Does the department have any idea how many of these licences may be used in this manner?

Also, does the department have any idea how many acreage owners are becoming farmers to take advantage of the farm fuel benefit? Your own report on the audit indicates that this is an issue. If there's any sort of policing of this program at all, surely you can provide an answer to this.

It's also noted – and I'm going to read this, Mr. Chairman, for the benefit of the hon. minister. I'm going to quote from the executive summary of a document from the department: this option would also eliminate the abuse of the program by some farmers using an excessive amount of marked fuel for personal on-road consumption. End of quote. Now, does the hon. minister have any idea how much marked fuel is being used from this program in that way?

I also have questions regarding grants. There are a lot of grants for agriculture in the blue books, in the public accounts documents. How does the department track that these grants are being spent for the intended purpose for which the money was issued? Is there a maximum for grants per farm? Are grants distributed on a competitive basis, or does everyone who applies receive one? My last question on the grants in the public accounts would be: how are grants awarded?

Certainly, I have a few more questions. I have a lot of questions and very little time, unfortunately. I think we should go back to the fiscal plan for a few minutes, Mr. Chairman. On page 44 of the fiscal plan I see the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation loan limits. The corporation's per person loan limit will increase from \$2 million to \$5 million, and the overall borrowing limit for the corporation has been increased from \$1.2 billion to \$1.4 billion. Can the minister explain to the House, please, why it is necessary to increase this loan limit? When we're talking about the corporation's per person loan limit, does that indicate that a husband and a wife who are operating a farm together are both eligible for up to \$5 million, or would that be a deemed or a listed corporation? If I could have the rationale behind that, I would be very grateful.

Also, I see under Expense by Function on page 68 of the fiscal plan that agriculture, resource management, and economic development is getting an increase of over \$100 million from the budget in 2007-08 through to the 2008-09 estimates. I know what the forecast was in 2007-08; it was tweaked a little bit. How is this money being spent, and how is it being allocated between resource management, economic development, and agriculture?

Mr. Chairman, also for the hon. minister: on page 77, under

Disaster/Emergency Assistance in 2006-07 there was \$230 million from Agriculture and Rural Development. Now, we don't have any anticipated disasters here, which I hope the hon. minister is right. Is that coming from another pool of cash from the President of the Treasury Board?

Those are my questions on the fiscal plan.

Now, I also have some questions in regard to reduced tillage linkages. Reduced tillage linkage has a proven track record of delivering strong agronomic information and promoting the integration of sustainable agricultural production systems on Alberta farms. Both the provincial and federal funding support, as I understand it, has ceased, and without it reduced tillage linkages will be forced to cut back at the end of 2008 and shut down operations at the end of the summer in 2009. I'm asking the hon. minister why support for the establishment of sustainable funding for this organization is not going ahead at this time. Seventy-three per cent of Alberta agricultural producers and close to 50 per cent of annually seeded acres are not yet capturing the benefits of direct seeding and reduced tillage systems.

Now, there are benefits, and I'm not going to bore the hon. minister with the details of direct seeding and reduced tillage systems. It does make a positive contribution in four ways: agricultural competitiveness, environmental enhancements, risk management, and climate influence. If I could at this time get the rationale behind this funding indecision, I would be very grateful.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Hon. minister, you have six minutes and 50 seconds.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** How many?

**The Chair:** Six minutes and 50 seconds.

5:20

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Oh, boy. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Interesting questions from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I see his trust of the ag sector has not improved over the year. In fact, it would appear that he mistrusts us more all the time. But I'll answer your questions to the best of my ability in that time.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Point of order.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** The cost of the rural development fund moving back and forth: it cost absolutely nothing to the taxpayer, and I don't see why the member would think it should. In fact, I think that \$38 million was released from the fund last year, so we just carry on from where it was.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Yes.

**The Chair:** There's a point of order raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

#### Point of Order Factual Accuracy

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you. I rise under 23(h), (i), and (j), Mr. Chairman. I would ask that the minister retract that statement and apologize to me. I have never said inside or outside this House that I do not trust the department or its officials, and I'm asking him to withdraw that comment.

Thank you.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Mr. Chairman, if the hon. member was offended by my interpretation of trust, sure, I'll apologize to him in the interests of time because I don't want this to go on for too many days, which they're already trying to make us do. Are we okay? Okay. The intent is obvious.

#### Debate Continued

**Mr. Groeneveld:** Mr. Chairman, farmers basically are very honest people. I understand his concerns about the farm fuel program. His knowledge is no better this year than it was last year. I had the Attorney General in my office last week, and we discussed the farm fuel program. He's quite comfortable with where we went last year. Last year through in-house auditing 1,180 participants were cancelled. And you're absolutely right: there were 1,895 added.

Now, you can't assume that all acreage owners are using marked fuel. In fact, I would be really surprised that many acreage owners would have bulk fuel on their property. I'd be quite amazed that they would. However, they still would have to fall within the parameters of what qualifies for the program. There's no exception to that.

We're doing a renewal of the program this year. We've started that as we speak. Our staff as well as the fuel tax auditors from Alberta Finance are involved in the review. It's an ongoing process, and it will be completed this year. It's as simple as that.

Farm trucks. You bet there are farm trucks that haul grain and also move commercial commodities. But heaven help them if they get caught because it's not legal to haul a commercial commodity with a farm truck. They're checked constantly at the weigh scales, so that, as well, doesn't wash with me.

For some of the issues you bring up I just would like a little explanation.

**The Chair:** Hon. minister, there's a point of clarification from the member.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Yes. In the minister's remarks he talked about the Attorney General being in his office. Did he mean the Auditor General, or is he doing some work with Justice to charge a few folks? What did you mean when you said Attorney General?

**Mr. Groeneveld:** I'm sorry. The Auditor General. I'm sorry.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** I apologize if that offended you as well.

**Mr. MacDonald:** No. It didn't offend me. Just get your facts straight.

**Mr. Groeneveld:** All right. Let's keep the facts straight. I could go to jail if I kept the facts straight here I think, but I won't go there.

I would be very interested if the hon. member would tell us how we would police some of these issues that he keeps bringing up. Would we put more sheriffs on the road? Would we have inspectors? Where? On the farm? Maybe sometime rather than criticize, something constructive would be great. Maybe we could use some of your thoughts in the process. However, I'd better move on. I think I only had six minutes. What's the next one?

Grants. Certainly, there are some grants for farmers out there, as there are for virtually every industry that operates in Alberta. All grant applicants sign an agreement and are required to report on how

they're used. If they get funded certainly depends on the program criteria. I think we'd better move along very quickly here.

Loan limits. Certainly, there are per entity limits. Loans are fully secured. We have a great track record, as I said before. [Mr. Groeneveld's speaking time expired] I think that's as far as I'm going to get.

**The Chair:** I hate to interrupt the hon. minister, but pursuant to Standing Order 63, which requires that the committees of the whole Assembly rise and report prior to the time of adjournment, I would now like to invite the officials to leave the Assembly so the committee may rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

**The Deputy Speaker:** I'd call on the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

**Mr. Lund:** Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development relating to the 2008-09 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2009, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

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

**Hon. Members:** Concur.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Opposed? So ordered.

Now I'll just take a moment to remind all hon. members here to please clear your desks because the Youth Parliament will be using the Chamber this weekend.

[At 5:30 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]









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