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The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, March 5, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We give thanks for Your abundant blessings to our province and ourselves. We ask for guidance and the will to follow it. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of 17 students from Minchau school in Edmonton-Mill Woods. The group is led by their teachers, Ms Linda Manson and Miss Joan Newman, together with a parent helper, Mr. Dan Rea. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the House my very first constituent guest from Calgary-Mackay. Mr. Danny Ng is a second-generation Albertan Canadian. An engineer by training, he is now an entrepreneur focusing on building trade between Canada, Alberta and his family's ancestral village, Xiaolan, Guangdong, China. Mr. Danny Ng is in Edmonton to attend the Chamber of Commerce import-export seminar, and he is the mastermind behind the Xiaolan-Alberta International Business Conference to be held on March 18. Mr. Ng, please stand and receive the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my privilege and pleasure today to introduce to you and through you two constituents from the riding of West Yellowhead, in particular the town of Edson, Mrs. Ruth Martin Williams and Ms Joan Olson. Mrs. Ruth Martin Williams is the executive director of Reflections. Professionally she has collaborated with stakeholders from the provincial, municipal, and territorial governments and colleges and universities in developing and delivering educational programs. She was the assistant games manager for the 2006 West Yellowhead Winter Games involving over 2,000 athletes and 3,000 volunteers.

Ms Joan Olson has lived in Edson for 32 years, and she and her husband, Bob, have raised three sons and have been very involved in the community. She has volunteered with the Glenwood community club for 21 years. She is a founding member with the Edson and District Recycling Society since 1990 and has been with Reflections since its inception in 2001. She has been for the last three years and still is the president of Reflections. I will be talking more about Reflections in my member's statement.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly a group from my constituency. They are a group from a truly outstanding facility, Canterbury Court and Manor. Like true pioneers they didn't let something as small as a March snowstorm stop them from coming out. I would like to introduce them briefly by name. You know, as I give your name, why don't you stand up: Mrs. Wildgoose, Mrs. Grisdale, Mrs. Patrick, Mrs. McConnell, Mrs. Anderson, Mrs. Chostner, Mrs. Crossman, Mrs. Hussey, Mr. and Mrs. McCannel, Mrs. Maltby, Mrs. Norton, Mrs. Stenson, Mrs. DraBot, Mr. and Mrs. Ray Pierzchajlo, and they are accompanied by two wonderful supporters, Greg Lyderik and Donna Zipse. Please give them a warm welcome.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, have a group of guests here today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House, who braved the elements to come up from Calgary today to make an appearance on behalf of a cause that they believe in very deeply. My guests are all connected in one way or another to cancer patients who are being treated or who will be treated with the drug Avastin. I will be talking a little bit more about that in a couple of minutes in a private member's statement. But let me introduce my guests to you now. As I call out your names, if you would stand up, please, and remain standing: Michelle Graham, Nel Christoffersen, Jeanne DeVetten, Kan Pattar, Satbir Cheema, Lori Creech, Monica Istvan, Jeremy Judge, Andie Christenhusz, Tom Henderson, Debbie Woods, and Judy Dunbar. Many more are with them here in spirit today. If everybody would give them, please, the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have an anniversary today. On this day 17 years ago, in March of 1992, the hon. Member for Little Bow was elected to this Assembly in a by-election for the first time.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Reflections Empowering People to Succeed

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Reflections Empowering People to Succeed was incorporated as a society on April 9, 2002. Reflections' objective was to develop and promote a day program for adults with mental illness and other disabilities, including brain injuries. Since their incorporation Reflections has had a major impact on improving the lives of their members, which in turn has had a positive impact on the community of Edson. Through Reflections' employment program 20 members who were unemployed, some for as long as 25 years, are now in the workforce, increasing their economic participation and financial independence in Alberta's economy. One client went from being unemployed for years to being a supervisor due to the support of Reflections' employment assistance program.

Reflections' programs work as relapse preventive therapy. The success of these programs has impacted families as there are families who still have their family members, including fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, uncles and aunts, because individuals received support when considering suicide.

Reflections' nutrition program provides 200 meals monthly to members living with the reality of hunger. The nutrition program includes active participation by members in all aspects of nutrition: menu planning, shopping, and food preparation.

Reflections encourages its members to support the communities that support them. Members give back to the community of Edson by volunteering, including the 2006 Winter Games in West Yellowhead, literacy tutors, the food bank, and extended care facilities. Reflections does not just want to improve their members' lives; they want to reduce society's stigma and discrimination surrounding mental illness. Reflections' community education programs work to reduce stigma and discrimination. By doing so, barriers to treatment are removed and paths to recovery are opened for Reflections members.

Reflections' work is critical. National statistics show that 20 per cent of Canadians live with mental illness. Support for Reflections is support for individuals, for the community, and for the province of Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. member, did you want your guests to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly?

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my excitement to introduce them, I forgot to ask my guests, Mrs. Ruth Martin Williams and Ms Joan Olson, to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Dr. Brendan Croskery

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 14 the Calgary board of education held a retirement celebration for Dr. Brendan Croskery highlighting his 10 years of service to students in Calgary and his exceptional leadership record as the chief superintendent for the Calgary board of education. Dr. Croskery came onboard with the CBE in 1998 and became the acting chief superintendent in 2001. By 2002 Brendan became the permanent chief superintendent. There is little doubt that at this time the Calgary board of education was seeking to regain the public trust of Calgary citizens.

Brendan was the right man for the job. His focus on student learning outcomes and providing strong support for a governance model shows in the outstanding academic success of Calgary students. CBE students' results are higher than the provincial average on almost every measure. Mr. Speaker, this is an outstanding accomplishment considering that the CBE is Alberta's largest school district and would be considered a mean setter. All students succeeded under Dr. Croskery's tenure. The CBE educates 45 per cent of Alberta's ESL students; they scored above the provincial average on 95 per cent of the measures, again a statistical phenomenon. Also, special education students in the CBE exceeded the provincial average on 100 per cent of the special education measures.

This past year the CBE celebrated its seventh consecutive year of improving the overall learning outcomes of its students. This is unprecedented for any school jurisdiction in the history of Alberta, and it all happened under the leadership and direction of Dr. Croskery.

On a personal note, I've come to know Brendan as a kind, caring, and compassionate individual whose intellectual capacity far exceeds anyone I've had the pleasure of working with. I believe Dr. Croskery plans to stay in Calgary. I hope that students in this province benefit from his future line of work either as a consultant or an academic.

Mr. Speaker, I hope all members of this Legislature can join me

in recognizing Dr. Croskery's exemplary service provided to the students of this province through his 10 years with the CBE.

Thank you.

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

1:40

Drug Coverage for Avastin

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The continuing miracle of the last hundred years or so has been that we have beaten so many of the diseases that used to kill us. Many we have cured outright. Most of the rest we've learned how to manage. So it is that now almost everyone is touched by or will know loved ones who are touched by cancer in their lifetimes. And not all cancers are the same. Not all cancer patients have the same experience when fighting the same kind of cancer. There's really nothing fair about cancer.

Take colorectal cancer, for instance. It is one of the most curable cancers, if I can use that word, if it's detected early, which is why this province actively promotes colorectal cancer screening for people over 50. If you haven't been screened, talk to your doctor about getting screened. When colon cancer is not caught in time, it can be deadly. It kills close to 600 Albertans a year.

There is a relatively new and promising treatment called Avastin approved by Health Canada some three and a half to four years ago for use in the treatment of advanced colorectal cancer and recently some forms of breast cancer and lung cancer. Avastin works by cutting off the blood flow to tumours, slowing their growth and sometimes shrinking them to the point where a previously inoperable tumour can be removed surgically or sometimes to the point where they disappear altogether. Like I said, it doesn't work equally well for every patient because there's nothing fair about cancer.

My message today, however, is about bringing fairness to cancer treatment. An advanced colorectal cancer patient in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and several other provinces will receive Avastin for free because it's covered by those provinces' drug plans. The same patient in Alberta will pay \$2,000 every other week because in this province Avastin is not covered.

Some of my guests in the gallery today have responded very, very well to this drug. The husband of one of my guests has had seven treatments. It cost him \$14,000 to get the tumours to the stage where they can be operated on, and shortly he will undergo surgery for that. For others the bill can be thousands and thousands of dollars higher. It causes people to burn through their life savings, lose their homes, cash in their RRSPs. That's the most unfair thing of all.

Mr. Speaker, someone in the fight of their lives, the fight for their lives, should not have to worry about financial ruin for their families. It is time Alberta funded Avastin.

Thank you.

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

International Women's Day

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a privilege to stand today and note that Sunday, March 8, is International Women's Day. International Women's Day is recognized by citizens around the world to celebrate past progress toward equality for women, reflect on the challenges women continue to face, and consider what action we can take in the future to ensure girls and women achieve equality in all aspects of their lives.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta women contribute to every part of our society. We are honoured and proud to have countless exceptional women leaders acting as role models for our province's girls and

women, including Alberta's Famous Five but also the incredible team of cabinet ministers and MLAs from all parties serving this province. These are, indeed, remarkable women.

As we know, women have made great strides in today's world, but we also know they may still face challenges in many parts of their lives. This is why we must continue to take action on women's issues so that our daughters and granddaughters will not have to face these same obstacles. From working to prevent family violence to providing scholarships for students whose studies contribute to the advancement of women, our government has many programs and services that support women. On behalf of all women in Alberta, thank you.

I rise today not only to recognize this day and the importance of strong and supported women to our province but to encourage all Albertans, women and men, girls and boys, to honour International Women's Day and reflect on the steps they can take to support women's equality each and every day and to thank those past and present for their contributions.

Thank you.

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

Seniors' Pharmaceutical Plan

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Seniors from all across Alberta have been sharing their concerns with me about this government's proposed changes to our health care system, in particular the Alberta pharmaceutical strategy. They're telling me how the Conservative government is not doing enough to meet the health concerns of today's seniors. Proposed changes to the seniors' pharmaceutical plan will significantly increase the amount that middle-income seniors have to pay out of pocket for the medications they require.

Let's be very clear about this, Mr. Speaker. It is yet another attack on universal health care by this government, and we intend to oppose it. We need to reduce health care costs for all seniors, not just some seniors. Placing a greater financial load on our seniors is simply not the answer.

Seniors shaped this province, yet it was the seniors who sacrificed during the cuts of the 1990s, and it is again the seniors who are being told to shoulder an unfair portion of the burden today. Mr. Speaker, enough is enough. This is not what Albertans voted for.

I am tremendously proud that my party brought medicare to Canada under Tommy Douglas. This was a true victory for Canadians. This system, which is one of our nation's proudest, is under constant pressure from private interests, and the current government cannot be trusted to defend it. Mr. Speaker, I can assure you and all Albertans, both young and old, that when it comes to the strong delivery of health care in the province, the Alberta NDP will continue the hard-fought battle of a visionary leader and ensure that health care remains as it should, universal and public.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie

Dr. Brown: Merci, M. le Président. Je me lève en Chambre aujourd'hui pour le lancement des Rendez-vous de la Francophonie albertaine, une célébration nationale de deux semaines soulignant la culture, la langue, et le patrimoine français, qui se tient du 6 au 22 mars. Ici en Alberta les communautés françaises lanceront des célébrations avec des cérémonies de lever des drapeaux partout dans la province, suivies de deux semaines de festivités pour tous les

albertains. Il s'agit d'une magnifique occasion pour nous tous de célébrer notre diversité et notre patrimoine unique.

La Francophonie albertaine, une des plus importante et ayant la plus grande croissance au Canada, joue un rôle important dans l'abilité de notre province à créer des communautés accueillantes et inclusives. Les centres de carrières et d'emploi francophones ainsi que les centres d'accueil et d'intégration pour les nouveaux arrivants et les immigrants débordent d'activités. Un joueur clé dans ces réussites est le Secrétariat francophone du gouvernement de l'Alberta. Le secrétariat joue un rôle important en développant des partenariats positifs qui renforcent le bien-être et l'autonomie des franco-albertains.

M. le Président, je remercie les membres de cette Chambre pour leur appui continue, et je les invite à profiter des célébrations qui soulignent notre histoire unique et nos riches traditions et culture.

[Translation] Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in the Assembly today to kick off Alberta's Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie, a national two-week celebration of French culture, language, and history that runs from March 6 to March 22. Here in Alberta francophone communities will start celebrations with flag-raising ceremonies across the province, followed by two weeks of celebrations for Albertans. This is a great opportunity to celebrate our diversity and our unique heritage.

Alberta's Francophonie, one of the largest and fastest growing in Canada, plays a key role in the province's ability to build welcoming and inclusive communities. Francophone career and employment centres as well as francophone settlement and integration services for newcomers and immigrants are bustling with activity. A key player in this success has been the government of Alberta's Francophone Secretariat. The secretariat plays an important role in building successful partnerships to enhance the well-being and self-reliance of French-speaking Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, I thank members of this House for their continued support and invite them to take part in the two-week celebrations that salute our unique history and our rich traditions and culture. [As submitted]

Presenting Petitions

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, as chair of the Standing Committee on Private Bills I beg leave to present the following petitions that have been received for private bills under Standing Order 98(2).

- (1) the petition of Beverly Anne Cormier for the Beverly Anne Cormier Adoption Termination Act;
- (2) the petition of W. John Brennan, board chair of Caritas Health Group for the Caritas Health Group Statutes Amendment Act, 2009; and
- (3) the petition of Les Filles de la Sagesse for the Les Filles de la Sagesse Act Repeal Act.

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 203

Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009.

Bill 203 would define province-wide standards for municipal election finance and disclosure requirements, allowing for greater

transparency and ultimately enhancing the integrity of the democratic process in Alberta.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a first time]

1:50 Oral Question Period

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

Health System Restructuring

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister of health needs to answer for the situation that's facing Edmonton and other Alberta emergency rooms: unacceptable wait times, more complications, and preventable deaths as admitted by some emergency physicians. To the minister: will the minister provide the Assembly with the exact number of people who have died while waiting for treatment in Alberta's emergency rooms in 2008?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, it has not been drawn to my attention that any have. You know – and I'll table five copies of this – as is so often typical of headline writers and those who do their research through the headlines, we only take certain parts of a story. We're referring, I presume, to this morning's local newspaper, where a local doctor was making some comments. What the Leader of the Opposition did not refer to is that this same doctor says that the Edmonton region of Alberta Health Services has done a good job in trying to reduce waiting lines, that triage liaison doctors so on and so forth, that these policies are evidence that Alberta Health Services "is trying and is really dedicated to make our emergency care in the city tenable."

The Speaker: Later in the Routine there's an opportunity to table such documents.

The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been 10 months since the minister's rushed restructuring of Alberta's health care system. The experiments continue. When can Albertans expect to see improved quality, access, and basic lifesaving services?

Mr. Liepert: I'll go on, Mr. Speaker, to quote the particular gentleman that the Leader of the Opposition has done his research on, who says, "The problem is that there is no easy solution." However, we have brought forward a number of initiatives, including our continuing care strategy, our pharmaceutical strategy, our Vision 2020, all measures that we brought forward late last year that as we implement into the system will go a long way.

Ms Blakeman: Point of order.

Mr. Liepert: I should say that on April 1 we will be incorporating the EMS services into our health care system, so we are taking a number of actions to make access more efficient.

The Speaker: There's a point of order that will be dealt with at the end of the Routine.

The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What specific plans does the minister have to reduce the number of people in acute-care beds so that people in the emergency room can be transferred to other areas, freeing up treatment centres for emergencies?

Mr. Liepert: A good question, Mr. Speaker, because that was the essence of our continuing care strategy that we brought forward last fall. I hope that we are successful through our budgeting process to ensure that we have additional funds available so that we can have more provision of home care in seniors' homes, in lodges, in areas where they don't have to be in acute care or they don't actually have to be in long-term care if we can provide the quality of health care that they require. That, to me, is the more immediate solution that we need to try and get to.

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

Obstetric Services in Rural Alberta

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, the response that the health minister provided yesterday to the concerned citizens of Banff and to all Albertans clearly showed a lack of understanding and sensitivity to the frustration over what is happening to their most cherished health system, including obstetric services, in rural Alberta. To the minister: how has the minister allowed the steady decline in obstetric services in the face of increasing demand since 2000?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we have not done that. In fact, we probably lead the country in terms of the provision of services. We took a very significant step several months ago when we announced that starting with this budget year, we are going to publicly fund midwifery services. All of these initiatives go exactly to address what the leader is raising.

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, obstetric services have gone down from over 80 to the mid-60s in the last six years.

My next question is for the Premier. What is the Premier doing to ensure that citizens in rural communities will have access to good-quality obstetric services?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the good news. The province of Alberta is one of few provinces in Canada that has seen this unbelievable increase in births, which speaks well for the confidence that people are showing in this great province. I believe the increase in the number of births has far exceeded those of the last record, that was set way back in 1983. As a result it has put some additional pressure on neonatal and all of the other obstetric services. As I said before, even in these economic times we're going to continue our education programs for nurses and doctors to make sure that we have the necessary people to meet the demand.

Dr. Swann: My final question, again to the minister of health. February 18 in this House the minister compared our health system model to the American auto industry business model and the need for change. Is this decision on Banff obstetric care a business decision?

Mr. Liepert: Well, just to be clear, Mr. Speaker, I was not comparing it to the American auto business. I was comparing it to the Canadian auto business and said at that time that one of the issues I believe is predominant in some of these situations is that the fundamental business model is wrong and that if you keep throwing money at the wrong model, you're going to continue to get the same results. I believe that in health care we need to ensure that we have the right model. Just simply throwing more money at it is not going to solve the problem.

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

Drug Coverage for Avastin

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. On November 25 of last year, when I asked the minister to consider funding the cancer drug Avastin, the minister indicated the drug status at that time; that is, that a couple of years earlier the appropriate committee of physicians had reviewed Avastin and concluded that it should not be covered under the drug plan. However, since then, Avastin has gone through all but the final step of a reconsideration process, and it is my understanding that the minister now has on his desk or will have in a few days a recommendation to fund Avastin. My question is: will the minister agree to fund Avastin?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, a little bit of history. Avastin was first introduced to the marketplace in 2005, and at that time the Alberta Cancer Board's Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee considered whether it should be on the drug benefit list or not. It did not recommend inclusion on the drug benefit list, but during the ensuing couple of years Avastin has been prescribed by physicians in a number of instances. Last November, as the member raises, I did promise to have the committee re-evaluate in light of the new evidence whether we should be considering it. The committee did recommend in January of this year to the Alberta Health Services Board that they consider the recommendation, and I can say that this morning I received a letter from the Alberta Health Services Board recommending that they fund the drug. As of April 1, with the new budget year, Avastin will be added to the drug benefit list.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my guests in the gallery and many other Albertans I wish to thank the minister. I have no further questions.

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

Protection of Children in Care

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Children and Youth Services. Two years ago a boy in the Alberta foster care system was abused and ultimately died. Last year the minister told us that her hand-picked review board concluded that the foster care system in Alberta was working well. However, information I've recently received suggests that a recent incident suggests otherwise. Will the Minister of Children and Youth Services confirm that a young child very recently apprehended in southern Alberta just sustained life-threatening injuries while in foster care?

Ms Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, I'm not exactly sure what the member is speaking to. It is true that we did have that tragic incident that you referred to not too long ago, but I can tell you that we have 2,300 foster families in this province doing a wonderful, wonderful job. While those tragic events are exceptionally tragic – one death is one too many – I can say that after the incident that you referred to, we did do the foster care review. It determined that we do have a good system and that we can make it better, and we are doing that.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, last year the minister promised after the last fatality that she would immediately implement the panel's recommendations to end the practice of overcrowding foster homes.

It appears as though this promise was broken. Will the minister admit that this very recent tragedy occurred in a government-approved foster home that had been allowed to exceed the maximum number of children in care once again?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The foster care review last year, as I said, was a very extensive review, had internal and external experts. They did say that the foster care system was good, but they also came out with eight very good recommendations, which we adopted. All are to be fully implemented by the end of this spring. As well, internally we're taking a look at and have started a review on our kinship care.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, this doesn't relate to kinship care. This is a different incident.

This tragedy is further evidence that serious steps need to be taken immediately to protect kids in government care. Last year's public relations exercise that masqueraded as a review of the system just didn't cut it. To the Premier: will the Premier today announce a full public inquiry into Alberta's foster system and commit to implementing its recommendations?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the minister responsible is very passionate with respect to her responsibility for the children under care of this government and has done an excellent job. She'll continue to do that on behalf of those children. Some have been abandoned by their families and are in the government's care. She'll continue to help those families and individuals to the best of her ability and the ability of this government. We take child care very seriously and will continue to do that as well.

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

Highway Safety and Maintenance

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Along with many of my constituents I travelled the Queen Elizabeth II highway this morning from Leduc to Edmonton, and there was not a snowplow in sight in the midst of the snowstorm this morning. To the Minister of Transportation: where is the highway maintenance when we need it the most?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm very, very surprised that this hon. member didn't see a snowplow this morning on his way. I can tell you that the weather has been very, very bad out there this morning, causing havoc on the roads. I made a call myself to my department this morning to find out where our plows were. They looked it up on the GPS screen, and we had over 500 plows on the roads this morning in this province. There were 25 of those plows in the Leduc area and another 35 between Red Deer and Leduc. By GPS today we can tell, even when there's an accident – we can trace back – exactly what time a plow was in that exact position.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly hope they weren't camouflaged in white because they were certainly hard to find.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents have consistently told me that over the years the maintenance standards have dropped significantly. Could the minister tell us why?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that our government, our Transportation department, sets the standards of maintenance in this province. I've been told that from way, way back when, when the government was doing the maintenance themselves, our standards are exactly the same or better. We have inspectors that go out and make sure that these contractors do the work. I'll tell you what. I'm sure this hon. member has done business at some time in his life. These contractors don't get paid unless they go to work. They're businessmen, and they go to work so that they get paid.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. Mr. Minister, I was constantly passed on my way this morning by many drivers who must have thought this was a summer's day. Are there any enforceable laws that would slow these careless drivers down?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely. In fact, I want to take this opportunity to remind drivers in our province that the posted speed limits are the maximum. When we have conditions such as today, with icy roads and poor visibility, drivers who put themselves and others at risk can be charged with a number of offences, including driving with undue care and attention. We do have the laws in place, and we do enforce them.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon was just snowed by the Minister of Transportation.

Off-road Vehicles in Natural Areas

Mr. Chase: One fantastic aspect of Alberta that is sometimes lost in the oil sands debate is the pristine beauty of many natural areas that Albertans cherish and enjoy. Last month the government was talking about expanding off-highway vehicle access into natural areas, further disrupting environmental integrity. To the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation: is it the policy of your ministry to expand trail systems to allow for more off-highway vehicle access to natural areas as a way to increase tourism in this province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Ady: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do have a trails committee, that's looking at this issue right now. The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater is currently chairing that committee, both for myself and the hon. Minister of SRD, to ensure that we have the right answers to these questions. We are having more and more vehicles. In fact, they will tell you that the province of Alberta sells more of those off-road vehicles than in all of North America. We need a management plan in place for all of these vehicles, and the trails committee will come back and report to me.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. The start of that plan should be compulsory helmets for ATV operators.

Given that in a 2008 survey of Albertans' priorities for provincial parks 41 per cent of Albertans were opposed to increased support for

off-road vehicle use compared to only 17.3 per cent for increased support, can the minister explain why she is striking a committee to expand the off-highway trail network in direct opposition to what your survey has indicated?

Mrs. Ady: Well, that is a good question as well. As I just stated, more and more of these vehicles are out there in the province. We want to make sure that there's good management of those, or they will go to places that we don't want them to. We want to make sure that there are trails there so that they stay on those, that they use our environment appropriately, so we will continue to look at this issue.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Hopefully, part of the looking at the issue is the hiring of more conservation officers to enforce those trails.

Your survey results are clear: 61.3 per cent of Albertans want more land left undisturbed compared to 3.6 per cent wanting less. Why is the minister ignoring what Albertans want, thereby ignoring what the majority of Albertans have clearly told you to do? How successful is this ATV lobby?

Mrs. Ady: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would say that you're right: people do like to. I would say that this government has been well at work when it comes to expanding more parks. If you were to look at our track record, you know, just in the last year with the River Valley Alliance, we're looking at Lois Hole park. We've also just brought in the Doc Seaman piece – that was a wonderful thing – the OH Ranch. We are at work on this, we're doing more, and we intend to continue this work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

East Calgary Transportation Utility Corridors

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary parks foundation is looking to make pathways and green space along the transportation and utility corridor in east Calgary. The first leg of this project runs behind the community of Monterey Park, which I proudly represent. I have met with the community, and the community and myself strongly support this project. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. What is the process for determining what transportation utility corridor land can be used for establishing pathways and green space?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is an application process. It's outlined in the transportation utility corridor policy, and it's posted on Alberta Infrastructure's website. Essentially, the proponent submits an application for ministerial consent to my department. The department will review it, speak with the city involved, and we'll determine if it would qualify as a pathway.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I strongly support this project. Does the minister support the proposed plan to utilize the undeveloped transportation utility corridor land in east Calgary to construct recreational pathways?

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, I very much support that as a use where it's appropriate. We are in meetings now with city parks. The east

Calgary greenway project is on the table now, and we're considering the request, taking it through the proper steps. If it does in fact qualify, we certainly will support that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll take that as a yes.

My final question to the same minister: once Alberta Infrastructure hands land over for this use, who takes care of the maintenance of that particular property?

Mr. Hayden: I think I should clarify that if it does qualify and it's safe enough to do it, of course, it will happen, and then it would require a licensing agreement. Generally speaking, in this particular case the licensing agreement would be with the city of Calgary, and they would be the ones that would enforce it.

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

2:10

Blue Cross Coverage

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Corporate filings from Syncrude shareholders indicate that this government's royalty deal will transfer billions in public wealth to an already profitable oil sands company. At the same time, the government is jacking up costs that many families and seniors must pay for medically necessary drugs. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Does the minister support government priorities that grant huge benefits to a highly profitable oil sands company while forcing ordinary Albertans to pay so much more for medically necessary drugs?

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, if you wish.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we have said right from day one that we are going to deliver a more efficient, effective health care system, and we plan to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Corporate filings show that the royalty deal this government struck with Syncrude is worth an additional 12 per cent in net, after-tax profits to shareholders. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: why doesn't this government increase Blue Cross benefits for families and seniors by a similar 12 per cent, just like it increased the after-tax profits for Syncrude shareholders?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, there has been no increase in Blue Cross for seniors, and what the member is probably confused about is that, as I outlined to his colleague to the left there the other day in the House, the premiums that we charge in our nongroup plan have fallen behind. They have not increased since 1993. What we are proposing are increases that will bring it in line with those plans that are offered by employers both in the private and public sectors.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's clearly stated in a government news release of December 8, 2008, that this government will drive Blue Cross rates up to the same level as private insurance. The winners in this, of course, are the private insurance companies, and the losers are the regular Albertans, like those in the gallery today. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: why doesn't this

government stand up for ordinary Albertans instead of selling them out to private insurance?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we stand up for ordinary Albertans every day in this House, and I think it was proven just over a year ago on March 3.

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

Gang Violence

Mr. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today in concert with the many Albertans who are concerned about gang violence in this province. This week Calgary police revealed details of a drug bust where they seized the same type of body armour used by police along with other police paraphernalia. My question is to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. What is this minister doing to keep body armour out of the hands of criminals in this province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is indeed a very disturbing trend. There's absolutely no legitimate reason for anybody outside of law enforcement to have body armour. I've contacted the federal Minister of Public Safety and the federal Justice minister, urging them to take action on this issue. I've requested that the federal government consider tabling amendments to the Criminal Code that would make body armour a restricted device that can only be sold, purchased, and possessed in accordance with provincial law or regulations. The changes I am proposing will give police another tool in their ongoing efforts to disrupt and dismantle gangs and organized crime in Alberta and make our communities safer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what is being done to stop gangs from other jurisdictions, British Columbia or otherwise, from doing their dirty business in this province?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, again, this province has moved on the gang issue by providing more police in Alberta and recently announced four integrated gang-enforcement units. I can assure you that police in Alberta are working closely with police in other jurisdictions to fight gang crime. One method is by sharing gang intelligence. In fact, last week several gang members were arrested in Vancouver in connection with a murder investigation. I can tell you that the Edmonton and Calgary police services along with members of the integrated response to organized crime unit in Alberta worked with police in British Columbia to make those arrests. It's through this type of co-operation and innovation that police will continue to reduce gang crime and the illegal drug trade in our province.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Calgary Airport Tunnel

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is not regarding the highway today. It is about my constituents telling me very clearly that they want this government to ensure a prosperous future

for their local area. An infrastructure system is needed that will be able to handle the growth of this rapidly expanding community, and a key part is a tunnel under the new runway at the Calgary airport. That is to provide better access from the east of the city. My questions are to the Minister of Transportation. What is the status of this project?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't tell the hon. member the status of that project because it's not a government of Alberta project. That's a municipal issue; it's a local municipal road. I don't know where the city of Calgary is on whether or not they're going to fund that tunnel.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is that there have been some meetings going on with the minister and the city of Calgary. This is the fastest growing part of Calgary, and it needs proper infrastructure planning. Does this government support the building of this tunnel, and will this minister be advocating strongly to get the funding needed for this project?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're speaking of an awful lot of money here to build this tunnel. We have a couple of different issues, and I mentioned it to the aldermen that I met with from Calgary. First of all, the road where they want that tunnel is a dangerous-goods road, which is Barlow Trail. As you know, for safety reasons alone we cannot have dangerous goods in a tunnel, so the whole plan would have to be revised. You'd have to change that from dangerous goods. Also, I'm not a hundred per cent sure yet how happy the airport authority is with a runway over and above a tunnel.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're talking about infrastructure funding again. Does this minister agree that this is clearly a viable stimulus project that will create much-needed jobs and one that is a necessity to ensure the current and future prosperity of my constituents and all Albertans?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, we just announced this week a huge project in southeast Calgary. The ring road in the southeast, Stoney Trail, will create lots of jobs. We plan on doing a lot of other necessary highway work in the province, which again will create jobs. We really do want to make sure that your constituents are looked after and we have economic growth that goes on in Calgary.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Long-term Care

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This government's failure to create long-term beds has created a backlog in hospitals so horrific that patients are dying in waiting rooms. Emergency departments are overcrowded because patients can't get a regular hospital bed because too many are occupied by long-term patients. Instead of creating the long-term care beds it promised, that would ease the emergency room congestion, this government has created a hospital backlog that is costing lives. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: will you admit that your failure to keep your promise to add 600 new long-term beds has created a backlog that is costing lives in emergency rooms?

Mr. Liepert: No, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the minister isn't being straight with Albertans by suggesting that people who have long-term requirements can be housed in independent living options or in their own apartments. The fact is that there are far more people who have been assessed as requiring long-term care in Alberta than there are beds. That is creating a backlog in hospitals, and people are dying in waiting rooms. The choice the minister is really offering to Albertans who need long-term care is to get the level of care they need or not. To the minister: why won't you admit that the backlog in Alberta emergency rooms is a direct result of your failure to create new long-term beds?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, the congestion in emergency is far greater than just the inability to move patients into beds. It is one of the reasons; there's no doubt about that. We are working diligently to try to resolve that. I believe also that on April 1, when EMS becomes aligned with health care and not municipal transportation services, that will go a long way towards easing some of that burden. There's a whole bunch of other initiatives that we are going to be pursuing that eventually we want to have access to in emergency.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'll conclude with a simple question for the minister. How many Albertans have been assessed as requiring long-term care beds, how many long-term care beds are there, and how many are required in order to make up that difference?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that if he wants an answer to that question, he should put it on the Order Paper.

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

Edmonton Crime Rate

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. *Maclean's* magazine ranks Edmonton as one of the most dangerous cities to live in Canada. The province's capital is number 5 on the list and is number 2 in the number of homicides. My first question is for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. Year after year Edmonton ranks high on this type of list. When are we going to see Edmonton rank high on safe communities lists?

Mr. Lindsay: Well, Mr. Speaker, we want all Albertans to live in communities where they can safely live, work, and raise their families. I want to point out that the rankings in this particular *Maclean's* article were based on 2007 figures. Since then we have added significant resources to reduce crime and support safe communities. Over the past year, for example, we have added more than 300 police positions in Alberta, including 70 front-line officers in Edmonton, plus an additional 24-member integrated gang enforcement unit and a SCAN unit to target property used for illegal activity. We're also putting 20 more probation officers in Edmonton.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplement to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General: can the minister tell us what her department has done to make Edmonton a safer city?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We believe in the government that the best way for us to deal with this issue in Edmonton is to work in partnership with the police, in partnership with the Solicitor General, and to make sure that police and Crown prosecutors are working very closely together to track prolific offenders and to ensure that once the police have been able to arrest people, we're able to track them through the system and make sure that they're held on bail.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Final supplement to the Minister of Justice again: what is her department doing in the long term to ensure that Edmontonians can raise their families in a safe and secure community?

The Speaker: The Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Part of what we have to do under safe communities is not just talk about crime and touching people once they've been impacted by crime but deal with work that communities are doing in partnership with the police and on their own to build institutions and structures and confidence in their own communities. The safe communities innovation fund, which the Premier announced last fall, will be putting \$60 million into those sorts of activities. We'll be announcing the first of those results in about two months, and those will continue over the next three years.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater.

Extending Municipal Council Terms of Office

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Municipal Affairs recently voiced his disinterest in extending the terms of municipal councillors from three years to four years. I don't believe I'm doing this, but I'm actually going to quote from the media, that I have a great deal of respect for. This is from the *Edmonton Journal*, where he was quoted to say that he hadn't heard an overwhelming push, desire, or communication in that regard. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: why does the minister consider the AUMA representing 99 per cent of Alberta municipalities an underwhelming representation? What number would be necessary?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to add clarity to the question, not prior to the last election but prior to the election before that we did a general review of the Election Act. We did not do that this term. What we did do is send letters to the AAMD and C and the AUMA and contacted both the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary asking them what they felt were the main concerns. Residency identity is one that came up, and I feel that the area that the hon. member is talking about needs to have further consultation.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that. Perhaps we could move back a little bit more to where I thought I was aiming. Municipalities fight

every day to make sure that every dollar counts, and extending council terms would save considerable taxpayer money in these cash-strapped times. Would the minister consider this a money-saving opportunity?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, this would be a dramatic change in the Election Act for Albertans and for Alberta municipalities. We have not done a full consultation on that proposal. Now, the AUMA did bring that forward. Would it be a cost savings? It may be a cost savings, but would it be a focus or a direction that the citizens of this province want to see?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2005 – and I think you've alluded to this: the Local Authorities Election Act review – actually, your colleagues had recommended extended terms of office. I'm wondering if there has been further work done and if you've gone outside of the Local Authorities Election Act review looking for extra input because it doesn't seem to jibe.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't see where we have gone past the extensive review that we did in 2005. I would also like to say that our intentions are to do a review after the next municipal election, and that could be on the agenda at that time, but it needs to have a full consultation after the next election if the people so desire.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Recycling Industry

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of my constituents who has been in the business of scrap metal recycling for more than 13 years regularly employs from five to 35 employees, but because of a serious downturn in the recycling market he's had to lay everybody off. My question is for the Minister of Environment. There is strong evidence from right across the province suggesting that Alberta's recycling market is showing extreme volatility. What is the province doing to address this?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, let me say that I think we should all empathize with both the employer and the employees in this situation, but I think what it shows is that even the recycling market is not immune from the economic downturn. In December of this year Alberta Environment brought all of the various stakeholders together to discuss this very issue. I'm somewhat disappointed to report that the consensus of that group at that time was that this industry is extremely volatile and there really are no short-term solutions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry to hear that that meeting could not provide any short-term solutions. What does the future of recycling look like for my constituents and others involved in the recycling industry across the province?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, if there are no short-term solutions, hopefully we need to find some longer term solutions. There still is a market for high-quality material, albeit that it's a commodity market when you're talking in this case about scrap metal. I understand that there's a problem in the steel industry right now, and the two of them are coinciding. Consumers really have a role to

support recycled products, products that are manufactured from recycled material. We have regulated programs, and I think that in the long term we need to incorporate both sides into those programs, not only the collections side but also the recycling side.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: with this downturn in the recycling market what are you doing to ensure that more waste is not going into landfills?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that I need not remind all members that when it comes to recycling, that's only one of the three Rs. There's also reuse and reduce. We can have significant emphasis on reduction in landfills by concentrating not only on recycling, which is laudable, but also a commitment to reuse through recyclable bags and simply making a point of reducing. We can do that through some of the work that we're doing on demolition and waste material, for example.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Workers' Compensation Board Investments

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The market value of the investment portfolio of the WCB was worth \$6.6 billion at December 2007. My first question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. What is that WCB investment worth now?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, I don't have those figures at my fingertips. I would indicate to the member asking the question that I could get those numbers and share that with him.

2:30

Mr. MacDonald: You should have those numbers, but I'd be grateful if I could have them.

Again to the same minister: why did the WCB hire new external investment managers in 2007 when this government was planning to implement for all investment pools AIMCo, or the Alberta Investment Management Corporation?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, the WCB operates very, very independently of a lot of the other activities that this particular province is involved with. I can say that WCB has done over the last few years a tremendous job in making sure that they're solvent, that they can meet their future obligations. If we look at what happened in other provinces and where our WCB is, I'm very, very pleased to see that the WCB has enough resources to meet all of their future commitments.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister: we've got to be aware that the WCB reports to this hon. minister and that the WCB's activities are included in the annual report from that department.

My third question is: will employers' WCB premiums or will workers' benefits go up or down as a result of this latest investment strategy by the WCB?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question, and I think the answer is both. Generally speaking, the benefits with

better financial positions accrue to both the employers and the employees themselves. Every year there are rebates that are given back to those employers that have shown to have done a great job, and they are rewarded with a refund on their cost. As well, the WCB is mandated to look at increasing benefits, at least to offset inflation costs.

Fire Safety Standards for Secondary Suites

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, regulations enacted this January provided new fire code standards for existing suites, including the requirement for adequately sized windows and interconnected smoke alarms. A recent fire in an illegal secondary suite in Calgary caused the untimely death of three tenants. The tragic event highlighted the plight of many people living in substandard and illegal secondary suites across the province. My questions are for the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Given the changes to the Alberta fire code which came into effect, can the minister explain what prosecution measures are in place to make sure that existing suites comply with all of the fire code regulations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Violations of the safety codes are taken very seriously by our ministry. If the suites do not meet the safety standards, the owner can be charged under the Safety Codes Act or under the Public Health Act. The penalties are serious for violating the Safety Codes Act: \$15,000 for a first offence or six months in jail or doubling that for the second time. This enforcement provision demonstrates our commitment to keeping Albertans safe.

Dr. Brown: Strong provincial building and fire codes aren't of much use if they're not being followed. Will the minister undertake measures to inform landlords what these new fire code regulations are regardless of when the suites were built?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, we do have a website that's available. Safety is everyone's responsibility. We have also developed a guide. When individuals are building or, let's say, enhancing a secondary suite, they can look at what is necessary. Also, when there are development permits that are given by the cities, they also give that information to those individuals who are doing renovations or developing a secondary suite.

Dr. Brown: Can the minister please explain where the buck stops and who's going to be responsible for ensuring that these codes are being adhered to?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, safety is everybody's concern. The province does have very strong building and fire codes and safety codes. It is the municipalities' responsibility to enforce provincial standards, investigate, and lay charges. Again, property owners have responsibility, the municipality has responsibility, and the province has responsibility.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I'm hoping that the Minister of Municipal Affairs will show concern over the children who are locked in residential treatment centres each night in Calgary in barred circumstances.

Child and Youth Advocate

Mr. Chase: It is of the utmost importance that this government takes whatever means necessary to ensure the safety of children in its care. Last year it was revealed that there are serious issues regarding the role and functions of the Child and Youth Advocate. A review was undertaken, a review which the Minister of Children and Youth Services should have received by now. To the minister: will the Child and Youth Advocate report directly to the Legislature or, at the very least, to an all-party policy committee?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is right that before Christmas we had talked about having a review done, taking a look at what different provinces across the country do as well as reporting mechanisms. I have had a committee that's been taking a look at those exact issues, a really good committee. We've had external and internal experts on this committee as well as, and probably most importantly, youth. I do expect that report to be on my desk, hopefully, within the next week or so.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I'll look forward to it being tabled and shared.

Will an advisory committee be established that would include community stakeholders to help address systemic problems in our youth protection system?

Ms Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, like I said, I won't have that report for another week or two, so I'm not sure exactly what the contents are. But I think it's really important to say that we all want the same thing. We want a really strong voice for our children, we want a really accountable advocacy system, and as well we want reporting to the public that is meaningful and timely.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. When will the minister table and, more importantly, implement the recommendations of the review so that Alberta's youth will not be placed at further risk of neglect or abuse?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I do expect that in the next week or so, and my intentions would be to move on it quite quickly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was recently announced that Alberta's minimum wage is increasing on April 1 to \$8.80 per hour, up from the current \$8.40. My question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. My constituency of Edmonton-Mill Woods is wondering: how is the minimum wage determined by your ministry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back in 2007 this government decided that the minimum wage should be linked to

Alberta's average weekly earnings. In 2008 these earnings increased by about 5 per cent, and this increase will bring Alberta's minimum wage to a rounded figure, as the hon. member indicated, of \$8.80 per hour. This rate will at least temporarily place us second highest amongst all provinces. But it's my understanding that other provinces are also adjusting theirs to where we'll be in the middle of the pack.

Mr. Benito: To the same minister. We're already hearing from at least one business association that says that its members now have to completely revise their budgets with less than a month's notice. Is this fair, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, this increase to the minimum wage should not come as a surprise to anyone. We have not changed our mind, not wavered from a system that has been in place for a couple of years now. Our policy calls for the minimum wage to be reviewed every year and that it would be indexed to the weekly earnings, with any change to take effect on April 1. I re-emphasize that that is to happen every year. In doing so, we ensure that new entrants to our workplace are entitled to an entry-level rate of pay that strikes a fair balance between the workers and the business community.

Mr. Benito: Again to the same minister. When some say that the minimum wage is too low and should be a living wage and others say it's too high and could create layoffs, can you please explain: who are we to believe?

The Speaker: Find an answer to that. It's not a question.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is quite right in that we regularly hear from a number of small businesses and retail associations that suggest that raising the minimum wage might cause hardships for companies trying to make ends meet. The opposite happens on the other side, where labour associations and social agencies repeatedly suggest that the minimum wage should be higher. We're sensitive to both of these, and we're trying to strike a fair balance.

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

2:40

Ambulance Services

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are now very close to the effective date for the transfer of ambulance service from municipalities to the province. Many people in Lethbridge have been calling me to find out the status of negotiations. My first question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Could the minister provide us with an update on where we are in this process?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to say that with the exception of one very small provider where some loose ends need to be tied up, we have now in place contracts with all 65 jurisdictions in Alberta to provide ambulance services as of April 1. Of those 65 contracts we have 12 which are integrated services with municipalities. The remainder are where Alberta Health Services will direct-deliver ambulance services.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Health and Wellness again. Lethbridge has an integrated fire and ambu-

lance service and has been concerned about the quality of future ambulance service. What words of assurance can the minister give the people of Alberta that their emergency services will not be compromised as a result of this transfer?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I believe, Mr. Speaker, that what we have in Alberta today are incredibly dedicated professionals, paramedics delivering ambulance services in Alberta. We have just as dedicated firefighters and police. At the end of the day these individuals work well together whether they are part of the same system or doing the job that they need to do to ensure that patient safety is paramount. I'm very confident that we will have a better system as of April 1.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. My final supplemental is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. Emergency workers have said that their work is unique and that they need a separate way to be represented in collective bargaining. Will the minister ensure that these workers' interests are protected?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Between now and April 1 we'll continue to work to ensure that a system will be developed that is very inclusive and fair. We've met with a number of stakeholders, and we've received numerous submissions from others. We are reviewing them carefully before making any final decisions about the new process that will be in place. We expect to have these recommendations for government within the next coming weeks and for a decision to be made before April 1. There's no doubt that there will be changes, but while there will be those changes, employees will continue to be covered by collective agreements, and they will have access to union representation.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 109 questions and responses today. Two hon. members did quote from certain documents during the question period. I'm going to ask that they table the documents they quoted from, the Minister of Health and Wellness being one and the Member for Lethbridge-East being the second, if you would deal with that.

In 30 seconds from now we'll continue with the Routine.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of letters regarding the government's pharmaceutical strategy. These are from the CN Pensioners' Association, Denny May of Edmonton, and Wayne Hampton of Lacombe. They express concern about the replacement of a universal program with income testing, which is effectively a tax on the sick, and the privacy of their income information that will have to be shared with pharmacies.

I'd also like to table the appropriate number of copies of 10 reports from long-term care workers indicating specific problems on shifts that were short-staffed. These indicate that some residents' baths were missed, toileting was late, and there were not enough staff to keep track of those residents who sometimes wander and are at risk of falling.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon. The first is the program from the 45th annual Night of Music presented by the Edmonton public schools over at the Jubilee Auditorium last evening. I was joined there by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, and we were both impressed by the performances from elementary, junior high, and senior high students.

The second tabling I have is a document from Employment and Immigration here in Alberta. It is a discussion of who is eligible among temporary foreign workers for health care benefits.

The third tabling I have is titled the Capital Region New Upgrader-Related Property Tax Revenue Estimates. It's a document from Alberta municipal affairs and housing, local government services, dated November 27, 2007. It is the scenarios of the money that would have been collected if we had built upgraders in the capital region.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague the Leader of the Official Opposition I'd like to table two sets of letters. The first letter is from Michael and Kelly Moynihan, and this is regarding the closure of the obstetrical unit at the Banff Mineral Springs hospital. They are both very concerned and are rebutting some of the comments that were made by the minister of health.

The second is a very thorough letter from Chad Kerychuk, who is also expressing his great concerns about the closure of that unit at the Banff Mineral Springs hospital. He is feeling that expectant parents are having to make last-minute changes in plans that they had worked out for some time. This is immensely stressful, and he's asking that this closure be reconsidered.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a document I referred to in question period today.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to Standing Order 7(6) I would ask the Government House Leader to please share with the members the projected government business for the week commencing on the 9th of March.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be delighted to advise the House that on the Order Paper for next week we anticipate on Tuesday being in Committee of Supply on the second day of interim supply estimates.

On Wednesday we would anticipate doing debate on a number of government bills: bills 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20; in other words, most of the bills that are on the Order Paper. Some of them we don't anticipate a lot of debate on. It's hard to

know just exactly how many might proceed, so all of them are there. We also have Committee of the Whole on 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 15, and as per the Order Paper. I might indicate to the House that we anticipate that bills 21 and 22, which are on notice, the appropriation bills, would be available to the House next week after Committee of Supply completes.

On Thursday, March 12, in second reading the same bills and the same bills in committee.

Speaker's Ruling
Quoting Documents
Legal Opinions

The Speaker: Hon. members, I received several notes during question period from members inquiring whether or not it was permissible for people to quote from newspaper articles. The answer to that question is yes. What the rules do prohibit, however, is questions which inquire whether statements made in a newspaper are correct. The rules also prohibit, though, any question which requires an answer involving a legal opinion, and we must have had half a dozen of these this week from all sides of the House, including some of the members who sent me the most notes asking how come those questions are permitted.

2:50 **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.

Interim Supply Estimates 2009-10
General Revenue Fund and Lottery Fund

The Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am very pleased to move the 2009-10 interim supply estimates for the general revenue fund and the lottery fund.

On March 2 the hon. President of the Treasury Board tabled the 2009-10 interim supply estimates, which contain a schedule of interim amounts to be voted to support operations of the offices of the Legislative Assembly and departments of the government of Alberta and the lottery fund from April 1 through to June 30, 2009. Mr. Chairman, that motion was carried and referred those matters to this committee.

Mr. Chairman, interim supply estimates provide funding authorizations until the new budget is approved. This is not unusual for government. In fact, it's required whenever spending authority is required to bridge the gap between the prior fiscal year and the passage of a new budget. Authorization is needed so that government can continue to provide services until the budget is passed.

These estimates are based on the departments' needs to fund government programs and services. Government spending is typically higher in the early months of the year. This pattern occurs because some payments are due on April 1 for the first quarter and some annual payments are also due on April 1. Members will note that the interim supply is inordinately high compared to what is expected from the overall government budget simply because there are a lot of front-ended costs that need to be paid out in the first quarter.

When passed, these interim supply estimates will authorize approximate spending of \$9 billion for expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$581 million for capital investment,

\$49 million for nonbudgetary disbursements, and \$409 million for lottery fund payments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to discussion throughout the afternoon.

The Chair: Before we proceed, I would like to ask if members want to use 10 minutes each back and forth or 20 minutes combined. Let me know, and then we'll have the time.

Mr. MacDonald: Ten minutes, I believe, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: All right. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. Ten minutes.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I rise to participate in the annual interim supply budget discussion or debate for 2009-10, the fiscal year that we're looking at. Certainly, as we go through this document, we see that we're making budget requests for each and every department and office of the Legislative Assembly, which is, I guess, considered normal in this province. I for one would have much preferred to have seen the entire budget now. [interjection] Well, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud is making a suggestion. I have had various meetings with groups not only in the city but across the province who get funding from the province, and they're very anxious to see what happens when we do, finally, get the budget on April 7, I do believe. There are a lot of questions.

Yesterday we heard in this House that the President of the Treasury Board and his associates had no idea that there was a recession on the horizon. We only have to look, Mr. Chairman, at the budget from last year to realize that that series of statements from the President of the Treasury Board was incorrect. It is a reflection of how our economic affairs have been managed by this government.

Last year when we did get the Budget 2008 fiscal plan, one only has to look at page 11, and you can see where this province was planning to have financial issues around the looming U.S. recession. To stand up in question period and say that they had no idea that this was coming – we're losing tax revenue. We're losing resource royalty revenue. We are losing significant revenue through our investments, if we're going to have any revenue at all.

On page 11, Mr. Chairman, it states that "the outlook for the U.S. economy has deteriorated sharply since the beginning of the year and it appears to have entered a recession." It goes on to state that the "weakness in the U.S. economy [is] expected to lead to slower Canadian export growth." In this document it indicates that 90 per cent of all exports from Alberta are to the U.S. I looked at the latest statistics, from February of this year, and 88 per cent of all exports are to the U.S., \$95.7 billion according to the latest economic update. Did we shift away from having all our export eggs in one basket? No. Unfortunately, we didn't. It was clear that we were relying on the American economy for the majority of our exports. We knew there was a recession coming, but it's apparent to me after looking at the third-quarter update that we did very little to prepare for it. I'm sorry.

Now, if we go on further in the fiscal plan, the three-year document, this is on page 61, the "possibility of a US recession in 2008 would reduce demand." This is concerning nonrenewable resource revenue. Also, it's interesting to note here, Mr. Chairman, that there's an indication that "royalties paid on bitumen prices expected to reduce 2009-10 revenue." So last year there was a lot of detail in the fine print about the looming recession, and I can only conclude that many government members, many cabinet ministers across the way did not read the fiscal plan that was presented by the minister of finance.

Now, on page 118 it is indicated, Mr. Chairman, that “despite the likelihood of a U.S. recession and turbulent global financial markets, Alberta’s economic outlook remains positive.” That was this time last year. The storm clouds economically were on the horizon. It’s reflected in the drafting of this fiscal plan, but it was not reflected in this government’s fiscal policy.

Now, for the next indicator you only have to go a few pages further in the fiscal plan. On page 127 we are talking about the three-year economic outlook.

Global Growth Picture Mixed

- Key economic indicators in the United States have deteriorated sharply since the beginning of 2008. The U.S. economy is likely already in recession as the slump in the housing market appears to be spreading to the broader economy.

Hello? The economic conditions in the U.S. and in the global markets come as a surprise to the government members across the way? I just can’t accept this because, certainly, your fiscal plan last year gave good solid warnings pretty well in every chapter and verse of it of what we are experiencing today.

3:00

Now, again on page 138, Mr. Chairman, I’m going to quote.

Fallout from the U.S. Housing and Credit Markets

The impact of the U.S. housing market on the sub-prime mortgage and broader credit markets represents a notable risk for both the U.S. and global economies. The United States appears to have already entered a recession although the extent and likely duration remains highly uncertain. The United States remains a key export market for Alberta, accounting for about 90% of our total international exports.

We have yet again another example that someone in this government knew that there was trouble on the horizon, but we did nothing about it. The minister of finance only a few short months ago, this past fall, was indicating that we would have an \$8 billion surplus, which turns out not to be true. How we are going to manage our financial affairs is another question.

In the interim supply budget there is no mention of the price sensitivities for our nonrenewable resource revenues. I think we should spend a few minutes talking about our price sensitivities for nonrenewable resource revenues, Mr. Chairman. If we look at last year’s fiscal plan, we can see where there is significant detail on the price sensitivities and what they mean. Alberta’s new royalty regime, which was effective January 1, 2009, is more price sensitive. The effects of energy price changes on Alberta’s royalty revenues will also increase. The revenue impact of a \$1 change in the price of oil will increase from \$130 million in 2008-09 to \$211 million in 2009-10. For natural gas the revenue impact of a 10 cent change in the Alberta reference price will increase from \$114 million in 2008-09 to \$166 million in 2009-10. So when we look at what was presented in the third-quarter update last week, we see that there are significant changes in those sensitivities. If an hon. member across the way in the government, in the cabinet, could clarify what numbers we will be dealing with not only in this interim supply budget but also in the budget for the entire province, I would appreciate it, and the taxpayers of this province would appreciate it as well.

The oil price sensitivity will change now by \$105 million. That means that when the price of oil goes up or down, before, whenever the fiscal plan was tabled last year, the net change would be \$130 million. [Mr. MacDonald’s speaking time expired]

Ms Blakeman: That’s 20?

Mr. MacDonald: That’s 10. May I continue, Mr Chairman?

The Chair: Other members who wish to speak?

Ms Blakeman: I’ll let him go ahead.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I would really appreciate this, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You go ahead, Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Now, the net change in the fiscal plan that was introduced last year was \$130 million, and it has changed post-January 2009 by \$105 million to bring it to \$235 million. This may not be of interest, and I’m not trying to confuse the House here, Mr. Chairman. But I would like to know: do we collect \$105 million less for every dollar if conventional crude oil declines that amount in price? If conventional crude oil goes down, do we collect \$105 million less for every dollar it goes down with the new price sensitivity chart, which is noted as \$235 million for conventional oil?

Now, with natural gas if the annual change was 10 cents, the net change would be \$114 million in royalties. With the new, post-January 2009 sensitivity it is \$158 million, or a change of \$44 million. My question – and I hope I can get an answer on this – is: do we collect \$44 million less with a 10 cent drop in the price of natural gas per gigajoule in Canadian currency?

We know that the new royalty structure that was implemented in January of 2009 is price sensitive. We collect more whenever conventional oil and natural gas are significantly higher, but how much less are we going to collect now that the price of natural gas is much less than was anticipated? I think it’s \$4.20 a gigajoule at the moment. I hope it’s a lot higher than that. Crude oil before question period was \$41 and some-odd cents. [interjection] Since question period it started to drop? [interjection] Yes.

If I could have clarification on that I would be really grateful, if I could have an estimate of exactly how much money at these current prices with these current sensitivities with both conventional oil and natural gas the government anticipates in this budget year to collect with this royalty regime. Things have changed. These sensitivities are sort of mentioned here in passing on page 8 of the third-quarter fiscal update, but these are very, very important questions as we debate the entire interim budget and also the budget on April 7, 2009.

Now, I would like to point out to the House, Mr. Chairman, footnote C on page 8 of the third-quarter fiscal update: “2008-09 sensitivities include 9 months under the current royalty regime and 3 months under the new regime. After January 1, 2009, sensitivities for an entire fiscal year will increase as shown.” I hope I explained this in a manner that is understandable. These price sensitivities are certainly different, but they’re very, very important, and if I could get an answer from an hon. member across the way, I would be very grateful.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Chairman, it’s very difficult to provide specific answers as they relate to budget and forecasts and projections because all of that, as I’m sure the member is aware, is the essence of the budget itself and is the responsibility of the minister of finance and the President of the Treasury Board. What we have before us are interim requirements that essentially bridge the gap between the point at which our fiscal year ends, March 31, the expenditures for which have already been approved by this Legislature, and a reasonable and foreseeable point in the future following March 31, at which point the new budget would be passed. All of the details with respect to that new budget are very much part of that budget process, and it would be (a) inappropriate for anyone to comment on forecasting and the like at this point in time, and (b) I would suggest

that it would also be almost impossible for someone to provide that kind of information in the absence of all of the detail that will accompany the budget documents.

3:10

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I'm surprised at that. These price sensitivities are very, very important, and they do concern not only this interim supply budget but also the fiscal year 2009-10. Certainly, in the past the province has had no problems whatsoever making a forecast. Last year, for instance, we had a three-year forecast of anticipated revenue not only from nonrenewable resources but also corporate income tax, personal income tax, investment revenue, et cetera. So I just don't understand why the hon. members across the way wouldn't have the information available in this interim supply budget debate which would indicate to us the changes that these price sensitivities are going to have on the fiscal year which we are discussing with the interim supply. These numbers are significantly larger than the previous price sensitivities, and if we are with the changes on an annual basis getting \$235 million less in royalty revenue on conventional crude oil, and if we are getting \$158 million less when the price of natural gas on an annual basis drops by 10 cents, this is a significant loss of resource revenue. If I could have that clarified, Mr. Chairman, I would be grateful.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Chairman, without getting into debate, I think I answered the question, and if the member doesn't like the answer, there's nothing I can do about it. The fact remains that the detail that he is requesting is the very essence of the detail that accompanies the budget. That level of detail is not available when we deal with interim supply.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I must say that I'm disappointed in that. Whenever we go through this interim supply budget line by line, there's billions of dollars here in allocations. When one can't get an answer as to how all this is going to be funded, I find that unusual. With that I will cede the floor to another hon. member of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to join in debate on Bill 22, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2009, and kick around a few ideas about how we're going to spend our first \$10 billion this year, I guess, because that's about what the dollars add up to. I understand that this involves some front-loading of programs and you have to put more than just a few weeks' worth of dollars into the interim supply budget to get things going and keep things going and all the rest of that. So we won't go down that road. And I'm not going to quibble about whether the interim supply bill should be concerning itself with \$10 billion in spending or \$6 billion in spending or how many billions of spending we should be concerning ourselves with. It is what it is, and it is a big number, \$10 billion.

Of course, it's still, in my mind, a number that we ought not to have to be dealing with because – and I'm sure if I'm wrong about this, Mr. Chairman, someone opposite will correct me – it seems to

me that we wouldn't have to deal with interim supply at all if we could just get organized around budget day, just get organized around bringing in a budget and having it approved and ready to go by April 1 of every fiscal year.

We came back into this House – excuse me; I'm going to have to look on the calendar – on Tuesday, February 10, with the throne speech. We sat for three days that week. Well, the 10th was throne speech day, so that's really all we did that day. We listened to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor give the throne speech, and then we all repaired to the rotunda for cookies and milk and those little sandwiches without the crusts. Then we came back into the House and did some business on the 11th and the 12th, and then we went for the Family Day weekend, which was a long weekend. Then we came back in on Tuesday the 17th, and we sat three more days. Then we took a week off for a constituency week. Gosh, if I was a taxpayer sitting at home listening to this or at work monitoring this on my computer, I'd be getting just a little bit hot under the collar right now that these guys have been back at work since February 10, and they've already taken a long weekend and a week off.

Now here we are at the end of the third week of actual legislative work, and we're debating this great big interim supply bill because we're not even going to have a budget to debate, we're not even going to have the budget read into the record by the Minister of Finance and Enterprise, until Tuesday, April 7, a full four weeks after we came back into the House. I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman; I don't have those old standing orders – and they were temporary standing orders – at my fingertips because they go back a couple of years, but there was a brief period, a brief, shining moment in the history of our standing orders not too many years ago when we actually committed to, you know, coming back into the House at a specific date in February and then, I believe it was either 10 days or two weeks later, delivering the budget. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I don't think we ever actually got around to doing it that way because those temporary standing orders never got final approval at the end of the year, and then we were into an election cycle and so on and so forth, but that idea, which I think was a good idea, has never come back.

I think it was a good idea, Mr. Chairman, because when you start your fiscal year on April 1, I think it's a good idea to have your budgeting process worked out by then. I think that, you know, if we were to come back on Tuesday, February 10, and rather than take a week off two weeks after we came back because we were just so overworked – and please note for *Hansard* that I said that with every ounce of sarcasm and cynicism that I could muster in my voice – if perhaps we had brought down the budget on February 24, two weeks later, we'd be well into debate on the budget now. I'm willing to predict – and I don't think that I'm taking much of a psychic flyer here at all – that we'd be through the complete Committee of Supply process in terms of debating the budget and through first, second, committee, and third. The budget would be approved, passed, set, and ready to go before we hit the end of this month and the beginning of April and the beginning of the next fiscal year. I'm willing to bet that, if we had just shown a little bit of discipline in terms of when we were going to start the process. We should have done that.

3:20

Now, I know that the finance minister and, I suspect, the President of the Treasury Board and probably the Premier and maybe everybody on the government side of the House feels the same way, that, oh, that's just too tough to do in a year like this because we're on such a roller-coaster ride as far as the economy is concerned. We don't know from one day to the next what's happening with the markets, with the credit crisis, with the real estate slowdown – can't

call it a meltdown in this country, and thank goodness for that, but it certainly is a slowdown, and if you're trying to sell your house right now, you know that all too well – with the rise in unemployment, with slipping into a recession, with running a deficit for this fiscal year that the finance minister had to report in her Q3 fiscal update. Only a few months after she was touting a projection of an 8 and a half billion dollar surplus, now we're into a 1 and a half billion dollar deficit.

Of course, we have 2009-2010 coming, and we know that we're looking at a significant shortfall in revenue relative to what we brought in this year, in the billions of dollars, I think, maybe in the \$5 billion or \$8 billion or \$10 billion range according to some of the people that I've been talking to. We're into a very, very different situation. We're into a situation where nobody knows whether we've hit bottom or when we're going to hit bottom or how we're going to know when we've hit bottom until we've already started coming back out of it, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

But, really, Mr. Chairman, what would prompt anybody to think that things are going to be any more stable on Tuesday, April 7, than they would have been on Tuesday, February 24? This is a roller-coaster ride. It's a seven-ticket ride on the Conklin midway at the Stampede. It's going to go on for a while yet. There are a few loop-the-loops in there and some nasty surprises. There are going to be times when your stomach is above your head. We just don't know what all the twists and turns on the ride are and when and where it's going to end. But it doesn't change the fact that our fiscal year starts on April 1, 2009, just like it started on April 1, 2008, just like it started on April 1, 2007, just like it's going to start on April Fool's Day 2010.

Preparing a budget, Mr. Chairman, is not an April Fool's joke. It's a serious business. It doesn't matter when you do it. Pick a date. You're going to be dealing with some uncertainty, some instability, some not insignificant amount of instability, and you're going to have to take your best shot at it, which should not be a stretch for this government, taking a shot at it, because their budgeting process is about as accurate as EPA mileage figures for new cars. You know: your mileage may vary. Our spending may vary. We'll have to come back to this House once or twice anyway for more supplementary supply for things that we went and spent money on that we didn't think or we didn't have the guts to tell people we were going to spend money on back when we were bringing in our \$37 billion budget.

Mr. MacDonald: How about those 525 snowplows on the GPS?

Mr. Taylor: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, we could use a few of those snowplows out on the roads today. This may be one time that I might be in agreement with the Minister of Transportation. I see him smiling over there, and I'm going to make a note of that. [interjections] Yes, I know we're all out.

Anyway, back to the matter at hand. If we brought the budget down in time for the beginning of the new fiscal year, if we brought the budget down in February a couple of weeks after we come back into this House and listen to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor read the throne speech and started debating it then, we would have a budget in place in time for the fiscal year, and we wouldn't even have to be doing this interim supply stuff. The members opposite complain they can't go into detail anyway.

Okay. I'm going to take my seat now and see who else wants to jump up and join the debate. I'll be back.

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

Mr. Mason: Yes. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased

to make a few comments with respect to the interim supply estimates. I'm going to make them fairly general. As we know, with the schedule of interim supply, they're very broad numbers to get the government through until they can actually get a budget before the House, so there are not a lot of specific line items that you can really point to. So I'd like to make a few comments, I guess, on the interim supply in the sense that it's anticipating the next provincial budget.

I'd like to start with the economic outlook. The Minister of Finance and Enterprise a couple of weeks ago had an economic update – this was about a week before her financial update – and one of the things that she talked about was losses in the heritage savings trust fund to the extent of about \$3 billion, that that would not be restored in order to avoid a technical deficit. I've argued in the past that we shouldn't have deficits in Alberta, that we don't need to have deficits in Alberta, and indeed, Mr. Chairman, if we had got the level of financial contribution from our petroleum industry that we could have – I'm particularly referencing the tar sands – I don't think we would have to be running a deficit today.

So I guess the first point that I would like to make is that having amongst the lowest royalties in the world really hamstringing this government in terms of being able to survive the ups and downs in the price of oil and natural gas. The less you retain as the owners of the resource and the more you allow the people who extract the resource to have, the more difficult it is for the owners of the resource – that is, the people of Alberta, represented by the government – to actually accommodate and survive in a healthy fashion the ups and downs that are so typical of that industry.

The second point that I'd like to make is that the economic update indicated a difficult time for the province financially next year but predicted a recovery the year following; that is, in 2011. This absolutely is flabbergasting, Mr. Chairman, that the provincial finance minister would tell Albertans that she expects the recession to be over in a year. That's essentially what she said. The result is, as we saw from the fiscal update a week later, that the government really has no plans to counteract a recession longer than one year.

My view is that that is going to create considerable hardship and economic dislocation in this province because the consensus among governments outside of this province and among economic experts is that we may in fact be in for a fairly prolonged recession and a fairly deep one. In fact, the free fall of the markets and the rapidly growing lists of layoffs outside of this province indicate that. The layoffs within the province will build and continue to grow, especially in 2011, when the minister is predicting we are going to be in recovery. I suggest that because of major projects winding up in the next year or so, unemployment in this province is actually going to be considerably worse a year out and beyond. If the government is betting that the recession is going to be a very short one, then they are gambling with Albertans' jobs and prosperity, and I want to go on the record as saying that this is an extremely dangerous assumption and that the economic strategy of this province clearly needs to extend beyond one year.

3:30

Now, I want to say something also about the priorities of the government. As they have been battering down the hatches for the economic storm that lies ahead, the government has given a few hints of what its priorities are. Now, they had campaigned in the last election on creating at least 600 new long-term care beds and five new long-term care centres in the province. They have now stated that they're going to retain the current number and not expand it as promised, but there is a wide gap between the number of people who need long-term care and the number of beds that are available. The result is that people who need more care are in places where they

can't get the care they need, first of all, and secondly, they displace other people from those beds. We've seen that with respect to emergency rooms, which I talked about a little bit in question period today. Because there's a shortage of long-term care beds, people are in acute-care beds. Then when people come into emergency, they can't be put into an acute-care bed because it's occupied by a long-term patient, and as a result we have backlogs in our emergency rooms, and people are dying. So that's not a priority. Obviously, long-term care in the broad sense is not a priority of the government.

I think another thing that's not a priority is public transit. While the government had allocated \$2 billion towards public transit as part of the Green TRIP, they cancelled that at the first sign of reduced government revenues. They've cut that back now to \$195 million, so approximately under 10 per cent of what they had committed. Clearly, public transit is not a priority of the government.

What is, then, Mr. Chairman, a priority of the government? What things have they given priority to? Well, I think the first thing that we can say is that they are committed to the carbon capture and storage program and have retained the \$2 billion in previous surpluses that they had allocated towards that. Now, that is not something to reduce emissions but to bury them, and it is something that places the taxpayer on the hook for at least the first \$2 billion, when the very wealthy corporations, like Syncrude, Suncor, and in fact the power companies that produce electricity from coal, are being essentially subsidized. The subsidization of power companies and tar sands operators is a priority of the government, unlike seniors.

I think we saw some other priorities the other day. It's clearly a priority of the government to support the oil industry and the conventional oil industry in these times of economic downturn. I think we can see a pattern. We begin to get an inkling of what the priorities are going to be when the actual budget comes down on April 7.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. If the Minister of Environment is willing, I would like to combine our two 10 minutes into one 20-minute exchange. Is the minister willing to do that?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm more than willing to do anything that the member desires. However, I think I made it pretty clear that I don't really know that there is an opportunity for exchange because of the nature of the business at hand. I don't know that there are any questions that I can answer beyond those that I already have. If the member wishes to speak for 20 minutes, that's fine with me. I don't know that I have enough information to contribute to go back and forth for 20 minutes.

Ms Blakeman: Fair enough.

The Chair: Hon. member, do you want to take the 20 minutes?

Ms Blakeman: Yeah, I will. Definitely.

The Chair: All right.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. If the minister signals that he's interested in answering, we'll let 'er rip.

I think that a number of my colleagues have already spoken of their frustration over the process, and I have certainly been on record

a number of times over the years expressing my frustration. I mean, the government has complete and total control over how this House runs. They can call us in any time they want. They can add on night sittings if they want. With a 72-member majority they can pretty well have their way any way they want it. There's not a lot we can do about it. [interjection] I can see that the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill is excited about that thought.

The truth of the matter is that this budgeting process is up to the government, and they can do better. Any sort of feeble protestations that there have been a number of things that have stood in their way – well, they could have just decided to get around it.

I remember once the Government House Leader getting up and saying: "Well, I mean, who says that we have to have a budget as of this date? You know, budgets can come in any time. They can come in all year." True enough. But we have a fiscal year that starts on the 1st of April, and there's an expectation that there is money to pay for things as of the 1st of April. The logical response that flows from that is that the budget would be passed prior to that. We need about a six-week run, so you're really looking at the need to have a budget come in by the middle of February.

What we've seen is that this very, very late budget – we're now talking into April – has become the new norm. The result of that is that it makes it very difficult for groups that have to then perform their budget process to be fiscally responsible and have their planning completed as per the timelines that are placed on them. I'm talking about what used to be the RHAs but would now be the sort of local hospital boards, how they're going to use their money.

School boards are another group across the province that are expected to have plans in place that are reflecting the government's, and they can't do it because they don't know how much money they've got coming. I mean, in starting this budget process at the beginning of April, it will be almost the end of May before we're done. So that's two full months into the fiscal year. At that point the school boards will know how much money.

We've got a number of previous school board trustees that are now elected members, and I'd be very interested in hearing what they have to say about, you know, their experience on a school board and how not getting your budget figures would affect you. The Member for Calgary-Mackay was on the school board. The Member for Edmonton-Decore was on the school board. Oh, yes, there's the Member for Calgary-North Hill, who was on the school board. Bonnyville-Cold Lake was a school board trustee, I think. There are lots of people in here with direct experience of the effect of that. I never hear them say anything, and I'm sure that their former colleagues that are still on school boards would appreciate it if they would say something.

I want to move on and look directly at the interim supply budget for Environment. As I went through this, what I noticed is that the interim supply for the Ministry of Environment is substantially lower than most of the other supply amounts that have been requested for the other ministries. We've had a \$63 million request for Environment and \$1 million in nonbudgetary disbursements. I mean, aside from very small ministries like International and Intergovernmental Relations – we don't mean to diminish in any way the importance of International and Intergovernmental Relations. It's requesting, like, \$10 million. Fair enough. Obviously, the Environment request for \$64 million is higher than that, but in comparison to a number of the other ones – you're looking at Education, which has a request of \$1,143,000,000. Employment and Immigration is \$255.8 million. Health and Wellness, of course, is huge; it's asking for, you know, over \$3 billion. Even Housing and Urban Affairs is asking for \$133 million. Municipal Affairs, \$588 million; Seniors, \$640 million. Then you have Environment at \$64 million.

3:40

One of the questions that I would like the minister to answer if he's able to – this is a noticeable difference – is why the supply request from his department is so much smaller than the supply request from other departments that are of equal size in total budget and in many cases even of smaller size in total budget. They've actually requested more money. I know that sometimes ministries need upfront money. You know, they've got projects that happen during the summer, and they need to pay for those before they get there. Fair enough. But you'd think that there would be activity in the Environment department that was happening during the summer, yet it is still, I think, next to International and Intergovernmental Relations the smallest supply request that we've got here this year. I'm just wondering if the minister can comment on that.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Chairman, I will comment on that. I think that the member actually answered her own question. The reason is that because of the nature of the business that we have in Alberta Environment, we don't have the degree of granting and that subsequent front-end loading that many other ministries have. The details of the budget will come out on budget day, when the budget document itself is tabled. I can assure the hon. member that there are more than adequate funds included in this appropriation so that we will not be out of business before the Legislative Assembly gets around to passing the budget.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Thank you very much for responding to that question. We don't know what the budget amount is at this point, so when I look at the request of me as a member of the Assembly to grant money to the government, my question is always: what for, and is there a way of sort of verifying that? Often that's about having standards set, it's about monitoring the work that's going on, and it's about enforcement of the work that's going on. Obviously, we don't have the budget, so I can't ask some of those questions. I thought: well, what is a way that I can look at this and say, "Is it reasonable to grant this money?" Okay. It's about performance. All righty-ho.

I went back and I looked at the Auditor General's recommendations for the Environment ministry. These appear, by the way, in the October 2008 report, and specifically I'm looking at page 382. These are recommendations that have been raised in the past that have not been successfully met or implemented. Two of the ones that are raised here, in fact, have been raised multiples times. One of them originally was from the 1998-99 report, and that is about enhancing approval systems. Now, in '98-99 there wasn't a system of numbering or of grading and giving priority to certain Auditor General recommendations; they all sort of came out the same. So this doesn't have a number on it, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't important.

This is appearing on page 159 of the '98-99 report under Environmental Protection. "It is recommended that the Department of Environment enhance the systems that support the Approvals process. Attention should be directed to issues of management information and data completeness." Now, this recommendation was originally brought forward, as I said, in '98-99. It was repeated in 2000-2001. It was repeated again in 2004-05. So three times the Auditor General has followed up and said that there has been unsatisfactory progress on implementing this.

It is specific to financial security for land disturbances because what this was talking about was the environment management system, that automated system that supports an approvals process. Staff have to rely on this environment management system, and the information has to be complete and accurate and timely. The work

at the time suggested that there were a number of issues that had not been completely addressed around the timeliness of the approval process.

There was no system, for example, to track how long it takes to process an approval, and some approvals cannot be reviewed on the EMS document viewer. That has yet to be accomplished. And I thought: "Well, okay. I'm being asked to approve money to a department to operate for a period of three months." But when I go back and look at performance and I say, "Well, is there anything outstanding there that I should be bringing to attention and saying: you need to do this before I, you know, can support your request for additional money?" there's an example of it.

Second example was in 2002-03. On page 103 was a recommendation. We're now numbering the recommendations, so it's recommendation 12 recommending "that the Ministry of Environment implement an integrated information system to track contaminated sites in Alberta." Well, Mr. Chairman, what goes around comes around because I'm pretty sure – well, yes, it would be just yesterday that I asked a question in this House about contaminated sites and how taxpayers were now going to get the honour and the privilege of forking out \$30 million more than they did the day before to help pay for contaminated sites that oil and gas companies had walked away from. So here was the beginning of this recommendation that has yet to be implemented to the satisfaction of the Auditor General and is turning up again in the October '08 recommendations. That originally, as I said, came up in '02-03, and the recommendation was made again in '05-06.

Then there are a series of other ones that were brought forward in '05-06, which tells me that there was a concentration on that department in that year, and most of these are around drinking water. I'm just guessing that this is probably following along on Walkerton and the one in Saskatchewan, wherever that was. On page 37 we've got recommendation 1 recommending

that the Department of Environment make its system to issue approvals and registrations more effective by:

- Strengthening supporting processes such as training, manuals, checklists, and quality control . . .
- Ensuring that applications are complete and legislatively compliant,
- Documenting important decisions in the application and registration processes,
- Processing applications and conversions promptly,
- Maintaining consistency in the wording of approvals and registrations across the province, and
- Following up short-term conditions in approvals.

Environment issues place-based drinking water approvals. Registered facilities follow a provincial code of practice. Mechanisms to promote consistency in approval writing.

3:50

Their findings were: training, support materials, and mentoring can improve; template not updated for five years; a quality assurance function would promote best practices in approval writing; resourcing issues have caused backlogs; not all applications were legislatively compliant or complete. It goes on for several pages. As I say, that recommendation has still not been dealt with to the satisfaction of the Auditor General. It continues to be noted in outstanding recommendations, which means that they're outstanding; they haven't been fulfilled.

When we look at page 43, we see a key recommendation, and that's recommendation 2, that the department

improve its drinking water inspection processes by:

- Applying the same inspection frequency targets to all water-works regulated by the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act,

- Ensuring inspectors receive sufficient training in waterworks systems and operations,
- Revising documentation tools and practices, including making them more risk focused, and
- Informing operators promptly of inspection results, ensuring operators respond appropriately, and concluding on each inspection.

That's a highlighted recommendation. So it's a key recommendation, meaning very, very important and a high priority, coming from the Auditor General, and that is still outstanding.

We go to page 49 of the report of '05-06. Again, recommendation 3, a numbered recommendation, that the department update its strategies to deal with the Province's needs for certified water treatment operators.

Going to page 52, a key recommendation, recommendation 4: improve the information systems used to manage its drinking water . . . by:

- Updating EMS forms and improving reporting capacity,

Where have we heard that one before? That would be in '98-99.

- Co-ordinating regional, district, and personal information systems to avoid overlap and encourage best practice, and
- Using data to improve program effectiveness and efficiency.

Moving on, we had recommendation 5, which is actually not leaping off the page at me here, page 48, recommending that the department

at the district level expand its communication with partners involved in drinking water matters.

Volume 2, page 84, recommendation 28, that the department improve its system to regulate water well drilling by:

- Ensuring that drillers and drilling companies meet approval requirements;
- Implementing controls to ensure that water well drilling reports are:
 - received on time,
 - complete and accurate, and
 - accurately entered into the Groundwater Information System.

There we had six unmet recommendations on drinking water, one on water well drilling and then on contaminated sites and financial security for land disturbances. So a fair number of things that are outstanding, and the requirements have not been met there.

I realize, Mr. Chairman, that my time is running out, and I will endeavour to negotiate with my colleagues to get back on the speaking list again because I think one of the great concerns that Albertans have identified to me and to other members and to the government is the issue of water: clean, safe, fresh drinking water for Albertans.

Then we look at a request from the government, "Please, give us more money in order to operate," essentially unscrutinized at this point, because once we grant that interim money, they're good to go until the end of June. They have enough operating money there. Yet this issue of largest concern to people, which is drinking water, fresh water for Albertans to use, Albertans first, there are a number of recommendations from the Auditor General that have not been met, nor could I find – and perhaps the minister can point it out to me – any reasoning from the department as to why those recommendations are still outstanding. This was as of October 2008, so it's not as though I'm way out of date on this. Yes, some of the recommendations have been brought forward from past years, but they continue to be unmet as of October 2008. I think the concern that's expressed to me is our capacity to . . . [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired] Shoot.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will get back up

and rejoin the debate here. I want to get back to a few general points and a few general questions if I can at this point, and depending on how long it takes me to elucidate the specificities of my obfuscation or whatever, I may get onto some specifics here in this round as well.

I was talking earlier about the notion that we wouldn't even need to be doing a debate on interim supply if we could just fix a date on an annual basis that the budget would be brought down and fix it about two weeks after we come into this House so that we could debate the budget and pass it in time for it to take effect at the beginning of the fiscal year. What a revolutionary concept. However, that hasn't been done yet, so we are in debate on interim supply, a debate that brings with it the issue of the granting of money without a sufficient amount of detail on the amounts being debated. We have \$10 billion worth of very vague spending requests here.

We know that Advanced Education and Technology, for instance, needs \$744,300,000 to get it through the next few weeks in expense and equipment/inventory purchases and another \$34,900,000 in nonbudgetary disbursements. We know that Culture and Community Spirit needs \$97.2 million for expense and equipment/inventory purchases and \$300,000 for nonbudgetary disbursements. We know that Energy needs almost \$134 million. We know that Education needs \$1.142 billion. We know that Health and Wellness needs \$3,238,000,000 for expense and equipment/inventory purchases and another \$4.8 million for capital investment, but we don't really know any of the specifics involved there. We just know that Health and Wellness needs a lot of money because Health and Wellness always needs a lot of money because it's a very expensive portfolio. We know that Housing and Urban Affairs needs \$133,100,000, but all we know that it needs that for is as an expense. We don't even have the line "expense and equipment/inventory purchases" there. And on it goes. It all tallies up, totals up, to about \$10 billion.

It's very difficult to get into any kind of meaningful debate. I think the hon. Deputy Government House Leader has conceded as much in some of his comments here this afternoon. It's very difficult to get into any kind of meaningful debate about these significant monetary amounts when there's no information to go along with it, no detail.

Another point that has to be made is about the lack of budget management, which was highlighted yesterday when we debated the second supplementary supply request of the year. We know going forward that whatever comes down on April 7 will be a budget that will be somewhat different from recent years for no other reason than the government has already admitted that there will be a deficit in fiscal '09-10 and we have significant declines in revenue from oil and gas.

I'm going to throw out some questions and see if we get any answers back today or any time before April 7. It's not likely, but one should live in hope, especially on a Thursday afternoon.

4:00

What is the estimated deficit for the 2009-10 fiscal year? [interjection] The minister of health just said: there's the \$64 million question. However, hon. member, I'm willing to bet that the deficit is going to be more than \$64 million. Call it a crazy hunch.

How does this interim supply reflect the current economic situation? Now, there's a question I would love to know the answer to before we start debating the budget. How does this \$10 billion here, the upfront money, the down payment on our operations for the year, reflect the current economic situation?

I mean, I leaf through this skinny little book, and I see that Employment and Immigration needs \$255,800,000 for expense and

equipment/inventory purchases. I note that we debated some money for Employment and Immigration in supplementary supply yesterday. I note that the Minister of Employment and Immigration gave some answers yesterday that indicated, not surprisingly, that there were areas where extra spending needed to be undertaken by his department because of the change in our economic conditions and the subsequent job losses, the need for more retraining money and things like that. But I cannot tell from the interim supply document how the \$255,800,000 request from Employment and Immigration in interim supply reflects the current economic situation. I would like to know that. I would like to know that specifically of the Minister of Employment and Immigration.

I'd like to know specifically from the health minister how the \$3.2 billion interim request in his department plus the \$4.8 million in capital investment reflects the current economic situation. What does the \$4.8 million in capital investment mean? It's a very small percentage. It's about 1 per cent of the amount of capital grants in his department, in his ministry, that the finance minister told us last week in the Q3 fiscal update have been delayed, are being postponed, are being rescheduled and reprioritized and all of that.

She said at the time that those repositioning and reprioritization issues from capital grants are based on the notion that for one reason or another that was money they intended to spend on capital projects this year that they just couldn't get around to. I don't know. They couldn't get the building permit. They couldn't find the guy to pour the concrete pad. I'm not sure what it was, you know, but the point remains that whatever the reason for not getting around to it this year, there's going to be one heck of a lot less incentive to getting around to it next year, when there isn't nearly as much money to play with, I would think.

I hear this government talk repeatedly and I've heard the finance minister talk often about the notion that this government is going to continue with its infrastructure spending. I hear them talk about it in terms of regarding infrastructure spending as an economic stimulus program that is already well under way, that anticipated this downturn, I guess. But when I hear talk about infrastructure spending, it sounds to me like roads and sewer lines and waterlines and that sort of thing. It doesn't sound like there's a tremendous commitment to capital projects involving, you know, hospital facilities that the people of this province need: long-term care, continuing care, assisted living, whatever level you want it to operate at. There doesn't seem to be the commitment to involve itself in economically stimulating infrastructure or capital projects, built things, public works for the public good that the public of Alberta need, that you can't make out of asphalt or gravel, and I would like to know about that.

Do these estimates include the department belt-tightening that the finance minister stated was necessary for the upcoming fiscal year, or will cuts not be reflected in spending until the budget is released? Well, really, Mr. Chairman, there's no way to tell just looking at these documents – is there? – whether there's any cutting of spending happening or not. Can't tell. I'd like to know. I'd like to have known before this.

I come back to the point that I made earlier, that it doesn't really matter whether you bring the budget in on April 7 or you bring the budget in on February 24 or you put it off until August, you know. The day you bring the budget down, things are still going to be uncertain and unstable because that's just the nature of the times we live in. You've got to make the call or get out of the phone booth. Unfortunately, when you've got a government to run, you've got to make the call because they need the money.

How does the list of capital investment reflect the third-quarter fiscal update's stated reprofiling and rescheduling of capital grants?

[Mr. Taylor's speaking time expired] How could that time have flown by so soon? I leave it to others.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Blakeman: Well, how lucky can you get? I get another chance at this. I would have thought there would be all those people that wanted to get up and speak about this budget.

Mr. Taylor: You were about to shoot something when the clock went off, weren't you?

Ms Blakeman: Well, no. The "shoot" was an expression of my disappointment that I couldn't keep going.

Okay. I'm going back again following on my concept that if I'm going to give somebody more money, I'm going to look at how well they're doing with the money I gave them last time.

Going back to the October 2008 Auditor General's report. Now, of course, you will remember that there was a very large report done in here on climate change, Alberta's response to climate change. There were a number of recommendations that were made as a result of this. Let me be clear: I'm not finding fault with the Department of Energy for not having accomplished all of this because, frankly, they've had six months, and I wouldn't require that of them. It does tell you the amount of work that needs to be done.

Let me just take a step back here. I think one of my concerns and one of the things that I would like to know is if the money that we're allocating here today is going to go to a change in direction. Because what I've seen from this department is that it's not about protecting the environment; it is about sort of getting out of the way of the Department of Energy and what the Department of Energy wishes to do. I think we need to change that.

We need to refocus so that our Department of Environment is about protecting the environment: first of all, for Albertans, the people; secondly, for our biosphere, literally the environment that we have here, our wetlands and our water, and allowing those particular bioenvironments to stay healthy; and third, for an economic development.

Don't mistake me and don't get all upset and go run around saying: oh, the Member for Edmonton-Centre got up and said, you know, that we should stop all oil and gas and nonrenewable natural resource development in the province. That's not what I'm saying. But we do need to put a focus on protecting the environment while that development happens. In some cases maybe the development might have to take a step aside while we put some protections in place.

I've already identified water as a key concern of Albertans. It has been something where the department has not met the requirements and met the recommendations. That's about an attest auditing. That's about recording what you've done and how you've spent the money. As we start to move into systems audit, it is about: did you get value for money? Did you accomplish for the money you had what you said you were trying to do? It's a much more complicated way of looking at it, but ultimately it gives us tools as legislators to be better able to answer the questions of our constituents as to: did we get what we thought we were paying for? Did we get it? Did we get healthier babies and fewer low-weight babies? Did we get that? Well, you might have to do a number of things to achieve that. Did we get, you know, clean drinking water for every Albertan? That may be harder to achieve than it sounds at the first go.

We did have a systems audit done on Alberta's response to climate change. I would have to say that the biggest thing that comes out of this is that we don't know because we are not keeping track of things well enough and monitoring things well enough to be able to give ourselves a benchmark from which to measure that.

4:10

Some recommendations were set out by the Auditor General, in this case recommendation 9. Again, it's a numbered recommendation, so that's a serious recommendation. It recommends some areas of improvement for the department.

- establishing overall criteria for selecting climate-change actions.
- creating and maintaining a master implementation plan for the actions necessary to meet the emissions-intensity target for 2020 and the emissions-reduction target for 2050.
- corroborating – through modelling and other analysis – that the actions chosen by the ministry [actually] result in Alberta being on track for achieving its targets for 2020 and 2050.

So what we're learning here is that we actually can't tell how well we're doing in moving forward on climate change.

The government did not consistently consider cost-effectiveness when it decided to establish climate-change programs to fulfill the 2002 Plan.

I'm looking at the bottom of page 98 in the October 2008 AG report.

It did consider cost-effectiveness for the energy retrofit program and for the Specified Gas Emitters program . . . [but the cost] of Me First! and the Bioenergy programs were known at the planning stages, but the amount of emissions reductions expected at the planning stage . . . was not documented.

So we have no way of knowing.

We've started implementation plans, but we don't know how we're progressing along with that. We don't have the overall criteria for selecting the projects to fulfill the 2002 plan and haven't developed overall criteria for selecting projects to fulfill the 2008 strategy. Well, that's gone.

The ministry does not know the best route to achieve reductions. The actions will achieve target, but we can't corroborate them. Major actions were not modelled, and where they did model action, it wasn't included in the plan.

We have an additional numbered recommendation 10, that "for each major action in the 2008 Climate Change Strategy, the Ministry of Environment evaluate the action's effect in achieving Alberta's climate change goals."

Recommendation 11 is that the ministry "improve the reliability, comparability and relevance of its public reporting on Alberta's success and costs incurred in meeting climate-change targets."

If I could recommend this to anybody that's trying to track along, you can download this from the Auditor General's site and read it yourself. It's a good way of understanding where we're at and gives us some standards to measure the progress of the department.

Here we have a department that is requesting \$63 million plus a million dollars in nonbudgetary disbursements. We've been told by the minister, in response to one of my questions earlier today, that there's no front-end loading on this, that most of their projects just roll through, and that this \$64 million plus a million dollars is going to be enough to take them through. But we have no sense of this and, as a number of my colleagues have noted, no details to understand what exactly is going to be done in those first three months. Actually, by the time the budget will be approved, now by the end of May, two full months will have passed in which we did not know what the government was going to be doing.

The reaction I usually get about this point from members of the government is: well, hang on; we have a three-year process here, so you can tell what's going on if you go back and look at the three-year budgeting process. Yes, she said cautiously, but every time I look at that, it has shifted so much that you really cannot compare year to year. One of the ways of watching that is the performance measurements, which, again, absolutely disappear. You look and there's a whole new series of performance measurements which all say that there is no benchmark because they're developing it. The

idea of this three-year rolling budget is one that we should be attempting, but we've got to try a little harder to get closer to actually sticking to it.

Of course, we've now had a huge change in our finances. Part of what I'm trying to dig out from everything I can read about the department's plans is: will this change in the economy, will the change in the price per barrel of oil affect what the Department of Environment is going to be doing to protect our environment? How are they going to end up moving forward? Will there be cuts in what the department is going to be doing during this fiscal year?

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Taylor: And the hits just keep on coming, Mr. Chairman. Up again. When the little beeper went off last time, I was just starting to ask about the third-quarter fiscal update and the reprofiling and the rescheduling of capital grants therein and asking if we can draw any kind of relationship or correlation. I'm hoping I will get an answer back from somebody on the government side sometime before the budget, but not holding my breath, on how the list of capital investments in the interim supply reflects the third-quarter fiscal update's reprofiling and rescheduling of capital grants. Will there be a significant slowdown in capital spending in the upcoming years? How much of this interim spending, how much of this \$10 billion, is the result of the budget being delayed? I know the easy answer – all of it – but in real terms how much of this spending is as a result of the budget being delayed?

Here are a couple of things I'd like to know. Given that we are in such perilous times, such unpredictable times that the government has had to put off the budget until early April, will the government be reducing travel expenditures and hosting expenses and vehicle allowances and nice-to-do, nice-to-have things like that, fluffy, perky things that perhaps ought not to be indulged in when times are not good? I wonder if we'll get an answer to that. This is something I would love to know. This is something I would love for someone on the government side . . .

Mr. MacDonald: The details on the health care budget?

Mr. Taylor: Oh, that, too. I'd like to know that.

This is what I'd love to know if somebody on the government side of the House will spill this before budget day: what kind of cost-cutting advice was given to all these ministers from the Finance minister? Were there any specific areas highlighted for reducing expenditures? Do we see any of that reflected in these interim reports?

Ms Blakeman: Is that what he's waiting for with bated breath?

Mr. Taylor: Is somebody waiting for something with bated breath?

Ms Blakeman: Yeah. The minister of health.

Mr. Taylor: The minister of health is waiting for something with bated breath. How can I help him?

Mr. MacDonald: The budget.

Mr. Taylor: Oh, he's waiting for the budget with bated breath. The minister of health says he doesn't know how much money he's going to have. Gosh, I'd have to ask him back: when does he get to find that out? Do you get any clue before budget day?

Mr. Liepert: April 7.

Mr. Taylor: April 7. So what do you do as a cabinet minister between now and April 7? Do you just kind of sit there, you know, twiddling your thumbs and wondering what's going to come? You rely on interim supply, obviously, to pay the bills between now and then, so when all of this is said and done and when we're finished asking questions and you're finished not answering them, you're going to have, Minister, your \$3,242,800,000 to get you through until the new Visa card comes in the mail – I mean until the budget comes – but you're still not going to know what the situation is for the new fiscal year. What are your spending plans? I will put this to the health minister: what are your spending plans for this money, for the \$3,242,800,000, the \$3,238,000,000 in expense and equipment/inventory purchases and the \$4,800,000 in capital investment? What are your spending plans for that money from the time this gets approved?

4:20

Mr. Liepert: Avastin.

Mr. Taylor: It's not all going to go to Avastin, and you know that very well.

Mr. Liepert: Part of it will.

Mr. Taylor: Part of it will, but one would think a fairly small part of it. One would think a fairly small part of it. Do you stay the course with the spending that you've been doing? Do you cut back? Do you save some of this in case it turns out that you're going to need it because you've had your spending cut in some other area as your budget has been reduced? What kinds of thoughts go through the health minister's mind, I wonder, when he's in this situation, when you're heading out to get yourself and your department through the next few weeks until we've finished the budget debate, till we have the budget? I'm very curious – very curious – as to what that would be like. I would love to be a fly on the wall, you know. I would love to be a fly on the wall.

You know, you look at the health budget, for instance, and I keep coming back to the \$400 million in capital grants reprofiled from the '08-09 budget. What was that? What's being delayed? Are we going to get three floors out of a six-floor expansion of the Peter Lougheed hospital in Calgary? Is that going to go ahead or not? Is this going to have an impact on construction of the new south Calgary hospital? Are things going to come to a grinding halt, or are they going to slow down there? What other hospitals in what other communities, Grande Prairie for instance, are right off the books as a result of this or delayed? Who gets to move to the back of the line again is really the question. There are many health facilities that are under review – Fort Saskatchewan, Grande Prairie, the south Calgary campus, the Lougheed expansion – and there's \$400 million in delayed projects, so you've got to figure something's not going ahead that we thought was going to go ahead.

Now, if I can refer back to the example of the city that I know best, Calgary, you think back to the experience with the expansion of the Rockyview general hospital and how they built that. They opened all the new beds, and then they closed all the old beds because they didn't have the staff to staff the expanded facility. So

they basically moved the patients from the old beds into the new beds, moved the staff from the old beds into the new beds, closed down the old beds with a net loss of five or six beds. When all that capital money was spent on the expansion of that phase of the Rockyview, we ended up with a smaller hospital than we had before we started building.

I'd love to know how that happened or why. I would love to know because, I mean, a hospital is not like putting a new granite countertop on your counter in the kitchen. It's not something you just do in a day or so. It's not like laying new carpet, right? It takes a while to build a hospital. It takes a very long while to build a hospital in Calgary, and it takes a fairly long time to expand a hospital.

The Calgary health region, which no longer exists because of the restructuring that we're going through, came to the realization four or five years ago now that: "Holy bleep. We don't have enough beds for our population. We'd better start building some more hospital facilities." They embarked on an ambitious and unquestionably expensive program to try and expand the Rockyview, to try and expand the Peter Lougheed, to put the new Sheldon Chumir urgent care centre downtown, to put urgent care centres in various other parts of the city, to do a pretty significant rebuild on part of the Foothills hospital. All that, Mr. Chair, was just to get us through till the new hospital opened.

The Chair: It's 4:25. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. Pursuant to Standing Order 4(3), which requires that the Committee of Supply rise and report prior to the time of adjournment, the Committee of Supply shall now and rise and report.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions relating to the 2009-2010 interim supply estimates for the offices of the Legislative Assembly, the general revenue fund, and the lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Deputy Speaker: Does Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I now move that the Assembly stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Monday.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:27 p.m. to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 27th Legislature - 2nd Session (2009)

Activity to March 05, 2009

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 200 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills with lower numbers are Government Bills. Bills numbered Pr1, etc., are Private Bills.

*An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If it comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel for details at (780) 427-2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned a chapter number until the conclusion of the fall sittings.

- 1 Employment Standards (Reservist Leave) Amendment Act, 2009 (Stelmach)**
First Reading -- 6 (Feb. 10 aft.)
Second Reading -- 90-93 (Feb. 17 aft., passed)
- 2 Lobbyists Amendment Act, 2009 (Redford)**
First Reading -- 9 (Feb. 11 aft.)
Second Reading -- 93-94 (Feb. 17 aft.), 121-23 (Feb. 18 aft.), 212-14 (Mar. 3 aft., passed)
- 3 Credit Union Amendment Act, 2009 (Berger)**
First Reading -- 17 (Feb. 11 aft.)
Second Reading -- 123-24 (Feb. 18 aft.), 202-03 (Mar. 3 aft., passed)
- 4 Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2009 (Bhullar)**
First Reading -- 17 (Feb. 11 aft.)
Second Reading -- 124 (Feb. 18 aft., adjourned)
- 5 Marketing of Agricultural Products Amendment Act, 2009 (Griffiths)**
First Reading -- 17 (Feb. 11 aft.)
Second Reading -- 125 (Feb. 18 aft.), 214-15 (Mar. 3 aft., passed)
- 6 Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Amendment Act, 2009 (Forsyth)**
First Reading -- 18 (Feb. 11 aft.)
- 7 Public Health Amendment Act, 2009 (Liepert)**
First Reading -- 18 (Feb. 11 aft.)
- 8 Feeder Associations Guarantee Act (\$) (Groeneveld)**
First Reading -- 18 (Feb. 11 aft.)
Second Reading -- 203-08 (Mar. 3 aft., passed)
- 9 Government Organization Amendment Act, 2009 (Campbell)**
First Reading -- 18 (Feb. 11 aft.)
- 10 Supportive Living Accommodation Licensing Act (Dallas)**
First Reading -- 18 (Feb. 11 aft.)
- 11 Fisheries (Alberta) Amendment Act, 2009 (VanderBurg)**
First Reading -- 19 (Feb. 11 aft.)
- 12 Surface Rights Amendment Act, 2009 (Berger)**
First Reading -- 19 (Feb. 11 aft.)
- 13 Justice of the Peace Amendment Act, 2009 (Redford)**
First Reading -- 19 (Feb. 11 aft.)

- 14 Carbon Capture and Storage Funding Act (\$) (Knight)**
First Reading -- 138 (Feb. 19 aft.)
Second Reading -- 208-10 (Mar. 3 aft., adjourned)
- 15 Dunvegan Hydro Development Act (Oberle)**
First Reading -- 105-06 (Feb. 18 aft.)
Second Reading -- 210-11 (Mar. 3 aft., passed)
- 16 Peace Officer Amendment Act, 2009 (Lindsay)**
First Reading -- 106 (Feb. 18 aft.)
- 17 Securities Amendment Act, 2009 (Fawcett)**
First Reading -- 106 (Feb. 18 aft.)
- 18 Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement Implementation Statutes Amendment Act, 2009 (Stevens)**
First Reading -- 161 (Mar. 2 aft.)
Second Reading -- 211-12 (Mar. 3 aft., adjourned)
- 19 Land Assembly Project Area Act (Hayden)**
First Reading -- 161 (Mar. 2 aft.)
- 20 Civil Enforcement Amendment Act, 2009 (Denis)**
First Reading -- 161 (Mar. 2 aft.)
- 201 Traffic Safety (Vehicles with Unlawfully Possessed Firearms) Amendment Act, 2009 (Hehr)**
First Reading -- 106 (Feb. 18 aft.)
Second Reading -- 165-76 (Mar. 2 aft., adjourned)
- 202 Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009 (Johnston)**
First Reading -- 138 (Feb. 19 aft.)
- 203 Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009 (Johnson)**
First Reading -- 251-52 (Mar. 5 aft.)

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