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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.

Monday, March 9, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

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

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, we'll now be led in the singing of our national anthem by Mr. Paul Lorieau. I would invite all here to join in and to participate in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

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

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly the consul general of Greece, Mr. Georgios Ayfantis. Mr. Ayfantis is on his first official visit to Alberta, and I was pleased to be able to host a lunch with him today. As he pointed out, one thing we do share is that we're both great places for tourism. With the weather outside I know the hon. members would like to perhaps be visiting Greece today. There are almost 12,000 Albertans of Hellenic descent, and they help enrich the Alberta culture. Every summer Calgary holds a Greek festival to promote Hellenic culture with food, dance, and music. I'd ask Mr. Ayfantis to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration.

Mr. Goudreau: Merci, M. le Président. Aujourd'hui j'ai le privilège de présenter en votre nom, à vous et à l'Assemblée, des leaders de la communauté francophone de l'Alberta. Ils ont participé ce matin à la cérémonie dans la rotonde de la Législature à l'occasion des Rendez-vous de la Francophonie, une célébration nationale annuelle de l'histoire et de la culture françaises.

Je suis heureux de vous présenter les membres exécutifs de l'Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta. L'association, connue sous l'acronyme l'ACFA, est l'organisme porte-parole des francophones. L'ACFA a son bureau provincial à Edmonton et chapeaute 14 bureaux régionaux ou cercles locaux à travers la province. Le gouvernement de l'Alberta est fier de la relation positive qu'il a construite avec l'ACFA, et ensemble nous sommes engagés à améliorer le bien-être et l'autonomie des francophones en Alberta. Présents parmi nous aujourd'hui sont Mme Dolorèse Nolette, vice-présidente de l'ACFA, représentante du nord-ouest; Mme Jeanne Robinson et Reed Gauthier, représentants du nord-est;

Mme Carole Anne Patenaude; représentante de la région du centre, Mme Omayra Issa; et M. Denis Perreaux, directeur général.

Les accompagnants pour cette journée spéciale à la Législature sont M. Denis Tardif, Cindie LeBlanc, et Manon Hamel, membres de mon équipe au Secrétariat francophone. Je leur demanderais de se lever et être reconnus par l'Assemblée.

Je vous invite à vous joindre à moi pour leur souhaiter une bienvenue chaleureuse.

Merci, M. le Président.

[Translation] Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the privilege of introducing to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly a number of leaders from Alberta's francophone community who participated this morning in a ceremony in the Legislature rotunda as part of Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie, a national two-week celebration of French culture and history.

I am pleased to introduce executive members of the French Canadian Association of Alberta. The association, commonly known as the ACFA, is the provincial organization representing all francophones. The ACFA has a provincial secretariat in Edmonton and 14 regional, or affiliate, chapters across the province. The Alberta government is proud of the positive relations it has built with the ACFA and commits to supporting initiatives that will enhance the well-being and self-reliance of French-speaking Albertans. I would ask our guests to stand as I introduce them: Vice-President Mrs. Dolorèse Nolette, representing the northwest; Mrs. Jeanne Robinson and Reed Gauthier, representing the northeast; Mrs. Carole-Anne Patenaude; representing the central region, Mrs. Omayra Issa; accompanied by Director General Mr. Denis Perreaux.

Also joining them on this special day at the Legislature are members of my staff at the Francophone Secretariat: Mr. Denis Tardif, executive director; Ms Cindie LeBlanc, assistant director; Ms Manon Hamel, community liaison officer for southern Alberta.

I would ask all of the members of the Assembly to give these guests a very warm welcome to our Legislature. [As submitted]

The Speaker: Hon. members, today is also Commonwealth Day. All hon. members will have on their desks a message from Her Majesty the Queen, head of the Commonwealth.

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, today we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Commonwealth, which is comprised of 53 member states and over a third of the world's population. I'd like to introduce to you and all members of the Assembly three directors of the Edmonton branch of the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada who are seated in your gallery. These individuals work diligently in carrying out the important work of the society in Alberta and across the globe. They are Major Alexander Tsang, Mrs. Sheri Paquette, and Reverend Joshua Phillpotts. I'd ask that they now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a young gentleman with a genuine interest in Alberta politics, and that is Mr. Dawson Wikkerink. He is seated in the members' gallery. I've had the pleasure of meeting Dawson on several occasions both in Lethbridge and in Raymond. Dawson and his family, Wayne and Anne and his brother J.R., live and farm just 15 kilometres outside of Lethbridge. Dawson is currently in grade

3 at Fleetwood Bawden school and has been a keen follower of our political process. In fact, when it's his turn for sharing with his classmates, he provides regular updates of our political processes, including both the recent leadership and the general election. I know that farming is in Dawson's blood, and so is politics.

A memory that I will always cherish. I had made a comment to the media when I was in Lethbridge, correctly put by the media, that we sold our cow herd and that I kind of missed early spring, you know, when the calves are running around the field with tails up in the air, really spirited. He was kind enough to send me a picture to my office of their first-born calf last year. Dawson, I would welcome you and your dad, Wayne Wikkerink. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a wonderful group of 37 grade 6 students from Brander Gardens elementary school, located in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. Accompanying the students are their teachers, Natalie Gago-Estevés and Daniel Lemieux, along with teacher aide Mrs. Carroll. They are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, it's also my pleasure to introduce to you and through you today a number of Alberta Education employees whose innovative work on Speak Out, the Alberta student engagement initiative, has gained momentum across Alberta and high praise with education stakeholders, parents, the media, and, most importantly, the students themselves. Seated in the members' gallery and representing Alberta Education are Jennifer Keller, director of student engagement; Litzzy Baeza, manager of student engagement; Sandra Dyal, Speak Out forums co-ordinator; Jamie Stewart, co-ordinator of student engagement; and Greg Kuzniuk, public affairs officer. These fine individuals are responsible for motivating Alberta's youth to participate in an ongoing province-wide forum on education, and they deserve the appreciation of the Assembly and all Albertans for raising the level of discussion in an engagement of our students. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two groups to introduce today. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a group of 32 visitors from Boyle school, who are in all week for the School at the Leg. They are led by their parents and teachers Emily Thomson, Tracey Currie, Bonnie Antal, Karen Douglas, Cheryl Snyder, Curtis Gunderson, Dale Bencharsky, and grandpa Tom Ghostkeeper, who worked in this building for five years. I believe they're in the members' gallery behind me, and I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 14 visitors from the New Horizons seniors' club in Radway: Allan and Cecilia Holt, Norm West, Esther West, Lena Chykerda, Helen Kuchmak, Mike Halun, Alphie Delorme, Martha Delorme, Joy Langley, Nick Kuchmak, Harold Moffitt, Nestor Bury, and Ruby Burkosky. They will be entering and leaving during question period, but I'd like to acknowledge their presence here today and welcome them to the Legislature.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the privilege of introducing to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly a number of very special guests from my constituency. They sang for us here this morning during the symbolic Franco-Albertan flag-raising ceremony in the Legislature rotunda as part of Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie, the national two-week celebration of French culture and history. It is with great pleasure that I introduce the grade 6 students from l'école Père-Lacombe, who I believe are in the public gallery: teacher M. Mathieu Brosseau-Tremblay and parent helpers Mme Lise Roy-Maxwell and Mme Adeline Viens. I'd ask them all to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to this House 24 very brilliant students from Patricia Heights elementary school and from my constituency of Edmonton-McClung. Accompanying them is their teacher, Mrs. Beverly Oldford, and parents Mrs. Angela McEwen, Mrs. Lisa Hamdon, Mrs. Tina Choucair, and Mrs. Krista Leddy. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today with two introductions. My first is to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly two representatives from the University of Calgary: Mr. Gary Durbeniuk and Mr. Brian Wik. Gary is the vice-president of development at the University of Calgary. In 2007-08 his department raised over \$82 million to support scholarships, bursaries, research, and new learning spaces at the University of Calgary. Brian Wik, University of Calgary's senior director of government relations, is responsible for maintaining effective working relationships with the provincial government. I would like to thank them both for their ongoing commitment to the University of Calgary and to students in Alberta and abroad. They're seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I would ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

It is also an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly members of the Council of Alberta University Students, or CAUS. They are an advisory group of presidents and vice-presidents of students' unions from universities around the province who are meeting with the members of the Assembly all this week. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon, and I would ask that they would each stand as I call their name to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. They are Beverly Eastham, CAUS chair and recently re-elected vice-president external at the University of Alberta; Jenn Prosser, CAUS vice-chair and U of L Students' Union vice-president academic; Janelle Morin, University of Alberta Students' Union president; Dalmy Baez, University of Calgary Students' Union president; Alastair MacKinnon, University of Calgary Students' Union vice-president external; Lauren Webber, recently elected as external commissioner at the University of Calgary and daughter of the Member for Calgary-Foothills; Adam Vossepel, University of Lethbridge Students' Union president; Kendall Yamagishi, University of Lethbridge

Students' Union academic commissioner; and Duncan Wojtaszek, executive director of CAUS. They are now standing in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that you give them the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly Mr. Stanley Swensen, seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. Mr. Swensen is a memorial counsellor for Remco Memorials in Didsbury, in the constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. He earned his doctorate of veterinary medicine in 1971 from Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. What a great school. He is also a graduate of Rocky Mountain College, biblical studies, where he earned his bachelor of arts in education. He and his wife, Linda, have two daughters, Cynthia Dawn and Amanda Jane. He's joining us today to get a better look at how things operate in this Legislature. I'd ask that Mr. Swensen please rise and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege today to introduce to you and all members of the Assembly one of the true statesmen of Alberta business, chairman of the board of the ATCO Group of companies, truly a family that shares with many, many communities in Alberta. It's my pleasure to introduce Mr. Ron Southern. Would Ron stand and please accept the warm, traditional welcome of this Assembly?

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Legislative Assembly my brother John MacDonald and his wife, Pam MacDonald. John is a farmer, and Pam is a teacher. They're visiting Alberta for an entire week. Last week they were in Calgary to attend the annual meeting of the Canadian Horticultural Council. John is a past president of that council. They are proud parents of three children. They're expecting their first grandchild at the end of May, and they're very much looking forward to being grandparents. They have already risen. They are in the public gallery. I would now ask that hon. members give them the warm, traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many brave and determined people come through the galleries to watch the proceedings, none more brave or determined than those I'm going to introduce to you today and to all members of the Assembly. First is Lorna Chandler, whose husband died in a farm accident. The fatality was the subject of a recent inquiry. I'd ask Lorna to stand. Second is Philippa Thomas, who is here with her husband, Bruce. Philippa is permanently disabled because of a farm accident. With them are two tireless crusaders on this issue, Eric Musekamp and Darlene Dunlop. I'd ask them all to rise. Please give them a warm reception. Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly two engaged and concerned citizens of our province who I met with earlier today and who have presented additional signatures to a petition originally presented to the Legislature in August of 2006. My guests are Mrs. Diane Martin, president of the Alberta Lymphedema Association, and Mrs. Theresa Storm, a Calgarian who suffers from primary lymphedema. Earlier today I met with Diane and Theresa to discuss the closing of the only clinic in southern Alberta which treats non cancer-related lymphedema patients. I want to thank these two individuals for coming to the Legislature to raise their concerns today. I would now ask that they both rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have as my guests seven individuals representing Women in Black Edmonton, an organization that opposes violence in all its forms, whether it be in the home, in our communities or cities, or full-scale military action. In 1975 the United Nations proclaimed March 8 to be International Women's Day, a day on which women around the world should commemorate their struggles and celebrate their achievements in attaining justice and equality for women throughout the world. Women in Black Edmonton were the recipients of the Salvos peace award from Project Ploughshares for 2006. My guests are seated in the members' gallery and I would ask them to rise as I call their names: Marilyn Gaa, Sarah Miller, Susan MacEachran, Jean Ure, Anna Radyo, Peggy Folinsbee, and Barbara Sykes. I would ask that they now receive the traditional warm welcome from this Assembly.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Provincial Borrowing

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the midst of a boom Alberta was spending 23 per cent more per capita than the national average. Now, in the midst of a bust, the Premier is thinking about taking out a loan rather than taking a serious look at the rampant, often wasteful spending this PC government has gotten so used to. To the Premier. Never mind the great rates at the bank. The fact is that putting Alberta back into debt is against the law in this province. Is the Premier planning to do away with the Fiscal Responsibility Act?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is picking up on a headline that was in the *Edmonton Journal* following a discussion I had with a financial analyst Sunday morning. I put forward the situation where the province of Alberta has a triple-A credit rating – we can't have a better credit rating than the country of Canada, so we will always stay at the triple-A credit rating – and we also have \$6 billion cash in the bank to spend on capital. My simple question was that if we were to borrow against the \$6 billion, keep that cash in the bank but borrow against it at very reasonable rates or even still borrow cheaper than what we're getting for return in interest on the cash in the bank, why wouldn't we do it? To me, I think that's a good business decision.

Mr. Taylor: Gee, Mr. Speaker, I don't know. Maybe because it's illegal.

If Alberta is going to be taking out loans, does that mean there

isn't enough in the sustainability fund and the capital account to cover your expenses, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Stelmach: Well, first of all, they're not my expenses; it's providing programs for people in this province. The sustainability fund is different. Again, this is not truly the whole understanding of the opposition. There are two funds that we have in the bank: capital, which is for construction of infrastructure – roads, schools, hospitals – and the sustainability fund, which is in place to cushion the dramatic drop in the price of oil and gas.

Ms Blakeman: We know what it is. It was our idea.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, if it was your idea, then you should know more about it.

What happens is that the sustainability fund stays in place, and we will draw on those savings as necessary if oil and gas prices do not increase over the next year or two, and the reason being that we always were clear with Albertans. This is like putting money between the mattresses. We'll draw on it when our revenue drops. That's very good planning, and the only jurisdiction in North America that actually has cash in the bank to do that.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, he's talking about using somebody else's money from somebody else's mattress. That would be the taxpayers of Alberta, ultimately, who are going to have to pay this money back with interest.

Has anyone in the government made a serious attempt to spend smarter before the Premier started thinking out loud about taking out a loan so that he doesn't have to take his fingers out of the cookie jar?

Mr. Stelmach: Once again, complete missessaging there on behalf of the person asking the question. This is for capital. What a good opportunity to finally catch up with the roads and the schools and the hospitals we need at one-third or even half of the cost we were paying in this high inflationary period that we just went through. It makes sense. Let's throw some figures. If we're getting, let's say, 3 per cent on the money in the bank, and we can borrow at 1 per cent and make 2 per cent on the money in the bank, man, I think that's a good business decision.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Protection of Children in Care

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has failed once again to protect a vulnerable young child in their custody. The government's pretense of not holding a public inquiry as an excuse to protect the child's identity rings hollow. It's too little too late for this child. To the Premier: to honour the memories of the three children most recently killed or critically injured while in custody of the ministry of children's services as well as to provide some degree of closure for the parents and family whose children were apprehended, will the Premier conduct a complete and transparent public inquiry?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, our hearts go out to the families, both the birth families and also the thousands of foster families that open their doors, their homes, to foster children in this province. This is a matter that the minister is investigating thoroughly. There is legislation in place to protect the identity of the children and the families. I think that legislation is appropriate.

Last year we gave the opposition an opportunity to sign a waiver and open up the files to those two individuals that are opposition critics. I believe maybe one had accepted; the other one refused. Then to use this House to now debate a situation that the minister is thoroughly investigating – once again, I have tremendous trust in our minister to investigate fully.

Mr. Chase: Mr. Premier, you and I are both grandparents. We can be empathetic. We can be sympathetic. But you're the one that needs to take action. Given the disproportionate number of aboriginal children taken into custody, what assurances can the Premier provide that he is working with his federal counterparts to support aboriginal families within their home so that fewer children will have to be placed into foster or kinship care?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, with respect to working with aboriginal and Métis families, this province has shown great leadership in the country of Canada in terms of building relationships with the First Nations. In fact, we have entered into agreements with a number of chiefs that offer children's services on reservations. We believe it is culturally right, and we're working with the First Nations to do whatever we can to improve the quality of life and also reduce the number of children that are under the care of the government. It is much better for them to stay within their families.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. We have one recent aboriginal child dead, another barely hanging onto life in the Foothills hospital while his mother maintains a vigil. Why, having made the decision to apprehend these children, was more thought not given to the conditions of their placement, including support for and oversight of the foster parents?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the department has a very thorough way of assessing foster families. As was the occasion this weekend where the foster families got together for a celebration, one of the foster families said that, you know, 99 per cent of the time things go right. Occasionally, you do have a situation like this, but let's not point a finger at all of the foster families in this great province because without them we wouldn't have anyone to assist us in dealing with . . .

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

Farm-related Accidents and Fatalities

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On average, there are 18 deaths and 1,500 significant injuries from farm-related accidents in Alberta every year, yet most farm workers have no protection under the Occupational Health and Safety Act or workers' compensation or the labour code because of the deliberate policy of this government. To the Premier: when will paid farm workers have the same protection under Occupational Health and Safety as other workers as recommended by a judge in a recent fatality inquiry?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, a judge has made a decision. The two ministers responsible – the minister of agriculture and also Employment and Immigration – are now looking at how to hold consultations and work with the public to see what we can do in this particular area. It'll take a little time to work out the various situations, but we're moving ahead.

Dr. Taft: It doesn't need consultations. There are off-the-shelf solutions in every other province in this country.

The fatality inquiry notes that neither the Department of Employment and Immigration nor the department of agriculture normally investigate farm deaths because, unbelievably, there's no legislation to require it. The judge noted that investigations of deaths allow for the incorporation of standards to prevent similar deaths in the future. Again to the Premier: will this government implement changes to automatically require investigation of all farm worker deaths?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm not familiar with the letter of the law, but I know that all deaths on family farms – and other farms are investigated if there's a death and an accident – are certainly investigated by the police. But this is looking at how we can work towards preventing not only deaths but accidents where, you know, there is loss of limb or some damage to one's individual health. As I said, progress is being made, and we'll be able to report to the House at the most appropriate time.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Enacting work standards for paid farm workers was done long ago in other provinces, so people are wondering why this government won't act. The Premier, who is key in this, failed to disclose the names of major supporters for his leadership campaign covering \$160,000 in donations. It's widely known that huge feedlot operators granted him an airplane and a helicopter for his leadership bid, but those donations were not filed. To the Premier: will the Premier admit that his government won't budge on this life-and-death policy because he doesn't want to offend the backers of his leadership campaign?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. member is bordering on a question of privilege, and I would ask him to withdraw those comments in the House or I shall proceed with one.

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

Assembly of Land for Large Infrastructure Projects

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This government's proposed Bill 19 will give them total and unchecked control over private property owned by Albertans, and if they dare to protest, this government would throw them in jail and fine them hundreds of thousands of dollars. Rural Albertans are furious that a rural Premier and his cabinet would propose such a Stalinist law. To the Premier: why won't you admit that this policy tramples the land rights of rural Albertans?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, looking back in history, we could have done things better in terms of acquiring land for public infrastructure or possibly right-of-ways for pipelines and electrical transmission lines as well. We want to work with landowners to ensure that they are treated fairly as we develop long-term corridors in the province of Alberta. The province will grow. We will require more electrical transmission lines. We want to make sure that when we're crossing someone's property, when we're buying land for the purchase of that public use, all landowners are treated fairly. That's the purpose of the bill.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the Premier thinks that black is white.

Ordinary Albertans won't stand for a government that tramples on their rights even if they're threatened with prison time. This policy is a disgrace, landowners know it, and they're furious that this government would propose such measures. The government will rue the day that it betrayed rural Albertans. To the Premier: how can you claim to respect the 600,000 rural residents of this province when you're about to throw their land rights into the meat grinder?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, you know, it's one thing to go to someone to write these questions and add offensive language, but this is a serious matter. We want to work with landowners to make sure that they are treated fairly. There is huge room for improvement in the way we buy land for public infrastructure, and we want to ensure that all landowners are treated fairly. It is a complex issue. In some cases a municipal government or the provincial government may want to almost, like, sterilize land for the future for years and not appropriately deal with the actual cost of that land because we've sterilized it for years on end. How do we deal with that situation fairly? That's the whole discussion through this Bill 19.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the principle of fairness is entirely absent from this bill. It empowers government to make more sweetheart deals with their P3 friends and their energy company buddies to build whatever they want on farmers' land. It might be a power line, a ring road, or a nuclear power plant. It is an authoritarian policy brought forward by an arrogant government that takes everyday rural Albertans for granted. To the Premier: will you do the right thing and withdraw Bill 19?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the power lines that are built through agricultural lands, farmers' own land, are there to supply energy to the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary. If you don't want to supply energy, just tell us; we won't have to build the transmission lines. But I don't know how you will get energy to the major centres without building new transmission lines, simple as that.

Speaker's Ruling Questions about Legislation

The Speaker: Hon. members, nearly four minutes has transpired in this last set of questions. The chair is a bit concerned because the chair does not believe that this bill has been moved yet for second reading in this Assembly, and we're now debating bills in question period. Questions related to policy are one thing, but questions with specifics to a bill are quite another thing, particularly when the bill has not been moved for second reading.

The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Victims' Restitution and Compensation

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There have been issues raised recently about a perceived loophole in the government's new Victims Restitution and Compensation Payment Act. My first question is not for the Premier but for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Could the minister provide some clarification regarding this concern?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There has been much discussion about this issue in the last couple of weeks in many places that I've been. I wanted to take the opportunity today to talk about Bill 50 with respect to what it achieves and compare that to what the Canadian Criminal Code tries to do. What we see is a Criminal Code that requires a conviction before property can be seized and sold. It also has a loophole where, if a person who owns property has their property seized, the police are not able to move forward and ask the Crown to make an application to sell the property. Our provincial legislation does not have that loophole and therefore is more effective.

Mr. Quest: My second question to the same minister. This law is also being questioned for its ability to seize property before a criminal conviction has been obtained. Aren't all Albertans considered innocent until proven guilty?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our legislation does not speak to innocence or guilt. Our legislation speaks to property. What we are doing with our legislation and with Bill 50 is nothing more than what a citizen in Alberta could do who felt that property should be seized and sold. We believe that if the citizens of Alberta think that something should be done, it's entirely appropriate for us to pass legislation to not only support them in what they would like to do but to assist them and in some cases step into their shoes and take the same steps.

Thank you.

Mr. Quest: No supplemental.

Opening of Calgary Courts Centre

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, the former Minister of Justice advertised a political fundraiser to raise money for his re-election at the opening of the publicly funded Calgary courthouse in January 2008. This was just weeks before an election call. Although the event was put on the back burner, questions still remain. To the Deputy Premier: isn't it problematic that the most senior lawyer in our province was soliciting partisan donations at an event that was to be held at the Calgary courthouse on the same day as its grand opening?

Mr. Stevens: Well, Mr. Speaker, I must say that I recall the court opening. I don't recall doing any solicitation at all at that event.

Mr. Hehr: Well, fair enough. I'll table these documents after, but just to give you a highlight of them, you were soliciting donations through the PC Association. Nonetheless, I'll move on.

To the Minister of Justice: as that's the background, why did taxpayers pay for an event, the opening of the Calgary courthouse, that was being advertised by the Progressive Conservation Association as a fundraiser for the then Attorney General?

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

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Whenever we open a courthouse, we have an event. I know that as Minister of Justice I've been to a number of events where we've opened different clinics within courthouses, where we've opened different courthouses throughout the province. I know that opening the courthouse in Calgary was a very important event. From my department I'm advised that people believe the Calgary Courts Centre is one of the

top three courthouses on this continent right now. I think that it's important for a lot of people to have the opportunity to see it, and I believe that they did so on that day.

Mr. Hehr: I agree one hundred per cent with what the minister said. However, do you think it's wise, believing in the separation between government responsibility and court responsibilities, that the PC Association should be advertising fundraisers at the courthouse for an Attorney General, that are going for partisan goals?

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

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my understanding that when courthouses are opened, we have an event. I can't speak to the specifics or the allegations that the hon. member has made.

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

2:10 Postsecondary Education Affordability

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to a recent report by the Educational Policy Institute some institutions may have to increase tuition by as much as 25 per cent in the future due to losses to their endowment funds and declining revenues as a result of the global economic slowdown. My questions are to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. Do you foresee adjusting Alberta's current tuition fee policy to help students and institutions?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am somewhat familiar with the report that the Educational Policy Institute did. It was a national study. In Alberta we take great pride in the affordability framework which we put together in consultation with the students, and at this time there are no plans to change our current tuition fee policy. Currently students in Alberta pay somewhere under 25 per cent of the cost of their postsecondary education with Alberta taxpayers making a very good investment of upwards of 75 to 80 per cent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First supplemental to the same minister: how is the government supporting institutions in their effort to provide affordable student housing?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we're working with other members of this government in terms of their portfolio responsibilities in housing and students finance in my department. Affordable housing is one piece of the puzzle, and living on campus is one piece of the puzzle, but even living on campus is not necessarily desirable for all students. Some of our students are perhaps a little older when they come into our institutions than they used to be. Perhaps more of them are married with children. Perhaps the environment that they would like to live in while they attend our postsecondary institutions might not be conducive to on-campus. So we're looking at the whole package, and we'll continue to do so.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the

same minister: does the federal government's deferred maintenance program have potential to help Alberta students?

Mr. Horner: Very much so, Mr. Speaker. You know, our guests in the gallery would recognize that we've chatted about deferred maintenance at our postsecondary institutions many times over the last few years. It's certainly one of the priorities of our department. I have been in discussions with our federal counterparts on how we might be able to work together to reach mutual priorities on campus, which would include the deferred maintenance. That deferred maintenance, if we can utilize some of those federal dollars, obviously frees up dollars in other areas of the postsecondary budget that we hope would help the affordability framework for students.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Long-term Care

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Rural seniors are concerned that they may have to leave the area that they have called home for most of their lives when they find that they are unable to live independently. The seniors may in fact be second generation to the community. To the minister of health: what commitment is the minister willing to make to rural seniors so that when they have need of a long-term care facility, they will not be moved far from family and community?

Mr. Liepert: Well, as the first part of that preamble, the member referred to living independently. That's exactly what we want to try to do: ensure that if seniors want to live independently, they can have the health care provision that they need to retain that ability to live independently.

Ms Pastoor: I think that, clearly, the minister of health knows exactly what I'm trying to say. What I'm saying is that they are going to need long-term care. That is not independent living. No matter how you cut it, they need care, and they need the facilities.

The minister has proposed incentives for private and nonprofit investment in long-term care facilities. Will there be a provision for a percentage of these facilities to be developed in rural Alberta?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what incentives the member is referring to. I'm not aware of any incentives. However, the provision of long-term care by nonprofit and private providers has been in this province I think probably as long as the province has been incorporated, and we don't intend to change that.

Ms Pastoor: In fact, extra beds were promised in that area.

On February 18 in the House the minister stated, "I would hope that we could provide the options that we wouldn't need this policy," referring to the first-bed policy. What details and timelines can the minister give Albertans that he's really taking action on this issue, that it hasn't been put on the back burner?

Mr. Liepert: Well, clearly, one of the timelines will be the provincial budget that comes on April 7, Mr. Speaker, to see what funding we have available in Alberta Health and Wellness. We are working diligently every day to ensure that seniors have the accommodations that they need in their community, and we'll continue to do that.

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

Pigeon Lake Fishery

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents continue to be concerned about the whitefish fishery at Pigeon Lake. They are worried about the stocking of walleye and the special walleye licence program. My questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. What is he doing to support Pigeon Lake's whitefish fishery?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, the battle for Pigeon Lake continues. On the one side you have the walleye and their backers; on the other side, the whitefish. I say good. The fact that they're fighting each other – not the humans but the fish – is a good sign that our walleye stocking program has succeeded. We've succeeded in re-establishing a balanced fishery with all species of fish and better angling for humans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why has the minister allowed Pigeon Lake to be taken over by walleye to the detriment of whitefish, according to the long-time residents of the Pigeon Lake area?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, there's something fishy about that question. The restocking of walleye has benefited the whitefish fishery. Before the restocking program the whitefish were quite small. Now our fall netting survey shows that the average weight of the whitefish has doubled between 2003 and 2007, and the average length has increased from 42 to 49 centimetres. In the battle for Pigeon Lake size matters, and the whitefish are rising to the occasion.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. My constituents in the Pigeon Lake area ask the minister if he will consider scrapping the special walleye licence and allow a one-walleye-per-day limit for all anglers at Pigeon Lake.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I want the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar to know that I'm all for scrapping; scrapping between the whitefish and the walleye, that is. Opening up Pigeon Lake to an open season would quickly take us right back to where we were in the 1960s, with no walleye being left in the lake. The special walleye licence has made Pigeon Lake a premier walleye fishery and is helping to rebalance the population. Let the battle for Pigeon Lake continue.

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

Infrastructure Costs

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In comments this weekend the Minister of Transportation indicated that construction costs have dropped 40 per cent in six months in the province of Alberta due to the recession. When I look back six months, I see the following: a \$650 million, 30-year contract to build schools and a \$1.4 billion, 30-year contract for the north Anthony Henday Drive. That's a total of over \$2 billion in P3 projects. My first question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. Does the hon. minister now see that tying Alberta taxpayers to a 30-year P3 payment at peak construction costs is a very bad deal for taxpayers?

Mr. Hayden: No. In fact, Mr. Speaker, to the contrary. If you look at the agreement on our website and the payment schedule for the maintenance over the period of the contract, it's tied to labour costs and the consumer price index. When things get tough, the price comes down, and we as Albertans enjoy that break.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, that is untrue.

Again to the Minister of Infrastructure. Given the falling construction costs, will the government still be giving out those sweetheart deals where you've got overrides, cost-plus contracts for 15 per cent and 20 per cent on those contracts? Those details are on your website. It's obvious that you haven't read them.

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, that's completely incorrect. The agreement and the schedule for payment is posted on the website, has been posted on the website since the P3 was first announced. It's there. It dictates that the costs for maintenance on an ongoing basis are tied to those factors that I mentioned earlier. When we go forward with a project, there are no sweetheart deals unless it's a sweetheart deal for Albertans. We get the best price and get efficient and effective delivery.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would advise the Minister of Infrastructure to read closely the changeover portions of the contracts that he mentioned.

Again to the same minister: if the province can borrow publicly at just 1 per cent, as the Premier mused yesterday on radio, why is this government tying Alberta taxpayers to 30 years of high private-sector debt with these P3 contracts?

2:20

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, it was referred to earlier today by the Premier that, in fact, we have money in place within our provincial coffers for sustainability funds for our capital for the future, and it is actually receiving interest rates that exceed those that we pay in our agreements. It's only good business on behalf of Albertans to make sure that we get the most effective, efficient delivery of our infrastructure in a timely manner.

The Speaker: During that last exchange one hon. member used the phrase "untrue," and another one used the word "incorrect." The chair considers that a draw. There will be no points of order arising out of the last exchange, but I'd ask members to try and find other words to use.

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

Foster Care Review

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year the Minister of Children and Youth Services pledged to immediately implement a recommendation to stop arbitrary placements that ignored the four-child limit for foster homes. This weekend a director from her ministry said that there's at least one foster home in Alberta that has eight children. To the Minister of Children and Youth Services: how many foster homes in Alberta are in excess of the four-child maximum? Or is that yet another issue about which the minister is unaware?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member does mention the foster care review. I can say that the foster care review last year was extensive. It had internal and external experts. There were eight recommendations that stemmed from it. We accepted all of them. I mentioned last week that we're at various stages of implementation. Later today I do plan on tabling a report that will say what the status is of all the recommendations.

Ms Notley: Well, we have not however received an answer to my first question with respect to the number of homes in excess of four children.

As you mentioned, the minister pledged to immediately implement the recommendations of the hand-picked panel to clean up the foster care system. Thursday, as mentioned, the story changed, and we were told that the recommendations would be implemented by this summer. To the Minister of Children and Youth Services: given that you don't appear to have the slightest idea of what's actually going on in your ministry, how can Albertans trust that you are competent to protect the children in your care?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think I've always been very consistent with any information that I shared about the foster care review. That was a very extensive review last June. We accepted all of the recommendations and started to implement them. Like I said, this afternoon we'll have full information on the status of all of the recommendations.

Ms Notley: Well, last year we were told that they'd be implemented immediately. Now we're being told that they might be implemented by this summer. Last week the minister appeared unaware that a foster baby was clinging to life in a Calgary hospital. She gave us vague platitudes, and then she went into hiding. Indeed, last Thursday this minister told the Legislature that Alberta has a good foster care system. If this poor baby dies, however, he will be the third to suffer such a tragic fate under your watch in just over two years. To the minister: have we not yet reached the point where, in good conscience, you will do the right thing and resign?

Ms Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, as the member mentioned, we do have a serious incident where we have a little boy fighting for his life in hospital. I can tell you that the police are investigating this. At this point they have not said or determined whether this was an accident or whether it was because of wrongdoing, but I can tell you that I'm not waiting for any deliberation to take action. There are things I am doing. There are things I will not do. What I will not do is be irresponsible and speculate and interfere with the police investigation.

What I am doing: last week I talked about that I already had called a special review on this very case; today I'm announcing that I plan on making the findings of that review public. As well, I'm going to have information in the next couple of days and will make sure that there's a co-chair of that special case review who is an external expert. I think the bottom line is that we will always stay committed to continuous improvement of our child intervention and our foster care system.

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

Registered Education Savings Plans

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Both the federal and provincial governments give grants and tax shelters through programs like registered education savings plans to encourage and assist parents to save for their children's advanced education. Many Albertans are concerned about the financial well-being of their savings and the investment of the money contributed in these programs. My question today is to the hon. minister of finance. In light of the global economic situation what guarantee do parents have that that money is safe?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2005 in celebration of a special event in Alberta, the centennial, we offered parents up to \$800 as an incentive for saving for their children's future education. It was open to people to make their own selection of financial institutions. The private businesses that are banks do not receive any kind of insurance or guarantee from the provincial government, but the federal government under the Canada Deposit Insurance Corporation has such a guarantee. When the institution fails, there's a hundred thousand dollars available for up to a hundred thousand dollars. People have to make sure that they have that kind of protection when they deposit money.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Madam Minister. The Alberta government has invested, like you said, tens of millions to supplement our young people's registered education plans. To the same minister: what assurance do taxpayers have that this money is invested wisely and protected against mismanagement or bankruptcy by the institution that it's invested in?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Yes. Mr. Speaker, first of all, when you provide a deposit to any financial institution – and Canadian financial institutions are among the best in the world, and I think that that's a real tribute to both our federal government and the institutions themselves – the first thing to do is to find out if that insurance, the CDIC program, is in place. Choose well your financial institution and rest assured. There are some things that are not insured for – scam, fraud, theft, or in fact a situation where the institution itself falters on its investments – only the hundred thousand . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many new Canadians have friends and relatives in their former lands who have lost their investments in the recent economic downturn. What protection do we have for fellow Albertans against such happenings?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, as long as they invest in an institution that's CDIC insured, if that insurance is provided by the bank, then there's no further action that has to be taken to guarantee that particular protection. They don't pay extra insurance; that's provided by the bank. It is, in fact, automatic.

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

Oil Sands Area Groundwater Monitoring

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Academy Award short-listed documentary *Downstream*, about the impact of

the oil sands development on the Athabasca River, has again raised a number of issues important to Alberta and, more importantly, questioned how this government has managed the resource. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Can the minister tell us whether the government has conducted research on resource extraction in the oil sands region and any increase in the levels of toxic chemicals in the water?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I mentioned on numerous occasions in the House that the government has an ongoing monitoring system to monitor not only the water that is within the Athabasca River itself but also at various points throughout the watershed to assess the ongoing quality of groundwater as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Yeah. I think most of that is industry led, and it's self-reporting.

Next question to the same minister: given that this minister stood in the House last year and stated, when asked if groundwater had been contaminated, that "there is no evidence to indicate that there is any impact on the Athabasca River," is this still the minister's position?

Mr. Renner: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Can the minister tell us why neither he nor the Minister of Energy nor the Premier has ever met with the people in Fort Chipewyan or Fort MacKay to listen to their concerns? The industry had the intestinal fortitude to go and speak with them, so why hasn't this government?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I can't say it's untrue, I guess, so I'll say that I think the member is misinformed. In fact, I have met with the people and the leadership of Fort Chip. I have personally been there twice. I know that the Minister of Aboriginal Relations has been there at least twice, perhaps three times. We have had a good working relationship, and in fact at the last meeting that I had in Fort Chipewyan, we agreed in principle to the implementation of a community-based monitoring system. I understand from my staff that the details for the implementation of that community-based water monitoring system are moving well along, and we should have it up and running sometime this year.

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

2:30

Packaging Waste

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I recently bought a gift and ended up with a small item wrapped up in a substantial amount of packaging. Unfortunately, I'm sure that we've all had similar experiences. I understand that packaging is necessary to preserve and transport products, but the material is often used just once. I'm sure that I'm not the only one who finds this unnecessarily wasteful. My question is for the Minister of Environment. What is the province doing to reduce unnecessary packaging?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, as many members are aware, we have the document *Too Good to Waste*, which is a strategy that allows us to deal with waste of all kinds. We have shown leadership in this

province with respect to beverage containers, tires, electronics, paint, and used oil. The issue of packaging is something that we now need to deal with. However, unfortunately, because of the relative size of our market in relation to the national market it's difficult for us to act unilaterally on an issue such as packaging of materials.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. If the problem of packaging waste cannot be solved by Alberta alone, then are you working with other jurisdictions on the issue?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Renner: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The CCME, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, has been engaged in this file, and I'm pleased to report that at our most recent meeting in Whitehorse about three weeks ago we reconfirmed our commitment to develop nation-wide national standards for packaging that will be geared towards reducing the amount of waste that's generated through the retail sale of goods.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. It's good to hear that progress is being made to reduce this type of waste. Can the minister tell us what Albertans can do right now to help ensure that this kind of packaging does not end up in landfills?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think we always have to resort back to what we all learned in school, and that's the three Rs. There needs to be a commitment on behalf of Albertans to reduce the amount of waste, and that's partly through the program that I just made reference to, some standards, but we can reuse material. There's nothing to prevent individuals from reusing packing material that they have in their possession for one reason or another, and we can also recycle that material. I encourage Albertans to do all three.

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

Public Transit

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the recession bites, more and more Albertans will be turning to public transit, which provides the most affordable way of getting around cities and towns. For many Albertans public transit is their only means to get groceries, to get to work, to see family and friends. To the Minister of Transportation: what is this government doing to provide support for the increased ridership that public transit will undoubtedly experience in this recession?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, as you know, all public transit has been looked after by the municipality that public transit is in. We don't really have public transit as a province. We look after all the roads and everything that public transit can run on. But we did announce a program for Green TRIP which is going to deal with a lot of public transit. We've been having meetings on that already. We're doing our last consultation right now on what type of programs we need to not only put people on public transit but to reduce greenhouse gases from the tailpipe.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that Green TRIP hasn't left the station yet.

To the same minister again. In its report titled Plan It the city of Calgary has made very clear the vital importance of an upgraded public transit system to Calgary's future prosperity. Does the government agree with the report's conclusions, and will it be committing to projects accordingly?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, we won't be committing to projects unless they meet the criteria we've come out with within Green TRIP, and the very best ones, the most innovative and what's going to reduce the most greenhouse gases and get the most cars off the road, are the projects that are going to win, that we will be able to supply some resources to.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As with so much, the commitment of this government will be measured in funding, not words, and the funding for public transit through the Green TRIP initiative has already been cut by over 90 per cent. Will Albertans ever see the full \$2 billion that was promised for public transit? That is so important even before considering the economic stimulus impact it would have.

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't say what our revenues are going to be in this province, but I can say that we have committed to \$2 billion. What the hon. member is referring to is the hon. finance minister's third-quarter update, stating that there was only \$195 million within Green TRIP. She's talking the '08-09 time. We don't know what we're going to have in this year's budget. I'm sure that because of the way our economic downturn has been and the way that our income isn't as high as it was, we may have to stretch Green TRIP out a little bit.

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

Flood Damage in Calgary

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Calgary neighbourhood of Sunnyside experienced flooding, with many of the residents sustaining water damage to their homes. My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Since the minister is responsible for the Alberta Emergency Management Agency, can he please explain to this House how the province responded to this serious incident?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The safety of Albertans is paramount for this government. The Alberta Emergency Management Agency was on scene immediately, and we continue to provide technical expertise with cleanup and damage assessment. We are working with the residents and also the municipalities to determine what support is necessary and what support is needed.

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, my next question is for the same minister. A number of residents in Sunnyside have lost personal items and experienced property damage as a result of this disaster. What is the

province doing for a disaster recovery program for these flood victims?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, they should contact their insurance provider. Secondly, they need to contact the city, and that can be reached at 311. Also, I'd like to suggest to individuals who do have damage to dispose of carpets or whatever damage they have appropriately. We will continue to work with the city and the residents to collect information that's necessary to see if the flood does qualify for support.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Heritage Savings Trust Fund Investments

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Not everybody took a bath in last fall's market meltdown. Last week it was revealed that the city of Calgary's 2 and a half billion dollar capital fund performed extraordinarily better than the heritage fund in 2008. The province's savings lost 15 per cent of their value. Calgary's fund lost only one-tenth of 1 per cent. To the minister of finance: can the minister explain why the heritage fund underperformed Calgary's fund by so much?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would have to do some type of analysis. The heritage savings trust fund was 14 and a half per cent. There was a slightly larger per cent of loss given to some of the other funds that are managed by Alberta Investment Management Corporation on behalf of the province. One would have to undertake an analysis. I could give you a list of funds that performed less well than the heritage fund, but it's embarking on a very dangerous precedent. It depends entirely on the mix of assets. It depends entirely on the manner in which those assets are bought and sold. Some of those losses may in fact be paper losses which can be reacquired at a later date.

Mr. Taylor: As Calgary's fund did so well by staying away from derivatives and, instead, investing in safer bonds, will the minister be changing the government's investment practices to safeguard the heritage fund in the future?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, a great deal of analysis is undertaken before there's any change in the mix of assets and the mix of products that are purchased. In fact, in endeavouring to discover what sort of science is used in that regard, I have consulted with a number of people, including the Canada pension plan principles that talked about maintaining exactly the status quo. We have looked at the schedule of assets for this coming year, and when we deliver the budget, we'll be able to report accordingly.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How does the minister plan to recoup the losses in the heritage fund over the next few years, or does this government consider savings a luxury we can no longer afford?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, when you speak to the board members that are responsible for the Alberta Investment Management Corporation, they are very clearly bright, assertive policy-makers. They have every intention of being aggressive with the fund within the limits

that we define in terms of a risk. I'm very satisfied that they will come up with the right strategies to continue the unprecedented record over the last 30 years of management of the heritage savings trust fund. Albertans should be proud of our track record.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 98 questions and responses.

In a few seconds from now we'll call upon the first of six members to participate in Members' Statements. In the interim can we revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests (continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Campbell: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three officials from the Grande Cache Coal company that are here today visiting with officials from Employment and Immigration and Energy. I'd like to introduce Mr. Bob Stan, CEO and president of Grande Cache Coal; Mr. Lloyd Metz, vice-president of mining from Grande Cache Coal – we go back to 1981 in Estevan, Saskatchewan, with the Estevan Coal Corporation – and Mr. Bernd Martens, the vice-president of environment. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Lethbridge and District Exhibition

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is March madness for Lethbridge and District Exhibition. There's Ag Expo, the North American Seed Fair, extreme pro rodeo, and the home and garden show. There will be an expected 50,000 guests through the gates in March. Ag Expo is western Canada's premier agricultural trade show. The North American Seed Fair has been held annually since 1897 and is the oldest seed fair in western Canada. There were 50 different classes in pedigree seed, open classes, and junior classes. There were 13 judges, 17 committee members, all of whom are volunteers, who put in many hours to ensure its great success, in addition to a very dedicated staff. Products of agriculture are important exports for Canada. It supports our rural communities, which we are in danger of losing. Rural or urban, we are all dependent on agriculture. After all, we all eat.

Our Aggie Days is an agricultural education show: 3,000 school-children came to learn about agriculture in a fun and interactive environment. It is an annual event provided free of charge by the Lethbridge and District Exhibition. To further highlight the importance that agricultural exhibitions play in communities, Exhibition Park was privileged to host both the federal minister of agriculture, Gerry Ritz, and the Alberta Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the MP Rick Casson. The ministers attended, participated, and toured the seed fair and exhibition. I'm sure they were both left very impressed.

Mr. Speaker, on another note, it is a very great honour for someone to receive a special name from our First Nations. The Member for Lethbridge-West received just such an honour last week at an international powwow in Lethbridge. The name translates to "sees many things." I know he will wear his name proudly. Please join me in congratulating him and thanking him for his work with First Nations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright.

Student Engagement Initiative

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to say a few words today about Speak Out, the Alberta student engagement initiative that was launched by the government last fall. The role of the student engagement initiative is to motivate Alberta's youth to participate in an ongoing province-wide discussion on education. Asking for students' input and taking action on their ideas will create more actively engaged citizens and a stronger education system. To date the Speak Out team has conducted 30 Speak Out forums in high schools across the province. The Speak Out interactive website is being actively used by students. In fact, there are over 3,500 posts on the discussion forum, and the numbers grow daily.

On May 3 and 4, 2009, the first Speak Out Annual Student Conference will bring together approximately 200 youth from all over the province to explore and discuss recommendations for the education system. At the forum the Minister of Education will be announcing the three winners of the Speak Out video contest, the theme being What I Want, What I Need: My Vision for Education. The deadline for the video contest submissions is March 31, so interested students still have a few weeks to enter a video.

Students have an opportunity to apply to become a member of the Minister of Education's student advisory council, which will be formed in May after the first annual conference. This council will explore new and innovative ways to improve learning opportunities, and council members will act as representatives for Speak Out in their communities and schools.

More information on the conference, video contest, advisory council, and Speak Out in general can be found online at the Speak Out interactive website at speakout.alberta.ca.

Youth can and should influence the decisions today that affect the rest of their lives. Their perspectives are essential to future changes and decisions being made in education. I'm excited to hear what students have to say because every single voice counts. I urge all young Albertans to become involved and to speak out.

Thank you.

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

Marlborough Park Boy Scout Event

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This February 22 I had the opportunity to attend a Scouting event at the Marlborough Park community hall. It was a wonderful event that brought out dozens of people and inspired young people. The event involved three Scout troops: the 174th Marlborough Park, the 71st Marlborough, and the 161st Forest Heights. Every year they gather to celebrate the birthday of the founder of the Scouts, Lord Baden-Powell.

Scouting offers young people an opportunity to do many things that they might not have had a chance to do on their own, everything from canoeing to Cub car building. The Scout law is something we can all take into consideration when we go about our daily lives even though we and even the youngest member in the House have long passed the age range. A Scout is helpful and trustworthy, kind and cheerful, considerate and clean, wise in the use of all resources.

I was proud to present an award to Brian Swan, who has served the Scouts for over 25 years and has mentored many young people in living up to that motto. In helping run the Scouting program, he has taught many youths in my area valuable life skills from community service to outdoorsmanship. I thank Brian for his service and hope that he continues to serve our community.

I also want to thank everyone that is involved in Scouting in our

community. Your service makes a profound difference in the lives of our young people.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Rotary Club 104th Anniversary

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to honour the 104th anniversary of the Rotary Club, which was celebrated on February 23, 2009.

For five years I have also been a very proud member of the Rotary Club of Edmonton. The club's four-way test is an important ethics compass for the things that we think and we say and we do. It is a guide in both my personal and my political lives. The four questions we must ask ourselves are: is it the truth, is it fair to all concerned, will it build goodwill and better friendships, and will it be beneficial to all concerned? This test is indicative of how the Rotary Club and its members conduct themselves through service to their community.

The 104 years of remarkable Rotary Club service have provided resources for park systems, accommodations for the homeless, food programs for schools, seniors' residences, and aid to medical causes such as the effort to eliminate polio globally.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to congratulate the Rotary Club on the celebration of 104 years of service and commitment to bettering Alberta's communities and communities throughout the world.

Thank you.

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

Kidney Disease

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. March is National Kidney Month, and this Thursday, March 12, is World Kidney Day. World Kidney Day is recognized in over 100 countries. This year the focus of World Kidney Day is on the importance of high blood pressure as one of the key symptoms and causes of chronic kidney disease. This is an incredible opportunity to raise awareness about the potential risk factors for kidney disease. By properly educating ourselves on the risk factors, we are more likely to take the steps to prevent this disease from affecting our health. Over the last year I have attended several events for the Kidney Foundation, a constituent organization in Edmonton-Calder.

On March 12 the Kidney Foundation is hosting its first annual World Kidney Day radiothon at Southgate shopping centre. It will be on air with EZ Rock 104.9 FM and The Bear 100.3 FM throughout the day. You may have already heard the radio commercials we recorded a couple of weeks ago. It's a great opportunity for this organization to share stories of those affected by kidney disease, raise awareness, and encourage Albertans to support this remarkable cause. An estimated 2 million Canadians either have chronic kidney disease or are at risk of developing it. It is important that we encourage awareness to prevent more from being affected by this disease. I encourage everyone to support the Kidney Foundation in any way that they can.

Thank you.

2:50

Commonwealth Day

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, I rise today in recognition of Commonwealth Day. The Commonwealth was formed 60 years ago, and Canada was one of the founding members of this association, which now comprises 53 nations and nearly 2 billion people, one-third of humanity. Today all hon. members have before them a message

from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, our head of state, our Queen, and the head of the Commonwealth. As Her Majesty has noted, it is the belief of the Commonwealth members in values like democracy, freedom, human rights, and equality which binds us together today as in 1949.

Mr. Speaker, it is one of these values, democracy, which I wish to acknowledge in particular today. That is the genius of the British parliamentary system of government, a proud legacy which has served this province so well for over a hundred years, a system in which the executive and the legislative functions of government flow from the same electoral mandate, a system where individual parliamentarians represent citizens of electoral districts and carry their voice to parliament for fixed terms, a system of ministerial responsibility in which the first minister and ministers in council exercise the powers of the Crown and the state and govern in the name of the people. It is our parliamentary democracy, which has never been equalled by any other form of government, which binds so many of the member nations of the Commonwealth today.

On the 60th anniversary of the Commonwealth I'm sure I speak for all hon. members of this House in thanking Her Majesty the Queen for her message and for her more than 50 years of faithful service as the head of this proud association of nations. May God save the Queen.

The Speaker: Thank you for that last statement, hon. member.

I will advise hon. members that this year, in 2009, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association annual meeting in Canada, the Canadian region, will be held in Toronto, Ontario, in the third week of July. I'll be advising members of such as we go into early April.

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 21

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2009

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 21, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2009. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a first time]

Bill 25

Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2009

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 25, the Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2009. This being a money bill, His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

Under the November 2007 memorandum of agreement the government agreed to pay the teachers' portion of the pre-1992 unfunded liability payments until August 31, 2009, and then assume the total pre-1992 unfunded liability on September 1, 2009. The goal of this amendment act is to ensure that the implementation of the pension agreement occurs in a timely manner.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children and Youth Services.

Ms Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a document showing where our ministry is in implementing the recommendations made during last year's review of our province's foster care system. There has been much discussion over the last few days about the status of the recommendations made by the review panel, whose members were well-respected experts internal and external to government. It has been suggested that some of the recommendations have not been acted on. I do want to set that record straight. All eight of the recommendations made by the committee were accepted, and this document shows that implementation in every one of the recommendations is either complete or well under way.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo and myself had an opportunity to participate in a Poverty Talks! workshop. In 2008 and 2009 in over 45 community meetings approximately 350 participants answered the following questions: what would make a difference for low-income Albertans, and as a low-income person what would I like to see change?

The Speaker: Hon. member, this is tablings.

Mr. Chase: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

I have two other tablings. They are both from child care workers concerned about the decertification of their profession. The first is from Maureen Thompson, who writes, "I am writing in regards to the sudden loss in my recognition as a Fully Certified Child and Youth Care Counsellor with Children and Youth Services within the Government of Alberta."

From Morag Rempel: "I am writing to you out of concern for the future of the quality of care offered to some of our most vulnerable children." She points out that "in 1984 the government took bold steps to protect the children in care by implementing strict hiring standards, a move applauded by child care providers across Canada, U.S.A. and Britain." She'd like us to continue to lead in our child care services.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. First, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a story from the *Edmonton Journal* dated June 11, 2008, which relates to my questions today. In the story the minister of children's services is quoted as saying that the recommendations on foster care would be implemented immediately as opposed to many months later.

The second one is on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. It is the appropriate number of copies of two documents from the Alberta Lymphedema Association which describe the closure of the Calgary clinic and the result that non-cancer lymphedema patients have no place to receive treatment in southern Alberta.

The third, Mr. Speaker, is the appropriate number of copies of 10 reports from long-term care workers indicating specific problems on shifts that were short-staffed, including where residents were left in

bed well into the morning and received late meals and had scheduled baths missed.

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

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling five sets of documents in the House today regarding my questions in question period. The documents note on them: "Please join Deputy Premier Ron Stevens and other distinguished guests [to] celebrate a Milestone – The opening of the new Calgary Courts Centre" and "Please make cheques payable to Calgary Glenmore PC Association." We note that the . . .

The Speaker: Okay. Let's get on with the tabling.

Mr. Hehr: All right. Nonetheless, I am tabling some more documents which list the costs to the taxpayer of the event, including \$5,000, it looks like, in the amount of food and drink as well as the costs, then, of some 32,000-plus dollars to the taxpayer to open the courthouse on that day.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Hon. members, please remember that we have Standing Order 7(7), that basically says: at 3 o'clock. That's the reason why the chair is trying to push this ahead, so that we don't run up against that, because you still have the Clerk.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of Ms Pastoor, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, an *Edmonton Journal* website article dated January 7, 2009, entitled Gov't Rejects 4-year Council Term.

The Speaker: Hon. members, today the chair interjected on one occasion with respect to what he considered mildly intemperate language and then listened very, very attentively to the member's statement given by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder. We now have an additional reason why temperate language in this Assembly is so important. In the member's statement the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder made it very, very clear with respect to kidney problems, kidney concerns. He said that high blood pressure leads oftentimes to kidney problems. So temperate language in this Assembly reduces the blood pressure, reduces the kidney problems, helps the Alberta health care system. We should all be part of it.

3:00

Orders of the Day

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 201 Traffic Safety (Vehicles with Unlawfully Possessed Firearms) Amendment Act, 2009

[Debate adjourned March 2: Mr. Kang speaking]

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

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today again in support of Bill 201. The purpose of the bill is to promote public safety, to make Albertans safe on the streets. The penalties associ-

ated with the offence are a fine of not less than \$2,500 and not more than \$25,000 or imprisonment of not more than one year or both and a driver's licence suspension of one year for a first conviction under the section, five years for a second conviction, and indefinitely for a third conviction.

To go down further, it says that if a police officer has reasonable and probable grounds for believing an offence has been committed, the officer shall request the surrender of the driver's licence and detain the vehicle. The licence is suspended for 24 hours, and the vehicle is impounded for the same length of time. The new section applies to drivers' licences issued both inside and outside of Alberta.

Like I said, the whole purpose of the bill is to make Albertans feel safe when they leave the house, to make their quality of life better than they have now. It is about suppressing the conditions that lead to criminal activities by gang members who are carrying illegal weapons in their vehicles, and it is about protecting the lives of innocent Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, I think that Albertans are worried about their safety. They are worried about the safety of their children. They're worried about the safety of their neighbourhoods. More and more people are concerned about drugs being pushed in the schools, on the streets. I've got the example of a 7-Eleven store in Calgary-McCall. It was getting out of hand, and luckily we were able to get things under control with the help of the police and the neighbourhood around the 7-Eleven. I'm hoping that the problem is solved and we don't run into that problem again.

We all know there have been shootings in B.C. – in Surrey, in Vancouver, in Abbotsford – every day almost, every week. There have been tragic incidents in B.C., and even in Calgary-McCall there have been gang-related shootings. Deaths have been occurring in Calgary-McCall, too, in the past year. One doesn't feel safe on the streets of Calgary.

Mr. Speaker, I remember when I came here in 1970. There was a time we could leave the doors unlocked. We used to go shopping, leave the windows unrolled, go shopping, and come back. We didn't have to worry about cars being stolen. We didn't have to worry about houses being broken into because, you know, criminals were not running rampant, I would say, on the streets. Now there are gang members, they're pushing drugs, there are new drugs coming every day, and they're shooting each other on the streets. We have to get tough, I think, on the gang activity so our streets are safe before it's too late to get our streets back. It has been happening, the way things have been going.

I had a meeting with the police inspector, and the concern is out there. We should have more resources for the law enforcement agencies so they can investigate properly, they can prosecute, and they can head off the criminals before they commit any crimes. I believe Bill 201 is one more step in the right direction. It is proactive, and it's going to prevent crime, seizing guns before a crime is committed.

The present law, Bill 50, is a good law, but there are some loopholes in it, as well. It's just very vague as to who to charge when the police find illegal weapons in the vehicles because the occupants may deny that the guns belong to them. Mr. Speaker, the vehicles are a mode of transportation of illegal drugs and guns. Vehicles are used in criminal activity.

We heard the argument from the hon. members from other side of the House last week that as owners of unregistered long guns hunters and farmers would be charged under this legislation. Instead of having a clear intent of the bill, despite what the police officers are telling us would happen – it simply is not the case with this legislation that owners of unregistered long guns would be at risk of being charged. I think we can deal with any concerns raised by amendments to this bill.

Let's not be partisan about the bill. Let's bring all the genuine concerns forward, and let's amend the bill so we can strengthen the hand of our law enforcement agencies.

Bill 201 goes further to close the loopholes which arise in Bill 50. Passing Bill 201 is not going to harm law-abiding citizens. It's only going to hurt the criminals where it hurts. It will send a clear message to gang members that drive around with illegal guns in their vehicle that it will not be tolerated; it will be unacceptable. So if you're caught with a gun, you will be paying a heavy price for possessing an illegal weapon. This is just to strengthen the hand, again, of the police. I stress that point again and again because we're all concerned about gangs. You know, we are all concerned about the criminals, so I don't know why there's a big hesitation from the other side to proceed with Bill 201.

Bill 201 is being painted as such a draconian measure, that anyone with a gun in their vehicle will be put in jail or lose their car. What happened to "people are innocent until they're proven guilty"? You know, they will have to be proven guilty before they're charged.

The Speaker: I'm sorry, hon. member.

Hon. members, we have eight minutes remaining for this portion of business, three of which I will use to recognize an additional speaker if one wishes to participate, because I have to allow five minutes for the mover of the bill to close. Any additional member wishing to participate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and join second reading on debate of Bill 201, the Traffic Safety (Vehicles with Unlawfully Possessed Firearms) Amendment Act, 2009, brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo. The intention of this bill is directed at reducing gun crimes in our communities, and I want to thank the Member for Calgary-Buffalo for the spirit of this legislation. We on this side of the House very much appreciate support in our fight against crime.

As has been mentioned, this government amended the Victims Restitution and Compensation Payment Act, or VRCPA, in 2008, which empowers our police officers to immediately seize vehicles and all property that has been or may be used to commit a crime. This act received wide support from police forces, victims organizations, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo. This hon. member stated on November 20, 2008, that the amendments to the VRCPA "would allow for us to deal with seizing vehicles of people who are driving around with guns unsafely and who are transporting them for use in crime." Further, the hon. member said, "this type of legislation would ensure that guns and gangs are kept in their place," and the hon. member is absolutely right to emphasize how the VRCPA empowers police.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, the amendments to the VRCPA were designed to protect the safety of Albertans, as it prevents criminals from driving their vehicles to carry out illegal activities. As the hon. member for Calgary-Buffalo said, the amendments to the Victims Restitution and Compensation Payment Act "would ensure that guns and gangs are kept in their place." That's what the act is currently doing and why I, too, support the amendment. This strong government legislation goes well above and beyond what's proposed in Bill 201. Although I very much appreciate the hon. member's concern for tackling gun crime and, again, the spirit of this bill, perhaps he did not expect that our police and prosecutors would be so very effective employing this legislation. I'm sure that, along with all the members on this side of the House, he is very relieved to hear the reports last week of \$4.6

million in illegal profits removed from criminal hands. Perhaps in view of the reports he's heard, he may even wish to withdraw his bill himself in respect for the more effective government legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I have to urge all members to reject this redundant though very well-meaning bill. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo to close the debate.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today we vote on whether my private member's bill, Bill 201, the Traffic Safety (Vehicles with Unlawfully Possessed Firearms) Amendment Act, 2009, passes second reading. I've heard a number of MLAs speak on this bill. Although I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, I think I know which way the wind is blowing on this.

Nevertheless, I've heard basically two major objections to this bill, and one I can really appreciate. It was brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, who was really worried, actually, about law-abiding citizens possibly being caught up in this, as my bill said that illegal firearms would be cracked down on. One of the unintended consequences of this, I believe he said, was his grandmother would be out with her .22 in the back round and possibly get picked up, which was, honestly, a concern. It could have happened under my bill.

However, I wish we would have taken this a step further; we could've gone and maybe, as the hon. member said, looked at revising this bill to have been to unregistered or restricted firearms. I appreciated his intellectual honesty in at least attacking the bill in that format and framing it as such because that is one of the unintended consequences that maybe we could get rid of, although police officers said they wouldn't be going after that, yada yada yada. But I appreciate that.

Now, moving on to the second argument, and it was that Bill 201 is redundant as it was brought up by the victims of crime restitution act. By all means, I hate to say it: that is not being, from my point of view, intellectually honest. Here's why. There's a loophole here, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont should know this.

Right now if a police officer pulls over a vehicle, a gangbanger who's driving a vehicle either stolen or rented, which many people are, with one of these restricted firearms, that are illegal, you know what happens, sir? What happens is the police officer lays a charge under the Criminal Code. Guess what? I've been told by police officers that going to court, the person denies that the gun was there. Well, guess what? No charge. Now we're supposed to, through the victims of crime legislation act, go through an in rem proceeding, attach that illegal gun found to a guy who's not criminally convicted of anything to maybe find some property or something like that out there to attach to him. Well, you know, more power to him if we're successful in this. I really don't think it's going to happen.

Further, what happens to the individual, the young gangbanger, who really doesn't keep his assets on paper in a nice little stockbroker report that says: I own 47 shares of this company, that company? It just doesn't work.

What this bill was intended to do was cover off the loophole from albeit a wonderful bill, the victims of crime restitution act, which is great work by the government, that I applaud them for. This was merely to close a loophole. That's all I'm here saying. Please, I hope that some other MLA, maybe from the governing party, comes up with this idea and goes to the Justice minister and says: hey, maybe we should bring this amendment in. I would applaud it, I would stand for it, and I'd say: that's another good piece of work by this government.

I wish we could maybe go to committee stage and have some of these resolutions changed. I think we really could make it workable, could maybe make those minor changes that would put some touches

to the victims of crime restitution act, again a wonderful bill, that would allow for this loophole to be covered off.

I thank you for your time here today and for your commitment. Please vote in favour of what I think is a worthwhile initiative for this government to undertake.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:17 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Blakeman	Kang	Pastoor
Chase	MacDonald	Taft
Hehr	Notley	Taylor

Against the motion:

Allred	Evans	Olson
Anderson	Forsyth	Prins
Benito	Horne	Quest
Blackett	Jablonski	Redford
Brown	Jacobs	Renner
Calahasen	Klimchuk	Rogers
Campbell	Leskiw	Sandhu
Cao	Liepert	Sherman
Dallas	Lindsay	Snelgrove
DeLong	Marz	VanderBurg
Denis	Mitzel	Vandermeer
Drysdale	Oberle	Woo-Paw
Elniski		

Totals:	For – 9	Against – 37
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[Motion for second reading of Bill 201 lost]

3:30

Bill 202

Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009

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

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to open debate on Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009.

I have met with many stakeholders who believe that this piece of legislation has the potential to greatly help municipalities. They have also been consistently pleased that this bill would make municipal spending practices as transparent as other levels of government. Many people have pointed out that the federal and provincial governments are both audited by their respective Auditors General. They want municipalities to be held to the same account.

Bill 202 creates the office of the municipal auditor general under the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The municipal auditor general would work with Alberta municipalities and their external financial auditors to assist municipalities with making their operations both as effective and efficient as possible and to make sure that Albertans get value for their money. It would also create a mechanism for Albertans to determine whether they are receiving fair value for their business and property taxes. The municipal auditor general would conduct a performance audit of any municipal system or program

that is deemed appropriate. It would subsequently provide the municipality with detailed recommendations for improvement and potential actions that may help achieve this. These measures would help to ensure that a municipality's operations and services are executed in a way that makes the best possible use of public funds.

Currently a municipality is required to submit annual financial statements and a financial information return to the provincial government. This helps to provide the government with the information needed to ensure that a municipality is operating within the parameters set out in the Municipal Government Act. When an external auditor completes a municipality's audited financial statement, they also provide the municipality with a management letter. This letter may identify areas where a municipality could improve financial controls or where different accounting procedures and processes may reduce costs or improve services.

It is my understanding that a management letter given to a municipality is not always made public and may not provide a municipality with in-depth analysis of their operations. On the other hand, the recommendations from the municipal auditor general would be made available to the public as soon as possible. This would provide for an additional level of oversight and accountability as the public would have access to these recommendations. In addition, the municipality would be required to notify the municipal auditor general within a specified time on the actions a municipality intends to take with respect to the recommendations. If a municipality does not take adequate or appropriate action on these recommendations, the municipal auditor general may report these concerns to the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

In short, Mr. Speaker, this office would work with municipalities to help ensure that their operations are sustainable in the long term. This bill is not intended to remove the operational freedoms that Alberta municipalities currently enjoy. Rather, Bill 202 simply seeks to give municipalities the tools they require to ensure that they are providing their residents with the highest possible value for the money they receive. Any recommendations provided by the municipal auditor general would take into consideration the long-term vision of a municipality.

Mr. Speaker, a performance audit would be particularly beneficial for Alberta's rural municipalities who may not have the capabilities to conduct an independent performance audit themselves. Bill 202 would provide rural municipalities with the expertise necessary to ensure that they can continue to meet the increasing demands of their residents in the long term. As the province continues to grow, we are all aware of the pressures municipalities are under to ensure that their operations and services consistently meet the needs and expectations of their communities.

Mr. Speaker, the province launched its 10-year funding commitment, the municipal sustainability initiative, MSI, to help address these pressures. The amount given to municipalities totalled \$500 million in 2008, and it's scheduled to increase to \$1.4 billion annually by 2011. The office of the municipal auditor general would ultimately seek to answer the question: are the funds received for property taxes and from the province creating appropriate and sustainable value within a municipality? This is not to say that Albertans are not receiving value for their taxpayer dollars at the municipal level. However, with property taxes increasing and the amount of financial assistance the province is currently giving the municipalities, Bill 202 seeks to create an additional level of support and accountability at the municipal level. This would seek to ensure that Albertans are receiving the maximum value for money for municipal services and programs. The municipal auditor general would have the authority to conduct an objective performance audit of any area within a municipality deemed appropriate.

To be clear, Bill 202 does not intend to conduct a yearly performance audit of all Alberta municipalities. Municipalities would have a performance audit conducted at the discretion of the municipal auditor general. This discretion would be based on consultation with the financial auditors, municipalities, or concerns from the public.

In summary, the municipal auditor general would help municipalities ensure that they are spending taxpayers' money in the most efficient and effective way possible. I anticipate the municipal auditor general to become a centre for best practice of municipal operations. The office would encourage intermunicipal co-operation by recommending areas where municipal partnerships would benefit both parties.

Mr. Speaker, the auditing process is crucial to all areas of our society as it gives us an objective perspective on spending. I think that any measure we can take to strengthen auditing at the municipal level is good for our province. I look forward to hearing my colleagues' comments and urge them to support this cost-saving measure.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be able to rise to speak to Bill 202. It's certainly an interesting bill, obviously geared, I suppose, in some respects toward improving certain areas of functioning within municipal government, but it is a bit surprising to see a bill like this coming from someone from this particular government caucus, I would suppose, just based on, you know, some of the attitudes that we tend to have here provincially vis-à-vis our own relationship with the federal government.

It is a bill, of course, as has already been mentioned, that would empower the minister to appoint a municipal auditor general, who would then engage in audits of municipalities that would ultimately be reported to the provincial minister, and then there would be various authorities with respect to following up on that. I think that in the introduction of this bill the member spoke about how provincially we have an Auditor General, and federally we have an Auditor General, although I'm pretty sure that provincially we don't have an Auditor General that audits us and then reports to the federal government or vice versa. I can't imagine that as a province we would agree to that kind of arrangement, so I find it a bit interesting that municipally we would appoint an auditor general and then have municipal governments having audits that were being reported back to us, the provincial body.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

At the end of the day this is a bill that impinges rather significantly on municipal autonomy. This is something that I think is problematic. Municipal government is growing and developing across the country. Municipal government is not a level of government; it's actually a separate order of government. That independence to a large extent needs to be acknowledged notwithstanding the way in which it first came about. We also need to look at, politically, how these municipalities have evolved. We know that municipalities have been asked to take on larger and larger levels of responsibility within our communities and within our societies. We know that they have in many cases stepped up to the plate in that regard. We also know, frankly, certainly in Alberta, that the level of engagement at the municipal level for the average person is as high as it is provincially.

I am concerned about the idea of exercising even sort of more

centralized control over individual municipal governments. I respect the need for having high standards and ensuring that there are high standards and transparency and all those kinds of things, but it would seem to me to be a little arrogant and a little wide-reaching to march into the municipal sector and ask for this level of oversight and control.

3:40

The Municipal Government Act already has provisions for independent audits of municipal finances. As it is, municipalities must already submit annual financial statements and auditors' reports to the minister, and the minister already has the power to set requirements for financial reporting and auditing. A minister may at this point appoint an auditor to audit the books of a municipality at the request of at least one-third of the council or on petition by the electors. I think that these kinds of limits allow for intervention where necessary, but it ensures that the intervention is only where necessary as described or as acknowledged by either the municipal councillors themselves in any given municipality or at the request of the electors. Finally, where the auditor is appointed under this process, again the legislation already gives them access to these municipalities' records and their data.

I'm not sure exactly how this bill will move forward, but at this point we have some concerns about the apparent intrusion that this might represent into the political autonomy of municipal governments across our province. It is for that reason at this point that we are unlikely to consider supporting the bill. Although, again, we certainly invite the opportunity to hear and consider and weigh the debate as the bill progresses, if it does.

Thank you.

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

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a very interesting bill for someone who has come out of the municipal sector and actually was elected as a municipal councillor. I think my first and foremost comment on this would be that should there ever be such a person, I certainly would be opposed to their reporting to the minister. If there's going to be such a person, they'd have to report to this House. That is far too narrow a scope that the minister would have over the municipal actions. It has to come to the House. It has to be someone that we could feel very confident in, that was actually independent and had done their homework without any oversight or the feeling of being overseen by a minister of the Crown. It really has to come to the House.

My other question would be: who would pay for this? I'm just wondering if there's any level of government at this point in time that has any extra money. I believe that one of the costs that I heard was \$700,000. I know it doesn't sound like a lot when we're talking in billions, but it's an awful lot to create 700,000 new dollars. So that would be a question: who's going to pay for it? Certainly, I don't think any of the municipalities, including the big cities, would want to absorb that kind of cost, nor do I think that the provincial government at this point in time can drag up that kind of money out of the sustainability fund or any other little slush fund they may have hidden somewhere.

Auditors usually can't fix the messes that they find, but they can identify them and make very specific recommendations based on analytical data. So there is an argument for having an auditor. Auditors can't make policies, good or bad, and certainly auditors can't reflect on the behaviour of a particular municipality. That really is the responsibility of the elected people. Again, it's up to the people that elect them if they think that their behaviour has not been what it should be.

However, there is an argument to be made for smaller municipalities that, as has already been mentioned, really can't afford to have these extreme audits and the time that it takes to actually dig through books and go back in time and actually compare the audit against the bylaws or the laws that they have made at that level. So there is an argument to perhaps help those municipalities in some fashion, particularly if the citizens of that particular municipality are complaining. I believe that in the province today there is one municipality that is certainly having difficulties, and the citizens are getting a little excited about the accountability of their council.

It has already been mentioned, too, that it could interfere with the autonomy of municipalities. It has also been mentioned over the last 10 years, certainly since I was elected, that there is more and more – the word used, I believe, from my colleague was “responsibility.” Of course, I'm calling it downloading. There have been responsibilities downloaded onto municipalities without the dollars to follow to ensure that those programs, particularly on the social side, are actually adhered to. So, certainly, money would be a question.

I think this bill is interesting to me as well because I can actually argue both sides. I can argue for and I can argue against, which doesn't really put me out of line with anyone that I've spoken to nor with some of the groups that are out there: the city of Calgary, the AAMD and C, and the AUMA. If I'm correct, the AUMA has come out with a position against. CFIB and the Canadian Taxpayers Federation are in support of a provincial municipal auditor general. I believe that, of course, their approach would be from the taxation point of view: are they really using their dollars wisely so that they can control the mill rates in a better fashion?

From the people that I've spoken to, I believe that there is a mixed bag out there, some for and some against. I guess what I'd like to say is that this is a bill that I would like to see go maybe even to the committee level where there could be more discussion and perhaps a longer time to have a chance to take a look at this because people out there really aren't either firmly for or against. They actually can sort of argue both sides. I think this bill needs more time to have stakeholders look at it and get some more information on it. When I spoke to people, the reaction was mixed for and against, but the reaction was also mixed, which interested me, as to whom it actually should report. Some thought the minister was fine, and others thought no, that if there was somebody, it should report to the House. That's why I think that this bill does require more time.

I know that from Lethbridge's point of view the politicians down there and the chamber of commerce and some of the other people that I've spoken to and, in fact, some of the auditors that belong to the firm that actually audit the books for the city of Lethbridge are, again, mixed in their reaction to this. I think that our mayor had a good point in that many people don't realize that out of a Canadian tax dollar municipalities only get 8 cents, and we're at the level that's most accessible to the people. I think that people, particularly at the municipal level, really have more access to information on how the money is spent at the municipal level than the provincial or federal levels. It's very difficult at the two upper levels to actually get the information readily that you need unless you're FOIPing it, which, of course, costs a lot of money, too. At this point in time, you know, I'm speaking as having spoken to people with mixed reactions but also from my own experience. I think that Lethbridge has always had good audits and, certainly, has won many awards for the way they keep their books, the way that they are open and the way that they present them. I guess they don't find mistakes.

3:50

I really think it's a bill worthy of further discussion than we know private members' bills get, which probably won't get past second reading, unfortunately. I would like to see it go to committee. I'd

like to have more time for people to take a look at this. There are some people in Lethbridge who write regularly to our newspaper who are most concerned with the fact that they think that the audit wasn't done properly and that it wasn't done on time nor presented on time, which is actually a legislated provincial law. That's something that an auditor would be able to make recommendations to or to look into why it happened that that particular activity didn't happen on time. There are other municipalities, I know, in that same situation.

Mr. Speaker, I will speak to this again. Again, I would hope that it would go to committee because I think it's worth while having a discussion and trying to get some kind of a stronger, definitive feeling from the community of where they'd like this to go.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to speak to Bill 202. In challenging economic times Albertans turn to their neighbours and communities for support. The Premier has stated his firm belief that strong municipalities are the key ingredients to strong communities. This shapes my ministry and everything we do. To foster strong communities throughout the province, the government of Alberta remains committed to supporting municipalities through a variety of programs, including the municipal sustainability initiative. This support is having real impact. It is putting Albertans to work right away, addressing vital infrastructure issues and needs, and helping our communities position themselves for the future. Provincial funding is helping to build new roads, recreation facilities, fire halls, and libraries.

Strong communities also need to be accountable to the ratepayers. That is what Albertans expect. That is what this government expects. Ensuring that we have financially stable and accountable local governments is a priority for us. As such, I appreciate the hon. member bringing forward this bill. It is critical that municipalities be prudent and responsible with taxpayers' money. Many municipal financial reporting processes are already in place. For example, the Municipal Government Act already requires municipalities to conduct annual financial audits. The Premier also gave me a mandate to build an accountability framework to ensure that funding provided to municipalities is used to meet agreed-upon objectives. The framework will increase our accountability to Albertans so that they can see how these funds are being used.

Mr. Speaker, as accountability is such a strong component of what we already expect of municipalities, this bill could nicely complement the existing financial reporting process. It could offer Albertans another tool to evaluate the performance of their local councils. Using resources wisely is always important. In times like today it becomes even more critical to ensure that each dollar collected from taxpayers is spent wisely.

I'd like to thank the hon. member for drawing attention to the issue of accountability through the introduction of this bill. While there remain a few questions, as mentioned by the hon. member opposite, to be worked on on the terms of how this bill could be implemented, the member clearly recognizes that we need to respect taxpayers' hard-earned dollars and use them wisely to invest in and build strong municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, it's been a pleasure to speak to Bill 202 and make comments on how, as I said previously, we can work with municipalities to make those municipalities a strong component of a better Alberta.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to participate in the discussion today on Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. Bill 202 seeks to create an office within the provincial government whose mandate would be to assist Alberta municipalities in ensuring efficient use of their resources. The municipal auditor general would help municipalities conduct performance audits. The broader goal of the bill is to help improve the operations process of municipalities in a manner that would allow them to retain their current degree of autonomy. The office of the municipal auditor general would also be able to share and expand the network of practical knowledge amongst municipalities.

It's important to note that any recommendations made by the office of the municipal auditor general would operate within the scope of the municipality's own vision and specific circumstances. Individual municipalities may have differing financial, operational, and mobilization considerations when recommending the best course of action. For example, it may be more cost-effective to lease gravel road grading equipment in one municipality than it would be to purchase it. However, in another municipality it may be more cost-effective to purchase equipment than it would be to lease it. The point to take from this example is that each Alberta municipality is going to have unique needs and individual circumstances, and it's important to take these unique considerations into account when providing recommendations for improvement.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 202 aims to create a stronger network and improved service delivery for municipalities in Alberta. The provisions that Bill 202 seeks to establish are intended to help facilitate the sharing and implementation of best practices for municipal operations. There's a wealth of information that can be obtained from robust, objective performance audits. If deficiencies exist in a municipality, they can be revealed and assessed with comparative measures that would be developed and collected by the municipal auditor general. While there exist some inherent differences between municipalities in the province, useful comparative measures can, when properly assessed, shed light on any performance issues. These comparative and standardized measures can be very useful as a municipality seeks to improve its operations and service delivery.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of forums where Alberta municipalities can share best practices, such as municipal zone meetings. The municipalities within these zones meet frequently to share ideas, address concerns, and learn from the successes of other similar municipalities. By having comparable municipal performance measures, as Bill 202 seeks to establish, the dissemination of valuable information at these meetings would be further enhanced. Furthermore, the municipal auditor general would serve as an additional forum to share and recommend best practices with municipalities.

The recommendations given by the office of the municipal auditor general would be publicly accessible so as to provide full disclosure of the performance audit recommendations. In addition, a municipality would be required to notify the municipal auditor general of the actions it intends to take in relation to the recommendations given.

Mr. Speaker, it's well acknowledged that local governance is most suitable for the effective delivery of a great number of services. Residents of Calgary or Edmonton, where two-thirds of Alberta's population currently live, will have different service delivery requirements than residents of rural municipalities. Further to this, factors affecting service delivery can also vary, with the local council being best suited to adapt their municipal operations to accommodate any region-specific circumstances, but the basic

guiding principles for efficient operations, management, and service delivery remain consistent among municipalities. It's important that each municipality in Alberta get the most value for its tax dollars in order to make its goals achievable.

4:00

I'm pleased that Bill 202 continues to acknowledge the importance of local governance. For sufficient diversity to exist amongst our municipalities, their autonomy must be at the forefront. Similarly, municipal councillors wish to provide the range of services most closely aligned with their constituents' overall performance and needs. It's important, then, for municipalities to maintain a sufficient degree of autonomy so that efficient adaptations of local governance are possible.

Mr. Speaker, I don't believe Bill 202 infringes on any part or any important aspect of municipalities' autonomy. Rather, it seeks to assess the municipalities' operations and make recommendations, if necessary, for improvements that can assist the municipality in better actualizing its own goals. For example, the information compiled through the performance audit process by the office of the municipal auditor general can reveal where grant dollars can be better allocated. Municipalities may learn of extra funding opportunities through these recommendations, which may be very helpful for a municipality in their initiatives. Furthermore, the municipal auditor general would provide an additional level of accountability for the money allocated to municipalities from the government of Alberta, ensuring that they're used appropriately and for what they were intended. This would include funds received through such programs as the municipal sustainability initiative.

Again, Mr. Speaker, the aim of the recommendations made by the office of the municipal auditor general is the long-term sustainability of municipal autonomy in operations and budgeting. Bill 202 is truly a win-win proposition for both levels of government and, indeed, for all Albertans. The office of the municipal auditor general would act as a network to communicate best practices and improve the operating efficiencies of municipalities across the province. Municipalities will retain their autonomy in setting their priorities in budgets and can do so more effectively with the measures proposed in Bill 202.

I wholly support Bill 202, and I urge my fellow members to do so as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today to speak to Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. This bill proposes to create an office of the municipal auditor general, which would assist municipalities in conducting performance audits. I'd like to thank the hon. member for bringing forward the bill.

Mr. Speaker, as a long-time municipal councillor and reeve, when I first heard of this bill being proposed, I had some serious reservations. I thought that all we were going to do was add another layer of bureaucrats for councillors to deal with. Closer examination of the bill has revealed to me that it does make some points which would be beneficial to municipalities. I'd like to just mention a few of those points this afternoon.

First, performance audits would assist municipal governments in maximizing their efficiency by revealing areas for improvement and providing recommendations for action. These recommendations may suggest various actions such as the need for additional investment for better long-term sustainability. Mr. Speaker, the measures proposed in Bill 202 will greatly benefit municipalities in finding

shortfalls in the operational capabilities and would assist in providing the province with information regarding these shortfalls.

Performance audits would be independent of the municipalities, and the recommendations would be focused on achieving the greatest value for taxpayers. Objective performance audits conducted by accounting professionals would further strengthen the ability of municipalities to seek additional funding for improvements that would enable them to carry out long-term strategies and increase sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, all municipalities want to ensure that their operations are being conducted in the most efficient and cost-effective manner, and in some circumstances the efficiency can only be achieved by making further investments. For example, if a municipality is underperforming in one area, for example garbage pickup, the performance audit may be able to identify exactly how this operation is falling short of expectations. It could take into consideration every aspect of the municipal garbage pickup process and reveal where inefficiencies exist and how they can be improved upon. The recommendations may include a change in operational practices or if further capital investment is needed.

One of these identifiable inefficiencies could be old machinery constantly requiring repairs or machinery that consumes considerably more fuel than newer models. A performance audit could compare the cost benefit of maintaining the current equipment to that of investing in newer, more efficient equipment. If investing in new garbage pickup equipment would save the municipality money in the long run, the performance audit could make this recommendation. The performance audit report and recommendations could analyze all aspects of this operation. This would offer a substantial benefit to a municipality in determining the most efficient action to be taken.

Further to this, a municipality could use the recommendations from the performance audit report to support its current position and past decisions. If past decisions come into the spotlight, municipalities would be able to use the credibility of the performance audit to support their past decisions. Additionally, if current decisions come under scrutiny, the performance audit could assist the municipality to explain in detail why they made those decisions. A performance audit could also provide information on which programs, operations, or activities have been effective and explain how the past decisions of a municipality are reaping a benefit in the present.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 202 could also strengthen a municipality's argument for further funding when lobbying other levels of government. The recommendations provided in an objective performance audit would give municipalities a great deal of credibility when pursuing provincial or federal grants. Additionally, a performance audit may recommend where intermunicipal co-operation or provincial partnerships would lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness in their operations. For example, if a performance audit determined that a municipality's snow graders were costly to rent but that the neighbouring municipality owned one, it may recommend that they pursue a partnership with one another and share the cost of snow removal. The municipal auditor general might find the current funding allocations to this area insufficient to achieve the desired results and that a larger, multilevel strategy may be needed.

In another example the public transit network within a municipality may need to be modernized or perhaps bus routes reassigned. If it is determined that modernization is required for efficiency, that new buses need to be purchased, and that new transit stations are needed, the modernization endeavour may cost well beyond what the municipality itself could afford. It could be determined that transit routes need to be reassigned to transport people to other areas. Both

of these examples display how it would be mutually beneficial for different jurisdictions to work together to make this initiative efficient. Further, the benefits of an efficient public transit network would spill over into those other jurisdictions and areas such as environment, energy, and transportation.

Mr. Speaker, performance audits would also be useful in communicating to the public a municipality's decision to invest in certain areas as well as communicating to the public the areas that are efficient and the areas that are not. This would strengthen the argument of municipalities. Communication with the public is an essential component within government operations. As it is the public that elects governments, it is also the public that should be fully informed of government decisions. Bill 202 would enhance this stream of information by strengthening the municipal performance audit process, giving all municipalities a hand up when accounting for their decisions.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 202 fully recognizes how performance audits would assist municipalities in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations. For those reasons I believe that members of this Assembly should give Bill 202 serious consideration for their support.

Thank you very much.

4:10

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and engage in debate on Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009. I'd like to begin by thanking the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays for bringing forward this well-thought-out, forward-thinking bill. The goal of Bill 202 is rather straightforward, that the government create an office of the municipal auditor general, and in turn the office of the municipal auditor general would assist municipalities in completing performance and value-for-money audits. Creating a municipal auditor general would serve to strengthen municipal operations.

Now, before I dive into the advantages proposed by Bill 202, I'd first like to applaud and recognize the phenomenal job currently done by our municipalities, especially Strathcona. The audit practices currently employed at the municipal level provide clear and concise information, which is critical for ensuring an open and accountable government. Stemming from my appreciation for accountability, I feel as though I must clarify the motive driving this bill.

In no way should Bill 202 be viewed as an affront to municipal transparency. Bill 202 is designed to improve upon not only an effective but enviable accountability system. The measures proposed by this legislation are intended simply to assist municipalities. After all, the purpose of a performance audit is not to find fault but, rather, to find opportunities. Analyzing best practices data can clearly highlight strengths in planning as well as single out areas or programs that fall short of expectations. Simply put, effective audit systems promote and support effective value-for-money planning.

Mr. Speaker, the success of a government program is not based on whether or not they can achieve results but on achieving results in a financially sustainable fashion. Successful program planning requires that attention be paid to both costs and results. Performance audits are simply a program-by-program account of these two factors. Therefore, by improving audit practices, we are at the same time improving overall program and services planning. Bill 202 addresses the goal of improving municipal financial planning by creating a standardized information resource that allows municipalities to make clear, performance-based decisions.

The advantage of creating an office of the municipal auditor general is that all performance audit data would be centralized. In turn, a centralized body of information is easier to access and interpret than collecting performance data from several unconnected communities. With the measures proposed by Bill 202 in place, all of Alberta's municipalities would more easily be able to compare their services to their contemporaries'. An example of this could be a comparison of garbage pickup services between Lacombe and Ponoka. With a centralized body of a municipal auditor general the citizens and administrators in Lacombe could review the garbage removal practice of Ponoka and compare it to their system. If one municipality is found to have a superior system, the reasons for that superiority could be investigated and then applied to other municipalities looking to improve services. In this way having a central office to conduct performance audits can build stronger communities through the detailed sharing of program performance information.

In addition, performance audits could help foster co-operation at the municipal level. One example is if both Lacombe and Ponoka were interested in creating a facility designed to convert garbage into energy but neither could afford to construct such a facility on their own. The municipal auditor could recognize this joint desire and encourage the municipalities to look toward creating a co-operative program. In this example the cost of the waste-to-energy facility could be shared between the communities, and in turn both could benefit from a service they could not provide independently.

The strengths of this province will always come from the fabric of co-operation diligently interwoven with threads of kindness, dedication, and hard work. Mr. Speaker, I'm aware that the idea of an audit does not normally generate feelings of co-operation and unity. However, municipalities in this province are committed to providing the best services to their citizens, and I believe that co-operation between municipalities, which Bill 202 would help facilitate, would only serve to strengthen these services. Therefore, it's our duty to encourage the exchange of information to best promote strong communities and to ensure that the values of hard work and unity that help make Alberta great are encouraged in the future. In essence, I believe this is the strength of Bill 202. Creating an office of the municipal auditor general would create a system designed to foster information exchange and community co-operation. Sharing information and best-practice procedures would benefit all Alberta's municipalities.

I would like to close by again thanking the hon. member for bringing forward this bill. I urge all members gathered here to join me in support of Bill 202. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and join the second-reading debate on Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009. This bill was brought forward by my hon. colleague from Calgary-Hays, and I would like to thank him for presenting this valuable bill.

By this point in the process most of us have a firm grasp on the goals of this proposed legislation. Bill 202 aims to create an office of the municipal auditor general to help municipalities conduct performance audits. This proposed bill has many benefits, from assisting municipalities in obtaining provincial grants, to ensuring and promoting accountability, to helping to guarantee municipal autonomy. While these benefits are a strong endorsement of the legislation in and of themselves, what I find most advantageous about Bill 202 is the commitment it makes to municipal co-operation.

Community co-operation, of course, is one of the cornerstones this

great province of ours was built on. In fact, from the early days of settlement Albertans have recognized the value of co-operation and helping those in need. When homesteaders came out west and were given their quarter section of land, survival often depended upon the help of the community. Plowing, harvesting, maintaining a homestead were difficult tasks, many requiring the efforts of more than one family. Recognizing this, community members would step in and assist each other to ensure the success of all households.

Fast-forward a hundred years, and it is still apparent just how important co-operation is to the fabric of Alberta. We're blessed to have a significant number of volunteers who recognize that strengthening a community is not an individual effort but, instead, one that demands co-operation and hard work. Mr. Speaker, this is why I take great pride in this great province. On one hand, we're fiercely independent, advocating self-reliance and the idea that through hard work Albertans can fulfill their needs and desires, but at the same time we have always been a people willing to pitch in and become involved with other communities, ensuring the welfare of others.

Now, to tie all this back to Bill 202, it is important that we understand just how an office of the municipal auditor general could promote community co-operation and involvement. After all, when I think of community unity, seldom do I think of accounting and performance audits. Basically, it all comes down to an exchange of information. If a community is informed about the needs of another community that match their own, they might be more interested to pursue dialogue and possibly work toward a mutually beneficial relationship. Likewise, if a community excels at one aspect of their municipal operations, the reasons for their success could then be shared with other municipalities looking to improve specific aspects of their own operations and services.

Instituting a system that overlooks and encourages municipal best practices would create a body of information that could easily be shared between those communities. This is not to imply that communities are currently not talking to their neighbours; however, if information pertaining to operations were to be centralized in one body, municipalities might be more inclined to access this information and engage in dialogue with their peer communities.

4:20

Mr. Speaker, an example might help this best. Consider inner-city road construction and maintenance, which falls under the jurisdiction of municipal governments. Providing these services requires heavy equipment. These machines all have one thing in common: they require considerable amounts of capital. Now, say, for example, that two nearby communities were interested in expanding or improving their internal road systems but both were apprehensive about the cost of this equipment. The office of the municipal auditor general could then determine that these two communities were facing similar problems and recommend some form of community co-operation. In this example the cost and use of heavy road equipment could be split between the municipalities. In this way a community would be able to offer an increased level of service to their citizens while at the same time being able to stay within budget constraints. In this example the solution to these communities' problems rested on information exchange, and because the municipal performance audit information was stored under one roof, it was possible for the auditor general to make recommendations based on their joint needs.

The strength of this bill really rests on the idea of bringing all municipal performance review information under one roof. Currently although municipalities may institute performance and/or value-for-money audits, they are limited because they might not have access to the performance standards of their contemporaries. And even if a municipality had access to the performance informa-

tion of their neighbours, they might not have the ability to compare themselves to other communities. Bill 202 recognizes that the value of performance audits is to ensure Albertans that they are getting value for their money. After all, information is the cornerstone of both good governance and good service delivery. With clear and concise knowledge municipal governments can be better positioned to make good decisions on behalf of their constituents.

I would like to once again thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays for recognizing not only the benefits of information exchange but the value and the historical precedent of community co-operation in Alberta. I thank you all for the opportunity to rise today, and I certainly look forward to the remainder of the debate.

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

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour and privilege to rise and continue debate on Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, as sponsored by my hon. colleague from Calgary-Hays. The municipal auditor general would work with municipalities and financial performance auditors to co-ordinate and develop financial statements, make recommendations on how to improve business practices and make them more sustainable. Ultimately, this would provide a powerful tool to our municipalities to create more openness and transparency at the local level for all Albertans regardless of where they live.

I'm a supporter of this bill as it recognizes the positive relationships our provincial government maintains with our local counterparts. Local governments are in the best position to truly understand local issues and how to implement solutions. To this end, this government maintains a host of municipal grant programs which provide billions of dollars of funding for our cities, counties, and municipal districts each year. Much of this funding is used to develop priority projects that municipal councils can identify. These projects can include roads, bridges, facilities, and other necessary public service that allows us to maintain our high standard of living. Bill 202 would expand on this relationship by providing municipalities with a powerful new tool to ensure they are getting the greatest value for money for their operations and their services.

Mr. Speaker, this bill provides an opportunity to discuss and determine exactly which programs might benefit from performance audits. One such program is the municipal sponsorship program. Introduced in 1998, its objective is to provide grant-based financial assistance to smaller municipalities with a population of between one and 20,000. Once a municipal council has identified their project needs, they can apply to the municipal sponsorship program for financial assistance in the form of a conditional grant. These grants are calculated on population size, with additional funding available for intermunicipal projects or shared provincial-municipal projects. Before these funds are released, the municipality and the provincial government enter into a conditional grant agreement that ensures appropriate oversight and accountability measures. These measures include reporting requirements and the minister's right to audit any project receiving a provincial grant.

I am of the opinion that Bill 202 would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of this program for the following reasons. First, it would assist municipalities in ensuring that funds from the municipal sponsorship program are used effectively for approved projects; second, through the information-sharing mechanisms that the municipal auditor general would foster, municipalities would be better positioned and informed to embark on intermunicipal projects and could further take advantage of conditional grants provided for such projects.

Mr. Speaker, in 2007 the government expanded on its vision of the municipal sponsorship program by introducing a 10-year initiative, the municipal sustainability initiative, to assist municipalities with the challenges of unprecedented population growth. This program is an excellent example of the kind of co-operation this government is fostering with our municipalities. The goal of the municipal sustainability initiative is to provide predictable, long-term funding for municipalities. The funding will increase from the \$400 million initially distributed in the 2007-08 fiscal year to \$1.4 billion annually by 2010.

The funding process was designed in a relatively straightforward manner and aims to hold municipalities accountable for the funds allotted to them while allowing flexibility. Following the passage of the provincial budget, municipalities will be advised of their annual MSI contribution based on 48 per cent per capita, 48 per cent education property tax, and 4 per cent based on kilometres of local roads.

Further to this, municipalities must forward a proposed project profile to Municipal Affairs by April 1 each year. In addition, they must submit a multiyear capital infrastructure plan that outlines all proposed capital expenditures over a five- to 10-year planning period.

In addition, grants received under the municipal sustainability initiative must be held in a separate account, and the municipalities must submit a statement of funding and expenditures for the previous fiscal year. Bill 202 could improve the successful program through increased information sharing between municipalities, which could foster greater co-operation on major infrastructure project such as roads, public facilities, and more.

Mr. Speaker, another innovative municipal support program is the regional partnership initiative. This program provides assistance to municipalities who express interest in forming a partnership around a specific opportunity or set of opportunities. Specifically, municipalities can be eligible for funding grants under this program when they explore possible opportunities for co-operation and when they work out the specific role for each municipality in this agreement.

Bill 202 would improve the effectiveness of the program in two ways. First, through information sharing municipalities would be better equipped to understand the infrastructure and service needs of the neighbouring communities. Second, these municipalities would be better able to gauge the resources and capabilities of other municipalities and the potential role that may be played in a prospective agreement.

Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Bill 202 has the potential to make regional and intermunicipal co-operation stronger and more effective. Alberta's strong economy depends on the long-term sustainability of our municipalities. This is why I support Bill 202, and I encourage my colleagues all to do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

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

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure today that I rise to speak to Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. Bill 202 proposes to create an office of the municipal auditor general, which would implement standardized performance audits for municipal operations.

Albertans expect that their hard-earned tax dollars will be spent wisely at all levels of government. I'm glad to say that we experience that today, but, certainly, improvements are always good. Bill 202 is designed to meet this expectation by having the municipal

auditor general work with Alberta's municipalities to improve business practices and assist Albertans to determine whether they are receiving fair value for the taxes paid to their municipalities.

4:30

Mr. Speaker, performance audits help governments and other administrative bodies by revealing areas for improvement in their operations that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. Implementing standardized performance audits as proposed in Bill 202 would assist municipalities in ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in their operations, which would provide greater value for the taxes paid to communities.

The Alberta Treasury Board's performance auditing process is based on two principles. Firstly, public business should be conducted in a way that makes the best possible use of public funds, and secondly, people who conduct public business should be accountable for the prudent and effective management of the resources entrusted to them. Mr. Speaker, these principles illustrate this government's commitment to efficiency in Alberta's public sector. They recognize the importance of achieving value out of every tax dollar spent and providing a level of accountability with these tax dollars, all of which instill confidence in Albertans that their tax dollars are being spent as they would have their leaders do.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 202 would provide a standard for municipal performance audits that could ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness in their operations. Performance audits look in depth at both the organizational and operational elements of a government. It can then be determined if that body is achieving the desired results for the dollars allocated to each initiative.

To understand the benefits of the measures proposed in Bill 202, it is important to understand the process of a performance audit and how it helps to ensure that best practices are used in all aspects of an operation. Performance audits, like most audits, are carried out in four standard stages: a planning stage, fieldwork, reporting, and, of course, a follow-up stage. Mr. Speaker, a preliminary study may be undertaken for a performance audit to gather sufficient information to decide if and whether the audit is warranted.

If the audit is deemed necessary or it is a part of required procedures of an entity, the planning stage of the audit will then be undertaken. The planning stage involves establishing the criteria for the audit such as the scope, objectives, and, of course, the approach of the audit, Mr. Speaker.

Once the planning stage is complete, fieldwork begins by gathering and analyzing information relative to the specific performance audit. Mr. Speaker, this procedure will gather information on the actual performance of the entity in question and compare it to past performances and the current situation.

At the reporting stage the performance auditor makes recommendations to enhance the performance of the entity. This report starts at the beginning of the performance audit process and evolves throughout the undertaking. A first draft of a performance audit report will be issued to management in order to ensure the accuracy and the validity of the information, Mr. Speaker. Subsequent drafts will provide greater detail of how to implement the changes recommended by that performance audit. The final performance audit report provides an action plan to bridge the gap between the current and the expected performance.

Further to this, there would also be a follow-up stage to report on the progress being made on the recommendations of the performance audit report. The specifics of the procedures of a performance audit may vary, but the goals of all performance audits are to identify waste, ensure that best practices are being used, and ensure that these hard-earned funds are being put to the best use.

Mr. Speaker, performance audits are of particular importance when they are government related. When tax dollars are allocated to a project, department, or other entity, taxpayers expect that the tax revenue is used for that intended purpose. Furthermore, taxpayers expect that their tax dollars go as far as possible to maximize the goods and services that they receive from government.

Performance audits are helpful for both the private and public sectors to identify current shortfalls and how they can improve efficiency of these operations. Mr. Speaker, in the private sector it is essential that efficiencies are maximized to ensure the continued success of a firm. Likewise, we would expect the same in the public sector. Improved efficiencies in the private sector can maximize profits and return greater dividends to the shareholders. In the public sector efficiencies are just as important and desired. Public funds are entrusted to governments, and it is the responsibility of these governments to ensure that a maximum utility of every tax dollar is received. These efficiency improvements can result from even in many cases a small procedural change which can reveal and offer suggestions where funds can be better spent.

Bill 202 intends to ensure that Alberta's municipalities are given the tools that they need to effectively on our behalf analyze their operations. This office would play a key role in working with a municipality's financial auditor in identifying strategies for future planning as well as the cost-effectiveness of their current long-term goals. Mr. Speaker, like a performance audit in itself the municipal auditor general would assist in making sure that Albertans are receiving fair and just value for the tax dollars that they entrust to our governments.

Mr. Speaker, I look forward to hearing further debate on this bill and how it will improve transparency and how it will enhance the auditing process to ensure that our tax dollars are being most effectively used. Thank you.

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today in this Assembly to speak in favour of Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, brought forward by my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. I must first commend this member for bringing this bill forward. This member has a long history of wanting to improve accountability, and I'm pleased to support his bill. It must be something about southeast Calgary.

This government has put forth initiatives and legislation to make sure that accountability and transparency are achieved in everything it does. This bill is an additional tool, Mr. Speaker, that would help make sure that accountability and openness are achieved in all levels of government in this province. The objective of Bill 202 is to create a municipal auditor general, which would ensure that municipal operations are both efficient and effective. As a result there will be a standardized, objective body for municipalities to receive valuable information on how to improve their operations and services.

Mr. Speaker, strong local governments are one of the foundations of a prosperous province, and there are many quality people that are attracted to municipal governments, such as my alderman, Mr. Ric McIver. Bill 202 intends to streamline municipal operations and create a mechanism for Albertans to determine whether they are receiving a fair value for their business and property taxes.

Bill 202 is not the first of its kind. Looking to other provinces, Nova Scotia recently passed legislation that is very similar to what Bill 202 intends to put forth. Mr. Speaker, the province of Nova Scotia passed their Bill No. 138, which is An Act to Amend Chapter

18 of the Acts of 1998, the Municipal Government Act, which achieved royal assent in 2008. Nova Scotia's legislation created an independent municipal auditor general to oversee spending in municipalities. This legislation provides the Minister of Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations – I guess the ministries are named slightly differently there – the power to appoint a municipal auditor general to undertake the value of the money audits in all municipalities.

4:40

Mr. Speaker, the municipal auditor general must be a qualified auditor, which I presume typically is a chartered accountant, and may hold the office for a term of seven years. The municipal auditor general may examine the accounts, procedures, or programs of a municipality. They may also examine to the same extent persons and bodies receiving a grant from a municipality. The municipal auditor general is entitled to access books, accounts, financial records, electronic data, processing records, reports, files, and all other papers in the broadest sense as well as property belonging to or used by the municipality or municipal body.

The municipal auditor general is scheduled to take office on April 1, 2010. Now, of course, those of the members who know me, Mr. Speaker, know that April 1 is probably my favourite day of the year, and indeed it is. I'm thinking that we've chosen April 1, 2010, however, for opposite reasons, and I'll let the Member for Calgary-Hays talk about that in his conclusion.

The municipal auditor general will evaluate municipalities on whether the rules or procedures applied are sufficient to ensure effective control of money, if authorized expenditures are made with regard to economy and efficiency, and, most importantly, if the money has been spent with proper authorization and according to appropriation. This is similar, of course, to what this government deals with with its own Auditor General, Mr. Speaker. In addition, the municipal auditor general will evaluate whether municipal policies and procedures encourage efficient use of resources and discourage waste and inefficiency, two things that I detest.

The effectiveness of programs, operations, and activities will also be evaluated, Mr. Speaker. The municipal auditor general will report annually to the council in a public meeting if a value-for-money audit is completed and will submit a report to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. In this report the municipal auditor general will make recommendations for improvements in the efficiency of the municipality. Of course, much like our government, this must be done on an ongoing basis in each municipality in order to ensure economy and effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to draw this Assembly's attention to the current legislation in Quebec that promotes accountability and transparency at the municipal level and in advance apologize to this House for my terrible French. Under an act representing the *ministère des affaires municipales*, the bureau of examining auditors may visit the offices of the municipal councils at the discretion of the minister. The examining auditors determine if books, registers, and archives of the offices are being kept correctly and in accordance with the law. Furthermore, they make sure that the security for the secretary-treasurer is valid and is sufficient, and they ensure that public monies are administered according to law. I put to this House that this is something that we would like to see also in Alberta.

The laws respecting the revenues and expenses of municipal corporations in Quebec are observed by the examining auditor as well, Mr. Speaker. Examining auditors complete reports to the Minister of Municipal Affairs detailing each of the inspections and include their remarks regarding the office in question. The auditor

is required to include the changes that he or she deems necessary in order to obtain uniformity in the accounting of the offices. In addition, they are also to include the recommendations that deal with the safekeeping of the municipality's funds and the accomplishments of the secretary-treasurer and all of the other municipal officers.

Mr. Speaker, upon receiving the report from the examining auditor, the Minister of Municipal Affairs may give the municipal council instructions as he or she deems it to be in the interest of the municipality and, obviously, also in the interest of the citizens of that municipality. Next the municipal council will acknowledge the minister's instructions and may order steps it believes are necessary to carry them out.

The last jurisdiction which I would like to discuss is Ontario. In 2006 the Municipal Act of Ontario was amended under the title municipal statute amendment act. This amendment grants municipalities the opportunity to appoint an auditor general; however, it does not require the municipality to do so. Several municipalities in Ontario have already acted on this opportunity, including Ottawa, Toronto, Oshawa, and Markham. These cities believe that an independent perspective can help them identify ways in which they can do an even better job for their citizens.

Mr. Speaker, under the legislation the auditor general reports to the municipal council and is responsible for assisting the council and holding itself and the administrators accountable for the quality of stewardship over public funds and for the achievement of value for money in municipal operations, value for taxpayers. In short, these are just a few examples of how some jurisdictions have reached a new level of openness and accountability to reflect the wishes of their citizens.

I'm reminded of a constituent of mine named Oscar Fech, who always talks about accountability. I think that he would endorse this act. He's a proud resident of Kingsland, where I also reside.

Bill 202 intends to take the best practices of each jurisdiction, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has had many exceptional individuals who perform at the highest level when it comes to the management of municipal coffers. We recognize and praise our cities for achieving accountability measures that are currently within our own municipal governance, but we do not doubt our municipalities' successes and accomplishments. Rather, Bill 202 will give municipalities the tools they need to effectively and efficiently provide Albertans with enhanced accountability and transparency, which is why I support this bill and urge others in the Assembly to do the same.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona indicated that municipalities are a level of government. In fact, they're created at the pleasure of the provincial government, the body in which we sit now, pursuant to the Municipal Government Act.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak on Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, proposed by my colleague from Calgary-Hays. I am speaking in favour of the passage of this bill in second reading, which is the passage of the bill in principle.

Now, municipal governments are creatures of the province of Alberta by virtue of the Municipal Government Act. Of course, we do accord them a large amount of financial support, and I think it's reasonable to have the tools to ensure that the funds are properly spent, that those funds that are sent to the municipalities are properly directed to the programs which are intended to be targeted by the provincial government. Very large sums, as I mentioned, are

allocated by the provincial government, hundreds of millions of dollars, in fact.

I must say that large cities like my own, the city of Calgary, have very effective audit programs to make sure that those funds are properly spent and that they're spent in the manner in which they were intended to be spent. They have very stringent auditing procedures in the city of Calgary and also in the large cities like Edmonton, Lethbridge, and so on. I also want to commend the city of Calgary for some of their auditing procedures which have worked towards performance measures and efficiencies. I would like to mention a couple of those which have been very notable and, I think, which have been exemplary as far as municipal governments go not only in the province of Alberta but right across the country.

One I would mention is the 311 call centre implemented by the city of Calgary. This 311 call centre is a unified call centre which takes care of all of the departments of the city of Calgary. Whether it's a planning matter or a bylaw enforcement matter – it could be a pothole in the street, a barking dog; it could be concern with the municipal tax assessment; it could be almost anything to do with the civic government – when one calls the 311 number, they have trained employees on the other end of the line. Rather than being redirected by an operator and going through to different departments and perhaps getting connected with the wrong department, one is connected with a knowledgeable person on the other end of the line that can usually give answers straight away. That is one example where efficiencies have been very marked and improved upon and, I think, have set an example for many municipalities across the country.

4:50

I also want to mention the 911 call centre in the city of Calgary, which is a tremendous facility. That one integrates the dispatch of police, fire, and emergency medical services from one centre. It is presently in transition, and some of the operators that are in the 911 call centre are already trained to take calls in all three of those areas and to dispatch the necessary services. Those take a tremendous amount of training. They're highly skilled people. The efficiencies are obvious to anyone. Rather than taking time to talk to a 911 operator who has to ascertain what the nature of the problem is and then go through to the appropriate department – fire or EMS or the police – one is immediately dispatched according to what the requirements of the caller are.

Another efficiency that has been gained in terms of performance that I want to mention is in waste collection in the city of Calgary. Formerly we had waste trucks coming down the alley which were manned by three persons. Now we have a new type of vehicle which only takes two persons to operate, and it's much more efficient. Obviously, eliminating one of the three positions resulted in quite a considerable cost saving to the city of Calgary.

I think that the cities, large cities particularly, do a very, very exemplary job in terms of their auditing procedures and their performance audits. Now, having said that, I think the bill as presented by my colleague from Calgary-Hays suggests that performance audits could be of assistance in the case of many municipalities for maximizing efficiencies and that perhaps some of the smaller centres and some of the rural municipalities in particular might benefit by having the input of a municipal auditor general.

The measures proposed in Bill 202 could benefit municipalities in finding shortfalls in operational capabilities. It might assist them in providing information on where those shortfalls exist and what might be done to correct them. Those performance audits, of course, could be done independently from the municipalities, and the recommendations could be given to the municipalities in order to

maximize value for taxpayers' dollars. These objective performance audits could be carried out, of course, by professionals. They would enable some long-term strategies to be implemented.

Mr. Speaker, all municipalities, of course, want to ensure that their operations are being conducted in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. In some circumstances one might envision the fact of further investments, like the example that I gave about the city of Calgary, where they invested in a new type of vehicle to do the garbage collection. There are ways in which those efficiencies might be recognized and appreciated, and there might be recommendations made to make things much better.

Another example might be the cost of maintaining older equipment that is less efficient, upgrading to new practices, and of course technology is changing all the time. In particular an outside auditor might be able to have cognizance of what's going on in other jurisdictions, not only in the province of Alberta but right across the country, and be able to recommend some of those best practices to the particular municipality.

Performance audit reports and recommendations such as we receive here in this House from our Auditor General could analyze aspects of any particular operation or public service provided. They might enhance, for example, the delivery of social services by the city or municipality. Particularly in the case of small municipalities there could be efficiencies by joining forces and having some interjurisdictional co-operation between municipalities and delivering those services or perhaps having a centre for treatment or a centre for providing a particular type of social service in one municipality and sharing it with another.

Mr. Speaker, performance audits would also be useful in communicating to the public the municipalities' decisions to invest in certain areas. I think it's important for ratepayers to have some justification when their money is being expended, and a performance audit would certainly help in that regard. It would enhance the stream of information by strengthening municipal performances in their audits. It would give, as I said, guidance when accounting for decisions.

In summary, Bill 202 recognizes how performance audits might assist some municipalities in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations. For those reasons I am supportive of Bill 202, and I would encourage my fellow members to support this bill in principle on its second reading.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to participate in today's discussion in second reading of Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. Alberta has a large number of far-reaching municipalities, many of them rural. Their continued success is a crucial factor in the long-term prosperity of the province. Our municipalities have grown. As such, we as a government have committed to helping municipalities address such growth with the municipal sustainability initiative.

Our government is also committed to low taxes, efficient spending, and a sufficient degree of local autonomy as many important public services are provided at a local level. Bill 202 helps ensure that these goals are met by establishing a framework that will improve the communication and learning process between the government and Alberta municipalities. Mr. Speaker, this will be achieved through the office of the municipal auditor general as proposed by Bill 202. Municipalities across the province will benefit from the office proposed by Bill 202 as it will serve as a central node between all municipalities.

Currently there exist a number of forums for collaboration between municipalities, such as the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, or the AAMDC, and Alberta Rural Municipal Administrators Association. These organizations are co-operative bodies comprised of membership from Alberta's various municipal districts, especially in the case of the AAMDC, which includes each municipal district and county within the province. In the case of the ARMAA representation is composed of five broader geographic zones.

Mr. Speaker, co-operative associations such as those I just mentioned can serve as productive forums for discussion of municipal matters and as an effective liaison between the province and its municipalities. The AAMDC, in particular, maintains a good perspective of the operational aspects of the province's numerous rural municipalities through its organizational structure of five districts and representation by each county or municipality. Indeed, such an association can serve as a useful conduit for the office of the municipal auditor general. Bill 202 seeks to build upon this collaboration and would provide recommendations to improve operational efficiencies and effectiveness as well as documents and new implementations for future reference.

The proposed office of the municipal auditor general can work with these associations, thereby taking into full account the diverse needs of our rural areas while also promoting a transparent reporting process and accountability for municipal operations. Moreover, the standard performance audits compiled by the office of the municipal auditor general could enhance grant allocations and aid the implementation of best practices in municipal operations. This could ultimately help stabilize local taxes and increase budget flexibility.

Mr. Speaker, the municipal sustainability initiative funding criteria could also be enhanced as a result of information compiled by the office of the municipal auditor general. This can benefit municipalities that face unique challenges in their ability to conduct internal performance audits due to the geographical size of the municipal district or a staffing shortage. Rural municipal districts, for example, may not have the same administrative resources as large cities. Given the number of rural municipal districts in the province, their diversity, voluntary and independent information sharing may not be constant due to lack of resources. Rural municipalities can conduct ad hoc performance assessment from time to time; using external consultants when recruiting, for example.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake. The time limit for consideration of this item has been concluded. We will continue it next time.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

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

Official Mushroom of Alberta

502. Mr. Benito moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce amendments to the Emblems of Alberta Act to designate *Leccinum boreale*, also known as northern roughstem or red cap, as the official mushroom of Alberta.

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and introduce Motion 502. I acknowledge that there are pressing economic issues that currently exist; however, this motion is important to my constituents and 2,500 Albertans who have

chosen this mushroom to be designated as Alberta's provincial mushroom emblem. In fact, Her Honour Lois Hole, the former Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, believed it was a worthwhile goal and a way to recognize an important part of our heritage. She also believed that mushrooms play a crucial role in Alberta's ecosystem, history, medicine, culture, and cuisine.

By recognizing *Leccinum boreale* as Alberta's official mushroom, we would be continuing a long-held tradition. There are a number of official emblems that reflect Alberta's rich history, its people, and its biological and geographical diversity. Currently the Emblems of Alberta Act recognizes a number of environmental emblems.

For example, the wild rose was designated as Alberta's floral emblem in 1930 to recognize the valuable role it plays in Alberta's ecosystem. Also, rough fescue was adopted as Alberta's official grass in 2003, recognizing the vast amount and variety of this grass in the province. The lodgepole pine was established as Alberta's official tree in 1984, recognizing its value in constructing railway ties during Alberta's settlement as well as being the preferred wood for teepee poles, which I'm sure the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake knows very well. Petrified wood is found in gravel pits across this province and was made Alberta's official stone in 1977. As you can see, Alberta has recognized a variety of environmental emblems to symbolize this great province.

Mr. Speaker, there has been a lot of support behind this motion. One of the major proponents is the Alberta Mycological Society. This society plays an invaluable role in promoting the awareness of fungi in this province, and it is the only such organization in a western province. The mission of the Alberta Mycological Society is to raise awareness as well as to educate and promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the kingdom of fungi. Their awareness and education activities include seasonal trips, mushroom identification workshops, mushroom expositions, and an annual president's dinner, where a gourmet mushroom meal is served.

In 2004 the Alberta Mycological Society launched its Pick a Wild Mushroom, Alberta! campaign to choose a mushroom as Alberta's new provincial emblem, which was funded in part by the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation. The society received over 2,500 votes, with the *Leccinum boreale* emerging as the mushroom of choice for a new mushroom emblem of Alberta. This mushroom was chosen because it is found across Alberta, most commonly under poplar and trembling aspen trees. It is edible, easily identifiable, and has a long history of human use. It also has a long growing season and has been valued highly in a cultural sense as an edible mushroom by immigrant communities, especially the Ukrainian and Polish communities which populated this province.

Mr. Speaker, a great deal of time and effort has been put forward to establish a mushroom emblem for this province. Alberta would be the first province in Canada to establish an official mushroom emblem and would join a handful of American states that have already done so. Currently Oregon recognizes the Pacific golden chanterelle as the official state mushroom, Minnesota has established the sponge morel as the state's official mushroom, and legislation was introduced in Missouri in January 2008 to recognize the morel as their state's official mushroom.

It is important to point out that the mushroom industry contributes \$30 million annually to the Alberta economy – a \$30 million dollar annual contribution to the Alberta economy. By recognizing an official mushroom, we may help promote this valuable industry as well as inspire additional mushroom business ventures. It may lead to additional investment and diversification of the Alberta economy.

Mr. Speaker, this idea was brought to me by constituents in my riding. As their elected representative I have the responsibility to bring forward their concerns, petitions, and economic ideas, which

is exactly what this motion represents. It is not just an emblem but a symbol that could encourage the growth of Alberta's \$30 million mushroom industry. It is for this reason that I have brought forward Motion 502, and I encourage all hon. members to join me in urging the government to make *Leccinum boreale* Alberta's mushroom emblem.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Brown: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to commend the member for bringing forth the motion regarding the designation of the red cap mushroom as the official mushroom of the province of Alberta. I appreciate the fact that this motion has brought some recognition to not only members of the House but to the Alberta public for mushrooms and the world of mycology in general. I would also like to commend the Edmonton Mycological Society for the same reasons, in bringing forth all of these various mushrooms, including the red cap mushroom, to the attention of the public in Alberta and particularly for the participation that they engendered by virtue of having a public election or choosing one of the three finalists that they put forth to the Alberta public for the official mushroom of the province of Alberta. All of this information has created people's awareness of these fascinating vegetables.

Now, for most people wild mushrooms are largely a dark and unknown subject. Hence, we often hear the simile that someone who is deprived of knowledge or information is said to be like a mushroom: they're kept in the dark, and they're fed manure. But to those of us who love nature and spend time in the outdoors, mushrooms are not only beautiful things but a fascinating part of the environment, and for those of us who appreciate eating mushrooms, they're even more fascinating because they make a wonderful accompaniment to meats, great soups. They're great fried in stuffing. I use them in all of my wild game stuffings, and they're just great.

Mushrooms, as people may not know, are only the fruiting bodies of fungi. They belong to a particular phylum of fungi called the basidiomycetes. Basidiomycetes are fungi that have these particular fruiting bodies above ground, which we know as mushrooms or toadstools or puffballs or things of that nature. [interjections] Pardon me?

5:10

Mr. Liepert: It sounds like an opposition question.

Dr. Brown: No, those are different kinds of puffballs.

These basidiomycetes, as are all fungi, are part of a very healthy environment. They help to break down vegetable matter. Of course, the fruiting bodies that we see on the surface are only a very, very small part of the fungi. In fact, the vast biomass of the fungi lies either beneath the ground or inside of decaying vegetable matter, things like trees and fallen leaves. Anything that's moist and in an environment that has lots of moisture tends to have a lot of fungi invading it. It helps to break it down, and it helps to create soil.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I do love mushrooms, but my difficulty with this particular motion is choosing one of these wonderful basidiomycetes over all of the other basidiomycetes that we have in the province of Alberta. I thank the hon. member for providing us with a poster of some of these particular mushrooms.

I must say that I have some other favorites. I'm not too familiar with the red cap mushroom, but one of my favorites is the shaggy mane mushroom. I see on here that the Latin name for it is the *Coprinus comatus*. For those of you who don't know shaggy mane

mushrooms, they grow in disturbed areas, quite often along the roadsides. They're one of the most common mushrooms in the province of Alberta, and they're absolutely delicious. They have a very short shelf life, however. They have to be picked very early in the morning, and they tend to go black, which doesn't mean that they can't be used, but they become quite inky after a day in the sun. Shaggy mane mushrooms are extremely edible, extremely tasty. They have a very, very pungent flavour, so a few of those fried up in a little bit of butter help to flavour almost any dish. They're a wonderful mushroom. That's one of my favorites, and I'd be hard-pressed to pick the red cap over that one.

Another one of my all-time favourite mushrooms is the puffball, *Lycoperdon perlatum*. A lot of people don't know that puffballs are actually very edible. In fact, my aunt Frances Borgal used to love picking puffballs, and she often brought them to our house when I was a youngster. They can grow quite large, and sliced up and fried in a little bit of butter, they are also very, very tasty. Incidentally, puffballs were also used by the native Indians in making war paint. After they were dried out, the spores are very fine, and they used to adorn their faces with this extract from puffballs as part of their war paint.

There are other mushrooms that I could talk about. The field mushroom, *Agaricus silvaticus*, again, is another one that's a very tasty one. It's also very, very common in the province of Alberta, and it's the one that we would most commonly associate with being edible. A lot of the other ones people are reluctant to use because of the fact that they're afraid that they might be poisonous.

I want to thank, again, the member. As I said, the reason that I'm unable to support the motion is simply because there are too many other ones, and I would hate to pick one over the other. But I want to thank him for his efforts in bringing the red cap mushroom and all of these basidiomycetes to the attention of the Assembly and the public.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: I must comment that the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill makes the debate delicious.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you wish to speak?

Ms Notley: It's a moderate kind of pleasure to be able to rise and speak to this particular motion, the emblem debate. It's, I guess, very important that we have a conversation about the province's emblems. We have a lot of emblems, actually, in Alberta. We have, of course, the wild rose, which we've heard about. We have a grass emblem. Rough fescue is our grass. We have an official tartan and an official dress tartan. We actually have two separate tartans. We have an official bird. We have an official stone. Petrified wood is apparently our official stone, which is kind of interesting. We have an official tree, the lodgepole pine. I'm not sure how many of those are left yet, but there you go; we have an official tree. We have official colours, which are remarkably similar to other well-known colours, blue and gold, with quotation marks around it, not at all similar to, say, orange, so no similarities there. We have, of course, the official mammal, the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Of course, this I don't think made it into the rousing debate in question period involving the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, but we also have an official fish, the bull trout, a type of trout. Anyway, we certainly have a lot of official things, and I wonder how much debate went into the establishment of those particular official things.

Now we're talking about the official mushroom. I guess my first question is a little bit along the lines of the previous speaker. Why is it that we're picking this particular mushroom? You know, as soon as you pick one mushroom, you, of course, exclude all the

others. As soon as you recognize one thing, you inadvertently insult the others. If you pick this mushroom, do other mushrooms not get their day in the shade, as it were? What about the other important fungi out there? For instance, one might say that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood is a fun guy. Why can't he be on an emblem, for example? There are a lot of other things that could be on an emblem. The puffball was already identified by these folks over here. Clearly, if you were to actually do a vote, I'm sure that would be a mushroom that a significant unnamed group of government backbenchers would be inclined to want to support. So, you know, we have all these various and sundry overlooked fungi that will be, I'm sure, very deeply hurt through their failure to be included on this list.

Moving away from maybe the slightly more lighthearted reasons why one might not want to identify this particular mushroom as an official mushroom, I'm compelled to quote, actually, a member of the government cabinet, which is not something I do often. In this particular case I thought it was very interesting that the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit, I believe, was quoted in one of the newspapers, saying, "Bless them all for their enthusiasm, but do we really need any more official anythings?" I've gotta say that I was kind of inclined to agree with that. "Every time we do one of these things it costs money, and it's not a cheap proposition. I think we can spend our money elsewhere right now."

I have to say that that kind of leads into sort of my key point in this particular discussion. Members here may recall that we had a debate about changing the standing orders in the last session. One of the issues that members from the opposition put forward with respect to standing orders was the process through which members of the opposition managed to get either private members' bills or private members' motions onto the agenda. Of course, as you all know, right now we do it through a lottery. If you don't happen to be one that is very successful at lotteries, then you don't get a private member's motion or a private member's bill.

5:20

At the time we suggested a different approach, one where maybe the numbers of motions and bills would be split in half, and the opposition could take their half and divide them up on a pro rata basis. At the time I was told: no, no, there are very, very burning, important issues that all backbench members of the Assembly need to be able to address, very important issues, and that it's not partisan, and we all need to be able to have very important discussions about the really key issues of the day. So here we are today, having one of those conversations, apparently.

I would suggest that given the discussions we've had in the House over just the last three weeks, if I – well, in fact, I don't even have to. I was going to say that if I were to go into the sponsoring member's constituency and ask those constituents what they thought was a burning issue, but I don't actually have to go there because I often get mail from people outside of my riding. I believe I've received some from the hon. member's riding. Some of the things that they might talk about or in some cases have talked about would include their fear with respect to keeping their job over the next year or whether they will fall into that 15,000 and probably much, much higher number that the finance minister has said will lose their job.

They might talk about whether their grandparents will be able to find a long-term care bed with the appropriate level of care when they become ill and need that care. They might talk about the unfortunate state of our foster care system and whether or not we can keep our children safe in Alberta. They might talk about the issues of our environment and the fact that we appear to have no plan to meaningfully clean up the tailings ponds which are threatening the

water system in the whole northern part of the province. There's not a shortage of things that people contact my office about that this Legislature has responsibility over that they are concerned about. There is not a shortage of important issues for us to discuss.

That's why I think it's a bit unfortunate that today, because of the process we have in place, we're not able to bring these matters forward in the form of private members' bills or in the form of motions. Instead we're in this process where today we're talking about this particular mushroom.

Having said all that, I will of course also say that, you know, were I to actually have to choose one, I would have to say that the puffball, reflecting this Legislature, would definitely be the more appropriate choice. But I won't take any more time because I think I've made the point that we're really taking too much time dealing with this particular issue.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I don't have much more to add to this debate. My friend the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill has made most of my comments.

The Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has mentioned colours. I look at the colour of this mushroom, and it actually is red. I'm not sure if that is her favourite colour or not. It definitely is not mine. It's not something that I like to wear on a regular basis.

Just before I get to a couple of comments, Mr. Speaker, I wanted to mention that I do appreciate the motion that the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has brought forward. He's a very hard-working MLA. He's intellectually honest. Obviously, he was elected the same time as me.

I do engage in a bit of direct democracy every now and then, Mr. Speaker. Some of my favourite constituents have talked to me, and they've asked me why we actually are debating this when we have a world-wide economic crisis, when we have gang shootings in my own constituency, and some of the other issues that people have mentioned.

If we are going to debate this, the one thing I'll mention is that I've looked through this list, and I don't see any shiitake mushrooms here at all. Secondly, I also have started to look through some of the other motions here, other issues, as the previous speaker also did, and I notice that there are other motions, like Motion 523, which talks about deterring frivolous costs for the Human Rights Commission. That's another thing I'd like to debate, Mr. Speaker.

Some of the comments I'm getting about this just on my Twitter account. There's one person who is allergic to mushrooms, and she wonders if the government is trying to kill her. Somebody here also owns a mushroom farm in Sherwood Park, and someone takes it quite seriously here as well. On top of that, the press even is looking at this. But the most important thing that I will mention is, again, from one of my favourite constituents. She says: "Oh, come on. With the economy and infrastructure in disarray someone thinks you have to debate mushrooms?"

I will pass my hat to the next speaker and table these photographs that the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has been so kind to provide.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. members? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today to speak to Motion 502, Alberta's provincial mushroom,

brought forth by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. Motion 502 urges the government to amend the Emblems of Alberta Act and declare the red cap Alberta's provincial mushroom. The mushroom would be grouped into a category of natural symbols along with other provincial symbols: the flower, grass, stone, bird, mammal, and fish.

Mushrooms not only play an important role in our natural world, but they also play a role in my culture. Mr. Speaker, I am a supporter of this motion for one major reason. There are approximately 300,000 Albertans of Ukrainian descent in our province today, and mushrooms are very important to the Ukrainian culture, especially in our cooking. When I got married, I participated in mushroom picking near Smoky Lake. This activity is something that my husband's family has always participated in and still does. We get on our quads, we go into the bush, and we look for mushrooms. We pick all sorts of mushrooms, including the red tops, the type that we are discussing here today. Mushroom picking was a way to bring our family together to enjoy and appreciate the beautiful Alberta landscape. We then used these mushrooms in many of the Ukrainian dishes that my family cooked. I still use a lot of mushrooms in my cooking today, in dishes like nalesniki, which are mushroom crepes, mushrooms and cream, everyone's favourite. Plus, a mushroom dish is one of the 12 dishes that we serve on Ukrainian Christmas Eve.

Mr. Speaker, while it may seem strange at first to declare a provincial mushroom for Alberta, it makes a lot of sense, especially when it's such an influential ingredient in our culture. Legislation that creates provincial symbols of our heritage is very meaningful to the province and its citizens. It's very meaningful to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, his constituents, and people like myself.

I am supportive of Motion 502, Alberta's provincial mushroom, because the mushroom is a great symbol to myself. This is very important to Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to discuss Motion 502.

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

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to speak to Motion 502, Alberta's provincial mushroom, brought forth by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. Originally I was skeptical about having an official provincial mushroom, but then I thought that we have a provincial flower, the wild rose; a provincial tree, the lodgepole pine; a provincial grass, rough fescue; and I just recently learned, this afternoon, that we also have a provincial stone. While I can see that as important as fescue and roses and stones have been in my life, trees and mushrooms have been much more so.

There are persons in this House who have on occasion today said that they felt like they were being treated like mushrooms. We've used that phrase to describe population explosions. The humble mushroom itself has taken on a new prominence in Alberta. Veggie burgers often feature a portobello mushroom, that tastes, I am told, almost like beef. As a cheeseburger-in-paradise kind of guy I confess I don't have any first-hand knowledge of that. Mushrooms have transcended the range of culinary delights from pig-snout truffle to the chanterelle to the barn-raised little white ones. They are a delight.

For those of us who could not wait to leave home when we were young, we quickly discovered that mushroom soup was perhaps the most versatile food in the cupboard. It ranked right up there with macaroni and cheese as a staple of youth poverty. In those dark days leading up to payday, when we had to make a decision between beer

or groceries, we'd often buy beer, knowing that our environmental sensibilities meant that we would recycle the empties instead of discarding whatever it was that lettuce morphed into after two weeks in the fridge. We ate mac and cheese without milk, and we drank a little bit of beer. Mushroom soup could be soup, but often as not it was gravy in a can. My favourite meal, once I learned about ovenproof pans, was a little creation I called the SPAM filet. You open a can of SPAM – and, please, don't do this with corned beef; I'll have to talk to you about that – stand it on end, butterfly it, a couple of slices of pineapple, cover it liberally with mushroom soup, bake it in the oven, and that's excellent, excellent eating.

5:30

Of course, as every man in this room will know, once you entertain the thoughts of love, you will be called upon to show your new love interest your culinary skill with that old standard, pork chops and mushroom soup gravy. It is also at this dinner that you will discover your commitment to living the simplistic life and modelling yourself after Thoreau, which means that you don't own a corkscrew. The girl, if she shares an interest in you, will likely have one in her purse and will save the evening. You will of course be enthralled by this, and she will vow that while she appreciates the efforts, once you're living together, she will teach you how to cook real food. You will not fully comprehend what this means until you trade in your Camaro on a minivan and are expected to develop an opinion on things like the various shades of blue for the nursery.

Now, in British Columbia they have a slightly different affinity for mushrooms of the psychotropic kind. I can certainly understand how it might take that kind of fungus to make life more bearable, but as an illegal substance we can no more support the cultivation or harvesting than we can the consumption.

Seriously, Mr. Speaker, about this motion. This motion is for the law-abiding good people of Alberta, who know the difference between a red cap and a toadstool and who can be judged to act responsibly in their pursuit of the perfect fungus. I believe that the hon. member is an excellent representative of his constituents for whom this is an issue, and while there are those here who will attempt to silence his voice on this issue, I remind this House that we represent our constituents in this place and not the other way around. Give the hon. member his due. He's fulfilling a promise to a constituent, and we must respect this because, I am told, although admittedly the line has been just recently used, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is a real fun guy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What more is there to be said about this mushroom? We've had cooking lessons. We've had eating-the-special-mushroom lessons, that apparently some people may be more attuned to than myself.

Mr. Speaker, I know that some will say and some have already said: is this the most important task at hand for this government right now? To that end I must admit that it is not. But this is a private member's motion. It's normal practice for a private member's motion to come forward to urge the government to consider doing whatever is in the motion. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods' Motion 502 urges this government to adopt the red cap as the official fungi emblem of Alberta. That's important to this member, and he has come back with quite a bit of backup, insight, and knowledge as well as many reasons as to why he feels this is important.

Some things were touched on earlier, one of which was the

education benefits to Albertans on these mushrooms because of their significant value, that the average person is unaware of. One of those examples is how mushrooms contribute to medical research. In addition, they're a great source of protein, fibre, minerals, vitamin B, and ascorbic acid. They also help Alberta's ecosystems by decomposing organic matter. The mushroom, by growing around the roots, as was mentioned earlier by Calgary-Nose Hill, actually feeds many plants beneficial to our ecosystem, and the plants in turn supply those fungi with sugars that are required for them, that are picked up through photosynthesis.

In addition, mushrooms are a valuable industry. In fact, Alberta's mushroom industry contributes \$30 million in annual revenues. The industry helps ensure a diversified economy and creates jobs. The mushroom as a fungus is underestimated, and this motion can help promote that importance. Although the northern red cap does have some things in common with the opposition, just the red part, if we were going to consider fungi as an emblem, that mushroom would be the one to pick because of its abundance in the province.

Mr. Speaker, I close by urging everyone just to take a look at the motion and think of its importance to our fellow Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. I urge them to support his efforts to make this mushroom our provincial emblem.

Thank you.

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

Ms Pastoor: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I'm delighted to stand and speak to having a mushroom named as an emblem of Alberta, the red mushroom, not blue, not green, but red. Wonderful. I was pleased that one of my colleagues across the way alluded to psychedelic mushrooms. Now, that, of course, is what I thought we were going to talk about, which would have been a lot more fun. From what I understand, magic mushrooms really can expand your mind, and I'm sure the debate would be quite interesting around that.

However, we already in Alberta have armorial bearings, which includes the arms, the crest, the supporters, and our motto, of course, which is *Fortis et Liber*, which means strong and free. We also have the flag of Alberta and the floral emblem of Alberta. We have a grass. We have a pattern, which would apply to our tartan. We have a bird, we have a tree, we have a colour, we have a mammal, we have a fish, we have symbols of distinction, we've got regulations, and we also have some legislation for anyone using the official emblem in the wrong way. So I just think it's very interesting that the mushroom would be another object that we would have as an official something in this province.

I will just close with this thought: I would give you your mushroom if you would give me my rodeo. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member wishing to join the debate?

Seeing none, I would call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to close the debate.

Mr. Benito: When I accepted this idea from a constituency member, I spoke to my daughter, and my daughter told me: "Daddy, you have to be careful in presenting this to the House because many people may not see this as a traditional emblematic symbol. They might think that this is not a serious issue, that this is frivolous or funny." So that's the risk, and I'm willing to take that risk to represent the views and interests of my constituency members. I think that as an elected member of the House it is my responsibility to bring forward whatever issues they think might be important to this province.

There is an opportunity in this. There is a qualitative value to reinforcing provincial pride and legislation that builds on existing symbols and heritage which are meaningful in the life of the province and its citizens.

I just want to mention also that a study of nontimber forest products estimates the value of wild mushrooms to be \$100 million in Canada. A study of the pine mushroom in B.C. estimates revenues of \$10 million to \$40 million annually. There have been no specific studies of the economic value of wild fungi in Alberta. There are no regulations in place requiring permits. In 2001 in Montana, where mushroom-picking permits are required, 3,642 commercial permits and 3,750 personal permits were issued. The annual value to that state is \$200 million to \$500 million per day in the high-peak season.

I would still request everybody to support this motion. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 502 carried]

5:40

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

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the hour, I would like to move that we call it 6 o'clock and adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:41 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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