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The 27th Legislature
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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.

Tuesday, April 7, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon, and welcome. I would ask that members remain standing after the prayer so that we may pay tribute to two former colleagues who have recently passed away.

Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Mr. Duco Van Binsbergen December 17, 1936, to April 4, 2009

The Speaker: It is with sadness today that I advise the House that on Saturday, April 4, 2009, Mr. Duco Van Binsbergen, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, passed away in Nova Scotia at the age of 72. Mr. Van Binsbergen was first elected in the election held June 15, 1993, and served until March 11, 1997. During his years of service he represented the constituency of West Yellowhead for the Liberal Party. He was MLA 671. During his term of office Duco Van Binsbergen served on several committees: the Standing Committee on Public Affairs; Private Bills; Members' Services; and Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing. Mr. Duco Van Binsbergen experienced the liberation in Holland, Victory in Europe, VE Day, May 8, 1945.

Mrs. Catherine Chichak October 7, 1934, to April 6, 2009

The Speaker: On Monday, April 6, 2009, Mrs. Catherine Chichak, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, passed away at the age of 74. Mrs. Chichak was first elected in the election held August 30, 1971, and served until November 1, 1982. During her years of service she represented the constituency of Edmonton-Norwood for the Progressive Conservative Party. She was MLA 447. Mrs. Chichak was the first female Ukrainian Member of the Legislative Assembly. During her term of office Catherine Chichak served on several committees: Standing Committee on Public Affairs; Public Affairs, Agriculture and Education; Public Accounts; Law, Law Amendments and Regulations; Law and Regulations; Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing; Private Bills; and Legislative Offices. She also served on the Special Committee on the Chief Electoral Officer and chaired Professions and Occupations.

With our admiration and respect there is gratitude to members of their families who shared the burdens of public office. Our prayers are with them. In a moment of silent and private prayer I ask you to remember hon. members Mr. Duco Van Binsbergen and Mrs. Catherine Chichak as you may have known them. Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a number of very special kids and their families. They are here as part of the Kids with Cancer dream experience. Their dream is to become one of Alberta's top politicians, and they are here to

experience what it might be like. Their journey today included lunch with the Speaker, a special tour of the Legislature, and participation in a mock Legislature debate. It was my honour this morning to visit with the group in my office. I was very impressed by our very special guests. These remarkable kids are bright, they're compassionate, and would serve Alberta well as one of our top politicians.

Our guests, seated in your gallery, are Britni Allen, who is accompanied by her father, Rob Allen; Landon Haigh, who is accompanied by his father, Dale; Justin Bickford, who is accompanied by his uncle Jason Smith; and Nathan Spasiuk, who is accompanied by his mother, Connie Spasiuk. They are joined by the generous sponsors of this dream package, George and Theresa Cantalini and their children Matthew and Serena. Also accompanying the group today are Kids with Cancer representatives Joan Forge and Val Figliuzzi; also someone that's well known to the Speaker, his spouse, Kristina Kowalski; and my wife, Marie. I would ask that all of these very, very special Albertans stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to welcome an outstanding group of students from Evergreen school in Drayton Valley. This is the first group of students that I have had the pleasure to introduce in the Legislature, so they are indeed very special to me. These 45 bright grade 6 students along with parent helpers, bus driver, and teachers Mrs. Cloke, Mrs. Haskell, and Mrs. Bullock have toured our Legislature and learned a great deal about our building and provincial government. It gives me great pleasure to ask them to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of 62 students from Mary Hanley elementary school of the constituency of Edmonton-Mill Woods. The group is led by their teachers, Mr. Steve Bain, Miss Rebecca Lamac, Ms Philomena Bruch, and parent helpers Mrs. Shannon Buchart and Mrs. Michelle Hingley. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would like to ask them to rise and receive the traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two very special young men from my constituency. The first gentleman that I would like to introduce is Shawn Pickett. Shawn is a young father of two teenage boys. He is on my Red Deer-North PC board, and he was by my side for the entire campaign trail, so I'm very grateful for Shawn. This is his first visit to the Assembly. With Shawn is my constituency assistant, also by my side most of the time, Darin Doel. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly eight members of Les Chapeaux Rouges, the Red Hat ladies: Mrs. Carol Firmaniuk, Mrs. Elaine Hewens, Mrs. Lavina Sarnecki, Ms Catherine Garvey, Ms Claudette Binette, Mrs Madeleine Leipnitz, Mrs. Angele Boucher, Mrs. Therese Yakiwchuk. The Red Hat Society welcomes women from all walks of life to discover that real fun begins after 50. They prove that laughter, camaraderie, and active lifestyles are the best prescription for happiness and well-being. My guests are seated in the members' gallery above, and I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a privilege for me to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly four very distinguished gentlemen that have played a very important role in my political life, and they were also very instrumental in getting me elected. They are sitting in the visitors' gallery. I would like them to stand as I introduce them: His Worship Johnnie Doonanco, mayor of Glendon, perogy capital of the world; His Worship Craig Copeland, mayor of Cold Lake; Mr. Ed Rondeau, reeve of the MD of Bonnyville; and last but not least His Worship Ernie Isley, mayor of Bonnyville and former MLA for Bonnyville. Please give these four gentlemen the warm welcome of the House.

1:40

The Speaker: Is the hon. member saying that it took four good men to get her here?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce two supporters and friends of mine, Ms Ann Logue as well as Ms Eleanor Art. Both have been long-time residents of the great constituency of Calgary-Egmont. I'm proud to call them friends and very great campaign workers. They're sitting in the gallery right behind me.

Thank you kindly.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Mr. Stephen Snyder, seated in the members' gallery. Mr. Snyder is at the helm of the successful Snyder & Associates LLP here in our province's capital city of Edmonton. Stephen Snyder made a contribution to the public sector, having served during the time of the former Premier the hon. Harry Strom. He was instrumental in developing what is known today as the International and Intergovernmental Relations department. Stephen was a strong supporter of me and is regarded by me as a true friend. I'd ask Stephen to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two of my constituents up from Calgary visiting us, also very good friends, Mr. Gary Vegelis

and Mr. Reg Nepinak. Would you please rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Pastoor: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the House one of my part-time constituent staff members, who's up here from Lethbridge to see exactly what's going to be proposed in the budget. I am exceedingly fortunate to have someone of her experience and knowledge. Adele Downs has served the people of this province for many, many years. She has worked with two government ministers, the late Dick Johnston and the hon. Clint Dunford, in addition to hundreds of volunteer hours, in particular as the results co-ordinator for the annual Kiwanis festival and competitive Scottish dancing. It only took one good woman, not four good men: Adele got me elected twice. I'm sure you'll all agree that that wasn't a small feat. I would like to ask her to rise now and join with me as we welcome her to this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly three of my guests: first of all, Father Mircea, who's in charge of the Northern Lights library system; Ken Kwiatkowski, who is a councillor in the town of St. Paul; and the mayor of the county of Lac La Biche, Peter Kirylichuk. If I could ask them to stand up and receive the applause of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Provincial High School Basketball Championships

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the excellence of our high school athletic programs as demonstrated in the 2009 Alberta provincial basketball championships. For the town of Raymond, population 3,363, located just 34 kilometres south of Lethbridge, whose origins can be traced back to its first industry, its sugar beet factory, the results of the provincials were particularly sweet.

The Raymond Comets boys brought home the 4A 2009 Alberta provincial basketball championship. A source of pride in southern Alberta, the Raymond Comets now have the distinction of having won eight provincial championships, the most boys' championships ever won in our province. Raymond had even more reason to celebrate this year because the Raymond Comets girls won their provincial championship also. This is only the third time in the entire history of the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association that both 4A titles have gone to the same school, a tremendous feat. I would be remiss to not mention that last year the Raymond Comets boys football team won the 2008 provincial football championship, making it five times they have won that since 1996.

The celebrations continued, like their typical warm chinooks, to the town of Cardston, population 3,578, nestled about 77 kilometres southwest of Lethbridge, as the Cardston Cougars became the 2009 4A boys silver medalists in basketball.

Mr. Speaker, I invite all members of this House to join me in congratulating these terrific teams from Raymond high school and Cardston high school on their tremendous achievements.

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

Budget Soliloquy

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Is this a deficit which I see before me,
 Its resolution a sleight of hand?
 Come, let me confront thee.
 I wish thee not, and yet I see thee still.
 Art thou not, fiscal revision, sensible
 To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
 A deficit of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the economic-recessed brain?
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
 As this deficit which now I draw.
 Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
 And such a blunt instrument I was to use.
 Albertans made fools of the lost dollars and cents,
 Having wasted all the rest; I long for thee still,
 And on thy blank cheque and budget gout of blood,
 Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
 It is the bloody business which informs
 Thus to mine irises. Now o'er the one halfworld
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtain'd sleep; Tory witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hector's offerings, and wither'd murder,
 Alarum'd by his sentinel, the Danyluk,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace.
 With Tarchuk's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. Thou unsure and shifting earth,
 Hear not my missteps, which way they stumble, for fear
 Thy very stones prate of my roundabout,
 And take the present horror from the time,
 Which now suits with it. Whiles I regret, the deficit lives:
 Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

Ring

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
 Hear it not, Albertan; for it is a knell
 That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

Albertans, this tragedy could and should have been averted. To have your say, visit our website at www.budget2009.ca or contact the Alberta Liberal caucus by calling our toll free line: 1.888.886.BUDG.

The Speaker: The hon. member will receive an absolute failing grade for that statement. He violated a basic standing order rule of this Assembly. He violated it twice during his speech, and that is a no-no. He should know better if he stands in this Assembly and claims to be a former educator of some repute.

Introduction of Bills

Bill 33 Fiscal Responsibility Act

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce a bill being the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a first time]

Oral Question Period

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

Fiscal Responsibility

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A former Provincial Treasurer was quoted today as saying that Alberta is missing a culture of saving. Unfortunately, this province is also missing a culture of fiscal discipline and responsibility. As the finance minister prepares to announce the first deficit budget in 15 years, we can only hope for the sake of all Albertans that the government has finally learned the meaning of fiscal discipline. To the Premier: will the Premier develop a culture of saving in Alberta and commit to a long-term saving plan?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we're the only jurisdiction in Canada to have net savings. Just for some, perhaps, comparisons: some provinces have as much as \$18,000 per capita debt; some have \$11,000 per capita debt; in Alberta we have net savings of \$11,000 per capita.

1:50

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, how can this Premier claim to be fiscally responsible on the same day this government is forced to change the fiscal accountability act because of its own failure to be prudent?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we have a choice – we have a choice – to deal with a situation that has been totally unprecedented in terms of the world economic recession. No one knows how long it's going to last. The choice is simple: we either dip into our emergency savings or, on the other hand, lay off thousands of public servants, whether it be nurses, teachers, doctors, anybody that provides services to Albertans and at the same time also looks after the most vulnerable. We're not going to do that. We're going to dip into our emergency savings and make sure that we keep the momentum of this economy going.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, we spend 23 per cent more per person in this province than any other jurisdiction in Canada, and this government talks about responsibility. Last Thursday the Premier indicated that there was a comparison to be made with a family budget. Will the Premier admit that responsible parents don't pay down the mortgage without saving for future generations?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, actually, this government did both. Since 2005 we've set aside over \$20 billion in the heritage savings trust fund and other endowments. At the same time – I think this is important for all Canadians to know – in the last decade Albertans contributed a net contribution to Ottawa of over \$113 billion. That's how significant the economic growth in this province was to the whole country of Canada.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Alberta Office in Washington

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The recent recruitment of two high-priced lobbyists for Alberta's trade office in Washington, DC, raises a question of the value of that office, which costs Albertans \$1.4 million a year. That office failed last year to ensure that the government of Alberta received timely information on the U.S. energy policy when the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 was passed in Congress. This question is to the Premier. Does the Premier not think that this indicates that the Washington office is not providing effective service to Alberta taxpayers?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, on the contrary, our representative in the Washington office is extremely busy. I'm glad that the hon. member asked the question. To give Albertans an idea of how huge the lobbying effort is in Washington, there are approximately 8,000 to 10,000 bills introduced every year in Washington. That compares to about 40 bills introduced in the Alberta Legislature. On top of that the one person is responsible for 50 state Legislatures. That's to ensure that it follows every bill, the hundreds of bills that are introduced each year across the United States. That is a phenomenal task for one individual in our embassy office.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is what I would consider to be his job. However, I think that there is something falling through the cracks.

If two lobbyists are needed to be paid a further \$40,000 a month to get this province's opinions made to U.S. lawmakers, which is different than getting their bills, why are Albertans paying over \$300,000 a year to the representative in Washington?

Mr. Stelmach: Just to note a correction to the hon. member, the \$40,000 for the two firms: that's with all the research staff, all of the expenses included for the two lobbyist firms. Again, a former governor, James Blanchard, former ambassador to Canada, good connections with the Obama administration, and Mr. Paul Fraser, who was also minister of public affairs and was also in our Washington embassy for a period of time: these people are going to assist our representative in Washington to meet with all of the organizations. Again, it's not going to the person; it's going to the two firms, \$40,000 a month.

Ms Pastoor: Albertans are losing their jobs, and this administration is asking them to do more with less. Why, then, isn't the administration shutting down the taxpayer-funded office and really using these lobbyists that have the experience that you just spoke about?

Mr. Stelmach: It would be a very foolish idea. We have a revenue stream of approximately \$40 billion at stake, and we're going to have to put a full-court press on the United States, including all the governors, all of the public administration that we're dealing with, to make sure that we get the timely information.

Just to give you an example in terms of what our representative has accomplished: with respect to the state of Maryland, he worked very diligently with the Legislature there to remove its anti oil sands bill. Also, in the state of Minnesota he testified on the state's low carbon fuel standard and was able to garner support for the oil sands. That's just those two states.

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

Payday Loans

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last fall this House voted in support of a motion to cap interest rates on payday loans. The need to ensure that young families who turn to these loans are protected is more important now than ever. With mounting job losses and economic uncertainty, action must be taken before more people are forced into unmanageable debt. To the Minister of Service Alberta: when will there be legislation capping the interest rates charged by payday loan companies?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question is very timely. Currently Service Alberta is finishing up a consultation with a number of the stakeholders with respect to the issue of payday loans. A number of issues are on the table – the rollover rates, the interest rates that are charged – and it is indeed a huge issue of concern. As minister I've been very concerned about the proliferation of these businesses, and we are at the point where we'll be bringing something forward very soon.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister again: what supports are in place now to help these individuals who have already been trapped into the outrageous interest rates charged by the payday loan companies?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's incumbent upon the consumer, when they do choose to go to those businesses, to do their research. The unfortunate part is that some of those individuals may have a bad credit rating, and that's perhaps why they go. Perhaps going to a credit union or a bank that's under Alberta's jurisdiction would be a good idea. I think that it's incumbent upon the consumer to be careful where they go when they choose to use those services.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the minister's been concerned for a long time. Last fall the minister used the industry line that a wide range of people use these payday loans, yet federal agencies report that young, low-income families are those most likely to get one of these loans. To the Minister of Service Alberta again: why does the minister continue to take the side of industry in this debate?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As was mentioned previously in this House, a lot of consumers, individuals with incomes over \$70,000, are using payday loan companies to support them. Moving forward, in the consultation that we have done, we've actually been able to interact with people who are using these services so we can determine why they need these services and what kinds of challenges they're facing. We want to make sure that this is done the right way so that we do what's best for Albertans.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call on the next questioner, I'd like to extend to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood on behalf of all members of the House our deepest condolences on the passing of his father.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Alberta Job Losses

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that very much.

Mr. Speaker, 4,000 new Albertans were forced to go on welfare in December alone. Albertans want a jobs budget, not a welfare budget. The fact is that this government has had its head in the sand, and it's costing Albertans jobs. My question is to the Premier.

Given that the Premier's failure to deal with economic reality has already cost over 30,000 Alberta jobs, will the Premier do the right thing and bring forward a jobs budget instead of a welfare budget?

2:00

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, again, on behalf of our caucus we extend to the hon. member our prayers and thoughts as he deals with the death of his family member.

I'm sure that at 3 o'clock, when our minister delivers the budget, the hon. member will be very pleased because it will be one that's going to grow jobs in the province of Alberta and also support the most vulnerable.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Premier.

This government does not understand that jobs stimulate the economy better than welfare. They've let welfare cases skyrocket, they've let oil patch welfare run rampant, they've refused stimulus spending, and they've drafted a budget which I can only assume is based on the wrong predictions they've been using so far. My question is to the Premier. How many more Albertans will you put on welfare before you do the right thing and start protecting Albertans' jobs?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the budget is going to do a number of things. One, of course, be prudent in the overall spending. We're also going to ensure that we protect the most vulnerable, protect the programs that are so important to Albertans: education, health, and, of course, children's services. The other is that we will have to dip into the emergency savings to keep the momentum going and, at the same time, aggressively pursue other markets around the world so that we can keep our economy going.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last December's increase in welfare caseloads saw numbers skyrocket by 15 per cent, up to 30,000, yet the government refuses to do anything about it. Albertans want a jobs budget and you're going to give them, I'm sure, a welfare budget. My question is to the Premier. Why won't you admit that your government is on the wrong track, leading to a dramatic increase in the number of welfare cases and unemployed in this province?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I know that the hon. member has certainly the best intentions of keeping all Albertans working. We've been very fortunate in the province because in the last number of years our unemployment rate was around 3.8 to 3.9 per cent, the lowest in the country, and really that rate is almost zero per cent unemployment. It is projected to go up to about 5, 5 and a half per cent. It could even reach 6 – who knows? – looking in the crystal ball for the year ahead of us. We're going to do whatever we can to invest in those programs to keep Albertans working. You know, in about an hour or so I'm sure that he will be very pleased when he hears the minister deliver the budget.

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

Carbon Capture and Storage

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before the Legislature break I was pleased to see the Minister of Energy accept an award on

behalf of the province from the Aspen Institute for our carbon capture and storage initiative. Despite some international recognition I know that there are still some who have concerns about this technology and our financial support of it. My questions today are for the Minister of Energy. How does the minister respond to criticism suggesting that this technology is unproven?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you. Quite simply, Mr. Speaker, the technology itself is proven and internationally recognized as a very usable and practical technology. CCS is safe; it's been tested. It's fully supported by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the International Energy Agency, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The U.S. administration has also expressed support for CCS. We want to be the jurisdiction where CCS is perfected. We have the geology, the industrial activity, and we're committed with the funding to make this happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. A number of oil sands players chose not to submit a project proposal to potentially access some of the province's funding. Does this concern the minister or put the success of this program in doubt?

Mr. Knight: Well, Mr. Speaker, no, not at all. What I'd like to point out is that there are actually three oil sands-related proposals on the table. Let's remember a couple of things. First of all, the oil sands are not the largest source of CO₂ in the province of Alberta; coal-fired electricity generation is. The \$2 billion CCS plan will support three to five projects in total. We're very pleased that we have 11 proposals that we've received that we're now evaluating. The challenge will be in assessing those proposals and beginning our work. It's only the beginning of CCS for the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister explain to my constituents why government support for these initiatives is necessary? Isn't this something that industry should be funding on its own?

Mr. Knight: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, if Alberta wants to be the leader in environmental protection and clean energy development, then we need to step forward. That's exactly what we did with this funding. We believe that CCS holds a very important key for us to significantly contribute to the climate change solution while also protecting our economy and thousands of jobs for Albertans. While others are more concerned about rhetoric and stunts, we're moving with our investment to the science of solutions, technological solutions that we can share with the rest of the world.

Homeless and Eviction Prevention Fund

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, instead of implementing rent controls as recommended by the Affordable Housing Task Force, this government introduced the brainwave known as the homeless and eviction prevention fund, that has cost taxpayers approximately \$110 million. As of April 1 people who are facing eviction must either apply to the rent supplement program or for support from EI. To the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs. The HEP fund was sold to Albertans as a way to keep people off the streets and in their homes. As this has

come to an end, what will help people in my community from finding themselves in the Calgary drop-in centre?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to clarify, the HEP fund is not coming to an end. There have been some administrative changes that we discussed in the Assembly in the last session. Those, of course, followed a review of the program. As you indicated, hon. member, Employment and Immigration and this department are working together to administer the fund in the best way possible so that people are successful in staying in their homes through the rent supplement program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister guarantee that people who need emergency funding will receive the funding they need and not be placed on a waiting list?

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Speaker, we did announce this a week ago. I'm going to ask the Minister of Employment and Immigration to comment on the emergent funding available for the first month's rent and for a damage deposit.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, basically, Albertans who need help to pay their rent shortfall must contact our local housing authority, but in between we do provide some emergency assistance to them so that they're prevented from being placed outside.

Mr. Hehr: Well, to be honest, that really didn't sound overly reassuring to me.

Anyway, that fund was billed as an essential part of the province's solution of the housing crisis. Will the minister acknowledge that implementing even a temporary rent cap would have saved taxpayers approximately \$77 million last year alone and thousands of struggling Albertans their dignity?

Mrs. Fritz: The answer is no, Mr. Speaker. I wouldn't agree with that. In fact, the HEP fund has been very successful in assisting Albertans with staying housed when they're most in need. It's an emergent fund. It remains in place through our rent supplement program. That's where the rent shortfall program is; it's just simply changed administratively. But the fund is in place.

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

Assembly of Land for Large Infrastructure Projects

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During the last couple of weeks in travels through my constituency a number of my constituents raised questions regarding the government's policy on large-scale land assembly and its relationship to the establishment of routes for transmission lines. My questions are for the Minister of Infrastructure. Is the ministry considering any policy changes that would result in government acquiring land on behalf of power companies for the siting of transmission lines?

Mr. Hayden: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. This province already has a process in place through the Alberta Utilities Commission for the siting of new power line routes, and the process includes public consultation. My ministry's interest in acquisition of properties is

for transportation utility corridors, like the Calgary and Edmonton ring roads.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A supplemental to the same minister: is the minister considering any policy changes that would result in government acquiring land on behalf of private pipeline companies that would impact the applicability of the Surface Rights Act?

Mr. Hayden: Again, Mr. Speaker, absolutely not. Our province has a process in place for the routing of private company pipelines also, and that's done through the Energy Resources Conservation Board. They establish the routes for provincial pipelines. The National Energy Board establishes routes for interprovincial lines. The Surface Rights Act applies to all privately held land.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A final supplemental to the same minister: is the minister considering any policy change that would enable government to acquire land on behalf of a power company, for example, for a nuclear facility?

Mr. Hayden: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. As stated earlier, my ministry acquires land for large-scale public projects, such as transportation utility corridors, not on behalf of any private companies.

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

2:10 All-terrain Vehicle Safety

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On May 1 in New Brunswick rules will come into force restricting children's ATV use for safety purposes. These restrictions include limiting the engine size that those younger than 16 may use and a restriction to closed courses for those younger than 14. To the Minister of Transportation: will the minister be considering similar restrictions in Alberta?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're always reviewing safety features of all types of things in Alberta, especially when we're using any type of motor vehicle. Off-highway vehicles are used for a number of things, and we have laws in place right now that if they're under 14 years old, they have to be supervised by an adult. At this point in time they haven't come forward, but we're looking at some helmet legislation and a few other things. I don't know exactly what we're going to be doing towards what another province has done.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the minister should stop looking at helmets. He should bring in a law.

A recent report to the government of Manitoba stated that ATVs should be banned from some public lands. This government, however, is exploring increasing the amount of access ATV users get. To the Minister of Transportation again: at a time when other jurisdictions are considering restrictions on ATV use, why is this government moving completely in the opposite direction?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I absolutely disagree with what he says about moving in a completely different direction. Right now on our public lands most of those areas are set up for proper trail use. They're also set up where we change areas. That actually falls under the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. But I've been involved with some of the constituency associations that have approached us, and they're working under very good stewardship and land management.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Another concern highlighted in the Manitoba report was the role of ATVs' exhaust systems in causing forest fires. To the Minister of Transportation: given the threat of forest fires to human and animal life as well as property and the high cost of fighting those fires, why is the government considering increasing the amount of land these vehicles can use?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, Alberta Transportation doesn't look after that side of it. But I will tell you that there are certain restrictions that people have to use. They use spark arresters on a lot of these vehicles. We always have to live with common sense, that I sometimes realize the other side has a problem with, but common sense is the answer here, and if it's dry, we should live by that and manage ourselves properly.

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

Energy Conservation

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Saturday I attended and spoke at the very interesting Go Green Eco Expo at the University of Alberta Butterdome. Many of the displays dealt with conservation, recycling, and, in particular, innovation. To the Minister of Environment: what programs or initiatives has the government implemented to encourage Albertans to conserve more and reduce waste?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a timely question because as all members are aware, we have initiated a program of Too Good to Waste, and this program is really leading the nation when it comes to some of the success that we've had with respect to beverage containers and tires, in particular. As everyone knows, as of July 1 we'll be the first jurisdiction in Canada to include milk containers in our recycling. We've also had very successful programs for electronics, paint, and used oil, and we'll be moving into packaging and waste paper in the near future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Green builders focus on waste reduction at the source. What is being done to encourage all builders to conserve and recycle?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, construction and demolition waste is about a third of all of the waste that ends up in our landfills in Alberta. Clearly, this is unacceptable. There are ways that we can work to dramatically reduce that. At present approximately 20 per cent of construction and demolition waste is recycled, and 80 per cent goes into landfills. We'd like to reverse those numbers. We've got an MOU in place with the construction industry to begin that process immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is to the same minister. Smaller municipalities are having a tough time developing the critical mass necessary to make conservation programs sustainable. What is the government doing to help these municipalities?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, to some degree I think we're the victims of our own success. We've done such a good job of encouraging people to bring their recyclables back to depots that now, particularly with the economic reality that we find ourselves in, the cost of dealing with that recycled material, the value of that material has diminished to the point where it is getting difficult for some of the smaller programs to be successful. I've been working with the Recycling Council and encouraging them. I know they're working extremely hard to find new and alternative ways of using some of this material that comes in through recycling depots.

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

Achievement Tests for Students

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Motion 503, which calls for replacing provincial achievement tests with diagnostic tests, passed with a resounding majority three weeks ago. According to the Education minister's comments during the debate, it seems that the main hurdle to getting rid of these tests is to figure out what we should replace them with. Let me save the minister some time. We need to replace them with diagnostic tests. Considering that it seems to be merely a lack of knowledge that is delaying getting rid of these achievements tests, has the minister begun to look at diagnostic testing methods, and if so when can we expect a report?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member should know that the department has been looking at and working on diagnostic testing for some time. There are projects in place to look at diagnostic testing, particularly, I believe, starting with math at the grade 3 level. This is not a replacement for PAT 3s. Diagnostic testing is a testing process which will assist with the learning process for grade 3 students and for all students that those resources are applied to, a very useful tool but not an accountability tool. That's one of the learning tools.

The PAT 3 tests serve a different function. They also should be used as part of the learning process. They are also an accountability process, which is very necessary to be able to report to Albertans that the significant investment that they make in education is worth while.

Mr. Chase: Most importantly, Albertans that need to be reported to are the parents of those children who are suffering through the grade 3 SAT tests.

Although the minister has stated that the primary goal of these tests should be to benefit students, the minister also acknowledges that these tests do not help students succeed long term. Why has the minister not already taken action to replace these tests with tests that would benefit students, such as early diagnostic testing?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. member confuses the purpose of the two tests. Diagnostic testing is a very appropriate tool to be used to

assist teachers in determining what areas of concern they have with respect to student learning. The achievement tests that are administered at grades 3, 6, and 9 and the departmental test at grade 12 are to help determine whether the system is working and to be able to report to the public that we have a strong educational system. People come from all over the world, 25 countries in the last two to three years, to look at our system in Alberta. One of the pillars, one of the strengths of the system is the accountability testing that we have in place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Diagnostic tests allow improvement from the students whereas end of the line SAT tests do not improve education. They're simply a tool for the government to justify its purposes.

When can members of this Assembly and all Albertans expect the minister to get rid of the costly and ineffective grade 3 provincial achievement tests?

Mr. Hancock: As I indicated to the House and at all times in the whole discussion around provincial achievement tests, we are looking at our assessment processes. We are always prepared to review what we're doing. We've been talking with education stakeholders about the assessment processes. I was just in London in January and met with a group that's looking at assessment of 21st century skills. It's always prudent to update the way you assess both learning and the system, and we'll continue to do that. I see no immediate change in our process, but we're looking at what we're doing, and we're always willing to improve.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

2:20 Long-term Care Funding

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is bent on bringing more private U.S.-style health care to Alberta. That's why they've refused to create the 600 new long-term care beds that they promised last election, and that's why we have dangerous and growing hospital backlogs. In Strathmore they broke a promise to create 100 new beds and are leaving seniors there without proper care. To the minister of health: why won't you admit that new long-term care beds are the solution to hospital backlogs and make sure they're funded in this budget?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, clearly, as I've said in this House on many occasions, new long-term care facilities are part of the answer, not the answer. We currently have in this province a number of facilities that are either well under construction or nearing completion of construction. Some of them are fully funded by Alberta Health. Some are joint projects with the nonprofit or private sector. That's the model that we will continue to follow.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the health minister's neglect has caused a 50 per cent increase in Calgarians waiting for long-term care beds in the last year. His failure to create new beds has caused 23 per cent more people to sleep in hallways, surgery wait-lists to grow 18 per cent, and ER wait times to grow to nearly 17 hours. Why won't you make sure that this budget solves this crisis and properly fund the 600 long-term care beds that were promised in the last election?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, the two members of the NDP opposition – I don't know if they were in the budget lock-up or what – seem to have some advance knowledge; at least, they seem to think they do. I'd be quite prepared to wait and see what the finance minister actually does deliver this afternoon before I go running off making a whole bunch of wild and crazy comments like I just heard.

Ms Notley: Well, all I can do is wait and see.

We were promised 600 new beds a year ago, and we still don't have them. All we need to do to whittle down these wait times in the ER is to keep that promise for the new beds. Alberta seniors desperately need these new beds, but instead the minister is intent on privatizing them. Why won't you tell us now whether you're going to fund each of those 600 new long-term care beds you promised?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, as in my earlier answer I think we've got some 600 long-term care beds currently under construction. I know this particular party has some difficulty understanding that it doesn't happen overnight. If you make a decision to construct long-term care beds, there's a period of time that you have to hammer nails and put together bricks before it actually becomes a long-term care facility. I think that if the hon. member will just hold her fire, she'll see, I hope, that we've got some initiatives in the budget that are going to address some of the issues she raised.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Old-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Access to Alberta TrailNet Land

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At a recent meeting of the Cosway Adjacent Landowners group it was alleged that the Alberta government was responsible for the loss of certain rights and privileges that adjacent landowners had prior to abandoned rail lines being turned over to Trans Canada Trail and then subsequently to Alberta TrailNet. This was stated because the Alberta government allegedly did not uphold caveats that were in place prior to this land transfer. Could the minister of tourism please tell me who is actually responsible for the loss of these landowner rights such as access and fencing prior to this land transfer?

Mrs. Ady: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member's question is actually quite rooted in history. The railway owned this land from somewhere around the early 1800s. When they abandoned the railway rights, they gave these lands to the Trans Canada Trail Foundation, who, in turn, gave those lands to different provincial and territorial groups, in this case Alberta TrailNet. The government of Alberta had no role or involvement in this land transfer. That being said, I understand that Alberta TrailNet has offered to sign an agreement with the landowners so that they can continue to move livestock and equipment across the trail.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the minister for that answer. Regardless of who is responsible, to the same minister: is the Alberta government doing anything to help restore those rights and privileges that were lost?

Mrs. Ady: Well, Mr. Speaker, the transfer of the railway lands to the Trans Canada Trail group was under federal jurisdiction. The Alberta government did not have a role in the land transaction which the hon. member refers to. As I mentioned earlier, I understand that

there is an access agreement with Alberta TrailNet that they sign with landowners, and it allows landowners to get to their land on either side of the trail whenever they want.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thanks. Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that the Alberta government has gifted Alberta TrailNet \$1.2 million as well as provided an annual grant of \$61,104, will the government also set up a similar parallel fund with equal annual payments to compensate landowners for their losses and their legal expenses?

Mrs. Ady: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government does support the development of recreation trails throughout the province because we want Albertans to be more active. The number one activity in this province today is walking. These are walking trails, and some regions with these trails often find them to be interesting and to enhance their tourism. The issue that the member has raised has to be worked out between two private landowners and Alberta TrailNet. I am prepared to ask my department officials to arrange mediation between the landowners and Alberta TrailNet if the member and those groups think that this could be helpful.

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

Fiscal Responsibility Legislation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government's wasteful spending habits have now forced it to plan to repeal the Fiscal Responsibility Act. Included in that plan is a proposal to discontinue the \$7.4 billion capital account. My first question is to the minister of finance. What will happen to the \$7.4 billion that's in that fund now?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, we have tabled the new Fiscal Responsibility Act. We will be discussing it more fully this afternoon, when I come forward with the budget, and getting into a more detailed discussion in this House, no doubt. Essentially, the purpose of providing that piece of legislation is to accommodate today's realities. We've been dealing with surplus budgets under the previous Fiscal Responsibility Act. Now we're dealing with a new situation with a deficit.

You know, I'm glad that the hon. member asked me a question because today I've heard criticism about what this government is doing with the budget. Not once in this House has anybody ever suggested a program we should cut for Albertans, not once.

Mr. MacDonald: Your food and drink for one. That's a program that could be cut and should be cut.

Now, again, to the minister of finance: why are there seven exclusions in the calculation of the government's accumulated debt in this proposed plan?

Mr. Horner: He's debating the bill in question period.

Ms Evans: Well, yes. Mr. Speaker, this is not a place for debate of the bill. I would suggest we can do that through the questions that would properly come when we're debating the bill. In this particular period of time I think it would be very useful to have the preamble, the speech first. Out of courtesy today to the hon. members opposite I gave a very succinct introduction of the bill, and I'd be pleased to amplify on it later.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can understand why the minister of finance is reluctant to have this bill discussed in public because it certainly is a poor reflection on the budget of this government. You've spent far too much money wastefully.

Again, what is the government's accumulated debt projection going to be under this plan?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I would like to defer my comments to a later time. Then I would provide a more full amplification.

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

Agricultural Support Overpayments

Mr. Prins: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We all know that Alberta livestock producers today are facing difficult times. Recently this government distributed \$300 million to eligible producers through the AFRP 2 program. Most producers received their second instalment this spring. While the majority of producers appreciate the support provided by this government – it's more than any other jurisdiction in Canada – some producers subsequently received a notice of overpayment advising them that they had to repay some of these funds. Many of these producers are my constituents and are concerned. So my question to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: why did these overpayments occur, and what is being done to help these producers with repayment?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We certainly understand that this is a frustrating situation for a small number of producers. AFSC prioritized the processing of the 2007 AgriStability payments for hog producers. Due to an administrative error, unfortunately, some of the first claims did not count for AFRP 2 as eligible income. In addition, in some cases inaccurate information was provided to AFSC by the producers themselves, which resulted in payments certainly being higher than they should have been.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question to the same minister is: what is being done to help these producers to deal with these repayment issues?

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, Mr. Speaker, AFSC staff have been working with the individual producers involved and the producer groups to identify the best way to deal with the overpayments. In fact, just last week AFSC representatives met with Alberta Pork, and the repayment options that we offered them certainly exceeded their expectations. This includes an interest-free period until December 31, 2010. Producers also have the option of transferring any remaining overpayment amount to a low-interest loan and using future AgriStability payments to offset the overpayment.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you. My final question to the same minister: how many of the affected producers have been contacted, and are they being contacted individually?

Mr. Groeneveld: Certainly, Mr. Speaker, all of the producers at this time who had overpayments received a letter from AFSC earlier this month explaining the situation. In addition, AFSC staff have spoken personally to the majority of the producers and walked them through the individual cases and options that they have. AFSC is committed to working with individual producers and producer groups to sort out the issue. I would certainly encourage any affected producers with questions to contact AFSC to work through their individual cases.

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

Labour Protection for Paid Farm Workers

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Dunmore versus Ontario, a Supreme Court of Canada decision in 2001, explicitly stated that a law blocking farm workers' rights to unionize violates section 2(d) of the Charter. The Supreme Court specifically also noted that the only province other than Ontario to have such a provision is Alberta. Ontario has now, I believe, changed that. My first question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. Is it this government's policy to follow Supreme Court rulings or not?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Although there are some rulings there, it's my understanding that some of the provinces are appealing that particular ruling and are moving through that particular process. In Alberta currently farm and ranch employers and employees are excluded from all coverage under the Labour Relations Code.

Dr. Taft: I didn't get much confidence from that. It's probably news to the minister, but you can't appeal a ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada.

My next question will be to the Minister of Justice. Does the Minister of Justice consider it appropriate that the government of Alberta is ignoring the clear ruling of the highest court in Canada on the right of farm workers to unionize?

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

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will not in this House speak to that question and whether or not something may or may not be appropriate. What I will say is that this government takes the responsibility that we have with respect to labour rights very seriously. We have heard in this House on a daily basis exactly what the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Employment and Immigration have said with respect to farm workers' rights, and we'll continue to follow that strategy.

Dr. Taft: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier yesterday said that he suspected that "in any operation if the people that work want to gather and vote on the right to join a union, they have that option." But as the Minister of Employment and Immigration knows or, at least, ought to know, Alberta's Labour Relations Code explicitly blocks paid farm workers from that right. So back to that minister. The Premier stated yesterday the intuitive position that paid farm workers should be able to unionize. Will the minister therefore amend the law to bring it into line with the Supreme Court ruling and with what the Premier himself thought was already the case? Just do the right thing.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, I know that some groups support extending legislative protection to farms and ranches or their employees. There are no current plans to amend the code at this particular time. As I have indicated in the past, any changes to the legislation would require a lot of significant consultation with the farm and ranch community itself.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Seniors' Pharmaceutical Plan

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During the past few weeks a number of seniors have been approaching me regarding the proposed changes to the seniors' drug plan. I know that the Minister of Health and Wellness has said that elements of the plan are under review. Can the minister indicate what the timeline is for proposing modifications to the plan?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is correct, as are a number of other members, that we have had representations by a number of seniors in Alberta relative to the program. We are looking at a number of modifications that I hope within a very short period of time we can take to caucus. We then would want to ensure that we have a discussion with Albertans around those modifications. I can't put an exact time frame on when we would look at publicly announcing anything but certainly before this session is concluded.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Many of my constituents have expressed concern that due to economic changes world-wide their savings have been impacted, and therefore they find it difficult to pay the proposed deductibles. How does the current global economic situation impact the proposal for the seniors' drug plan?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I think that one of the really critical issues that has evolved over the past six months is that the world has changed. However, there have been a number of other suggestions relative to taxable income versus total income. There have also been suggestions that we should look at a July implementation date so that we can use more current year tax returns. Those are the kinds of things that we're going to be looking at, Mr. Speaker, to ensure that those in need that can't afford the drug programs are looked after but that there is an ability to pay as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you. Finally, to the same minister: would moving towards a universal pharmaceutical program for all Albertans, not just seniors, be something that the minister would consider?

Mr. Liepert: Well, we have a form of universal through a Blue Cross plan that we offer through government. However, I did notice that yesterday in the House the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was asking about a universal pharmacare program for Albertans. You know, as has become kind of typical, one day it's that we should be saving and not spending; the next day it's that we should be spending. I should note, Mr. Speaker, that the universal pharmacare program as proposed by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar would cost about a billion dollars annually.

Mr. MacDonald: Point of order.

The Speaker: Point of order? Okay.
The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Elk Antler Velvet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Chronic wasting disease is a fatal, contagious illness of deer and elk. What is known is that it is spread from gamed, ranched deer and elk into wild populations. It has also been shown recently that chronic wasting disease can be found in elk antler velvet, which is used as a nutritional supplement in Alberta and around the world. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Does the minister agree with the World Health Organization recommendation that all products, including velvet, from animals known to be infected with any prion disease should be excluded from the human food chain?

Mr. Liepert: It isn't something that has come to the top of my pile of the to-do list, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Blakeman: Again to the same minister: if the current mode of transmission for chronic wasting disease from animal to animal is not known, does the minister not agree that every precaution should be taken to avoid human contact with potentially infected elk and deer?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I must admit that this is something that I have heard discussed at caucus through the minister of sustainable resources. I think the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka is an elk rancher, and there are a number of rural members here, but I have to confess that it isn't something that I can actually make a reasonable answer to in this House.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My last question, then, is to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Is the department prepared to compensate game ranchers to help them phase out of this industry?

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly not. I would like to inform the member that Alberta has mandatory testing and import protocols in place to address CWD concerns for farmed elk and deer. It's interesting to note that Alberta's only case of CWD in farmed elk was in March of 2002, and we've tested over 50,000 captive cervids for CWD since 1996.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 102 questions and responses today.

2:40 **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table five copies of a return that I referred to yesterday, which is some dozens of comments from parents and students through the AARC program, that I would encourage the Member for Calgary-Varsity to read.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a letter dated June 10, 2008. It's a letter that I received from Elections Alberta regarding the conduct of the March 8 election in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar.

The second letter is a letter that is dated June 25, 2008. It's from myself, from Edmonton-Gold Bar, to Lorne R. Gibson, Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Alberta. Again, it is more questions regarding the general election in Edmonton-Gold Bar in March 2008.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, do we have a point of order?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, we do.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Point of Order **Factual Accuracy**

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise under our standing orders 23(h) and (i). I would like to bring attention to the House and particularly the minister of health – hopefully, he's had an opportunity to read the prescription drug coverage private member's statement that I gave yesterday. It's on page 520 of *Alberta Hansard*, for those who are interested. It's clear that what he originally said here in question period is untrue. It is not reflected in the comments from the private member's statement. Nowhere did I say any of the things that the hon. minister has suggested in question period. This what I did say:

The Official Opposition [has] made many good suggestions recently to extend prescription drug coverage in Alberta to all citizens. We need a more extensive public pharmacare program based on models in other Canadian provinces to help reduce rapidly rising pharmaceutical costs and to ensure proper access to medications.

I could go on further, but I will not in light of the time.

I did suggest that all hon. members of the Assembly read a report, again, by an associate professor of economics from the University of Calgary, Professor Hollis. This report is titled *Generic Drug Pricing and Procurement: A Policy for Alberta*. In that policy there is noted that "the Government of Alberta spent approximately \$887 million on prescription drugs through community pharmacies while private expenditures . . . totalled \$980 million."

The figures that the minister quoted were not from this hon. member or from any of my colleagues, and I would ask that the hon. minister please retract those statements that he made earlier in question period.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, there is no point of order here. I'd have to check the Blues, but what I did say is that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was proposing an extensive public pharmacare program based on other models in Canadian provinces. I said that we ran the numbers, and it's going to cost about a billion dollars, so I would suggest that there's no point of order.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I draw your attention to *Beauchesne's* 494, where I read under Acceptance of the Word of a Member.

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

Such appears to be the case.

The House will now go into recess until 2:59 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned from 2:44 p.m. to 3 p.m.]

3:00

Orders of the Day**Transmittal of Estimates**

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

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have received certain messages from Her Honour the Administrator, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! Please rise in the gallery.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Administrator transmits estimates of certain sums required by the offices of the Legislative Assembly for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

As well, the Administrator transmits estimates of certain sums required by the government for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

Government Motions

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, prior to moving Government Motion 12, I wish to table the 2009-10 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates as well as the 2009-10 government estimates. Also being tabled for the information of the Legislative Assembly are business plans for each ministry, which must be made public under section 13 of the Government Accountability Act. In addition, the Government Accountability Act requires that the government at the same time table the government's business plan and consolidated fiscal and capital plans. The hon. Premier will table the government's strategic business plan, and the hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise will table the consolidated fiscal and capital plans.

12. Mr. Snelgrove moved:

Be it resolved that the message from Her Honour the Honourable the Administrator, the 2009-10 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates, and all matters connected therewith be referred to Committee of Supply and that the message from Her Honour the Administrator, the 2009-10 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund, and all matters connected therewith be referred to Committee of Supply following consideration by the policy field committees.

[Government Motion 12 carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table the government of Alberta strategic business plan as required under section 7 of the Government Accountability Act. The strategic business plan sets out the government's vision and long-term strategic plan. It also includes the government's three-year business plan, which outlines the government's goals, strategies, and measures necessary to track results over the next three years.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, prior to moving Government Motion 13, I wish to table the government's consolidated fiscal and capital plans for Budget 2009. The consolidated fiscal plan is required under section 4 of the Government Accountability Act, and the consolidated capital plan is required under section 7.1 of the same act.

Budget Address

13. Ms Evans moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

Ms Evans: Alberta has long been a land of promise, a land of opportunity. To achieve that promise and to realize those opportunities, our ancestors had to overcome obstacles that are unthinkable to most of us today. They met challenges head-on and survived and emerged stronger than before. Today Albertans are facing new challenges, complex problems, many imposed from beyond our borders.

We have watched with trepidation as markets, credit, and commodity prices have fallen, and the world's economy has plunged into a recession. We have seen major international financial institutions fail. Moreover, we have learned of the impact on far too many people: their mortgages, their homes, and their livelihoods lost. Here in Alberta we have been affected – it's true – but far less than the others. We are facing the current global recession well positioned to come out of this economic storm stronger and with greater potential for both our people and for our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is strong because our government has invested in the core services which maintain our quality of life. Alberta is strong because we introduced measures to ensure the orderly development of our province, with plans for climate change, energy development, and homelessness to name just a few. Alberta is strong because our government has been investing in infrastructure, some 26 billion dollars over the past five years to build schools, hospitals, seniors' housing, and roads. Alberta is strong because we have been saving money. We have paid off an accumulated debt of some 23 billion dollars, and we have added about \$25 billion to our savings, including nearly \$17 billion set aside to help us cope with unexpected drops in government revenue. Alberta is strong because Alberta's fiscal plan has helped us maintain the lowest taxes in the country. Alberta is strong, and the job of this government and the people of Alberta is to build on our strengths.

This budget, our road map, is about creating a province where people are confident about the future for their children, for their businesses, and for themselves. We believe it balances the necessary social investments and fiscal responsibility to ensure that Alberta remains a place with a vibrant and competitive economy. Our plan reflects the holistic view of the principled leadership and entrepreneurship of the people of Alberta.

Allow me to explain. Our government faces the same issues that many Albertans and their families are facing. Our income is lower and our long-term savings have lost value due to falling markets. To improve our opportunities, we look at how a family manages when a steady stream of income is not there. Like most families we plan our budgets based on what we earn, what we need to save, and how much we need to spend. As you know, our families face many challenges and changes as they grow, and they accommodate those challenges and changes. We set short-term goals for saving, putting aside cash in a savings account for emergencies, and we set it aside for home renovations. We set long-term goals, and we save for our retirement. When money is short, we watch our dollars closely and focus our spending on the highest priority areas. When there are difficult times, just as a family would, we access our short-term savings to make ends meet. We will not spend our long-term savings to get us through these tough times.

Mr. Speaker, our government is realistic about the current financial and fiscal situation. Alberta's economy is forecast to contract by 2 per cent in 2009. We know that commodity prices will be much lower than they were a year ago, resulting in lower energy

and tax revenues to meet government obligations. In 2009-10 our revenues will decline by almost \$4 billion.

We also know that Alberta grew by 91,000 people in 2008. This growth resulted in increased demands: demands for more teachers, more health care professionals, more police officers, more social workers, more schools, more hospitals, and more roads. We know that all of this impacts Alberta's bottom line. In Budget 2009 operating spending will be limited to a 3.7 per cent increase, roughly the equivalent of population growth plus inflation.

3:10

We also know that government must maintain its support for the economy. Albertans could experience even more turmoil if we fail to do so. To that end, we will be investing \$23.2 billion on infrastructure over the next three years, \$7.2 billion for 2009-10 alone. That is about \$2,200 per person and more than double the per capita average anywhere else in Canada.

After balancing the need for more programs and services with the reality of our fiscal situation, we must supplement our revenues with \$4.7 billion from our sustainability fund. Fortunately, several years ago our government created short-term savings accounts and set aside funds to protect programs and services for Albertans in the event of severe economic hardship. Now, Mr. Speaker, that time is here. Now our government must be able to act and respond to these changing times. We will and we are.

The current fiscal framework met our needs when we had surplus budgets, but it lacks the flexibility we need today, so we've introduced a new framework that increases our ability to meet current budget pressures with rules to ensure that there is responsible spending. For example, deficits will be permitted only if there are sufficient savings in the sustainability fund to offset them. Borrowing will be allowed for capital purposes but not for operating purposes. Operating expense increases during the year are limited to 1 per cent of the total ministry operating budgets.

Mr. Speaker, it's important for Albertans to know that these changes in the fiscal framework do not affect our heritage savings trust fund. We will not compromise the hard work and investment of Albertans, nor will we sacrifice the dollars we have saved for the future of our children. We will, however, curb our costs.

Our fiscal austerity starts at the very top. Pay hikes have been suspended for MLAs and political staff this year, and the Alberta government will suspend bonuses for senior government staff in 2009-10. A further \$215 million will be found this year through a value review of government operations. Unless our fiscal situation improves beyond our forecast, we will take further corrective action of \$2 billion by 2010. When the economy turns around and our revenues improve, we will put surplus dollars back into the sustainability fund with a goal of restoring it to the approximation of 25 to 30 per cent of our operating budget.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans work hard, they pay their taxes, and they volunteer in their communities. Many Albertans are facing the dual task of raising children and looking after elderly parents. These economic times increase the pressure on families. Budget 2009 will not add to that burden. We will maintain and enhance the services Albertans need. We will keep taxes low, and we will make investments to keep Albertans working. We will also ensure that we continue to provide for the needs of our most vulnerable. Our operating increase this year is focused on the highest priorities for families, with more than three-quarters of it directed to children, to education, to health care for seniors and for persons with disabilities.

Budget 2009 provides a 4.2 per cent increase for Children and Youth Services, including funding to increase the number of foster

homes and to support programs for children with disabilities. We will follow through on our commitment to create 14,000 child care spaces by 2011.

Our budget provides a 5.8 per cent increase for persons with developmental disabilities and a 10.2 per cent increase for the AISH program. That includes a hundred dollars in the maximum monthly benefit to AISH recipients to assist them in meeting their expenses. With an 11.9 per cent increase for seniors' programs we will raise the maximum monthly Alberta seniors' benefit by \$40 for singles and \$60 for couples.

Claire Michaud from St. Paul is with us today, one of 138,000 seniors in the province who rely on the Alberta seniors' benefit. She receives monthly payments that complement what she receives from the federal government, and she has access to optical and dental programs. The 17 per cent increase that she will see in her monthly benefits will help her to relieve her mind from worrying about expenses, and then she'll have time to focus on the things that really matter, her grandchildren and the many activities that she enjoys. Thank you for coming from St. Paul, Claire.

Mr. Speaker, housing costs remain a significant burden for many Albertans, and Budget 2009 will help. We will build additional affordable supportive living units, 1,200 of them, for our seniors across the province over the next three years. We will provide \$468 million over three years as part of our commitment to complete 11,000 affordable housing units – well done – and we will provide \$400 million over three years to develop 2,700 housing units for the homeless and a further \$41 million to create 3,600 spaces for emergency shelters, a very good-news story.

Our government recognizes that education is the cornerstone of individual and community success. For 2009 operating support for K to 12 education will be \$5.4 billion, an increase of 3.2 per cent. Most of these funds will go directly to school boards to address growth, reduce class sizes, and operate and maintain our schools. We'll provide \$3.1 billion to our postsecondary education system this year. This includes a promised 6 per cent increase in base operating funds to support colleges, universities, and technical schools.

The Alberta government is committed to maintaining a strong public health care system, one that is accessible, sustainable, and offers high-quality care. In Budget 2009 the government will spend \$12.6 billion to operate the health care system, an increase of \$558 million. That alone represents more than 40 per cent of this government's total operating increase that we are spending this year, and we will be doing this even as we receive fewer dollars on a per capita basis from the federal government than any other place in Canada. The demands of our health system are placing increasing pressure on other essential programs. We will engage Albertans in building a more sustainable system to ensure that health care will be there when we need it in the future.

Mr. Speaker, the impact of the global recession on our economy has extracted a very human toll. Our unemployment rate is forecast to average 5.8 per cent this year and could average 6.5 per cent in 2010. We will spend \$164 million to enhance career and employment training. These programs help Albertans who lose their jobs to upgrade their skills and get them working again.

Budget 2009 also strengthens our commitment to protect our communities. Our safe communities strategy will be bolstered by 200 more law enforcement officers over the next two years and, along with that, more Crown prosecutors. Mr. Speaker, we will enhance addiction prevention and treatment as well.

Albertans lead the country when it comes to looking out for others through their charitable giving. That has never been more important

than it is right now. To encourage Albertans to continue, we are giving them an opportunity through \$20 million in the community spirit program. That successful program is continuing. This program provides grants to charities and nonprofit organizations based on the amount of dollars donated by Albertans. This complements the \$80 million that government provides in the form of the charitable donation tax credit, which allows Albertans a tax credit of 50 cents on every dollar that they donate over \$200.

3:20

Mr. Speaker, the issues of energy security, environmental protection, and economic recovery are interrelated. Our Premier has provided leadership so that we have addressed these vital issues in a collaborative manner.

Alberta is a resource province, and our sustained economic prosperity, indeed our country's sustained economic prosperity relies on our ability to achieve clean energy production and wise energy use. Our clean energy commitment is demonstrated through the \$2 billion we have committed to support research and development of carbon capture and storage. We will provide the first \$100 million this year for that particular issue and \$700 million over the two subsequent years to keep our commitment to CCS storage.

We will reduce greenhouse gases from vehicles by spending \$520 million through to 2011-12, increasing use of public transit through Green TRIP initiatives. A further \$40 million over the next two years will help us complete other conservation and energy initiatives. This includes funding for a consumer rebate program that will encourage Albertans to spend on greener and more energy efficient products and services. Our land-use framework will receive \$15 million to support the first two of seven regional plans, engaging people with common interests in responsible management of our land and natural resources.

Our government recognizes that building schools, hospitals, roads, and other public infrastructure is not only necessary to meet the needs of Albertans; it is also an effective way to support the economy and create jobs. Indeed, every \$1 billion spent on public infrastructure supports 11,600 jobs which directly benefit Albertans and Alberta communities.

Mr. Speaker, our \$7.2 billion infrastructure investment this year will support more than 80,000 jobs. These jobs run right across the economy, from construction to manufacturing, finance to retail, accommodation to food services. This investment in infrastructure is a win-win for Albertans both as workers and as owners of our fiscal resource. We can take advantage of lower concrete and steel prices as well as increased availability of labour to keep Albertans working and producing more results.

I mentioned already that we will be spending \$23.2 billion in capital over the next three years, and here is how: \$2.9 billion of our capital is devoted to building, expanding, and maintaining health care facilities in communities across Alberta; \$1.7 billion for 54 new and replacement schools to accommodate and benefit 31,000 students; \$1.2 billion for postsecondary facilities to provide spaces for more than 16,000 adult learners.

We will provide municipalities with \$5.6 billion for their own capital expenses. This includes \$3.2 billion provided through the municipal sustainability initiative and the Alberta municipal infrastructure program. Another \$715 million has been identified for waste-water infrastructure, water infrastructure, and irrigation rehabilitation.

Safe and efficient highways are needed to support our crucial industries of agriculture, energy, and forestry as they produce the goods and services that Alberta sells to the world. Mr. Speaker, \$5.8 billion will be spent over the next three years, including these

highways: construction of Calgary and Edmonton ring roads, further twinning of highway 63 to Fort McMurray, replacing the highway 22 bridge across the North Saskatchewan River [some applause] and 1,200 kilometres of paving and rehabilitation across Alberta. There's strong enthusiasm for that.

Budget 2009 also includes stimulus initiatives to encourage the oil and gas industry to invest in drilling new wells. We believe this is a wise investment because in Alberta each new oil or gas well drilled supports 120 jobs. These are not just statistics, Mr. Speaker. These are people, real people like Darcy McCoy. Darcy is a rig manager for Stoneham Drilling. He works for a small drilling contractor out of Calgary, and currently that contractor has 11 out of 19 rigs drilling in Alberta. That's good news.

Despite the economic slowdown and low energy prices energy companies continue to invest in exploration in Alberta, and they're hiring companies like Stoneham to do the drilling. For Darcy and his co-workers that means continued employment and, in his words, "food on the table" for their families. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, Stoneham's activity in this province alone will result in food on the table for hundreds of Alberta families.

Alberta's economy also relies heavily on agriculture, which must compete globally. This year livestock producers will benefit from a \$55 million investment in the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency, which will develop markets, initiate and increase innovation, and improve management of the supply chain.

Mr. Speaker, hundreds of thousands of people come to Alberta to celebrate our arts, to enjoy our natural environment, our festivals, our multiculturalism, and our hospitality. We will support our tourism industry with the creation of the Travel Alberta corporation, which will market Alberta to the world with a budget of \$57 million.

So what will Albertans pay? There will be increases in liquor markups and tobacco tax. However, Mr. Speaker, our government understands the need to keep the dollars in the pockets of Alberta families. Albertans can rest assured they will continue to pay the lowest taxes in Canada by far. We aim to keep it that way.

Indexing personal, spousal, and other tax credits will save Albertans \$115 million this year. Recipients of the Alberta family employment tax credit will receive an increase to offset inflation. In 2009-10 Albertans and Alberta businesses will no longer pay and will have the benefit of no health premiums, saving at least a billion dollars each year. We will raise the small-business threshold to \$500,000 for small-business owners in order that they may be motivated to grow their business still further.

Earlier, Mr. Speaker, I noted our overall revenue would decline nearly \$4 billion in 2009-10. We believe, as most private-sector forecasters do, that we're in a period of short-term decline. As energy prices and global demand for natural resources increase, we expect our revenues to grow and to begin again early next year, but it will take time for them to fully recover, so we're forecasting deficits over the following two years as well. We do expect a return to surplus budgets in 2012-13.

Our government has had a strong understanding of business principles and a passion for maintaining and improving our position on the world stage. We believe that now is the time to promote Alberta. We're proud of what we have, and we want global partners to come here and research, develop, and refine new technologies, new industries, new opportunities, and new economies.

3:30

Budget 2009 reflects our belief in all Albertans, our belief in our province, and our belief in the future. With our Premier's leadership we will seize the opportunity to manage the issues of today. We can, and we will. This budget describes our mission to manage our

spending, use our savings wisely, build on our capacity, and market Alberta to the world. It keeps Albertans working and provides prudent tax measures.

Alberta will continue to be a place for people of courage and determination to dream big, to embrace diversity, and to be strong. We will keep moving forward with wisdom from the past and confidence for our future. We have hope. We are building on a solid foundation, and we plan to build on strength for Alberta and make an even stronger Alberta tomorrow for your families and for mine.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the minister for this very optimistic budget. We look forward to vigorous debate in this House. At this point I move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In accordance with tradition I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 3:32 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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