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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.

Wednesday, May 6, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. In our mind's eye let us see the awesome grandeur of the Rockies, the denseness of our forests, the fertility of our farmland, the splendour of our rivers, the richness of our resources, the energy of our people. Then let us rededicate ourselves as wise stewards of such bounty on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Sine Chadi, a former member of the 1993 to '97 Legislative Assembly, the Member for Edmonton-Roper; Mr. Henry Mah, a wise elder from the Edmonton Chinese community as well as a member of the Order of Canada; as well, Dr. S.P. Singh, who is a retired professor from the University of Alberta and the president of the Indian societies of Edmonton as well as a humanitarian. I would ask my friends to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some guests that are seated in your gallery: Consul Hou Danna from the Chinese Consulate General office in Calgary as well as Mr. Felix Guerrero, honorary consul general of the Philippines for southern Alberta. These guests are here today to join in the kickoff of Asian Heritage Month. They both play a key role in making the From Asian Shores to Alberta Prairies initiative a success. The Chinese consulate is donating 1,000 books to the regional library system.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the great honour to introduce to you and to members of the Legislature a group of Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation fellows who are sitting in your gallery. They are participants in a nine-month international fellowship program based in Ontario, in Ottawa, and are visiting us today as part of the tour of western Canada.

Sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency, the fellowship program is a collaboration between the office of the Auditor General of Alberta, the office of the Auditor General of Canada, and the Comprehensive Auditing Foundation. Our guests are from Ghana, Guyana, Kenya, St. Lucia, and Thailand, and two are from Vietnam. They are accompanied today by their hosts from the offices of the Auditor General of Canada and the Auditor General of Alberta. I would now ask all of our guests to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am thrilled to stand here today and introduce a very special class to you and through you to the Assembly. The grade 6 class from St. Anthony school in Drayton Valley along with their teacher Dawn McConnell and parent helpers Charlene Wojcicki and Sharon Davidson are in the members' gallery today. I would like to point out one student in particular who is very special to me, my youngest daughter, Courtney Siobhan, a politician in her own right. It is wonderful to have Courtney and her classmates and teacher and parent helpers here today. I am sure they thoroughly enjoyed their tour and a special stop at the Premier's office. I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce through you to members of the Assembly three grade 6 classes from Timberlea school in the oil sands capital of the world – you might have heard of it – Fort McMurray, Alberta. It's my pleasure to greet them, their bus driver, and their teachers. There are 82 of them here today. I'd like to ask them to rise and receive the very warm welcome of the Assembly. They're entering as we speak.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the government's first group of policy interns. They're co-ordinated by corporate human resources. The new policy internship program provides postsecondary graduate students interested in the field of public policy a unique opportunity to work side by side with seasoned policy professionals in government. This talented group will contribute to important policy initiatives that will impact Alberta.

The policy internship program is part of the government's workforce plan to attract and retain employees to ensure a bright and prosperous future for all Albertans. I can assure you that after meeting with this group, the future of our public service looks extremely positive. I would ask these interns in the members' gallery to please rise and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of four people who donated some funds to a charity in St. Albert at the St. Albert Housing Society fundraising breakfast. We invited them to come here and have lunch and tour the Legislature. They did that, and we had a great chat at lunch today, talking about developments in St. Albert and the world economy and a number of technology innovations that we're doing. They're seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I would ask that they stand as I call their names. They are Bob and Lori Holm and Paul and Adrina Falkowski. I'd ask all members to give them the warmest greetings of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you an old friend of mine, Bill Hunter.

He's seated in the public gallery. Bill is presently from Calgary. He's formerly from the Gulch. People might recognize that as Dinosaur park, Drumheller. Bill and I go back a long way, 50 years actually, to when we were survey partners at SAIT though it wasn't SAIT then. It was actually the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art in those days. Bill and a group of us went to school together, worked together, lived together, and partied together for many years. Bill is up here today meeting with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. I'd ask my colleagues in the Assembly to give Bill the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly six very special people from the constituency of Athabasca-Redwater who are also good friends and very involved community workers. They've come in today to have lunch with me and talk about a whole raft of subjects that are important to our constituency: Jack Dennett from Redwater, Noel Major from Athabasca, Bob and Mabel Dick from Athabasca, Deb Crosswell from Thorhild, and Carol Lund from Athabasca. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

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

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some visitors from Calgary. They're here to join in the kickoff of Asian Heritage Month event earlier today. Some of them are seated in your gallery. We have Dr. Mayi Arcellana-Panlilio, a professor at the U of C and cochair of the Asian Heritage Foundation. She played a leadership role in raising \$10,000 for the book donation this afternoon. Next to her we have Mr. Vladimir Panlilio, an engineer who volunteers with the foundation. He played a key role in preparing the big cheque for the donation today. Then we have Ms Tuyet Lam, a board member of the AHF and one of the most active members of Calgary's Vietnamese community. She was instrumental in raising \$10,000 for the book project. Then seated in the gallery we have Ms Nancy Li, a student at the University of Calgary, who performed the beautiful *Carmen* piece for us this afternoon in the rotunda. Mr. Yang Li, professor at the University of Calgary, today played the special role of driver for Ms Nancy Li. We also have Mr. Ron Sheppard, chairman of the Parkland Regional library system, who was here earlier this afternoon to accept a donation from the Heritage Foundation for the purpose of purchasing multilingual books.

1:40

If you would allow me to finish another set of introductions. The Edmonton Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative helped us to organize the lunch for this afternoon's event. This group together with the Edmonton public library is developing a formal partnership to engage immigrant and refugee communities in designing relevant programs and innovative collaborations. Seated in the members' gallery we have Ms Linda Williams, from the Edmonton public library, who co-chairs the committee. From the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative we have Ms Nasreen Omar, president of the board of directors; Ms Nhan Lu, vice-president of the board; Ms Tigist Dafla, board member; and Mrs Dormitorio, who is a Filipino member who has been working with the Mill Woods community library. I would like to ask members of the House to give them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm just delighted to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the newest member of the constituency office team in the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre. Joining me under the STEP program this summer is a young man named Jordan. I'll ask Jordan to stand. Jordan is a student at the University of Alberta. He is in the final year of his political science degree, which is why it's always a good idea to come and work in a constituency office. After many years of being on the outside looking in, he is interested in being on the other side. Please join me in welcoming Jordan Taft to the Alberta Assembly.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce to you and through you sitting in the members' gallery Mr. Amarjeet Sohi. He's one of our local leaders from the city of Edmonton, city councillor from ward 6. He's also on safe communities and, I believe, one of the first Indo-Canadians elected to city council in Edmonton.

Also sitting in the gallery behind me is Mr. Ned Lee, president of the Lee association of Edmonton, as well as Mrs. Lai Chu Li Kong, vice-chair of the Edmonton Chinatown Multi-cultural Centre as well as chairman of the Edmonton Chinese library foundation. I would ask them all to rise so they can receive the traditional warm welcome of my friends in this Assembly.

Thank you.

Members' Statements

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

Asian Heritage Month

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In 2002 May was officially designated as Asian Heritage Month in recognition of the important contributions of Asian Canadians to the settlement, growth, social, and cultural development of Canada. In addition, various groups have been organizing events to celebrate Asian Heritage Month in Alberta since 2001.

Asian Heritage Month engages people of all backgrounds through pan-Asian cultural events that foster awareness of the broad spectrum of Asian Canadians' social participation and cultural heritage. With your background, Mr. Speaker, in East Asian history, I'm sure that you can attest that Asian Heritage Month is all about culture and history. The presence of Asian Canadians in Alberta dates back many, many years, and currently Asian Canadians make up 15 per cent of the population in Alberta's two major cities.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to represent a province that is as culturally strong and diverse as Alberta. As you can see, we have one of the most if not the most diverse representative bodies in all of North America, and that is something to be proud of. I want to thank all those who immigrated here over the years for their contribution to the culture of Alberta, and I hope this culture continues to flourish.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Wildfire Update

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wildfires are burning in many communities across the province, and some of these fires are

threatening homes and businesses. As I understand it, three homes were lost in my constituency alone yesterday. As we can all imagine, residents watching the flames can be filled with fear and anxiety.

On behalf of the Premier and every one of our caucus I want to recognize the tremendous efforts of the volunteer firefighters, who are working 24 hours a day to ensure the safety and security of the families who call these communities home. The services and support provided to the local residents is truly remarkable. Most of the firefighters battling these blazes are volunteers, making tremendous sacrifices and taking time away from their work and their families. Their selfless dedication is a true reflection of Albertans' willingness to support and protect their neighbours. I know of a Canadian soldier who just returned from Afghanistan, came home Thursday, changed his boots, and has been on the front line in Lamont fighting the fires since Sunday. Another volunteer has been on the scene full-time. He told his boss that the fires are where he had to be, and he didn't know when he would be back to work.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to acknowledge the efforts of all these volunteers, who selflessly go beyond the call of duty, working long hours and fighting exhaustion. Their efforts are nothing short of heroic. These brave individuals are supported by a range of agencies, including RCMP, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Alberta Emergency Management Agency, Service Alberta, volunteer organizations, and by their municipalities, neighbours, and communities. The efforts of everyone are truly invaluable in this time of crisis.

On behalf of the Premier, all of my colleagues, and the residents of these communities I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to everyone who was there and to those who are still there to ensure our communities and families are safe.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mental Health Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning I attended the Canadian Mental Health Association, Edmonton region, meet and greet breakfast. Since I'm already quite familiar with the decline in mental health services under this administration, the concerns of the people in attendance came as no surprise. But this administration needs to hear these concerns, pressingly so, and I'm passing them on today.

Since the indiscriminate closure of mental health beds in the province years ago, Albertans needing treatment for mental health problems have had few places to go. As a result, many Albertans with mental illness have wound up on the streets, plugging our emergency wards and hospital beds and simply struggling along as best they can, with a vastly reduced quality of life, at risk to themselves and to others.

While I acknowledge the renewed commitment to child mental health in this administration, we are simply providing inadequate services in this province. As citizens we have a solemn duty to take care of each other, especially our most vulnerable. Instead, this administration has abdicated its responsibility, with costly and tragic results. Again, Mr. Speaker, penny-wise, pound-foolish. In addition to the moral imperative, we see that homelessness, emergency care cost increases, family impacts, policing, lack of productivity far outweigh the costs of treatment in a properly funded system.

One message this morning rang out clearest of all: it's time to stop treating mental illness as a stigma and a poor second cousin within the health care system. The stigma of mental health is unacceptable

and unjust to Albertans suffering from real medical problems. Education is needed, both in the public at large and for this administration. The Auditor General himself has said repeatedly that we are not meeting the mark, with incomplete standards and gaps in services.

I urge the administration to invest in mental health and assign it the priority it deserves. A healthy Alberta is possible when we make the appropriate commitments to mental health services.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Oral Question Period

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

Health System Restructuring

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has finally admitted that their goal is to privatize health care. I was disappointed this week in estimates to hear the minister of health say: "It's about time we started running health care like a \$7 billion business and not having it run by health care professionals. I'm not going to sit here and have a board of health . . . professionals running a \$7 billion business." Thank you for making the Premier's intentions quite clear. To the minister: when did this government decide that health care was a business?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, this Leader of the Opposition can't figure out that when we are spending some 13 billion dollars of taxpayers' money, we should be running it like a business is run. What the hon. leader failed to mention in his preamble was the question that he asked, and the question was around something to the effect: why wasn't our new board made up of health care professionals? My response was: we have health care professionals who are involved in the delivery of the system, but when it comes to the governance model, we need to ensure that we have the best and brightest minds in the world.

1:50

Dr. Swann: So is this minister saying that there are no qualified health professionals in Alberta to sit on this board?

Mr. Liepert: I never said that at all, Mr. Speaker. What I said is that we have outstanding qualified health professionals who are doing outstanding work in delivering health care. It never hurts to have some outside views as to what works and what doesn't work. In many cases our board members have experience in other regions – in fact, in one case another country – to bring a different view to health care. If we want to stay with the same narrow, myopic view that the opposition parties have, we will always have a system that, quite frankly, at this stage is no longer sustainable if we don't make changes. It is not as accessible as it needs to be to meet the needs of Albertans and it is not effective and it is not efficient.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again the minister is launching out on a new experiment for the health care system. I would just like to ask the minister what evidence he has to shift now to a business model for health care delivery in Alberta.

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's be clear. This is not an experiment. This is the model that will be going forward to deliver

health care in this province. Already there are successes out there. We had a three-hour debate in estimates the other night. I pointed out a number of success stories. He chooses to ignore those, and that's fine. But as I talk to Albertans in this province, they tell me consistently: you as government are on the right path, keep moving forward, and don't blink.

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

H1N1 Influenza Virus Exposure

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, once again we're seeing evidence across the province that communications around influenza are somewhat smattered and inconsistent. One Calgary school, for example, has sent messages to their parents that influenza is affecting the school while schools in Edmonton are being kept out of information when there's a case of influenza. Could the minister clarify why there is already inconsistency and uncertainty and a sense of hiding information in Alberta around this new H1N1 influenza?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'll answer that question on behalf of the Minister of Education. The process that we have taken right from day one is that if it is a school-aged child that has been identified as one that has tested positive for the influenza, the school board is notified. School boards are locally elected bodies. They have the right to make a decision in conjunction with the principal as to whether or not it is significant enough to inform the parents. Some have chosen, as I understand it, to communicate to parents; others may not have. But, surely, that's a decision that a locally elected school board can make.

Dr. Swann: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, the restructuring of the health system is creating unwarranted anxiety and breakdowns in communication. I'm hearing from a number of regions that they're looking to their health unit, some are looking to their medical officer, some are looking to the province, some are looking to their school board for direction. Are these medical decisions going to be made at the school board level, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the time that I've been in this Assembly, I'm not quite sure that I've heard a remark coming from someone with medical training that could be such an absurd comment. The Leader of the Opposition knows full well, he's been told consistently all week that the chief medical officer of health is the one that is leading this communications effort. It has been going exceedingly well, to plan. I guess what is irritating the Leader of the Opposition is that he has nothing controversial to grab onto, so he starts to invent things that he thinks he's heard out there from people in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. leader?

Dr. Swann: No further questions. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Stucco Exterior Wallcovering

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our caucus fought this government on the pine shakes scandal, standing up for homeowners'

rights, but this government doesn't learn. Now homeowners are facing more costs as a result of bad building practices. What is a condo buyer to do? They trust this government to have effective standards, and this government has let them down again. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: why hasn't the government improved the building codes to stop this bad construction?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government has indeed improved the building codes. It has improved the building codes in regard to the high-intensity residential fires. We also did receive a handful of calls with complaints about building practices. From that we got the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to do an investigation and consultation with key stakeholders, and that member has provided me with his recommendations.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What is the government going to do to support homeowners who are now out thousands and thousands of dollars because of the bad standard this government has allowed for years?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure exactly what bad standard he's talking about. We have the Safety Codes Council, that monitors the building codes and the safety codes of buildings in this province on a regular basis. They do an incredibly professional job. We as a government make sure that if there are situations or there are concerns or there are problems, we address them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are thousands of homes which could rot because of the stucco covering linked to leaky walls. To the minister again. The minister has had months to get this done. Monitoring, reviewing, waiting: these are all specialities of this government. Unfortunately, action isn't. When can Albertans finally expect action on this issue?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is very interesting. We have one individual that brought forward a concern. The member opposite read it in the paper, and all of a sudden it's a concern for months. That particular concern that he's talking about was brought to my attention yesterday, and we are looking into it. I've asked my Safety Codes Council as well as the assistant deputy minister who is in charge to look into that concern. The question is not so much, as I know it right now, a question of product but a question of workmanship. We're looking into it.

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

Parental Choice in Education

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This government has dismissed NDP assertions that allowing teachers to be hauled before the Human Rights Commission for teaching something that a parent doesn't like will hurt education in this province. "Absolutely ludicrous," said the Education minister. "Flights of fancy," said the culture minister. Well, parents, teachers, school superintendents, and school boards have all said that the NDP was right and the government was wrong. In light of this, is the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit willing to drop his attempt to enshrine so-called parental rights in the human rights system?

Speaker's Ruling Anticipation

The Speaker: Okay. Hon. members, yesterday I advised hon. members that we do have an Order Paper. This bill is up for debate this afternoon. I indicated that prior to the date in which the bill was up for debate, we'd allow questions in the question period, but we'll not use the time of the question period if that bill is up this afternoon. If you've got a short response, fine, but we're not going to spend three questions on something that's going to be debated this afternoon in this House.

Parental Choice in Education (continued)

Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, we'll save the debate for this afternoon, but I've got a copy of the press release, and I don't see anywhere that they say that the New Democratic Party was right.

Mr. Mason: That's perhaps because the minister of culture can't read between the lines.

Groups representing Alberta's school councils, teachers, school superintendents, and elected school boards agree with Alberta's NDP that this government's policy will have a negative impact on the education of children. Given this view, coming from all sectors of the public education system, will the minister of culture admit that he is wrong and withdraw this ill-conceived policy before he does some real damage to Albertans' education system?

The Speaker: The hon. minister if you wish.

Mr. Blackett: We'll save the debate, Mr. Speaker, for this afternoon.

2:00

Mr. Mason: Well, Mr. Speaker, that was a question about policy.

Enshrining the rights of children not to learn about certain things in human rights is about as backward a step as there could be. It will not only make it harder for teachers to teach; it will make it harder for children to learn. Given that teachers, parents, superintendents, and public school boards have not been consulted, will the minister agree to withdraw these changes until the concerns of these groups have been addressed? Please answer the question.

The Speaker: No. That's not the way it works. We have rules that we follow. We're moving on.

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

Wildfire Update

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wildfires have been burning out of control in many Alberta communities. My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can the minister please provide an update on the wildfire situation in Strathcona and Lamont counties?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Lamont county and Strathcona county both have fires that still aren't completely under control. Our agency has deployed its mobile command unit to assist the fighting of these fires. These counties have declared local states of disaster. The concern with these two counties is the two fires joining together because of the extensive-

ness of the fire. There are residences that have been evacuated. We will continue to provide the resources and expertise to help these communities and their residents.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what's the status of the fire in Sturgeon?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, last night the fire in Sturgeon was very active, and it's now partially under control. They did declare a state of emergency yesterday, and several homes have been damaged and destroyed. The local emergency operations centre activated in your constituency in Morinville. The Alberta Emergency Management mobile unit has also been deployed for this fire. We have a reception centre for evacuees set up in Gibbons, and we're trying to coordinate the efforts and will continue to do so.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Also for the same minister. There have also been several recent fires in many other areas of the province. Could the minister give us an update on the status of those fires?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, yes, we did have approximately 20 fires that have been raging through Alberta. The fires in these areas have been reported to be contained or extinguished, and that is very much thanks to the continuing support and the assistance of volunteers and professionals. We continue to provide support and assistance also to the four First Nation communities in Hobbema as well as the Saddle Lake First Nation. We very much want to thank all of the agencies and the firefighters for the work that they are doing in battling these fires.

Provincial Electoral Divisions

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, at a time when government should be cautious about adding to the bottom line, this government is adding four more MLAs to this Legislature. A rough and ready calculation indicates this would cost taxpayers an additional \$10 million over a four-year term. To the Justice minister. Albertans need four more MLAs like a dog needs fleas. Why are we saddling the taxpayers with these additional costs?

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

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my humble opinion, MLAs play a pretty important part in effectively representing Albertans. What we know about this province is that in the past five or six years we've experienced tremendous growth. We've had to make very difficult decisions. We've wanted to make sure that Albertans get great service, we want to make sure that Albertans are effectively represented, and we believe that an increase in the number of seats will allow that to happen.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, this is just another example of this administration's big-government approach to governing Alberta. To the Justice minister: considering the economics and our current technological capabilities, can't we make do with 83 MLAs in this Assembly?

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

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a complicated business. This is something that's going to get to, I think, the fundamentals as to how we want to govern ourselves in this province. We think it's very important that as this province grows, we don't look in a parochial way or a backward way at how we've done things before. We think this province is growing and changing, it's diverse, and it needs to have effective representation. An increase in the number of seats will allow that to happen.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, without moving too far outside my own job description, I did notice that B.C. has a larger population and less MLAs. Why don't we follow their lead instead of following this big government approach to doing things?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We sit in this Assembly every day. We debate matters of important public policy. We think that it's important for Albertans to have a voice in this House. We think it's important as a government for people to be elected to this House and to be able to talk about public policy. We know from the opposition that they seem to have some difficulty with that and have some 1-800 number where they think people should be able to call in and ask questions. We think that that's an important piece of dialogue but that people should be elected to effectively represent Albertans.

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

Wildfire Assistance

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, this year my constituency is once again affected by wildfires. We know the volunteer firefighters are out there on the front lines working 24 hours a day doing a tremendous job to protect their neighbours and their communities and their municipalities. My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can the minister tell us how we as a government are supporting these firefighting efforts?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I visited the fires last night, and I really want to pass on the appreciation of the government for the efforts of the volunteers. I talked to the Premier, and he's very concerned and will be heading to the sites when he does return. We have activated the Government Emergency Operations Centre to coordinate the response. We are on-scene with equipment and getting additional resources. We're partnering with municipalities, SRD, Service Alberta. Just as a point of interest, last night I talked to an individual who has not gone home since Sunday, and I asked him how he does it. He says: "You know, there's only one thing that motivates me. I know that they would support me the same if I was in the same situation."

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. He indicates that he was actually at the fires last night. While I can commend the minister and the Alberta Emergency Management Agency and the municipalities who are co-ordinating the efforts, we know that many of these firefighters are volunteers. Can he elaborate about the role that they are playing in these efforts?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would say, I guess, in short, that it's nothing short of heroic. We have individuals that are putting their lives on the line for communities and for their neighbourhoods. They are well trained and committed to serving, and we're doing everything we can to support them. Their neighbours are supporting the firefighters by providing food, by providing support. This is a community effort in time of disaster and emergency. This is when communities pull together to support each other.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. I know that his department gets engaged and is engaged in these firefighting efforts. Can the minister tell us what resources his department has committed to fighting these wildfires?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to start by thanking the Minister of Municipal Affairs for being on the front lines last night and being there with the volunteer fighters and the communities there that are fighting them and congratulate those people for their bravery. Our priority responsibility is in the green zone. We've had 217 fires in those areas already. Fortunately, at the moment we have spare capacity. With the fires at Strathcona and Lamont we've been able to send in 90 SRD firefighters to join the 100 volunteer fighters that are there. Plus, components of the Alberta air force are there, the air tanker and two helicopters plus several bulldozers. We've provided similar support in other areas of the province. So long as we have spare capacity, SRD is ready and willing to be there to help our communities.

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

2:10

Nursing Shortage

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As part of the implementation of Vision 2020, the government's latest scheme to increase the role of private operators in public health care – my first question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. What are the recruitment targets this year to address the critical shortage of all nurses here in Alberta?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, that's an excellent question. Our ministry is well aware of the shortages of health professionals in the province of Alberta. We are maintaining our efforts in recruiting and attracting individuals in that particular field from around the world. We will continue to hold various fairs across individual countries to bring additional support here.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: what is the ratio of registered nurses to licensed practical nurses recruitment by the department this year?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, we have needs on both sides. I really don't have those numbers at my fingertips. I don't have those ratios there. Certainly, those numbers could mostly likely be made available if the hon. member wants them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I'll take the hon. minister up on that. Certainly, Dr. Duckett is quite curious about what this ratio will be, according to his blog.

Now to the Minister of Health and Wellness. In 2008 there were 6 RNs per 1 LPN in the old Capital health region, according to their annual report. According to the annual report of the Calgary health region, there were 9 RNs to 1 LPN, and it was a 2 to 1 ratio in the old East Central region. What ratio is the province now going to implement for registered nurses and licensed practical nurses in your Vision 2020 scheme?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, you know, if life were as simple as what this hon. member tries to make it out to be, that everything could have ratios – what the Alberta Health Services management team is going to be doing is ensuring that all efforts are made to have the right care provider in the right place at the right time. That may be an LPN. It may be a registered nurse. In some cases it might be a combination with an aide. There is a whole variety of ways to ensure that we provide the health care that Albertans need.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Alberta Law Enforcement Response Team

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A recent public update on activities of the province-funded Alberta law enforcement response team shows that ALERT enforcement units are making good headway in preventing serious and violent crime. Two hundred and nineteen police officers and support personnel arrested 133 individuals over a period of three months. My constituents and all Albertans are encouraged by the results and hope that even more could be done. My question today is to the hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. What I'm curious . . .

The Speaker: Well, you've now got the question. Time finished. It's the response time now.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, Mr. Speaker, what I will talk about is how effective the ALERT model has been in tackling serious and violent crime in our province. With an approach that emphasizes integration and co-ordination, the ALERT units target organized crime and gangs as well as online child exploitation in a very effective manner. These investigations do require substantial time and resources to gather intelligence information, identify targets, and gather enough evidence to make arrests. I'm confident that through the efforts of ALERT we'll continue to reduce the negative impacts of crime in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same hon. minister. You indicated that ALERT units are doing an effective job. Does that mean that we can expect the same results every quarter or more effectiveness using the same resources, more arrests, more drugs and guns seized, and more gang members taken off our streets?

Mr. Lindsay: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member that the great work of ALERT will continue. Again, our top priority in this province is to reduce crime so that Albertans are safe, and that means targeting and arresting those who have no respect for laws

and use violence and intimidation. We will continue to do everything we can to bring those people to justice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same hon. minister. My constituents are very glad that government continues to take strong action in combatting gangs and violent crimes. Will the changed ALERT model that you are considering put more police on our streets?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, ALERT has been up and running now for a couple of years, and, yes, we are looking at refining the model to make sure it operates more effectively. We are doing that, and we're sure that these changes will improve the efficiency of our police across the province.

Having said that, in regard to the comments about additional police, our Premier spoke about that numerous times. We will be adding four integrated gang units in April, made up of 67 members, to address ongoing gang and organized crime activities in the province.

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

Lobbyists

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recent news out of Saskatchewan illustrates that they performed their due diligence when attempting to maintain a presence in Washington, DC. My questions would be to the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. The Alberta taxpayers are paying \$40,000 a month for two high-priced lobbyists in Washington, DC, while the government of Saskatchewan just hired a former U.S. ambassador for less money. Why didn't this government hire David Wilkins for less money?

Mr. Stevens: Well, I was just meeting with Ambassador Wilkins yesterday, as a matter of fact. I think that Saskatchewan did an excellent job in selecting Ambassador Wilkins to represent their interests. I can tell you that Ambassador Wilkins is a good friend of Canada, a good friend of the west, and we're looking forward to working with Saskatchewan and Ambassador Wilkins in addressing the oil sands issues in the United States.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Now, the Premier of Saskatchewan justified this \$400,000 annual expense to the taxpayers of Saskatchewan by saying that it was a better deal than any other province was getting for similar service. In light of this development does the minister still feel that Albertans are getting the best value for their tax dollars?

Mr. Stevens: Well, Mr. Speaker, I must say that the Premier of Saskatchewan said what I, too, would say if I were in his situation. There is no doubt that Ambassador Wilkins will do a very good job for them. I must say this to the hon. member: I'm absolutely satisfied that we have outstanding assistance in terms of Ambassador Blanchard and Mr. Fraser and the firms that they represent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Albertans have been told to do more with less. Can the minister tell me why the Alberta government isn't operating in the same business mode? Would those contracts be reviewed?

Mr. Stevens: Well, Mr. Speaker, the contracts that we're talking about are one-year contracts. They started, as I recall, towards the end of March 2009. I'm sure that we will be reviewing those contracts as they expire sometime in terms of perhaps March 2010.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

H1N1 Influenza Virus Exposure

(continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Anxious parents across Edmonton have been asking their children all week if any of their classmates have suddenly been absent. This is because they're worried about the H1N1 flu infection and want to protect their children. I'm a parent of young children, as are many members of this House, and when there's a chance that my kids have been exposed to a dangerous virus, I want to know the facts. To the minister of health: why are you denying parents the right to know whether their kids have been exposed to H1N1 in their school?

Mr. Liepert: I'd suggest that if the member wants to find out about issues at her school, she should call her school trustee.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, school boards are actually looking to the chief medical officer of health for direction on this one. As a parent I know parents are regularly warned by schools of less serious public health concerns such as school-specific outbreaks of lice and chicken pox. To the same minister: if parents can be told about an outbreak of lice in their school, why can't they be told about a serious incident like a severe H1N1 infection?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, the chief medical officer of health has been very clear. He said that we shouldn't overreact, that we shouldn't be closing schools. In the case of when there is a situation with a student, it's my understanding that the Department of Education does contact the school board. It's the school board's decision what information they want to hand out.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, so far all we have is chaos. School boards are cancelling trips to unrelated destinations all over the world. Meanwhile, parents can't be told if there's an H1N1 case in their own school. We need a clear policy that tells parents right away if a child in their school has H1N1. Why won't the minister of health commit to a policy that publicly identifies schools where this flu virus occurs so that parents can decide how best to protect their children?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I would suggest that the best way to protect your children is to tell them the truth and not overreact, Mr. Speaker. If there's a situation that the school board deems serious enough that it would require a school closure, they will make that decision. Clearly, to this stage that hasn't been the case, so I think the member is worrying needlessly.

2:20

Seniors' Benefit Program

Mr. Allred: Mr. Speaker, yesterday evening I hosted a forum in my constituency on health care and seniors' supports. I want to thank

the hon. ministers of Health and Wellness and Seniors and Community Supports as well as my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Meadowlark for their participation. My questions today are to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. A number of seniors at the forum expressed great concern about lack of government support for vulnerable seniors. Can the minister describe what she's doing to support seniors in need?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, this government is committed to supporting low-income seniors who are most in need. The proof is in the 2009 budget, which included a \$48.6 million increase to seniors' programs. One of these programs is the Alberta seniors' benefit, or ASB program, which provides a monthly income supplement to approximately 138,000 seniors. The maximum monthly benefits have increased, and we expect another 6,000 seniors or so to be eligible when the qualifying income thresholds are increased in July. Our assistance to low- and moderate-income seniors also includes help with dental work.

Mr. Allred: My first supplemental is to the same minister. Some of the people at the forum expressed doubts about the government's commitment to providing care and housing options for aging Albertans. What is the minister doing to ensure that Albertans have the supports to spend their retirement years in their own homes and communities?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, seniors have told us that they want to live as independently as possible for as long as possible in their own homes in their own communities. To help seniors do this, Alberta Health and Wellness and my ministry have developed a continuing care program to help seniors age in the right place. This includes looking at home-care services and how to provide supports to help seniors remain in their homes longer. It also includes increasing the number of supportive care facilities, and my budget this year has another \$50 million to help increase those numbers, and that's added onto the \$119 million that I just announced a month ago for over 3,000 new supportive living units.

Mr. Allred: My final question is to the same minister. One of the issues I spoke about last night is the need for individuals to prepare for their own retirements. Since there's going to be a surge of baby boomers about to retire, what is the minister's department doing to prepare for the major demographic shifts that are about to occur?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's population, like the rest of Canada's and, indeed, like the rest of the world's, is aging. Although nobody has found the fountain of youth yet, we are preparing for this demographic shift. This preparation includes the Demographic Planning Commission, which received over 10,000 survey responses on the Internet, and we spoke to over 100 stakeholder organizations. We are now combining the work of the commission with research and cross-ministry input to develop an aging population policy framework. This framework is intended to help government make decisions for Alberta's seniors population.

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

Protection of Persons in Care

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There have been far too many cases of mistreatment and abuse of seniors in Alberta. Files on cases of abuse and mistreatment go back years, and many people

trying to help these seniors are running into dead end after dead end. Their concerns seem to go unheard. My questions are to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. How is the minister working with other groups to resolve these problems of mistreatment and abuse? When can seniors expect better protection from this government?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, this government has very good legislation called Protection for Persons in Care Act. Under this legislation we investigate every single complaint that comes forward about abuse in any kind of supportive living facility. If the abuse is in a criminal form, those complaints will go to the police. We have inspections of facilities, and we have investigators going out and speaking to the people who are involved in the complaints of abuse.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Who is it that makes the decisions on whether a public inquiry goes forward on a case of abuse or mistreatment?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, we have a branch within our ministry that does investigate every complaint that comes forward. We have a director that decides in which direction an abuse complaint should head. We get lots of complaints about the food, which is one of the most common complaints that we hear from our supportive living facilities. Those cases are not investigated, but we do work with the facility operators to encourage better preparation of food. More serious complaints are investigated thoroughly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the same minister. One particular case where decisions were made against a senior's wishes goes back over three years now with no action. Why are cases like this one sitting for years without any public inquiry when it's clear that there's a problem that needs to be addressed to better protect our vulnerable seniors? This is only one case.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of the situation that the member is speaking of; however, I would like to be aware of the situation, and if there is a problem, I would like to attend to it immediately. I would ask the member opposite to inform me of this situation so I can further investigate myself on why there is a holdup in taking action.

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

Physician Supply

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Reports of a hiring freeze affecting specialists who have received offers of employment here in Alberta have been circulating and continue to gain momentum. In Edmonton, home to one of the largest academic health centres in North America, this is cause for serious concern. My question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. Minister, for clarity and for the record, are these reports true or are they not?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, clearly, there's been some attempt by certain people to distort the facts, let's say, because what we're talking about here, first of all, are academic specialists. They are not family doctors that are going to be locating elsewhere in the

province. Just to clear up the record, I did speak with the CEO of Alberta Health Services, Dr. Duckett, and he confirms the following: not only has Alberta Health Services honoured the contracts of 16 physicians that were already in place, but it is also honouring verbal agreements with 25 other physicians; five physician positions are being advertised, and another 42 offers are proceeding within the existing budgets.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have only one supplementary question for the minister. Rumours have also been circulating, and reports in the media tell us that the incoming dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Alberta would not have privileges with Alberta Health Services. Is this true or not, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Liepert: Well, again, I don't know who's spreading these rumours, but I have some suspicions, Mr. Speaker. I would just confirm for the record that we welcome to our city the new dean of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Alberta, Dr. Philip Baker, and he will certainly have all the privileges required at the Royal Alexandra hospital.

While I'm on my feet, I wish dean Dr. Tom Marrie the best of success in his endeavours in Maritime Canada.

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

Nuclear Power

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The public is increasingly skeptical about the government's consultation on building a nuclear power plant in Alberta. Among other things the consultation workbook completely avoids mentioning the very real problems that are plaguing the construction of new power plants. My question is to the Minister of Energy. Can the minister name a single nuclear power plant anywhere in North America or Europe under construction today or any time in the last 30 years that's on time or on budget?

The Speaker: If that's within government policy, go ahead.

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What I will tell the House and the people of the province of Alberta is that the government of Alberta is not constructing any type of nuclear facility anywhere.

Dr. Taft: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's pursue that line because I think that's a promising line. The nuclear lobby is aggressively pursuing \$50 billion in government loan guarantees in the U.S. because without them nuclear power is not viable. To the Minister of Energy: will this minister rule out this government giving loan guarantees for developing nuclear power in Alberta? Can we just rule that out?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. The question, really, absolutely has no relevance to what's happening in the province of Alberta. We have not – not – given any loan guarantee to anybody to build any electrical generating facilities in the province of Alberta since I don't know when. I can tell you that

right now under the structure that we have in the province of Alberta, electrical generation is a stand-alone market facility. We have no nickel in it, and we do not intend to have any.

2:30

Dr. Taft: Okay. I'm glad there won't be so much as a nickel of public money in there.

To the same minister. Another way that nuclear power companies want to put their financial risk on the public back is to begin charging customers when construction begins on the plant rather than when power generation comes online. That means customers pay for nuclear power for years before it's even generated. Again to the Minister of Energy: will the minister rule out any option from this government that would require customers in Alberta to pay for nuclear power before it actually comes online?

Mr. Knight: Mr. Speaker, it's very obvious that the member opposite hasn't spent one iota of time to actually take a look at the structure of generating in the province of Alberta. He wouldn't ask a question like that if he had a little idea about what it is that we actually are doing in Alberta.

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

Seniors' Community Centres

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituency, Calgary-Mackay, is a relatively new, younger constituency. That said, the seniors population in my constituency is growing, and they are looking for ways to stay active in their community. My questions are to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. Seniors' centres are an important venue for seniors in our communities. What options are available to support seniors' centres in Alberta?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, there are hundreds of seniors' community centres throughout Alberta, and they exist because of community volunteers that have come together to ensure the establishment of these facilities. There are currently a number of sources of funding for seniors' centres. I'm very proud that the province is able to support seniors' programs through family and community support services, which is 80 per cent provincially funded. There are also lottery-funded grant programs such as the community spirit program, the community facilities enhancement program, and the community initiatives program, and the federal government has the New Horizons for Seniors program, which provides grants of up to \$25,000 . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member. I'm sure we'll get chapter 2 in the next question.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you. Can the hon. minister inform the Assembly if her department works with community organizations to provide services and information to seniors?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I do have to put in chapter 2, and that's because this is a \$25,000 grant that they're currently taking proposals for until June 12. I want our seniors' centres to know that.

To go back to the supplemental question, we have eight regional seniors' information services offices across Alberta helping seniors

and their families access information on provincial programs and services. Staff from each of these offices are available to visit seniors' centres in their area to provide information sessions on various topics.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you. My final question is to the same minister. Are there avenues through her department for seniors to become aware of the services and programs available in their communities?

Mrs. Jablonski: There are. Mr. Speaker, I just want you to know that seniors' centres are very important to everyone in Alberta. They provide lots of opportunities for our seniors. I could further discuss this with our representative from Calgary-Mackay.

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

High-speed Rail Link

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Transportation received a publicly funded report on high-speed rail in Alberta over a year ago. To date the public has seen or heard nothing from the government about that report. To the Minister of Transportation: why is the government refusing to release the report on high-speed rail? What have you got to hide, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, absolutely, I have nothing to hide. I will say that I agree: we've had the report for a long time. My department has been analyzing the report. I ask them every once in a while: what makes you guys so slow in there anyway? They're not coming back, but we are analyzing the report. As soon as we have real, real, true analysis in the proper form, we'll be letting the hon. member know.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the minister should put the entire department on the report so we could speed things up.

To the minister again: what is so controversial about this report that the government won't release a single page of it even under a freedom of information request?

Mr. Ouellette: I don't know anything about the freedom of information request, Mr. Speaker. That's handled, as you know, by officials in the department. I don't think there's absolutely anything that could be hidden in there. It's a report where we're trying to find out what the actual ridership would be and if it would pay back investment if we built high-speed rail. There could be nothing to hide there. We're just waiting to be able to make sure that we analyze it properly to release the proper information to the paying public.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the minister has been sitting on it for a year. It's about time you should release it, Mr. Minister.

To the minister again. The minister has been sitting on this report for over a year: I repeat it again. Maybe he hasn't even read it, maybe only once, twice, thrice. Give us a date. When will Albertans get the opportunity to see that report, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I agree. I'm not the guy that's analyzing the report. We have professionals in the department to do that work. I've never sat on the report either. I will say, though, that this is going to be a fairly complex report. This is really about: what will it do with the expanded population that we have in Alberta? Will it take pressure off the busiest highway at times in Canada, let alone just western Canada? Will this help with lowering greenhouse gases? What expense will it be to do all that? All of that is very complex, and it's being analyzed. [interjections]

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

Student Loans

Mr. Elniski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I feel a little bit like I drew the short straw on that one.

Lately I've been receiving a lot of feedback from students regarding student loan eligibility for postsecondary education. My first question is to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. It's my understanding that an unmarried student is allowed to earn up to \$800 per month before it affects the size of their student loan. However, for a married student their spouse's income is included in the eligibility calculation, and they're only allowed to earn a \$200 exemption. Why are these program eligibility calculations not the same?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely, it's this government's intent to ensure that all students have an affordable and accessible framework. The part-time earning exemption of \$800 per month applies to all students, both single and married. Reducing spousal contributions is one of the initiatives that was identified in the affordability framework for consideration for budgets in the future. Certainly, in the big picture married students really only make up about 10 per cent of the total student numbers that are applying for student assistance.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental is to the same minister. What is the government doing to ensure that married students, who often have greater obligations such as mortgage debt, receive equitable treatment in the calculation of student loan eligibility?

Mr. Horner: We certainly recognize, Mr. Speaker, the obligations of married students and take into consideration that they have higher day-to-day costs, including mortgages in some cases. The standard monthly living allowance for married students with no children is \$1,873 compared to the single student, who is eligible for up to \$941. For married students with children an additional living allowance of \$449 per month is provided for each child. As I mentioned in my previous response, support to married students is part of the ongoing analysis that we have within the affordability framework. Hopefully, depending upon budget considerations, in the future we'll be able to add to that wonderful package of items in student finance that does make this one of the most affordable places to take postsecondary education.

The Speaker: That was 102 questions and responses today, hon. members.

2:40

Statement by the Speaker

Members Absenting Themselves

The Speaker: Hon. members, yesterday in the House in the afternoon at the start of second reading debate on Bill 25, the Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2009, it was the decision of the House that advice should be sought from the Ethics Commissioner with respect to potential conflicts of interest among members in their participation on this particular bill, and the conclusion was that the chair should contact the Ethics Commissioner and seek advice from the Ethics Commissioner. A few minutes ago I received such advice of the Ethics Commissioner, and I believe it's of prudent nature and benefit that all members of the House hear this advice. I intend now to read the advice into the record.

For the benefit of all members, it's a letter dated May 6, 2009, addressed to me as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. It arrived in my office at 1:47 this afternoon. It says:

Dear Mr. Speaker:

Re: General Advice pursuant to section 44 of the Conflicts of Interest Act Re Bill 25, the Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2009

Thank you for bringing to my attention the debate which occurred in the Legislative Assembly on May 5 at Second Reading on Bill 25. I took note of your comments to all Members and the subsequent debate on the Bill.

Although Standing Order 33(2) requires a Member to declare a pecuniary interest and withdraw before voting on a matter, section 2(2) of the Conflicts of Interest Act goes further. It says:

(2) Where a matter for decision in which a Member has reasonable grounds to believe that the Member, the Member's minor or adult child or a person directly associated with the Member has a private interest is before a meeting of the Executive Council or a committee of the Executive Council or the Legislative Assembly or a committee appointed by resolution of the Legislative Assembly, the Member must, if present at the meeting, declare that interest and must withdraw from the meeting without voting on or participating in the consideration of the matter.

The letter goes on:

It is my understanding that this Bill relates to the Memorandum of Agreement of November 2007 under which the Government of Alberta agreed to pay the teachers' portion of the pre-1992 unfunded pension liability. As a result of this agreement, persons currently in the teaching profession will directly benefit as a result of reduced pension deductions from their individual paycheques. It is my further understanding that Teachers' Retirement Fund recipients will not be affected by this legislation in terms of an increase or decrease to their pension cheque.

Under the Conflicts of Interest Act, a "private interest" is not defined. The Act states what a "private interest" is not. It is not an interest in a matter that is of general application or one that affects a person as one of a broad class of the public.

Based on my preliminary review of the Bill, the *Alberta Hansard* excerpt from May 5 with respect to the Second Reading debate on the Bill, and the Conflicts of Interest Act, it is my advice that in certain circumstances, Members of the Legislative Assembly may have a private interest in Bill 25 and those Members would have to declare that interest and withdraw from the proceedings without taking part in or voting on the matter.

I have considered the matter under three basic scenarios: a Member who has retired from the teaching profession; a Member who is on a leave of absence from a teaching position or who may or may not return to the teaching profession; and a Member who has a spouse, adult interdependent partner, or minor or adult child who is a teacher.

1. Members who have retired from teaching

It is my advice that Members who have retired from the teaching profession – whether or not they are currently receiving

a pension cheque – will not benefit from this legislation. It is my view that the general application exception applies since the pension plan itself affects all persons who have rights in that plan. The fact that the pension plan may be adjusted on an annual basis is also, in my opinion, a matter of general application. Members in this category may participate and vote on this matter.

2. Members who hold a teaching licence and who have not retired. There are subsections in here.

- (a) If a Member holds a teaching licence but has resigned from their position with their school or school board, it is my advice that this is a matter of general application and those Members may participate in the debate. Since they are not currently contributing to the pension plan – whether or not they intend to return to teaching – there is no immediate direct financial benefit and it is my opinion that it is a matter of general application. Members in this category may participate and vote on this matter.
- (b) If a Member is on a leave of absence but has not yet resigned from a teaching position, it is my opinion that there is a private interest since the Member is technically still an employee of that school or school board. Until such time as the Member is removed from the payroll, it is my opinion that the Member may benefit from this legislation. That Member would have a private interest and must declare that interest and withdraw from the proceedings without participating in the debate or voting on the matter.
- (c) If a Member has a teaching licence and is still teaching in any capacity (since the Conflicts of Interest Act does not restrict Private Members from having outside employment provided it does not conflict with their public responsibilities), that Member would have a private interest and must declare that interest and withdraw from the proceedings without participating in the debate or voting on the matter.

The third category of identification.

- 3. Direct associates or children who are teachers

If a Member's spouse, adult interdependent partner, minor or adult child is a teacher, then it is my opinion that there is a private interest. While the benefits that will result from this legislation will apply to all persons making pension contributions, it is a subset of the larger population of those persons who have rights in the pension plan. Since there is an immediate financial benefit to these persons, it is my view that a private interest exists. Members who have direct associates or children currently in the teaching profession must declare that interest and withdraw from participating in the debate or voting on the matter.

The Ethics Commissioner goes on.

I have advised that a private interest exists, in part, because I am mindful of the preamble to the Conflicts of Interest Act that sets a high standard of conduct for Members to ensure that the public can be confident that Members are acting in the public interest and not to further their private interests.

This advice has been prepared on short notice and it may be that arguments could have been made that in all cases described above, the matter is not one of private interest but one of general application. I would recommend that in future, my Office be consulted prior to such legislation being introduced so that we can get a thorough briefing on the intent and effects of such legislation.

Yours very truly,

Neil R. Wilkinson

Ethics Commissioner

It's now in the *Hansard*, and in a few moments from now I'll also table copies of this that the members will be able to obtain within minutes of the closing of the Routine.

We're now going to continue but in 30 seconds only.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Mental Health Services

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The face of mental illness is different for everyone. As a boy growing up in a small Ontario town home to a provincial psychiatric hospital, mental illness took the form of strange people wandering our downtown streets, carrying on conversations with invisible companions, and whom we were warned to avoid at all costs.

These were, in fact, patients suffering from chronic mental illness, and for many the hospital had been their home for over 20 years. Early in my career I participated in the development of strategies to deinstitutionalize this same patient population. Hundreds of psychiatric beds were closed, and psychosocial and vocational programs were established in central locations. We waited for the patients to magically show up, ready to be integrated into mainstream society.

That was 25 years ago, Mr. Speaker, and fortunately things have changed. We have seen an extraordinary rise in patient and family support movements. Research has provided us with incredible advances in knowledge about the brain and new medications, and while there is still much more to be done, our mental health services, especially those provided in the community, have improved significantly. Many of us take great pride in the fact that Alberta is now home to the Canadian Mental Health Commission. As former Senator Michael Kirby describes so well in his 2006 landmark report, mental health has come "out of the shadows at last."

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, there is still one thing that hasn't changed enough, and that is the enduring stigma which surrounds mental illness. Too few of us know its burden on our society, how to spot signs of mental illness among our family, friends, and colleagues, and how to appropriately intervene. More to the point, we are afraid or somehow feel it inappropriate to talk about these issues. As a result, many, including our youth, do not seek help when they need it most.

2:50

Mr. Speaker, if there is one thing I observed during debates in this Assembly, it is that there is a deep and abiding concern on all sides of this House for the issue of mental health in our society. As we observe Mental Health Week 2009, it is my hope that members of the 27th Legislature will accept the challenge of defeating the stigma that plagues us.

Thank you.

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

Shandy Wogan

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The little school that could has produced one of many of my constituency's great minds. I'm talking about a grade 9 student who attends the Red Earth Creek school, approximately 450 kilometres north of Edmonton. As little as 10 years ago this school did not exist. However, the parents and people of Red Earth moved mountains to get a school for their children, and from the looks of it it's paying off in Shandy Wogan.

This grade 9 student is a brilliant, determined, and passionate young woman, which is evident in her recent accomplishments. Shandy won the best-in-fair trophy, the award of excellence in health and science trophy, and a gold medal for the life sciences at the

Peace Country Regional Science Fair on March 19, the first for a student of Red Earth Creek. These awards were for the study that Shandy undertook studying the effects of energy drinks on teenagers. As a result of these honours, she has won the right to attend the Canada-wide Science Fair, held in Winnipeg May 9 to 17.

Science is a passion for Shandy. This passion has been cultivated by her mother, who gives her every opportunity to expand her learning not only through school but through attending conferences and visiting museums. In fact, last year Shandy participated in her first science fair, where she studied human memory by using a pig's brain, dissecting it to identify the regions of the brain. Amazingly, she did not win that one, but that didn't and won't stop her.

Shandy aspires to be a doctor, and I have no doubt that with the perseverance and hard work she has shown, she will achieve this dream. Shandy is one of the young, brilliant minds who are the future of our province, and I have no doubt that we will be hearing more about Shandy in the future.

All the best to you, Shandy, at the Canada-wide Science Fair in Winnipeg from May 9 to 17.

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

Alberta Forest Week

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our theme for Alberta Forest Week is Something to Celebrate. To celebrate this special week, we need to acknowledge the value we receive from our forests. They provide us with clean air and water, homes for fish and wildlife, abundant recreational opportunities, and community sustainability. Forests cover 60 per cent of the Alberta land mass that drapes across our province like a giant green shawl. Forestry is the principal livelihood of approximately 50 communities in Alberta, employing 44,000 people and generating \$10 billion in annual revenue. Healthy forests are the foundation of all the values we receive from our forests, whether it's wildlife habitat or recreation or jobs.

Alberta is home to some of the world's best sustainable forest management practices. The Alberta government is committed to carefully managing Alberta's forests for the widest possible range of values and for the greatest benefits to Albertans today and in the future. Our forests are sustainable. The cut we allow does not exceed what the forest can grow each year. Alberta also invests in science and research to find better ways to manage our forests for maximum benefit.

Mr. Speaker, our forests are renewable and will be an enduring symbol of our sustainable land legacy. Our forests will be a safe home for wildlife. Our practices will safeguard our water supplies, support our communities, offer many recreational opportunities, and will continue to be loved and enjoyed by our children and grandchildren. Our sustainable forest management is a success story that provides economic, social, and ecological benefits to Albertans, Canadians, and the world. Alberta is determined to see our forests thrive on our landscapes through wise stewardship now and in the future.

Thank you.

Statement by the Speaker

Television Camera on the Chamber Floor

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we go on, I've received several notes from hon. members inquiring as to why there is a television camera on the floor of the Legislative Assembly. We have a policy, that we've had in place for a great number of years now, that from time to time members of the media by way of electronic devices,

television cameras, seek permission to be planted on the floors of the Legislative Assembly. We have a code of rules that applies to it, including a dress code, including what they can shoot and what they cannot shoot.

Such a request was made today, to have a camera on the floor in anticipation of the debate with respect to Bill 44. The camera will only be operative when the debate on Bill 44 goes forward if it goes forward today. There are very strict rules that the only person that the camera will look to is the person who is speaking. There is no general panning of the Assembly or anything else and no visual taken of anyone else.

Should there be a violation of the rule that we have, I'll tell you what happened a number of years ago when there was a violation of such a rule. Permission was sought by representatives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Permission was granted. The rules were violated. I banned the CBC from this building for a year. They went to court; they lost. They went to court; they lost. They decided it wasn't worth it.

Decisions of this Assembly are made by the members of this Assembly through the Speaker's chair, so there'll be no violation today, I'm sure. Everything will be done quite accordingly, and there'll be no intimidation, harassment, or anything else associated with this. If members object to this, kindly convey your thoughts to me with respect to this matter, and we'll review the policy that we have for the future, but I believe that everything will be quite fine. The camera will only be focused on the individual speaking.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wanted to table a copy of correspondence that I've received in my office, which is a commentary from Leslie Carlyle on Bill 44 that notes that she felt very strongly that had she not been taught about human sexuality through the Edmonton public school board, she would not have known that she could escape a sexual abuser, and she feels very strongly that the government should consider that allowing section 11.1 may prevent other children from finding out about the same thing and being able to protect themselves.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Hon. members, I indicated earlier today that I'd received a letter from the office of the Ethics Commissioner with regard to general advice pursuant to section 44 of the Conflicts of Interest Act regarding Bill 25, the Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2009. I'm tabling with the Assembly now the appropriate copies. If members wish to get a copy of the actual letter, they can do so; otherwise, it will be printed in *Hansard* for the benefit of all.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Knight, Minister of Energy, responses to questions raised by Dr. Taft, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview; Mr. Mason, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood; and Ms Blakeman, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, on April 29, 2009, Department of Energy main estimates debate.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Liepert, Minister of Health and Wellness, responses to Written Question 12 and return to order of the Assembly MR1, both asked for by Mr. Mason on April 6, 2009.

Orders of the Day
Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

The Chair: The Committee of the Whole shall now come to order.

Bill 33
Fiscal Responsibility Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Bill 33 is a bill that I have been waiting for some time to get a few comments on the record about. This was initially, I recall, introduced to the Assembly the same day we dealt with the budget, and it may have been overlooked. It certainly is a bill that is going to change how this government operates. They have indicated, to my knowledge, that it is a bill that reflects the times, and we are not to worry about this in any way.

3:00

Now, when we look at Alberta's fiscal framework and we look at what has gone on in the past, of course, we've had some rather different laws going back to 1993 about debt and deficits and the fiscal framework and the rules and the limitations the government places on itself for budgeting purposes. These restrictions and limitations are very similar to what one would compare to a teenager with an allowance. Sometimes this government doesn't know what to do with a lot of the extra money that they acquire.

The hon. Member for West Yellowhead is grinning over there, but it's not a grinning matter. It was only, Mr. Chairman, six months ago that the provincial finance minister was beaming that we were going to have this \$8 billion to \$12 billion surplus. The world changed rather quickly last fall, and the budget in this province does not reflect that change. But Bill 33 is certainly an interesting initiative.

Now, Bill 33 has seen many, many different forms, Mr. Chairman. Going back to 1993, it was the Deficit Elimination Act, then the Balanced Budget and Debt Retirement Act. It was revised again in 1999, and it became the Fiscal Responsibility Act. This act, the Fiscal Responsibility Act, was substantially amended in 2003 based on recommendations of the financial management commission. There were a series of frameworks there.

- Balanced budget requirements.
- Prohibitions on debt, especially for operating purposes.
- Mechanisms to deal with revenue volatility. Examples include: budgeting based on 90% of forecast resource and corporate income tax revenue; using only \$5.3 billion in resource revenue for budget purposes; establishing the Sustainability Fund.

Another good idea from this side of the House.

- Requiring an economic cushion or contingency allowance to be set aside.
- Limiting use of in-year increases to budgeted revenue.
- In-year limitations on spending increases.

As I said earlier, the fiscal and economic situation during this budget year, according to the government, necessitates changes to the framework. Now, it goes on to say in the fiscal plan, Mr. Chairman, that

the framework in place in 2008-09 was mainly intended to provide limitations during times of revenue growth. It provided relief from

the limitations when events occurred during the year, such as emergencies and disasters, or when revenue declined from the budget.

The whole issue of emergencies and disasters is certainly an interesting one, and one would only have to look at the *Alberta Gazette* to see how frequently that line was used.

Now, according to the government, the framework has become complex, requiring intricate transfers between funds, and has become less transparent. I couldn't agree with that statement any more than I already have. I'm pleased to see that this government recognizes that it has transparency issues. It's not sincere, in my view, in its effort to address them, but at least it recognizes it's got a problem.

This new bill, Bill 33, or the latest version of this bill, provides for a much simpler fiscal framework, and according to the government, it contains limitations but enhances flexibility, the economic Slinky that it is.

Dr. Taft: Economic Slinky?

Mr. MacDonald: It is an economic Slinky, this legislation, because of the flexibility that's needed by this government at this time. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview is very interested about the economic Slinky that is this bill.

It is the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview who was one of many who alerted, Mr. Chairman, taxpayers in this province to the fact that this was a crazy-spending government. They weren't prudent financially. They didn't balance the spending with savings like they should have. Now the only fortunate thing we have, of course, is the stability fund, which was an idea that the government adopted just in time, that cookie jar that is available to the hon. President of the Treasury Board during this very difficult economic period.

When we look at this flexibility, we have to consider the past fiscal framework and what it did. Now, deficits are only permitted under the new Fiscal Responsibility Act if funds are available in the sustainability fund to offset them. Under debt, according to the fiscal plan, the new Fiscal Responsibility Act maintains the requirement that the debt retirement account has to be equal or be greater than any accumulated debt. There are two words in here that are very important, Mr. Chairman: as defined. We're talking about accumulated debt as defined. This is where we get into the Slinky going down the spiral staircase. It never falls away or moves off the centre of that staircase as it goes around the corner because of the ability to draft legislation that only the President of the Treasury Board has.

This in combination with the requirement that deficits are only permitted if they can be funded from the sustainability fund means the government is not permitted to borrow money for operating purposes. According to the fiscal plan, the government can borrow only

- for capital investment in government-owned assets;
- to support capital projects that are owned by school boards, post-secondary institutions and health authorities.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but that would certainly include the 3P projects.

The government can only borrow

- as required by self-supporting corporations such as Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, Alberta Treasury Branches and Alberta Capital Finance Authority.

I think to say that these corporations are self-supporting is a bit of a stretch.

Of course, it was interesting that we dealt a little bit with this earlier, after question period, with the letter from the Ethics Commissioner.

- to pay back funds owed by the pre-1992 Teachers' Pension Plan to the post-1992 Teachers' Pension Plan.

Now, we talk about the sustainability fund here and controls on year operating expenses and nonrenewable resource revenue and financial reporting standards. These proposals, as I understand it, concern budget limitations. As I understand it, the year-end annual report will continue to report in accordance with the Canadian generally accepted accounting principles for the public sector. The main differences in this are going to be pension liabilities and the SUCH sector.

With pension liabilities, according to what I'm reading in the budget documents, this bill will continue to exclude the change in unfunded pension liabilities of the government of Alberta from expense. The annual report will report any increases in pension liabilities as an expense. I find that quite interesting.

3:10

Now, the SUCH sector. That includes schools, universities, colleges, hospitals. Similarly, this bill's rules, as I understand it, do not account for the inclusion of Crown-controlled SUCH sector entities – school boards, universities, colleges, and health authorities – into the government reporting entity. The annual report currently reports the change in equity of the SUCH sector as a single revenue item, modified equity. Public sector accounting standards will require reporting, and it goes on.

Whenever we're discussing this, we need to have a look not only at the balance sheet of the province, the fiscal summary. When we look at pension liabilities, if they are to be excluded under this bill, we have to look at what pension obligations were in 2008. They're listed, Mr. Chairman, as a liability on the balance sheet. Pension obligations were \$7.8 billion. This estimate, this budget year, 2010, they have climbed by over \$3 billion to \$10.9 billion, and in the next two years they are estimated to be over \$12 billion. These are the pension obligations.

Now, why would we be excluding them in this bill, Mr. Chairman? I know there is a new provision in this bill, and that would be, if we go to the definitions section, under 1(a)(i)(E): "any amounts raised for the purpose of paying to the post-1992 fund all or any portion of the amounts determined by the Minister of Finance and Enterprise to be owing in accordance with the Teachers' Pension Plan Act." This, according to my research, is a new tweak to the act, and that would, in the post-1992 fund, increase by \$184 million.

Now, other definitions are similar to what was used under the old act because we've got to remember that this act, if it becomes law, is deemed to have come into force on April 1, 2009.

That's only one portion of the unfunded pension liability, but these liabilities are significant, and they're adding up. I know that when I went through the annual report of the minister of finance, there were some significant changes in some of the numbers in the various pensions that report to the public through the hon. minister's annual report. I don't know if that's the reason why there is this \$3 billion increase or not. Perhaps at some point in the debate we can have an answer provided by the ministers opposite.

When we look also at debt servicing costs and we look at the fiscal plan tables, this is why we've got to be so careful with this bill. I'm not going to go into the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation's debt servicing costs, but I am going to have a look at the ones under Education, and they're listed here as financing costs for the Alberta schools alternative procurement, the P3s. It's interesting to note that the Minister of Education, the Minister of Infrastructure, and the entire government seem to be cooling off in their admiration for 3Ps. They never were a good deal. Never were a good deal.

When you look at the business plan of, let's choose for example Edmonton school district 7, the Edmonton public board, on their wish list they claim they can construct a school for \$11 million. If you average out what's going on with the 3Ps that were moved ahead last year, it's over \$33 million. I know it's a longer period of time, but, wow, that's quite a difference in unit cost.

I don't think taxpayers in this case have been served by this fascination with 3Ps. Once again, it's an issue of ideology over economic common sense. The financing costs for the Alberta schools alternative procurement 2010-11, the debt servicing costs, are \$17 million. The following year, the target – and these are targets, Mr. Chairman – is \$22 million, or \$5 million more. In two years it's \$39 million in debt servicing costs.

We look at debt servicing costs for Finance and Enterprise and general government. That's a real broad category. That's going up as well from \$112 million to \$170 million two years later. This is according to the hon. minister's own documents. Transportation: financing costs for government-owned capital plans. I thought at one time the government, with these 3P projects, was not to be involved in financing whatsoever, but here we find in the budget documents that there are financing costs. In the years that we know, for Education they're increasing and also for Transportation. Now, in 2009-10 it is estimated that the financing costs for the 3Ps are \$21 million. Two years later they're going to double. The financing costs are going to be \$40 million. With this bill I believe definition (C) under 1(a) provides the government the scope to handle this.

Mr. Snelgrove: You've lost your audience.

Mr. MacDonald: Never had them to start with, hon. member. Never had them to start with. Perhaps if the hon. members across the way were paying attention, we could save a few million dollars of the taxpayers' money.

This government, I'm telling you, hon. member, some of their spending habits . . .

An Hon. Member: Are they a Slinky, too?

Mr. MacDonald: Well, they're not like an economic Slinky. I would compare them to the gentleman who was on cable television advertising those ShamWows. I don't know if ShamWows is the plural. I'm sure the Minister of Transportation, if he was interested, could moonlight at a home and garden show and make himself a very good living. I'm confident of that. He could sell ShamWow by the square metre. I bet he could sell 10 square metres per presentation. People would be cutting them up and using them in their RVs and in their tents and to dry off their pets, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Brown: Do they work? Have you got one?

Mr. MacDonald: No, I don't have a ShamWow, but maybe he could sell me one. He's very anxious to sell me on these 3P projects, and I'm not buying that. No way.

Also, with Bill 33 – and I was distracted there; I apologize, Mr. Chairman – one of the consequential amendments in here, where the Auditor General Act is amended by repealing section . . . [Mr. MacDonald's speaking time expired] Thank you.

Mr. Snelgrove: I guess we're not supposed to sleep in here unless we're standing up and talking. You know, it's interesting that the hon. member says, "the bill as I understand it" and then clearly goes on to show that he doesn't understand it. He's completely discon-

nected with what this bill is actually trying to do and going to do and his revisionist theory of history and his gloom and doom into the future.

Mr. Chairman, it's really simple. The situation that countries or provinces, not just ours, find themselves in changes. It has and will probably continue to change. I think we could all be pretty sure that this won't be the last time that the province has to rethink and reassess its position on how it handles its money.

3:20

I think most people, certainly the people in this government, understand that sometime, maybe in a year, maybe in two years, maybe in three years – it may be longer – when the economic situation turns around, we will continue to lead and be one of the most stable and prosperous entities in the world. We will continue to use the tools that evolve in the communities of finance to invest and to make better use of our money.

This government took very bold steps a few decades ago. It, like many other provinces, had bought into the theory that deficit financing was somehow okay and that you could continue to spend your way into prosperity. By some extremely solid leadership at the time, Premier Klein and his government said: "Enough. Let's take Alberta and put it on a footing where it is completely steering its own boat. We don't want to put ourselves in the same position that many provinces and countries have gotten themselves where they've loaned out all of the opportunities they've got for very little gain."

The chairman would remember that when we entered into debt reduction in this province, we had roughly the same debt as the province of British Columbia. This province took steps to quit spending more than it was taking in, to pay off the debt, to be very open about it. And you know what? Albertans bought into it completely and said: you're right; for this time in Alberta, for the future we need to make sure that Albertans control their finances. No other province took those steps, and now British Columbia is looking at a 40-plus billion dollar debt. Are the people in British Columbia better off than we are? Is their standard of living improved because they've accumulated and continued to grow this much more debt? Are they better off because they're paying \$4 billion a year in interest? Our good friends in Quebec: are they better off because they're paying – well, we're paying for them – just under \$8 billion a year in interest payments?

It's okay, I guess, if you have no conscience and you want to continue to live off other people and you don't intend to tackle your debt and your obligations and the country will continue to take from those who work hard and earn it and have the good fortune to be sitting on top of oil. But the attitude of Albertans has been far more important in how we've become prosperous than oil. We could have taken the same step that many other parties or provinces would do – don't worry about your debt – and spent our way into this glorious, wonderful position they found themselves in: hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars in debt. Not just the direct government debt. Many other provinces have burdened their Crown corporations with debt of untold, unaccountable billions of dollars.

When the consolidated financial accounting comes into place, Mr. Chairman, it's not this province that's going to adopt or reject that thing. We have been doing it for a year, and we are ready to go to consolidated accounting. Most other provinces are terrified of having to open their books, where it's in the cupboard and where the cupboard is bare. When we bring our consolidated assets together, it's going to show Albertans that we have accumulated even more with our other interests – more – probably assets to the tune in excess of \$12 billion to \$14 billion and a cash difference of probably

\$4 billion. Some other provinces, Mr. Chairman, are going to show enormous liabilities and very little assets.

The hon. member would like to suggest somehow that this is a Slinky or whatever his goofy term was around doing this. This is about saying, actually, for the situation we're in today: "We have been prudent enough to put some money into a savings account. We have been wise enough to begin investing in infrastructure, which is as good an investment as you can get, the investment in our universities, our colleges, our roads, hospitals, and schools, to a rate that far exceeds any other state or province's wildest dreams per capita." We've been building diligently. We've been taking the wealth that's being generated from not only our oil and gas sector but from the other industries in Alberta that pay taxes, too, and we've been building an environment where business wants to come from around the world and locate, one, for stability and certainty because they know the business climate is fair; two, because they know that we're not going to have the same issues as the other provinces, that one of these days they're going to have to start paying their bills.

It is no different, Mr. Speaker, the overall debt, than is the completely irresponsible position that they would like to take, that there is no problem with health care spending. I think in our estimates the hon. leader of the third party said: "What's the big deal? Just borrow some money this year. You don't have to make tough choices."

Ms Evans: He didn't say that.

Mr. Snelgrove: Yes, he did. "Just borrow." I said: "Well, that's great. We're borrowing for capital." He's borrowing for operational, so you borrow this year to run your health system for another six months, seven months. Well, then you would just borrow some more, and sooner or later, even if you have a most limited education and no calculator, you would figure out – maybe 20 years, maybe 30 years, maybe after I'm gone – that you have to quit spending more than you're making. You can't have one department in government spending at three or four times the rate of growth and not start to severely hamper all the other departments in the government in doing the very important work they do.

I had, I would look back and say, the unfortunate opportunity to ask the Saskatchewan Health minister of a few years ago when he thought Saskatchewan might think there was a problem in health care spending. When it became 60 per cent of their budget? When it became 70 per cent? When it gobbled 80 per cent of their budget? Or when, in fact, it was eating 110 per cent of their income and they were just borrowing? His answer was very NDP-like. He said, "You so-and-so Albertans are all about money." I said, "Thank goodness you're not in finance." But that's the attitude of those who don't want to see the truth or the reality that there is an accounting day sooner or later.

So you can sit in here and you can make all the excuses why we don't need to tackle these tough problems, why we should continue to indulge in whatever flight of fancy they would like to do, but sooner or later you're either paying interest until you can no longer take that much out of your ongoing operational dollars to pay interest, or you quit building your infrastructure. We would have an operating surplus if we didn't build anything. Maybe that's the approach they would like: quit building schools, quit building roads, quit building hospitals, balance your books, put everybody at home and create a social program for them so they don't have to work. Federal governments did that for years in the Maritimes. What did that do? Quite honestly, sitting on the dock and waiting for the fish to come back wouldn't work in Alberta. I can assure you, Mr.

Chairman, that in 200 or 300 or 400 years when the oil runs out in the north, Albertans won't sit up there on the end of the oil rig waiting for the oil to come back. By then we will have gone on to far more current things.

One thing about this government is that we're already planning for the future because we think we're living in the future here in Alberta. Reinvesting in the nanotechnology sector, the genomics, realigning our research and our development departments, building one of the foremost health care systems probably in North America – in Canada, for sure – not only for the everyday patient but for research, sustainable research. One of the things we're going to be able to sustain our health care on, Mr. Chairman, is that if you get a cure for cancer, you save a lot of money. When you start to find out what's causing MS, what's causing all these horrible afflictions that take the people that we love, when we figure out how to fix that, we're going to go a long ways to fixing health care.

3:30

Yes, it does take money sometimes to save money. I know that. Sometimes you have to change the way you allocate your dollars to get where you're trying to go. What the Fiscal Responsibility Act worked for in the '90s was a spending problem. It got put back in. With the opportunity, then, to create the heritage savings account, we would say: "Okay. That's for the future." Very clearly we've said that that is the future and that that will stay there, and when we're back in a position to continue to invest in not only that but the other incredibly important endowments that we've got, when we're ready to say that our infrastructure spending is at an appropriate amount and we've caught up on the backlog of some of the maintenance, then we'll be better situated than any other country you can possibly think of that has the standard of compassion and the standard of living that we have here in Alberta.

You know, Mr. Chairman, the group of interns I introduced in here before question period very much resemble this caucus. They are from all over the world – one from Germany, from all over Canada – very, very ethnically diverse, very bright ambitious children, young men and women, wanting to come to Alberta because they see it as still the land of opportunity.

It's a little frustrating. When the sky finally falls for those over there and they'll have their happy dance in the rotunda, the sky will land on one of the most prosperous, well-planned-out, well-thought-out governments in the country. It will land on a health care system that's second to none. The sky is going to fall on an education system that is teaching students far ahead of most everywhere else. It's going to land on a diversified and prosperous agricultural sector and an energy sector that's not only meeting or exceeding all the environmental challenges that are thrown at us but leading in it. We will be the province that gets to sustainable energy. It won't be the ones that are down there clamouring for closing the oil sands. It will be the wealth the oil sands generates that allows us to reinvest in more experiments. It will be the clean coal industry that reinvests.

You can shut them all. You can pretend it's over. "Alberta was here once. We don't know what happened to it, but when the sky fell on us, it was so cloudy that we wandered aimlessly over to Saskatchewan, then maybe into Manitoba to find the despair that we so love." That's okay, and I'll give them a ride to the border. I'm happy to. You know, they won't know what they've left, but they'll know when they get where they're going what the people of Alberta have long known, that they've been governed by a party that has adapted and evolved over time and continues to meet and exceed what the people of Alberta believe their province is able to do.

This is a change, yes. It's a change that says that we are in the middle of an economic situation that we do not control, but we can

control our spending. We can start to put forward a very real understanding for the people of Alberta so that they, too, can see where this government is going to be in two, three, and four years and on. No other province publishes a second-year budget. Ours is a three-year budget, Mr. Chairman, and it shows people exactly where we are going.

One of the CEOs of Marathon Oil that I met before Christmas said that in their business sometimes you've got to budget for the worst and hope for the best. Mr. Chairman, that's what we have to do. We have to know it can stay worse for quite some time. It can get worse than it is now, and it can get better quicker than we know. The one thing that I know is that the people who really, really are able to tell us why it didn't happen aren't really able to tell us right now when it's going to happen.

The opposition put it up and say: well, if oil is here, this is what we'd do. Magically, they never have to worry about that. In the same day, Mr. Chairman, sometimes in the same question, they're going to save more or they're going to spend more. I don't know. There's only one dollar. It's divided up very clearly in our budget where the priorities that we see are. Our priorities have been put on health, education, and our seniors and on continuing to build the infrastructure that enables industry to prosper and want to locate here.

They can take this bill, Mr. Chairman, and they can make it out to be whatever bogeyman, whatever Slinky toy they want it to be. The fact of the matter is that we were prudent enough to establish a capital fund, a sustainability fund, a fund to go forward with carbon capture and sequestration, and several other saving things that are enormously important to Albertans. Now we're saying: "We told you when we put this in that it was for a rainy day. We hoped it would never come." I admit that a year ago at this time I did not expect to be back here a year later saying that things changed. They did.

Thank goodness our Premier and the finance minister had the foresight to say: we'd better put a little in the cookie jar because we don't want to touch the heritage fund. This bill just simply says that we put it there for a reason. Our bookkeeping, our accounting systems are different. If we have to acknowledge it differently, we will. We have never tried to stay away from the consolidated financial accounting. The Auditor General has consistently and for quite some time given this province a very unqualified financial statement and, as a matter of fact, often uses the Alberta government's accounting practices as an example to the rest of Canada.

We have nothing to hide. We are proud Albertans. We are proud of what has happened in the past. We know that with what we've done, we have a solid future. They can make whatever analogies or allegations they want to about what this bill means, but what it means for my kids and for me is a smarter, stronger future far before anyone else will come out of this downturn, Mr. Chairman.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciated the comments from the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, the President of the Treasury Board. It's good to have some passionate debate in here. He made a very strong case against debt in the first several minutes of his comments, laying the groundwork, in his mind, but in some ways also laying the case against the very piece of legislation we've got in here.

Debt is not always evil. We understand that. In fact, the aggressive, over-the-top campaign to pay off the debt in the last 15 years I think has had a lot of negative consequences, as I said yesterday. Now we're listening to the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster

change the government's policy and as President of the Treasury Board even steer the government's policy on this. It makes me wonder what his predecessor the former Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, Dr. Steve West, would say and how he might weigh in on this particular bill. [interjections] Not surprisingly, I'm getting comments that he said: don't listen to the opposition. I guess that was taken to heart, wasn't it?

I want to address a couple of things that were said in debate on this bill yesterday. One was a comment from the Member for Peace River talking about hypocrisy on our side. He couldn't believe the hypocrisy on our side in sometimes arguing for spending, sometimes arguing for savings, cuts, and that sort of thing. I think the President of the Treasury Board holds the same position. I think it's important to put some context around that.

What we have in Alberta are easily the most dramatic swings in public expenditures of any provincial government in the country. In 1986, '87, '88, in fact all through the 1980s Alberta was the highest spending province per person in the country. We were spending 20, 25 per cent higher than the average, and it was not sustainable. What we had, then, by the middle '90s after this bloodbath of government cuts was the lowest spending government per capita in the country, and that wasn't sustainable either. We went from the highest spenders in the mid-80s to the lowest spenders in the mid-90s. On the way down all kinds of people kept saying: "Stop the cuts. Stop the cuts. You've got to spend something on training your nurses and your doctors, and you've got to keep your schools open and maintain your roads." But, oh no. The drop kept going until we were absolutely at the bottom. By the middle '90s we had gone in one decade from the highest spending to the lowest spending. We're now back up to the highest spending again, and this isn't sustainable either.

3:40

What we're arguing for and why we're questioning this piece of legislation, Mr. Chairman, is for some long-term stability. Sure, when we're at the lowest in the country, we urge the government to spend more, and when we're at the highest in the country, we're urging the government to be more prudent, to have a long-term strategy. I think that explains to some extent, whether the members across the way accept it or not, why sometimes we're arguing for spending and sometimes we're arguing for savings. We are on a wild roller-coaster ride on the fiscal side of this government, and we want to get off the roller coaster and onto some nice, steady cruising.

Also, I want to reflect for a moment on a comment made yesterday in debate on this bill by the Member for Calgary-North Hill. I'm looking at *Hansard* from yesterday, page 977. He accused us. He said, "They're not quite sure what we're saving for." Well, actually, we have a very clear reason to save, Mr. Chairman, and I wish this government would listen to us on this. I wish they would listen to the Alberta Chambers of Commerce, the Institute of Chartered Accountants, the Canada West Foundation, and especially Jack Mintz, who was commissioned by this very government to give them advice on saving. The reason to save is because we have an enormous gap between what we're spending as a province and what we're bringing in. We're covering that gap through oil and gas royalties, but as those royalties decline, we need another source of income. So the reason to save in the long term is to create an enormous pool of capital that will offset the declining income from royalties.

Mr. Mintz's report is absolutely clear, and I would ask every MLA in this Assembly to take a few minutes to read that report. Their analysis, which was based on the government's own figures, suggests that if we don't start saving aggressively now, we will end

up either having to cut spending by 40 per cent or increasing taxes by 40 per cent or some combination of the two. What we're doing right now is not sustainable. That's why we need to save. That's what we've been arguing for a long time. Most Albertans get it. I wish the President of the Treasury Board and the finance minister would get with that program as well because then we could all look forward to a more certain future for this province.

Mr. Chairman, I'm going to propose an amendment to this bill, so I'll take a minute to have it distributed, and then we can discuss the amendment. Thank you.

The Chair: This amendment is now known as A1.

Hon. member, please continue on A1.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The amendment, made on behalf of the Member for Calgary-Varsity, reads as follows: that Bill 33, Fiscal Responsibility Act, be amended in section 3 by adding the following after subsection (6).

- (7) Subject to section 2, if the net assets of the Alberta Sustainability Fund exceed \$2,500,000,000, the excess or any portion of it may be allocated by the Treasury Board from the Alberta Sustainability Fund.

Now, the Alberta sustainability fund, Mr. Chairman, has a history that's notable. It's notable because it was sort of the little brother of the idea of a big, big sustainability fund, and it was brought forward by the previous Member for Lethbridge-East, Dr. Ken Nicol, who is an agricultural economist, when he was Leader of the Official Opposition. Then the idea was actually voted down as a private member's bill but readopted by government and brought into place.

The effect of this amendment, Mr. Chairman, is to guarantee a certain minimum balance in the Alberta sustainability fund. What this would do is it would add a clause after subsection (6) of section 3 that says that if the net assets of the Alberta sustainability fund exceed 2 and a half billion dollars, the excess may be allocated from that fund.

All we're saying here is nothing too radical. We're kind of taking the sustainability fund back to its original form, which is to just keep a minimum amount in the sustainability fund. We think that's a good idea. We think it's prudent. We think it avoids draining things down to zero. It's just a kind of prudent fiscal management that helps this government stay on the straight and narrow and maybe even get us off this roller coaster boom-and-bust economic ride.

I hope people have had a chance to look at the amendment, and I'll encourage and listen for debate. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on amendment A1.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Chairman, amendment A1. I will mark that on my sheet. Certainly, I would like to thank the hon. member for proposing this to the House. I think it's a sound idea during these times. To have a 2 and a half billion dollar amount, as the hon. member described it, as a minimum is certainly prudent. We know where the majority of our government revenue comes from, and we know the volatility that surrounds that revenue stream. Whether we're looking at personal income tax, whether we're looking at corporate income tax, whether we're looking at royalties from conventional crude oil, royalties from synthetic crude, or our natural gas royalties, there is significant volatility.

I would like to point out, Mr. Chairman, and I will use this as an example, that the anticipated revenue the government plans on getting this year from the sale of Crown leases, bonuses and sale of Crown leases – I don't want to use that word "bonus" – is estimated

to be \$631 million, which is significantly less than last year for obvious reasons. But in the three sales that I'm aware of that have occurred so far in this fiscal year, we have realized in bonuses and sales \$6.6 million. That is a far cry and that's so much less than what the government has targeted. Now, that is just an example of the volatility and the assumptions and the sensitivities that this budget relies on.

3:50

For us with Bill 33 to have this \$2.5 billion set aside for emergencies of any type is significant. I'm not convinced; taxpayers are certainly not convinced. In fact, I met with a group yesterday who are very, very concerned about the direction this government is going in. Now, members across the way may not take issue with that. But the individuals I talked to, one ran a small business, one was an MBA working for a major accounting firm, the other ran a medium-sized business whose activity had been significantly reduced since the new year. When that individual tells me that their activity has been reduced, one can only assume that the amount they pay in taxes, whether they're individual taxes or the taxes of their corporation, is going to be less.

The one benefit to those changes in taxes, as I understand it, is that there will be a significant increase in the transfer from the federal government. Earlier, members across the way were making a lot of noise and suggestions that the federal government could come up with an additional \$700 million. I noticed that in the robust times we have just gone through, our Canada transfer was reduced from what they had anticipated by \$700 million. So if there's a silver lining to a storm cloud, it's the fact that with our changes in economic activity there will be a significant increase in the transfer from the federal government. If there is, hopefully, it will be spent wisely, very wisely, by the President of the Treasury Board and those that sit on the board with him.

When we look at this amendment, it's a very sound amendment. As I said before, we know the volatility of our resource revenue stream. We know how the economy is affecting our tax revenues, whether they be personal or corporate income tax. So to have this minimum bank balance, I guess you could call it, I would really encourage hon. members to consider amendment A1.

At this time, Mr. Chairman, I would like to adjourn debate on Bill 33. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Chair, if it's appropriate, I would move that the committee now rise and report progress.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 33. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

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

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 27

Alberta Research and Innovation Act

[Adjourned debate April 22: Mr. Horner]

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, with Bill 27 I would like to, first off, express my gratitude to the minister. Earlier in April the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology was kind enough to sit down with myself. He had a few of his staff, very capable individuals, with him, and we had quite a pleasant discussion around this bill. I must say that I appreciated that. I thought about what the hon. minister had said regarding this bill. It's going to enable the government to implement a framework which restructures provincially funded research and innovation organizations by merging 10 existing entities into five new entities: one advisory body and four board-governed provincial corporations.

It sounds fine when you think of the idea that if Bill 27 was to become law, we would sort of have an increased incentive for research and development to occur in this province. The hon. minister, I think – and he'll correct me if I'm wrong, I'm sure – his hope, Mr. Speaker, was to have the Alberta region become a northern version of the Silicon Valley in California, with a lot of research and development and businesses being attracted by the ideas that are being developed and the application of those to the free market. It seemed like a very sound idea, and it may be.

Now, when we talk about the money that would sort of be pooled if this restructuring was to occur, it's a significant amount of money. My research indicates that this would be well in excess of \$2.5 million, including endowment funds. Certainly, when we look at the Alberta Agricultural Research Institute – and I got this information from the 2007-08 annual reports, Mr. Speaker – it's \$4.9 million. Alberta Energy Research Institute is a \$10 million amount. Alberta Forestry Research Institute is a \$3.9 million amount. The Alberta Information and Communications Technology Institute is a \$2.8 million amount. Alberta Life Sciences Institute is \$27.5 million. As I understand it, these five entities operate under the Alberta Science and Research Authority. The amounts are total dollars invested in projects by each institution. Now, with the Alberta Research Council, there's a revenue stream here, a total of \$85.1 million, and iCORE, which is a transfer from Advanced Education and Technology, is 11 and a half million dollars. That's a total of \$145 million. Of course, we've got the big endowment funds. The Alberta heritage foundation for medical research is over \$1.5 billion, the Alberta heritage foundation for science and engineering research at \$838 million. So it's a significant amount of money.

4:00

You know, there's a certain responsibility with that kind of money. I had thought: well, this is a very good bill. But after I read the Auditor General's report, which also came out in April 2009, the Auditor General had a lot of things to say about some of the organizations, some of the institutions that are under the care and management of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology.

Now, we had a discussion about this at Public Accounts this morning, and I was anticipating quite a detailed discussion among the members and the Auditor General regarding these specific recommendations, but the members had other issues which they

wanted to discuss with the Auditor. When we look at this latest report and we look at this bill and we look at the intentions of the department, I believe we should exercise some caution here. At this time I don't have confidence – maybe in the future I will – that the department will manage these significant amounts. I know I'm going to be told it's an outside board and that it's at arm's length, but the minister and the cabinet, as far as I'm concerned, still call the shots because of their ability to provide the appointments through order in council.

Now, when we look at what the Auditor is flagging, the Auditor is talking about increased fraud risk at some institutions, and he talks specifically about Bow Valley College, an investigation of an alleged fraud. He talks about significant internal control weaknesses at Grant MacEwan College.

Mr. Horner: It's not relevant.

Mr. MacDonald: Oh, yes. I'm sorry, hon. minister. You may not feel it's relevant, but these are all entities that are under, as far as I'm concerned, your direct control. They are an example of how some institutions, not all but some institutions, under your control have been operating. With this bill, if this bill were to become law, there would be a significant increase in the pooled funds, and there will be less control of this by the Legislative Assembly. This arm's-length authority at this time – I'm sorry – I can't go for when I look at what the Auditor General has flagged, not only for us in this Assembly but for taxpayers.

Now, the Auditor indicates that management and the audit committee need good information. Management needs timely, relevant, and accurate financial information to run an institution. Management provides summarized financial information to an institution's audit committee to allow it to effectively oversee and objectively assess the institution's overall performance. Meanwhile with Bill 27 here we're having this arm's-length operation. Now may not be the time for such an initiative. With Bow Valley College we already talked about that. The Auditor also mentions Medicine Hat College and suggests we could "improve its financial reporting to its Board by including – at least quarterly – complete statements of operations, financial position, and changes in net assets."

Grant MacEwan:

To improve the accuracy of financial reports to management and its Audit Committee, Grant MacEwan College should improve its capital asset processes by:

- documenting its assessment of the appropriate accounting treatment for costs for construction and renovation projects.
- improving its processes to code and record transactions accurately the first time.

Grande Prairie Regional College, also under the hon. minister's watch, implemented a similar recommendation to improve its financial reporting. It's good to see that they've listened to the Auditor, and hopefully the minister has been very firm in giving direction that the Auditor certainly be listened to and that his recommendations be implemented. The Alberta College of Art and Design, it is noted here, has not yet implemented a similar recommendation from the Auditor's report from last year.

Mr. Speaker, you can see why I am reluctant to give a ringing endorsement to this proposal. If one was to look at the Auditor's findings and recommendations like a report card, one of your children coming home with a report card, and there were a couple of Cs on it and there was a B and there was only one A, well, I don't think you would give the child a bigger or an expanded allowance.

That's sort of what the direction is here with Bill 27. I've outlined, you know, the consolidation of these funds and the total amount of money, and I'm not satisfied at this time that Advanced

Education and Technology will be able to, whether it's close at hand or at arm's length, ensure that the interests of the taxpayer will be first and foremost.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Lund: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to have the opportunity to join in the debate on Bill 27, the Alberta Research and Innovation Act. In listening very attentively to the hon. member that just spoke, I can see where he has been quoting things that have happened in the past and may be close to being accurate. However, this is looking into the future.

I'm very excited about the potential of Bill 27 and what it will do as far as research in the province. The bill seeks to encourage a more integrated and aligned approach to research and innovation in order to ensure the province's continued economic prosperity. Furthermore, Bill 27 would support the Premier's vision of a diversified economy by encouraging the growth of new industries through technology commercialization.

I would like to thank the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology as well as his department for the forward-looking thinking this piece of legislation demonstrates. In light of the current global economic uncertainty, making our publicly funded research and innovation activities effective as well as efficient is of paramount concern. When you look at the structure and the openness and the outcome type of setting that this bill creates, I believe that it will attract many more dollars to research, private dollars and not just government dollars.

4:10

Recognizing this, the government has developed the roles and mandates framework for Alberta's provincially funded research and innovation system. The framework seeks to reconfigure the province's research and innovation structure to reduce its complexity as well as to provide improved access and transparency for all participants. It is important to note that this framework was developed with extensive stakeholder consultation in order to make certain it would benefit this valuable part of our economy.

Bill 27 would provide a legislative model for the implementation of this important framework and would allow Alberta to further develop a highly qualified and skilled workforce and to build on our world-class postsecondary institutions. Further to this, it would allow Alberta to attract highly qualified individuals from abroad to advance and develop our research and innovation activities. This would be achieved in part by having a focused, integrated, and aligned research and innovation environment and would help to ensure Alberta's continuing competitive advantage.

The government has shown tremendous leadership in developing a research and innovation structure that reduced redundancies and promotes continued growth in the research and innovation industry. Furthermore, the roles and mandates framework would encourage improved access and transparency for all participants in the industry – Mr. Speaker, if one looks at the business model for the department, we see that this fits right in with goal 3 and goal 4 of the business plan from the department – and it is designed with a governance structure that helps to ensure the responsibilities are made very clear.

Further to this, Bill 27 would allow for the creation of research and innovation entities. These entities would focus on research and innovation in very specific areas, which could include bioindustries, energy and environment, health, and commercial development. The Minister of Advanced Education and Technology would be responsi-

ble for any provincial research and innovation entity created through the regulations. Further to this, the funding model would provide the minister the authority to approve each entity's plan and budgets. This would allow the minister to provide direction and to direct funds that meet the government of Alberta's research and innovation priorities.

The success of the proposed framework would be achieved in part by ensuring the collaboration and co-ordination between the new provincial entities and the government of Alberta ministries. The proposed structure for Alberta's government-funded research and innovation sector would include the establishment of an Alberta research and innovation authority. This body would provide advice to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology pertaining to the strategy and to policy as well as long-term planning. In addition, the bill would create two advisory committees, the Alberta research and innovation committee and the cross-government portfolio advisory committee. The Alberta research and innovation committee would advise the minister with respect to items pertaining to the co-ordination, mandates, and activities of the research and innovation entities whereas the cross-government portfolio advisory committee would provide advice and recommendations pertaining to the funding of the new created provincial entities.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation provides the necessary legislative model to implement the roles and responsibilities framework of Alberta's provincially funded research and innovation system. To this end Bill 27 would ensure the continued effectiveness and efficiency of Alberta's research and innovation activities, and it would further encourage the development and growth of this valuable industry.

Mr. Speaker, one of the things that we have found with the current situation is that we are lacking the openness, the ability to make sure that research is actually being done in areas that really do mean a difference to our economy. Of course, when you're looking for outside money to go along with the government's money, when that money comes in, you're pretty much assured that it's going to be for a project that is going to fit into the improvement of our economy.

One of the issues as well that has been a problem all along: there may be a major development that occurs, but commercializing it hasn't happened in Alberta. It moves outside. Bill 27 will create another entity that will help very much in the commercialization, which is extremely important. Really, we're missing out as a province on some of these things that have been discovered. The research has been done for them only to have it move outside of the province and outside of the country in a lot of cases in order to get the money and the ability to commercialize it.

I would really urge all the people in the Legislature to support this bill. If you have difficulty understanding it, then get a briefing on it and get to understand it. In my opinion, this is a major, major step forward. It'll do nothing but good for the province of Alberta.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I actually have quite a bit to say on this bill, but I'm just going to try and keep my comments fairly brief in my opportunity to speak in second reading to Bill 27, the Alberta Research and Innovation Act. I was aware that this act was coming some time ago because I started to have people approach me at public events saying: "We're really concerned. This bill is coming that is going to roll all of the research foundations together. We have real concerns about the effect that that's going to have." As I started to look over the possibilities, I've come to the conclusion that really this is about the politicization of

government-funded research. I think that is a monumental step backwards.

The reason why, Mr. Speaker, is that every now and then this province does something right, something really right. What they did really right here was to create the Alberta heritage fund for medical research and a number of other similarly configured and funded research foundations in Alberta. The uniqueness and the success of what we've seen through the Alberta heritage fund for medical research really inspired me because a couple of years ago – I guess it was the 2004 election – the Alberta Liberals had developed a whole policy about endowment funds as a way of saving and as a way of taking our nonrenewable resource revenue and driving it, directing it into something that would be of benefit to Albertans for many years to come, that that nonrenewable resource revenue would pay off for us for a long, long time.

The model that I looked at as I gave my input to the development of that policy was the Alberta heritage fund for medical research because what they did right here was that they had an independent and peer-respected board that made decisions. They put a good chunk of money into it. That was back in Peter Lougheed's day. Then the previous Premier put another chunk of money towards it. They have managed their finances very well, but they were definitely seen by the scientific and medical research community as arm's length.

4:20

What started to happen is that we created an economic cluster with that medical research foundation, so we started to get other pockets of activity that came to Alberta and came to the Edmonton area because of the work that was being funded through the Alberta heritage fund for medical research. It's odd to think of that as an economic cluster or an economic driver. I don't know. I'm not satisfied, exactly, with that wording of things, but it's the best wording I can come up with at this point to describe what I was seeing.

We were attracting researchers and scientists from across the world because we were giving out serious money. I mean, there's a level of grants that's considered pretty small potatoes, and then there's the kind of middling stuff, and then there's the serious money. If you're a top scientist, researcher in the world, you go where there's big money. We had not a lot of big-money grants to give out, but we had enough to give out some big-money grants.

They attracted some really impressive people here. As they came here, well, of course, they brought their families with them. If I may make a broad, generalized statement, their family members were no academic slouches. We ended up with a whole new group of people moving into Alberta just because we gained the benefit of the researchers and the scientists coming. Then we also ended up with these sort of ancillary businesses that started to spring up to support the research that was being done. So it was a really good model.

Now, what I'm seeing is that this government, as I often note with this government, has not looked far enough into what could be the unintended consequences. I hope these would be unintended consequences because I'd be very unhappy to learn that the government intended to do what I'm about to describe.

What I'm seeing is that this is the politicization, the control of these research foundations. I thought: "Who would come up with such a wacky idea? Why would any group of people decide to do this to something that worked so well?" Guess what? You know, we learn a lot from our families. What I discovered as I started to look around was that these members had looked to their federal cousins and, in fact, are following what we've already seen that their federal Conservative cousins have set up in controlling and politicizing the government-funded research grants on the federal level.

What would be the consequences of this? I started to think: "Okay. Well, if we end up with a politicized and a controlled fund to support scientists and researchers, is it going to reverse what we had? Are we going to stop getting the really, really A-level, gold-plated, prizewinning, blue-ribbon scientists and researchers that we've been able to attract to Alberta? Does that start to reverse itself?" The answer, I think, is yes. From my inquiries to people that are around in this sector, I'm being told that there is no indication that there will even be a competition this fall for new positions and that recruitment and replacement is essentially sliding to a halt.

You can understand why that would happen. If there's uncertainty, everybody tends to stop. We see that around election cycles. You know, we get six months out from an election cycle, and everything starts to sort of slow down in the departments because nobody knows who's going to be their political master, and they don't want to make big moves that they're going to get criticized for. Everybody just slows down until they know what's going to happen. We are definitely seeing that here.

I'm hearing that, indeed, there's a real question about the independence of the board to make the tough decisions that they have been able to make, that has been a critical piece of the success of that particular foundation that I'm highlighting. I mean, there's a very definitive time-sensitive consequence to all of this because they have an independent review every five years by international experts. [interjection] I don't know. I don't think the minister is going to be so happy about what could be coming out of that one. You can jig that. You know, you can have the right people in place and put them in place for the five years, you get your passing check mark, and then you pull the whole thing apart. That's certainly quite possible, and I've seen that happen in other situations. But it's darn hard to rebuild the next time you're coming around to that five-year review.

That's what I see has happened, and I've taken quite a bit of time already to describe it. I'll be very interested in reviewing a sort of sectional analysis and reviewing some more of the information I've been able to dig up about this when I'm able to speak in Committee of the Whole.

At this point I know there's some interest in moving on, so, Mr. Speaker, I would move adjournment of Bill 27 at this point.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 28 Energy Statutes Amendment Act, 2009

[Adjourned debate April 22: Mr. McFarland]

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This bill, the Energy Statutes Amendment Act, 2009, I think has some things to commend it. I look forward to an extensive discussion in committee. The bitumen royalty in kind mechanism that it proposes I think is worth a serious look. We've discussed that with the minister, and we've done some thinking through on that ourselves. There will be, undoubtedly, some questions around the orphan well funding, the extra \$30 million, I believe, this allocates for orphan wells and larger sites than that. But our general sense of this is that this is a bill that probably needs to make its way through.

So I call the question on Bill 28. [interjection] No. Sorry. I misspoke. Some day I would like to call the question on Bill 28 – that's what I meant to say – but not right now. I'll take my seat, and I think others may want to speak.

Thank you.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview for introducing my opportunity to speak very briefly to this bill in second reading. I've not had a chance to look through it in a great deal of detail, so I, too, look forward to the opportunity to discuss it further in third reading.

However, in first review of it, we do have some concerns with respect to the objectives being sought through this bill and the many amendments that it makes. It does appear to include a number of provisions for removing the need for an order in council and the subsequent report to the Legislature of same where permits and licences are being amended either in the coal sector or in the oil and gas sector by, in some cases, the ERCB or otherwise.

This is a concern because it's part of an ongoing pattern with this government to move more stuff from legislation to regulation and then more stuff from regulation to policy, and the more that's done, the less we're able to keep track of how things are and the less opportunity we have to debate it. Of course, that's particularly interesting as the nature of the changes are no longer considered regulatory. It will of course have some implications in relation to the upcoming Bill 36 and the legal nature of certain provisions that will be created through the operation of that act. So I think that there are some pretty significant consequences to this.

4:30

Generally speaking, this is an act that is designed to support the government's energy strategy that was released in December. Without getting into a great deal of detail, our caucus has a significant number of concerns with respect to that strategy as it was introduced, the first of which is that, like many other things that we've talked about over the last several months, it lacks detail. Also, in terms of the detail that we do have, it is a strategy that is premised on the notion that the primary focus of our economic development, our innovation efforts, our postsecondary education system, and our approach to renewable energy – it assumes that the fossil fuel industry is the primary vehicle for all good fortune in the province for at least 30 years. It very clearly trivializes the role that government needs to play with respect to the development of a renewable sector much, much sooner than 30 years from now. So, frankly, any piece of legislation that supports that very vague but concerning provincial energy strategy is one about which we also have concerns.

This bill will also of course allow for the notion of bitumen being received as an in-kind royalty. Although our caucus has talked at great length for some time now about the need for the province to take more clear action to compel bitumen to be upgraded in the province to create more jobs here, it's not our view that this is the mechanism that is most fair to Albertans, who are the owners of the resource. In fact, we need to be increasing the amount of money we get from these companies, and we need to be limiting the amount of bitumen that ultimately can be sent down the ever-growing number of pipelines which are being built as we speak. Of course, as we know, while the economy is slowing down, one thing that's not slowing down is the efforts being made to expand the capacity of our southern neighbours to receive our bitumen and process it there.

I think there's a lot more debate that needs to be had on this bill and the overall strategy that the government tends to adopt to the extent that there is any strategy inherent, ultimately, in how our energy resources are developed and managed for the benefit of Albertans. I'm not sure that there is, but if there is any, we certainly need to have a greater discussion on that, so I look forward to the opportunity to hear more from the government about how this bill supports their strategy and what the details are around that strategy.

I look forward at that time to having further discussion about our response to all of that.

I thank the Assembly for giving me the opportunity to speak to this bill in second reading. I assume we will now call the question.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other member wish to speak?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 28 read a second time]

**Bill 44
Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism
Amendment Act, 2009**

[Adjourned debate April 29: Mr. Blackett]

The Deputy Speaker: Like the Speaker said earlier, we have a cameraman here to film those who speak today.

I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very glad for the opportunity to rise in second reading and speak as the Official Opposition critic for the Liberal caucus to Bill 44, the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Amendment Act, 2009. This is certainly expected to be a controversial bill, mostly because the government started into this, I think, for a good reason, to correct some administrative process and procedural problems with the way the Human Rights Commission was actually operating. As they should and, in fact, should have, in 1998 they were going to have the act opened to add in the definition of sexual orientation under the prohibited grounds of discrimination under our Human Rights Act. Then I don't know what happened, but they started to clean out the fridge and added a whole bunch of other things in here that are certainly going to make for an interesting debate.

So let me say right from the get-go that I and a number of the people that I represent and many others that are not my constituents are very glad to see the inclusion of sexual orientation under prohibited grounds of discrimination. This has been a long-running embarrassment and sore thorn in our side in the way we look at ourselves and in the way others look at us in Alberta. As a result of a case that started here in Alberta with the Delwin Vriend case, the Supreme Court ruled that we must include, we must extend protection to those who have been discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation, particularly as it applies in employment, housing, and access to government programs and services.

The Supreme Court at the time was actually pretty prescient and kind of thought they might have some trouble with this government, and they insisted that not only would they tell the government that they needed to do this, but they would actually insist that the legislation be read as though the grounds were actually written in, and in fact that has happened in the last period of time. Those who approached the Human Rights Commission with a complaint around discrimination based on sexual orientation have in fact had their cases taken up by our commission here in Alberta. But for those that didn't know and went and got the act out and read it, there was nothing in there to tell them that they, in fact, had protection under those prohibited grounds – nothing – because it had not actually been written into our act.

So thank you for finally putting that into the act. It was long past time, but I'm still glad that you did it. It should be there. I think it's a real indicator of our Canadian society and Albertan society that we do understand and value that there is a diversity of people and that it's important to us as citizens that we offer protection to people

from discrimination and, further than that, we take a step further in that we offer the services of the Human Rights Commission on their behalf for that.

There are also a number of administrative matters that are being dealt with in this act, and that's things like the name. When the act got changed a while back, they added citizenship and multiculturalism, so what had been the Alberta Human Rights Act now became the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act, which also sort of made it a bit confusing about what was actually going on and who was supposed to be served by this legislation. So this is proposing that there be some clarity and removes the references to citizenship and multiculturalism.

As we led up to this bill being tabled in the House, the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit was very active in the media, and so were many others in trying to figure out what was going to be in the legislation. Part of the questions at the time were: who did you consult? Who did you actually talk to about what was going to go into this act? At various times we got various answers from the minister, a whole long list of people that were consulted, although others have come back to me since then and said: boy, if that was a consultation, never seen it done that way before. I think that there is some question there about whether groups actually were asked what they wanted to see in the act and what they didn't and whether in fact there was a two-way communication there.

4:40

One of the groups that the minister repeatedly referred to was the Sheldon Chumir foundation for ethics. Of course, we're very proud in the Liberal caucus that Sheldon Chumir was an elected member in our caucus for many years in this Assembly, has been a great citizen for Alberta, and has given us a great example and, in fact, a great legacy with the ethics foundation that carries his name. The foundation did a very thorough consultation, and the minister seemed very happy to take that consultation as his own.

It was interesting reviewing what the Sheldon Chumir foundation actually recommended happen with the review, opening up, and amending of the human rights act and what the minister took and what he didn't take. They did in fact recommend some things like changing the name. They made a number of recommendations about how the commission actually worked, and there have been some suggestions on streamlining that administrative process, clarifying the functions, renaming the commissioners as tribunal-less, severing the position of the executive director on the government side, who's actually the same person as the director of the commission – those were actually the same individual, so you could argue that there was a conflict of interest there – enabling a paper review, enabling the chief of the commission and the tribunals to delegate reviews and appoint panels, restrictions limiting the director's authority. The government has done a number of those things. So let me give credit to the government for what it has done right.

Here's the rub. You know, in 12 years in this Assembly, Mr. Speaker, I don't know that there have been very many bills that I could just jump behind and say: yahoo; let's go lock, stock, and barrel. This government always seems to like to present a difficulty. Usually where I start to have trouble is in examining both the intended and the unintended consequences of the legislation that they propose. Here we have a number of things that I am very eager to support in the legislation, and that is complicated by the other things that the government has included in this legislation. Of course, number one under that is section 11.1. That appears in the bill as the bill's section 9, but it's amending section 11.1 of the actual act. It's essentially allowing a parental opt-out.

Now, let me be clear here – and most people would have already heard this – that we already have a system in Alberta through the

School Act where parents can ask to be notified when certain subjects or issues come up in a teaching classroom situation, and they can give written notification to request that their child is given an alternate instruction module and is not engaged in the classroom instruction for those particular subjects. So we already had a process in place. But what this act does, Bill 44, is it actually takes something that, as we know, is operational now and falls under the School Act and drops it into the middle of the human rights act. So, one, that's an inappropriate place to have it. I'm just going to read this so everyone knows what I'm talking about. Section 11.1(1) says:

A board as defined in the School Act shall provide notice to a parent or guardian of a student where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, prescribed under that Act include subject-matter that deals explicitly with religion, sexuality or sexual orientation.

A school is now under some requirement, if this act passes, to identify again to parents what might be considered – and I listed all those things – essentially, subject matter that deals explicitly with religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation. Then you start to get into a description of how you consider the word “religion.” How is that going to be defined? Who does the defining of that? I don't understand why the government waded into this one, but I've been told repeatedly, and I guess we'll hear from other speakers, that this was a compromise, that it was a political compromise. In order to get the sexual orientation written into the act, this was the political compromise. This section would be inserted to satisfy what some other members of the caucus wish to have. Okay? That's what I'm told. We have lots of opportunity for others to talk about this.

It goes on, and in section (2) it talks about:

Where a teacher or other person providing instruction, teaching a course of study or educational program or using the instructional materials referred to in [the previous section] receives a written request signed by a parent or guardian of a student that the student be excluded from the instruction, course of study, educational program or use of instructional materials, the teacher or other person shall in accordance with the request . . . and without academic penalty permit the student . . .

And it goes on to say, basically, to either leave the classroom or be given something else to do while they sit in the class.

The problem that arises out of this is: what do you do about teaching and instructional opportunities – what they call teachable moments – that arise in the normal give-and-take of a classroom day? What is a teacher supposed to do? Do they stop teaching completely, not take advantage of the opportunity to explore something, a particular issue, because it might be interpreted by some parent or guardian as being subject matter that is dealing explicitly with religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation? How do you make that call in the middle of your teaching day?

Alternatively, the teachers under the School Act are actually given instructions about how to engage students and to take that opportunity, to seize upon those opportunities to find a way to help students come to – and I'm going to quote here. This is from the Sheldon Chumir document. Article 26(2)

stipulates that education is to “promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.”

They say:

It is difficult to see how withdrawing children from material which one religious group finds objectionable gives those students the tools to come to understand, tolerate or find friendship with people who differ from them on religious or other grounds.

Excellent point.

There's a situation being created with this legislation that, one, puts a tremendous burden on the teacher in the classroom, avoids opportunities that are amazing opportunities to teach students how to move forward in our increasingly diverse world. Further to that,

following up on my questions to the minister, a number of questions in question period in this House, it's clear that that section can be used by parents and guardians to bring a human rights case against a teacher, a school, a principal, a school board based on the situation that's described there. So now we have a situation. How about that for putting a chill on instruction and on a teacher?

Mr. MacDonald: Who would pay for the legal fees?

Ms Blakeman: Well, it's a good question. Human rights is not a simple process anymore. It's quite complex. You do end up with both sides often incurring a number of fees, including legal fees. So what kind of a chill do we put on our teachers to say: “Whoa. Be careful. Any time anything comes up that could be construed as being explicitly religious, sexual, or around sexual orientation, don't go there, or you could have a human rights case brought against you, which will cost you time and money.”

When I tried to press the minister responsible and say: “Okay. Well, if you're so sure this isn't going to happen, are you going to pick up the legal fees for any teacher that this happens to?” “Oh, well, it's not going to happen,” he said. This is part of, I hope, the unintended consequences but, I suspect, intended consequences of what's in section 11.1

4:50

Certainly, the school boards have reacted fairly vehemently around that and there have been joint media releases from the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers' Association – I'm sorry; I don't even know all these initials here – the College of Alberta School Superintendents, and the Alberta School Councils' Association. They are talking about the chilling effect that legislation will have in the classrooms, the onus on the school to now send out even more notification to parents of how and when a controversial issue might be caught up. But isn't that exactly what we need? When there's a controversial issue, don't we need all of those students to be talking and thinking about this so they come to some kind of understanding about the society that we have and that we can move forward in?

The government has spent – I don't know how much – \$25 million rebranding this province's image. I'm constantly being told: it's all about Alberta's diversity. Really? Well, I guess it's about Alberta's diversity but minus anything that might have to do with a subject matter that's explicitly religious, sexual, or around sexual orientation. How is that more diverse? How is that moving forward, you know, in this new millennium of ours? It's not. It's taking us backwards. For some reason this caucus has decided on a political compromise that is literally one step forward and at least one step back and, I think many will argue, more than one step back. Obviously, I don't approve of that section.

There is a lot of information that is out there now, and I really encourage people that are listening to this on the video streaming or reading *Hansard* to follow up with this.

A couple of other points I want to make before my time is over here on a couple of things that were not included in this that I think should have been. One of the issues is that there is no mention of gender identity. The definition of that and the understanding of where gender identity sits in our culture is a complex one and is hard for some people to deal with, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't deal with it. We should. The funding for gender reassignment surgery has now been cut by the minister of health, so there's even less support and understanding. Maybe these two things are linked and are consequential or sequential and are deliberate actions by the government. I don't know. But we have no recognition of gender

identity in this act. I think this was an opportunity to add it in, and it should be added in. We don't get these human rights acts opened up very often, and we should do the right work when we have the opportunity.

The Sheldon Chumir foundation had recommended as well – and I'll just read recommendation 12 – that aboriginal heritage “be added as an expressly illegal ground of discrimination in the Alberta human rights legislation.” They develop a very solid argument about that, appearing on pages 29 and 30 of the document that they released, *Toward Equal Opportunity for all Albertans: Recommendations for Improvement of the Alberta Human Rights Commission*.

The other issue that was not included and I think should have been is the concept of workplace bullying. The government seemed to have had a fairly firm grasp of childhood bullying, schoolyard bullying. The concepts are the same; they're just happening between older groups of people. They have programs that they run in their children's services section. They had a whole summit or one of those things they have – a round-table, a summit, a forum, a consultation, stakeholder something or other – that was chaired by the now minister of finance, the then minister of children's services, which was an excellent and very far-ranging exploration of the issues that are affecting children, especially around violence. Bullying is considered an issue of violence, especially for children.

So here we have an opportunity to add that into the human rights act. I get a lot of complaints in my office around that issue. There is no mechanism for people to take an issue like a workplace bullying issue to the Human Rights Commission because it's not protected grounds.

Also, very curious, suggested by the Sheldon Chumir again and not in this act – and I'm looking forward to the debate from government members as to why that choice was made – is the recommendation that we revert to the 1996 wording around hate propaganda and dissemination of material that encourages or may incite hatred towards an identifiable group. It was not put into this legislation, and I'm very interested to hear why the choice was made to not do that. I'll tell you that the media and a number of others strongly encouraged it.

Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to a vigorous debate.

The Deputy Speaker: The chair has received indication from the hon. members for Airdrie-Chestermere, Edmonton-Strathcona, Calgary-Nose Hill, and Calgary-Egmont to speak.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to stand in this House today and speak to Bill 44, the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Amendment Act, 2009. It's quite a mouthful. I wish to address what I believe is one of the most positive and meaningful advances for human rights that this province and this country has seen in many years. I refer to section 11.1 of this proposed legislation, or, as it is better known, the parental rights clause. This section, in accordance with article 26(3) of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights enshrines as a human right a parent's right to choose whether or not their child shall be taught controversial subject matter that may offend their family's most personal and closely held beliefs. Specifically, this refers to curriculum that explicitly teaches religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation.

Mr. Speaker, I want to applaud the minister and the Premier for making the inclusion of this parental rights provision possible, but I also want to express the pride that I feel in being a member of this government caucus. Although the members of this government

caucus are as diverse in opinion as the communities and people that they represent, I can say without reservation that we all understand that there is no institution, program, or initiative, government-led or otherwise, that is more essential to the future prosperity of this province than our committed parents and strong families.

Too often, Mr. Speaker, we allow the fluid and fuzzy boundaries of political correctness to cloud our political discourse surrounding what is truly critical to bettering our society. We have no shortage of government programs and solutions for every conceivable criminal activity, every health challenge, every mental health issue, every instance of poverty and hardship, and, indeed, many of these government programs and initiatives are important and must be continued. However, facts are stubborn things, and the facts are that the most effective antidotes against crime, poverty, and virtually any other social ill are caring parents working together to build loving, safe, and financially stable homes where their children are able to learn and grow into contributing members of society.

Mr. Speaker, the day that we lose sight of this truth, the day that we undermine the central and critical role of parents and family in the fabric of our society is the first day of the decline of this province and of this country. Committed and thoughtful parenting is the key to positively shaping the lives of our next generation for the better, and there is no more effective parental arrangement than a committed mother and father working side by side for the benefit of their child. There is an absolutely overwhelming body of social science evidence demonstrating beyond any reasonable doubt that children living in traditional intact families – a mom, a dad, and a child – when compared to any other family arrangement are on average less likely to be suspended from school, less likely to use illegal drugs and other harmful substances, less likely to commit minor property crime, less likely to engage in violent behaviour and violent crime, and are less likely to be the victims of various kinds of abuse. They are, on the other hand, more likely to graduate high school and go on to university and more likely to earn more income.

As we all know, not all families remain intact. Tragedy and misfortune are part of the human experience, and marriage breakups are not uncommon. Such circumstances are not easy for anyone involved, especially children, but when these instances do occur, how can anyone overlook the need for the heroic efforts of single parents, grandparents, step-parents, adoptive parents, and foster parents in picking up the pieces and guiding the involved children through what is for them a time of much confusion, heartache, and oftentimes financial difficulty? In these difficult circumstances it is the sacrifice and devotion of these parents that is all that stands between a child having a fighting chance at success in life and an almost complete guarantee of failure.

5:00

I personally think of the orphanage in China that my adopted baby sister came to our family from. My heart breaks when I think that had my parents not stepped forward to fill that parental gap, the happy little girl with the bright future that I know and love today would never have known safety and security and would never have known parental love. The fact is that she would likely have been consigned to a life of poverty, loneliness, and unspeakable choices.

Parenting matters. There is no position, there's no career, there's no job that matters more to the life of a child. By extension, there is no job that is more important to our society. Government programs no matter how effectively implemented, teachers no matter how well qualified, social workers no matter how well intended are simply unable to replace the role of parents in the life of a child. Why is this so? Well, simply put, it is due to the unique and special bond that exists between a parent and child that allows a parent to know their child better than anyone else possibly could.

My wife, Anita, and I have four boys. There's no one in this world that cares for those boys more than we do. There's no one that understands those boys better than we do. We know how each one learns and what motivates them. We know what values they live by because we taught them those values. In fact, we can already see some of the challenges that they will inevitably have to face, and we are preparing them to meet those challenges. There is no educational course of study that could possibly teach any individual what Anita and I know about our sons. Because we know them so well and because their welfare is the only agenda our feelings for them will permit, does it not follow that we as parents are in by far the best position to determine what is and is not in their best interest?

Now, we have laws that ensure that there is a basic standard of care that any parent or guardian must adhere to, and these laws are very important to maintain, of course. However, these laws merely attempt to guarantee that each child will be given a blank canvas upon which to paint his life's work. The first small brush strokes of that painting are best guided by the steady hand of a caring and experienced parent in the hopes that that child one day can be taught to paint a masterpiece. Hopefully, these first few critical brush strokes include a parent instilling in their child the first understandings of a value-based system of morality and ethics to promote and reinforce healthy and positive decision-making.

Oftentimes this system of time-honoured virtues is based on a specific religion. Other times it's based on traditional societal values or natural law or just good, old-fashioned common sense. Whatever the source of that value system, it is often very sensitive and personal to both the parent and the child, and so it should be. What use is a system of values that cannot or is unable to positively mould behaviour in any meaningful way? I would ask: if we expect, as we should, parents to teach their children positive values on which each child can build a successful future, should we not as a society respect the right of a parent to teach those values in the home without having them explicitly countered in our schools without parental consent? I say that we do owe parents that respect. I say that we owe children that respect.

Now, of course, lines must be drawn. Logistically it is impossible to burden our education system with the necessity to cater to every possible parental educational preference. However, is it not reasonable to commit to the parents of this province that with regard to their and their child's most personal and sensitive core beliefs, it is they, the parents, that will have the final say as to whether and how such subjects are taught to their children? I would submit that it is not only reasonable for parents to expect this; I would submit that it is their human right to expect this.

Mr. Speaker, that is what this proposed parental rights provision is all about. It is about recognizing the unmatched bond of commitment that exists between a parent and child, it is about affirming that it is within this relationship that a moral code of conduct is most appropriately taught, and it is about guaranteeing for each parent that it is they and no one else who will be ultimately responsible for what values are taught to their child.

It has been well said that the people we influence in a positive way constitute the real and lasting monuments of our lives. For most of us the people we are best positioned and best equipped to influence in a positive way are our children. Mr. Speaker, the day this bill becomes law will mark a special day for this province and for this country. It is a victory for human rights, it is a victory for parents and children, it is a victory for this province, and it is something that we can all be very proud of.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments and questions. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. The hon. member quoted the United Nations universal declaration of human rights. I would like to know why with this particular piece of legislation the hon. member feels that it applies, yet it does not apply whenever we're dealing with issues around children's services or issues around migratory workers who come to work in Alberta's farms and factories.

Mr. Anderson: I fail to see how we got from parental rights in child education to children's services. I don't know what the member is speaking about, what specific policy he may be speaking about. I would be happy to discuss that with him, but he'll have to be a little bit more specific on what in the world he is talking about.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that in this Assembly we have heard many outstanding comments from members. Every now and then you take a set of those comments home from *Hansard* and publish them for your community. I will be proud to do that with the comments made by Airdrie-Chestermere today, well acquitted and clearly identifying why his community is so proud of his representation.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I could feel the passion and the eloquence in the comments from the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere though it doesn't mean I necessarily agree with him. My question to the point is: why does the member feel that the ability of a parent to take their child out of a classroom needs to be put into the human rights legislation when it's already in the School Act? Why this extra step?

Mr. Anderson: Well, it's partly symbolic. There's no doubt about that. It's about recognizing the special relationship that exists between a parent and child. But it is also practical. If I look to our neighbours in British Columbia, there is no doubt that right now there is a movement under way to take that very right that parents have in British Columbia away from them so that they cannot opt their children out of these specific courses. So I think that it's important to enshrine that in this legislation.

It's important that we as Albertans don't look at this as a step backward. It certainly is not. I mean, I respect the Member for Edmonton-Centre's comments about us being a diverse province, and I agree with her. It is just absolutely important that we show that principle to all Albertans and to all Canadians. But are we not diverse enough, are we not tolerant enough that we can allow for a parent that has a different viewpoint on the way their religion might be taught in school or with regard to an issue that is very sensitive around sexuality and such? Are we not diverse enough, are we not comfortable enough in our own skin that there's room in our society for those types of people, or are we so worried about hurting people's feelings and being politically correct that we would effectively stamp on that person's closely held personal beliefs? I think that we are big enough and we are diverse enough and we are tolerant enough to accept the rights of all members of society, whether we agree with them or not. So that's why I think that it's important to have this in the legislation.

5:10

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the hon. member: what extra resources will be needed in public schools to enforce the amendment to the School Act?

Mr. Anderson: Well, I would say that that's a better question, of course, for the Minister of Education, but my guess would be: not very much if at all. As is stated, it is right now government policy, School Act policy, Department of Education policy that parents can opt can their kids out. The only difference is now parents will have to be notified in advance of those few tiny subjects, say a course in religious curriculum and such. They will be notified and have a chance to opt out of that. That's the only difference.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, now we are back to the bill, and I have a list of people who indicated to me that they wish to speak on the bill: the members for Edmonton-Strathcona, Calgary-Nose Hill, Edmonton-Gold Bar, Calgary-Egmont, Edmonton-Riverview, Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be able to finally have an opportunity to speak at more length about this issue. I won't go so far as to say that I'm pleased at the opportunity because I think that the fact that this bill is coming into this House today is, in my view, very disturbing to me as a member of this Assembly, and in some ways, you know, I'm quite sad today, actually, that I need to be in the House outlining the significant concerns that exist around elements of this piece of legislation.

What should be a time for a significant portion of Albertans to celebrate a long-awaited symbolic recognition of their equality has instead turned into this debate, which, in my view, undermines the impression of Albertans to the rest of the world, undermines our own collective commitment to education and to diversity and to a full, thoughtful discussion of things, and ultimately undermines the very new right which we are in the process of being about to recognize.

Let me just talk a little bit about that. Obviously, the key issue with respect to this bill is section 11, and that's, of course, the part of the bill that would allow parents to have their children opt out of instruction that deals explicitly with religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation. It is this particular section which, in my view, represents a very dark day in the history of this province.

Let me talk first about the issue with respect to religion. Now, I respect the right of parents to choose what religious instruction their children will or will not receive. Personally, I would prefer to see a system where all children were given a very neutral survey course on what different types of religion look like. That's my personal belief of what would represent the most enlightened approach to educating my children. But I understand that my belief is not everyone's belief, and I appreciate that some people feel very strongly that they don't want their children's religious instruction that they receive at home and their beliefs – it goes beyond just instruction – to be challenged in the school setting, and that's fine.

Section 50 of the School Act deals with that issue. It deals with that already. The School Act talks about education. The School Act talks about parents' rights in relation to their children's education. The School Act talks about that whole milieu. It is not necessary to put that provision into the human rights code. The human rights code is not a document designed to undermine the very rights which are included in the human rights code. It is not a document designed to, as the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere talked about, bow to every different person's version of what is politically correct today or tomorrow or the next day. It is a set of rights that we presumably all agree all people have. So I'm very concerned about muddying the waters with a statement that we are prepared to undermine some of those rights in certain circumstances.

Now, I'll talk a little bit about how it is I believe we're doing that, but I want to just stay for a moment on the issue of religious instruction. One of the problems with putting this into the human

rights code and taking it out of the School Act is that you make it a human right, and with that comes a whole slew of legal consequences and implications. It allows for a broad range of interpretive efforts to be applied to it. What we're putting in it right now could be amended through a great deal of litigation in the future, and because it's an active right which is found in the code, it will be treated differently than what's in the School Act, which is essentially an administrative provision.

Right now in our schools what theoretically happens is if religious instruction – and, of course, the School Act only talks about religious instruction. The School Act does not allow parents to pull their kids because somebody talks about the dreaded sexual orientation. Let's just say for a moment we're talking about the issue of religion. If religion is brought up, the family needs to get notice. Well, that's fine. What does the notice ultimately look like? At the beginning of the year, can the school board say: from time to time in grade 12 the social studies curriculum will call on the teacher to engage in discussions that will cover issues that may cover religion, that may cover theories of evolution, that may cover philosophical discussions that have implications for certain religions, which may cover the concept of, for instance, gender equity and gender equality? If they give that notice, is that enough? Can the parent then simply provide the notice to the teacher, and then every time those issues come up in the teaching moments that we've talked so much about, the teacher just says to the child: you have the option now to leave the room because we're talking about these issues. Is that the way it would work?

Well, now that it's in the human rights code, it is entirely possible that the parents would be able to go and say: "Well, this right that you're giving me is meaningless if it's administered this way, so in fact what you need to do is give me notice every time it's going to happen. You've got to give me dates. You've got to give me content. You've got to give me written curriculum because otherwise this right that you've now given me in the human rights code of my province is meaningless." That's what happens when you put it in the code. So then suddenly we create chaos.

Alternatively they can turn around and say: "You've given me this right, but in my exercising this right, my child has to now sit in the hall playing with his DS or something like that. In effect my child is being discriminated against now because I cannot crystalize or act upon my right that is in the code without otherwise adversely impacting my child by making him or her sit in the hall. Therefore, you've breached my right, so you need to actually come up with a whole new way to teach my child during the time that that education's going on."

With all of these things, this is not trying to create a panic. This is not trying to blow it up beyond what it is. It's not. This is the kind of thing that happens when you put a new right into the human rights code, and let's just be clear: this is a new right that we are putting into the human rights code. There is no other human rights code in the country that has this right embedded in the code. It is embedded elsewhere, not in the human rights code. This is the kind of chaos that we will create.

Then, of course, the other thing is that under the School Act it is not necessarily the case that the teacher would become the subject, a respondent in a human rights commission hearing. The teacher would not necessarily become compelled to defend their course of study, defend the way in which the particular issue came up in the class. They wouldn't under the School Act. They will now, another consequence of putting it into the human rights code.

5:20

Again, for the member opposite, this is not a symbolic change. This is a substantive change. It is a change that is going to signifi-

cantly limit the way teachers approach their job in the classroom. I have numerous friends who are high school teachers, who are high school social studies teachers, who are high school English teachers, who are high school science teachers. The teaching moment is a critical way in which they engage their students in critical debate in order to bring about a truly meaningful education. That process will be limited by this substantive provision which is now, for the first time in the history of this country, proposed as a human rights provision.

In short, what we are going to do is we are going to not just protect the rights of that one child to have certain things kept away from them in the school setting, but also while we do it, we are setting up a system that for every other child whose parent does want them to get a balanced education, to hear both sides of every story, to engage in a thoughtful debate, those children's rights will ultimately be impeded because of the natural chilling effect that will arise from this being an element of the human rights code.

I don't have a lot of time left yet, so I want to go on to the issue of where I think we are in effect creating a second tier, a second-class set of human rights in our human rights code. Once again, I believe we are leading the way in the country in our efforts to create a set of second-class human rights. Without this act being in place, thanks to the Supreme Court of Canada, gay and lesbian Albertans enjoy the same protection under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as gay and lesbian people across the rest of the country. That's because, as we all know, the Supreme Court of Canada insists that the right to protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is in effect read into our code.

Of course, we were hoping to actually have it written into the code to create a symbolic victory. Unfortunately, now what we're doing is that we are saying: we're going to write it in there, but then we're going to treat it just a little bit differently. In our human rights code we say that people cannot be discriminated against on the basis of their race, on the basis of their colour, on the basis of their gender. This is a long list of prohibited grounds. We are now about to add sexual orientation in writing to that list of prohibited grounds. Of course, as we know, it has already been read in there by the courts, but we're going to actually put it in writing. Yay for us.

Then, through section 11, we're going to treat that prohibited ground differently from all the other prohibited grounds because some people think that parents need to have the right to recognize the personal and sensitive core beliefs that they need to massage and parent their kids with. Apparently, we as parents need to be able to shelter our children from one of the prohibited grounds in the human rights code of this province. We're not giving parents the opportunity to exclude their children from instruction on other races. We're not giving parents the legal opportunity to exclude their children from instruction on other cultures. We are not giving parents the legal opportunity to exclude their children from instruction on other genders. But we are going to give parents the legal opportunity to exclude their children from discussion about sexual orientation. What that says to me is that we are treating it differently.

While the Supreme Court of Canada had told us we couldn't treat it differently, now we are going to say: we are treating it differently. That is why I am so offended by this piece of legislation. After 11 years of ignoring the Supreme Court of Canada's direction that we write in that sexual orientation is a prohibited ground for discrimination, we're going to write it in, and then we're going to qualify it, and we're going to treat them differently from other minorities within the province. To me that is deeply, deeply disturbing, and I think we should be very, very embarrassed.

Now, at the end of the day, you know, there has been lots of talk about: oh, well, the School Act already allows them to do that.

Well, as I say, the School Act talks about religious and patriotic instruction, and the school policy talks about sexuality. But this is not about sexuality. This is about some people are disabled, some people are brown, some people are women, some people are gay. That's all it is. Our children should learn that they should all be treated equally, and our schools should not under any circumstances refrain from telling all kids that because if it's in our human rights code, presumably we believe it too.

That is where we are left with all of this. As I have said, it is very, very concerning to me that we are embarking upon a path to, first of all, limit the breadth of discussion and intellectual curiosity within our schools through a mechanism that will put a chilling effect on our teachers and at the same time create a second tier of human rights in the province.

The Deputy Speaker: We have five minutes for comments and questions to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Seeing none, now I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak on the subject of Bill 44, the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Amendment Act, 2009. This bill would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, as dictated by our Supreme Court of Canada in the *Vriend* decision, it would also streamline the procedures under which the act is administered, and it also includes a provision on parental rights. Section 9 of Bill 44 states that

a board as defined in the School Act shall provide notice to a parent or guardian of a student where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, prescribed under that Act include subject-matter that deals explicitly with religion, sexuality or sexual orientation.

Parents would have the option, if they so chose, to have their children moved from the classroom or not participate while those topics were being discussed or covered. This section is intended to protect parents' choice to not expose their children to religious or moral beliefs that are contradictory to their own belief system. It is a right that is presently found in more or less the same manner in our School Act.

Mr. Speaker, the meaning of section 9 of the bill and its possible ramifications for teaching various classroom subjects has been the topic of much conjecture, surmise, speculation, and so on in the public, in the press, and by members of the opposition during question period in this House. The conjecture has centred around the fact that some could interpret the so-called parental rights clause in such a manner that a student might be excused from the teaching of various aspects of history or biology or evolution.

The rhetoric has been inflammatory in the extreme. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood asked: "Will Holocaust deniers be able to claim religious grounds to prevent their children from learning about the Holocaust?" The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity asked: "What is the justification for allowing our universal public education system to be held hostage by the social conservatives?" The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona asked: "Why has the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit proposed policy that allows a parent who believes in the subordination of women on religious grounds to interfere with a young girl learning about her democratic rights?" A comparison has also been made to the so-called Scopes monkey trial of the teacher, John Scopes, who defied a Tennessee law banning the teaching of evolution.

Mr. Speaker, in my respectful submission, all of this is hyperbolic conjecture and nonsense. There is nothing in this bill that prohibits

the teaching of evolution or which puts it within the ambit of dealing explicitly with religion. The Minister of Culture and Community Spirit, the sponsor of the bill, stood in this House during question period and refuted the narrow view of that clause. Mr. Speaker, if the hypothetical ramifications of this provision as posited by members of the opposition and certain members of the press were justified, I can say without hesitation, without equivocation that I would not be supporting it. If it allowed parents or students to opt out of a curriculum dealing with evolution or biological sciences, I could not vote for this. If it denied all students the opportunity of learning about the Holocaust or any part of world history, I would not vote for it either.

5:30

Mr. Speaker, as a former professor of biology I'd like to make a few remarks and some comments about evolution. The theory of evolution is quite simply an integral part of biology, the science of life. Life sciences are of great value to our society. They should be taught as part of the curriculum in all Alberta schools to all students.

The theory of evolution was elaborated by Charles Darwin in his publication *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in the year 1859, 150 years ago. He and his contemporary Alfred Russel Wallace identified the driving force behind evolution, natural selection. Darwin observed that within a population of living organisms of the same species, individual variability of traits occurs. Darwin believed that the offspring derived characteristics from each of their parents and that this variability of traits could give the possessor either an advantage or a disadvantage in survival and in reproduction in a particular environment. Of course, the exact mechanisms of genetics and the structure of DNA would not be known for a hundred years after Darwin.

Mr. Speaker, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the theory of evolution is central to the understanding of all biological sciences, and biological sciences touch our lives and our society in a myriad of ways, including, to name just a few, animal and plant genetics, livestock breeding, crop improvements, pest control, human health, food safety, medicine, antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals, vaccination, and disease control.

Evolution is often referred to as a theory, Mr. Speaker, but it is not simply an unproven, hypothetical theory as we might use that term in everyday parlance. When somebody dies violently, we might have a theory or a supposition as to the cause of death or a theory as to who caused the death, but when we speak of a theory in science, we mean something more substantive, that is testable.

The theory of evolution is based on scientific principles. It has been observed and tested repeatedly in both natural and laboratory settings and has been found to be sound, reliable, and repeatable. The process of evolution has been demonstrated and revealed by research in diverse fields, including paleontology, geology, taxonomy, biogeography, animal behaviour, and especially by genetics and the ability to read the genome of man and other living creatures.

With advances in technology and our ability to read the genetic code of viruses, we are now able for the first time to see evolution occurring virtually in real time as genetic sequences in influenza viruses change slightly from one population to the next. Flu viruses, with their rapid replication, quickly mutate their form into another strain. This happens frequently and makes tracking of specific strains of viruses extremely important. This is the reason why, when we get our flu vaccine every year, there are usually three new strains of flu covered in our vaccine. Scientists have observed the prevalence and the spread of new flu strains in the spring and are able to prepare vaccinations based on their genetic makeup for the following fall flu season. The H1N1 flu outbreak is now currently being

examined in laboratories around the world on a case-by-case basis to see how the virus is mutating and evolving. This information is invaluable to public health authorities, vaccine manufacturers, and health care providers. Mr. Speaker, it is for reasons such as these that biological sciences need to be taught to all students in all Alberta schools.

Mr. Speaker, I want to expand on why I believe the discussion of biological sciences in general and evolution in particular does not properly infringe on anyone's religion. I agree with His Holiness Pope Pius XII, who stated many years ago that there is no opposition between evolution and the doctrine of faith about man and his vocation.

There is no doubt that historically there was conflict between science and religion. The case of Galileo Galilei was a famous case where religious leaders were responsible for the persecution which occurred against a man who sought the truth, in that case the truth of the universe as proposed by Copernicus, that the Earth revolved around the sun. Happily, however, with very few exceptions the great religions have reconciled themselves to the fact that matters of science and the pursuit of truth do not in any way hinder the fundamental teachings of faith and religion.

Mr. Speaker, there is a distinct difference between faith and reason. Faith is the province of religion. Reason is the province of science. His Holiness Pope John Paul II agreed with this distinction himself and explored this in his encyclical of September 1998, *Fides et Ratio*. Reason is bound by laws and observations. The divorce of reason and faith is summed up by Immanuel Kant in his work *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he stated that reason is used for understanding of the world, that we are entirely dependent on our senses and our observations. Faith is very different. There is no need for any laws or any observations to justify what has happened. Knowledge of things that are unobservable and transcend our world cannot be proved by reason and science, only by philosophy or faith.

Mr. Speaker, the Earth and all the creatures in it were not created in six days, and the world is not 6,000 years old. We know these facts through science, that the myriad of living things on this planet evolved over a period of over 3 billion years. We know through science that the Earth is approximately 4.54 billion years old. These facts are based on reason, on the search for knowledge and truth. But nothing in these facts derogates from the wisdom of the teachings of the Old Testament, which deal with matters of faith. As Bishop Fred Henry of Calgary recently stated in an article, teachings in the opening chapters of Genesis cannot be read as literal statements of scientific fact. He states that "the sacred stories are not 'history' as we normally use the term." The purpose of them is to teach religious truths, not science.

As the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit has stated, this bill will serve to reinforce a right that was already available to Alberta families and already in practice in our classrooms. If a parent does not wish their child to take part in a specific piece of the curriculum or in a class, they have the option to opt out and not participate in the discussion where it explicitly deals with religion or sexuality. I emphasize the word "explicitly." It does not say tangentially, peripherally, or consequentially. Mr. Speaker, let us not descend, as some have, into wild speculation, hypotheses, or conjectures as to how the words "deals explicitly with religion" might be interpreted.

I am confident in supporting Bill 44 that this new section 11.1 as proposed in section 9 of the bill will not affect the teaching of biological sciences in Alberta classrooms. We should be confident that the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission and individual commissioners will do their job, that they will exercise sound judgment and proper legal interpretation when complaints are

brought to it regarding this legislation. I am confident that the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission will exercise a sound interpretation of the section and will not interpret the section to the broad manner posited by some critics of this bill. I urge hon. members to read Bill 44 carefully with a view to confirming our understanding that this legislation will not in any way affect the education or teaching of biological sciences or of evolution to Alberta students.

At this point, Mr. Speaker, I would move adjournment of the debate on this bill.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

5:40

Bill 34
Drug Program Act

[Adjourned debate May 5: Dr. Taft]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to rise and speak to second reading of Bill 34, the Drug Program Act, which provides a legislative mandate to establish and operate a provincial drug program and sets out the regulations for the minister to regulate and administer that program, a very interesting piece of legislation that has some real opportunities and real positive features to it that I think will benefit many Albertans. There are also some real concerns about it and how it will be implemented.

It does establish a provincial drug program and consolidates a number of different drug programs, and we see that as very positive and efficient in the interests of Albertans. It's absolutely essential that we get a clear plan with administrative clarification, qualifications for membership, and what benefits accrue to what parties. It's clear the plan is optional, and this also is a good feature but has some ramifications for those seniors who have been receiving the benefits of the present Blue Cross program and are now no longer in that position to receive it as a free service to their seniors' position.

As indicated in previous press releases, 60 per cent of seniors will receive either free prescription drugs or pay less, and this is a positive, progressive initiative for many in our society, I believe, and we applaud that. The recent changes that the minister has announced relate to the move to base the premium on income, taxable income instead of gross income. That, too, is a positive measure that I think reflects a lot of the public wishes and the seniors' groups, who have responded to this in a very vigorous way, many of whom we've heard from.

As I indicated, it's consolidating the drug benefit programs of Health and Wellness, Children and Youth Services, Employment and Immigration, Seniors and Community Supports, Solicitor General and Public Security, and these changes will most likely bring all of these under one set of administrative rules and eligibility criteria that are obviously in the public good and in the interest of more efficiency.

It also opens the door to what we have been suggesting for years, which is bulk purchasing and, in fact, an interprovincial co-operation to benefit all Albertans with reduced costs. We think this also is a very positive dimension to this bill.

We do have some concerns about it, of course, not the least of which is that we are reintroducing a bureaucracy now and a means test in which not only are we going to have to ask for personal data, financial data on seniors, but we are going to be judging on that basis who can pay and who cannot regardless of their illness status or their wellness status, I'd guess you'd say. Indeed, some so-called middle-income individuals are the most seriously ill in our society and will of course have to pay much more significantly than some

others. That's a serious concern for some people; I'm not saying for all. But it does raise the question about whether a means-based system purely and simply is appropriate if we're really trying to be, as I would say, equitable and fair about the system.

To us, Mr. Speaker, there are some key principles that should be involved in any kind of public program. That has to do with fairness, it has to do with consistency, and that has to do with universality as much as possible in our health care system, particularly for people who are chronically ill and who already have out-of-pocket expenses relating to those chronic illnesses or disabilities.

Several of the concerns that we have I can itemize here, and they have to do with, as I mentioned, those with chronic and expensive illnesses being penalized most and carrying the heaviest burden of both sickness and now costs.

The second is that it's discriminatory. It focuses on seniors as a select group, indeed a group that has the most sickness, as opposed to being a universal principle to apply to all citizens in terms of their ability to pay. I guess one might ask MLAs whether they'd be willing to be part of a program that would take up to 5 per cent of their taxable income before the program would kick in to pay for drugs. I wonder how many MLAs would be willing to fit into that program.

A third concern is that the income disparity is already adjusted for by taxation. We, of course, feel that to be really progressive, a policy should be tied to income. This is a partial attachment to income, but again it doesn't address the fact that the burden of illness is in the last few decades of life and that the burden of expense, then, will fall to seniors, albeit some who are well-off seniors. We think that can be tweaked a little bit, and I'll be introducing an amendment in the next phase of this debate.

A fourth issue has to do with the invasion of privacy and the concerns that many seniors have that they now will be scrutinized, perhaps having to defend and debate and discuss and appeal decisions around their bills. This raises some concerns, especially for seniors who are struggling with understanding some of these terms.

It has also blindsided seniors in a way that they were not prepared for, especially during this time. Planning for their retirement, they are hit with both this new pharmacy plan and a Blue Cross program that's suddenly changing, doubling and tripling in the next two years . . .

Mr. MacDonald: What about power bills?

Dr. Swann: . . . in addition to, as my hon. colleague is saying, power bills that may well be increasing as a result of changes in our rebate program and the deregulation that we've coped with for the last few years as well as a 40 per cent loss in their investment income, in the main. This is a time when we should be looking at seniors in a special way. I believe and our party believes that the seniors who built this province should not be inordinately burdened not only with increasing illness but increasing payments that they were not planning for.

Finally, it does seem unfair that we are rationalizing a system based fundamentally on age. Why should we focus this particular approach to drug coverage and drug payments primarily on the age of the citizen? So for these concerns and others we'll hopefully get support for a couple of amendments to come in the next phase.

In terms of the changes to Alberta Blue Cross coverage, we also have some serious doubt that this has been managed in the public interest. We look at the proposal to double and then triple the monthly premium for families over the next two years and have to ask the question: why is it suddenly important to make such huge

jumps in premiums? If this has been mismanaged in the past few years such that the program has not kept up with the cost of living and other issues, costs of drugs, then why has it been neglected for so many years? Now we're being faced with such a dramatic increase in Blue Cross coverage.

Another question has to do with why, as a government service providing for the public, we would be trying to integrate or harmonize a publicly funded program with the private sector. Clearly, this is designed to make drug accessibility and availability easier for those Albertans that need it. We're now setting up a system where essentially we're saying that it's a free and open game where private drug companies are in direct competition with what was supposed to be a public benefit program. Clearly, with the extra administrative costs of this income-based system, we're again going to be dealing with a big bureaucracy, and we're going to be spending on a bigger government when we're all wanting to trim government, wanting to make it more efficient and actually delivering more for less.

5:50

So those are some serious concerns raised by seniors and small-business owners who have said that this will not serve their interests as they share the costs of Blue Cross premiums with their employees. Seniors, as I've indicated, used to receive Blue Cross for free and only had to copay a maximum of \$35 per prescription. This is going to be a challenge for a number of them.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, the drug benefits program for rare diseases is clearly a positive direction. We support that. The drug approval process currently through an expert committee on drug

evaluation and therapeutics advising the health minister: excellent progress and very much supportable. The bulk purchasing, as I mentioned, is a very positive decision that's going to assist all Albertans in receiving better access to drugs, especially if it's an interprovincial purchase program. We could be leaders in that area. I look forward to that.

I also support the stimulus for pharmacists to take a greater role in prescribing, reducing the demand on physicians where it's appropriate and where it's supervised by a physician. I think that's very appropriate to be refilling prescriptions and making simple diagnoses and providing basic drugs to people. That will decrease costs in the system and improve access for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, those conclude my remarks, and I would move that we adjourn debate on Bill 34.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very exciting afternoon of illustrious debate. We want to thank all members for their participation today. Since it is almost 6 o'clock, I would move that we, in fact, call it 6 o'clock and adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:52 p.m. to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

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