



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday, February 8, 2010

Issue 2

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature
 Third Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, February 8, 2010

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome back.

I'd ask members to remain standing after the prayers so that we may pay tribute to former colleagues who have passed away.

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

Hon. members, there are three memorials today, unfortunately.

Mr. Ronald Armor Moore July 28, 1925, to January 9, 2010

The Speaker: On January 9, 2010, Mr. Ronald Armor Moore, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, sworn in as member 555, passed away. Mr. Moore was first elected in the election held November 2, 1982, and served until May 18, 1993. During his years of service he represented the constituency of Lacombe for the Progressive Conservative Party. During his term of office Ron Moore served on several committees: Select Committee on Workers' Compensation Act and the Occupational Health and Safety Act; Select Special Committee on Upper House Reform; Select Standing Committee on Law and Regulations; Select Standing Committee on Public Accounts; Select Standing Committee on Public Affairs; Select Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act; and the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services.

Mr. Harry Elliott Alger April 8, 1924, to January 27, 2010

The Speaker: Mr. Harry Elliott Alger, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, sworn in as member 547, passed away on January 27, 2010, at the age of 85 years. Mr. Alger was first elected in the election held November 2, 1982, and served two terms, until March 20, 1989. During his years of service he represented the constituency of Highwood for the Progressive Conservative Party. During his term of office Harry Alger served on the standing committees on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act, Private Bills, Public Affairs, Law and Regulations, Public Accounts, and the Select Special Committee on Upper House Reform.

Mr. William (Bill) John Yurko February 11, 1926, to January 28, 2010

The Speaker: Mr. William (Bill) John Yurko, former Member of the Legislative Assembly, sworn in as member 440, passed away January 28, 2010, at the age of 83 years. Mr. Yurko was first elected in the by-election held February 10, 1969, and served until April 24, 1978, at which time he resigned to seek the nomination in a federal constituency. During his years of service he represented the constituencies of Strathcona-East and Edmonton-Gold Bar for the Progressive Conservative Party. During his term of office Bill Yurko served as Minister of Housing and Public Works and Minister of the Environment. As a private member he served on the standing committees on Private Bills, Standing Orders and Printing; Public Accounts; Public Affairs, Agriculture and Education; Public Affairs; Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing; Law, Law Amendments and Regulations; Law and Regulations; and Automobile Insurance.

Mr. Yurko was elected to the Canadian House of Commons for the constituency of Edmonton East May 22, 1979, and was re-elected on February 18, 1980. His term ended September 4, 1984. He was a recipient of the 2002 Michael Luchkovich award for outstanding public service by a parliamentarian of Ukrainian origin.

With our admiration and respect there is gratitude to members of these families who shared the burdens of public office. Our prayers are with them. In a moment of silent prayer I would ask you to remember hon. members Ronald Armor Moore, Harry Alger, and Bill Yurko as you may have known them. Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.

Hon. members, ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to invite Mr. Paul Lorieau to lead us in the singing of our national anthem, and I'd invite all present to participate in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it's my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly 32 visitors from Annunciation school. Now, we have a group of grade 6 students, some of the best and brightest in our constituency and in our province, accompanied by Mrs. Kathleen Korner, Miss Christine Melnyk, Mrs. Linda Girard. These are young people who want to grow up to be teachers, veterinarians, hockey players, pediatricians, and I'm hoping that after they enjoy their day today, some of them will want to serve the public and join us here in the Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, they had an unfortunate fire last summer at Annunciation school, so they had the privilege of being in a makeshift school in trailers. Lo and behold, their school has been renovated and reopened, and it's better than new. I'd like to congratulate these young folks for joining us. I'd like all members to give them a round of applause, and I'd ask the young people to rise and receive their warm applause.

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure that I introduce to you and through you a group of grade 6 students from Meyonohk elementary school from my constituency of Edmonton-Ellerslie. These students are participating in the School at the Legislature program this week. I had the privilege of meeting them this afternoon in the rotunda. I would ask all the students and teachers Mrs. Sylvester and Miss Peterson to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Service Alberta.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mr. Terry Alston. Terry has served as a member of

the board for the Association of Alberta Registry Agents for the past two years and was recently elected as the new incoming president of the association. Terry is also the vice-president and managing director of Crowfoot Plates Registry Inc. He's a very positive individual with a great enthusiasm for all the registry offices across Alberta. I now would like to ask Terry to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Mr. Blaine Maller, who is seated in the public gallery. Mr. Maller has been a great supporter of mine. I look forward to working closely with him as my political adviser and, I think more importantly, a friend. I'd ask Mr. Maller to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the audience our vice-president of policy for the Wildrose Alliance Party. I'd ask that John Hilton-O'Brien rise to receive the warm welcome of this audience.

1:40

Members' Statements

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

Leduc Recreation Centre

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'd like to share with the House a success story in my riding that helps my constituents lead healthier and more active lives. The Leduc Recreation Centre, constructed with nearly \$5 million in grants from this provincial government, had its grand opening in November, which was attended by the hon. Premier and my colleague the hon. Minister of Culture and Community Spirit. It features an NHL-sized performance arena with seating for 1,800, home to the Black Gold Rodeo, and twin NHL-sized arenas, which have hosted NHL team practices and the Canadian Olympic women's hockey team. It is the only sledge hockey compatible facility in Western Canada. It serves as the official practice facility for the Edmonton Rush lacrosse team. The LRC's two indoor field houses are used for soccer, lacrosse, volleyball, badminton, basketball, and banquets.

It also features a modern aquatic centre serving from babies to seniors. The eight-sheet curling complex, with reputedly the best ice in Western Canada, served as the year-long training facility for the Chinese women's Olympic team. It has a fully equipped fitness centre, four-lane walking and running track, and a youth/education centre containing a school space and the Boys and Girls Club of Leduc. The facility is completely barrier free and has been nominated, Mr. Speaker, by the Canadian Paraplegic Association for the Percy Wickman accessibility award. It is also environmentally friendly, utilizing recycled heat and low-use water fixtures.

Mr. Speaker, this facility is a tremendous example of a great partnership between the provincial government, Leduc city and county, and the private sector and was built on time and under budget by a tremendous Alberta construction success story, PCL. I commend everyone involved in bringing this great jewel of a recreation facility to completion for the benefit of the citizens in my constituency and the surrounding areas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Minister's Advisory Committee on Health

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On January 20 the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health delivered its report to the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. It was my honour to serve as co-chair of this distinguished group. Entitled A Foundation for Alberta's Health System, our report proposes a new legislative framework that puts patients and families first.

Mr. Speaker, throughout our deliberations Albertans told us they want three things: clarity about what Albertans can expect from their publicly funded health system, assurance that Alberta will continue to abide by the principles of the Canada Health Act and then go further to reflect made-in-Alberta principles, and most importantly the ongoing engagement of Albertans in meaningful dialogue about new legislation and policies that affect them. Recommendations include establishing a set of overarching principles created by Albertans and embodied in a new Alberta health act, a new mechanism to support evidence-based decision-making, and provision for a future patient charter to clarify what Albertans can and should expect from their health system.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to the over 1,700 Albertans who contributed to our work through an online survey, the committee met with 39 key stakeholders and received 34 detailed submissions from all sectors, including health regulatory bodies, academic faculties, and advocacy and labour organizations from across the province. We were delighted with the minister's recent announcement that the government has accepted all four recommendations, beginning with the tabling of the Alberta health act this fall. In doing so, this government has confirmed that publicly funded health care is and always will be a treasured public good in Alberta, one that will continue to be supported and improved upon through a promise to involve Albertans in the decisions about the future of their system. Delivering on that promise begins very shortly when we begin a province-wide dialogue on the committee's recommendations.

On behalf of the House, Mr. Speaker, thank you to co-chair Deborah Prowse and the other members of the committee for this tremendous contribution.

Thank you.

Optimist Club

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I believe that healthy optimism for the future is one of the characteristics that defines Albertans, and I try to live my life as an unrepentant optimist in the great Alberta tradition. But optimism alone can't move a province forward to a better tomorrow. If I am an optimist, it's because I see the amazing work that Albertans are doing every day to help their neighbours lead better lives.

That certainly applies to the members of the Optimist Club, a wonderful organization that I was pleased to visit this past Saturday morning at the Blackfoot Inn in Calgary. I was honoured to bring greetings on behalf of this House to the club's quarterly conference.

For those unfamiliar with the Optimist Club, it is a volunteer-based, nonprofit service club that enhances youth activities in the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan and the state of Montana. This venerable organization was founded way back in 1938. They've been doing good work for over 70 years. For example, the Optimists created Optimist park in southwest Calgary and a green space up here in Edmonton.

They have sponsored workshops for teens, giving pointers on important life skills for young people; they've conducted essay and speech contests for young people; they've held annual banquets

recognizing contributions of teens who have made a difference in the community; and they also have provided bursaries for students continuing their education. The club also funds the Alberta juvenile curling regional playdowns and provincial championships. The club is also involved in activities promoting musical education and youth activities in many schools.

I was very impressed by the dedication and commitment of the fine folks of the Optimist Club. They're really living the Optimist creed, which includes the following line: "be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble." In word and in deed the members of the Optimist Club give youth and all Albertans cause for optimism. On behalf of the Official Opposition and, indeed, all members of this House I want to publicly congratulate them on their hard work and efforts.

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

Raymond Student Achievements

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and privilege to rise today and recognize a group of extraordinary students in my constituency. Inside and outside the classroom the students of Raymond junior and senior high schools demonstrate what creativity, dedication, and hard work can accomplish. On November 21, 2009, the Raymond Comets defeated the Bev Facey Falcons 19-2 to win their second consecutive tier 1 football championship; 2009 was also an incredible year for Raymond Comets basketball, with both the girls' and boys' teams winning the provincial 4A championships in Red Deer. In rugby coach Dan Bickman led the Comets to victory over the LCI Clippers to win the tier 1 high school girls rugby championships. In calf roping Clay Barnson was a provincial high school champion in 2008-2009.

These students also demonstrated that they are just as determined to win inside the classroom as they are on the field or basketball court. They exceeded the provincial average for those eligible to receive Rutherford academic scholarships and the participation rate of students writing four or more diploma exams. They can also be proud of their outstanding fine arts program, including show choir and band.

Mr. Speaker, these exceptional students and their teachers give me great faith in the future of our province. I would ask all members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating them for their accomplishments, and best wishes for future success.

Thank you.

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

Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am honoured to rise today to acknowledge and celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Alberta initiative for school improvement, or AISI. Formed in 1999 by the government and several education partners, the mandate of AISI was to encourage awareness and involvement in continuous improvement for teaching and learning. Alberta teachers have always looked for ways to improve student learning, but AISI formalized a process so students across the province could benefit from the successes that were happening locally. It's the grassroots focus that has really driven and built momentum in AISI. The projects Alberta schools are involved in are playing a pivotal role in developing new best practices that will be relevant to students today and into the future.

Over the years AISI has encouraged those serving in the education sector to ask thoughtful questions and explore new learning

approaches and methods to ensure our students have the best possible learning opportunities. Mr. Speaker, it's an influential program that is strengthening the foundation of innovation, which is the heart of our province's education system. To date AISI has inspired over 1,700 projects, that have been filled with innovation, creativity, and a true desire to improve student learning and teaching.

Teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students have gathered in Edmonton to celebrate AISI's 10th anniversary at the annual AISI conference. The conference is showcasing over 60 creative projects developed by school jurisdictions across the province. It's a wonderful forum for education stakeholders to share ideas, learn from one another, and be inspired to achieve even more for students in Alberta.

I'd like to personally thank all of those involved in the AISI projects for their passion and contributions to the students of our great province. Congratulations for a very successful 10 years of AISI. This is an important milestone, one which all Albertans should be extremely proud of.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Clerk sets in motion the daily question period, let me just say that at the conclusion of the Routine today I will be making a statement with respect to question period rotation. Today's rotation will be that outlined in my memo to all members dated February 1, 2010.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Budget Process

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta doesn't need a new committee to maintain its competitive advantage. It needs a new government, a government that has the ability to make things better, a government that has a stable budgeting process, which has a long-term vision for the province, a government that is not devastated when oil and gas prices decline. To the Premier: how is the Premier changing the budgeting process to prevent the need for further cuts in the future?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, over the summer our minister of health will be consulting with Albertans about health care because it is Albertans' number one priority. The minister of finance will be delivering a budget tomorrow, which will roll out the details of a funding commitment to the Alberta Health Services Board.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government may have pieced together a budget for this year, but what about next year? What about 10 years from now? What is the long-term plan to establish a stable economic future for our province?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition will have to wait until tomorrow for all of the budget details, but I'm sure that once he hears the budget coming from the minister, he'll be pleased with the commitment. As I said before, it will give predictable funding for Alberta Health Services Board. I just ask that we wait for tomorrow's budget.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hollow bill put forward by the Premier is a weak move to give the appearance of action. Albertans need certainty, not vague gestures. When will the Premier take real action toward ensuring Alberta's long-term competitiveness?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, competitiveness is very important. Just watching the very large global economic shifts and countries competing for people, competing for investment, we have to make sure that we position this province to be competitive in all areas – that's not just oil and gas but agriculture and forestry and tourism – and make sure that we're in a position to attract continuing investment that drives, of course, the revenue that pays for all of the social programs that we enjoy.

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

Health Care Public Consultation

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's response to problems shows they are disconnected from what Albertans say and need. Albertans say we need family doctors; government says we need to restructure. Albertans say we need more public long-term care; government says we need to strike a committee. Albertans say we need to improve emergency wait times; government says we need new legislation. To the Premier: when Albertans need action and solutions, what is the Premier's reason for waiting six months to hear back from another committee?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, consulting with Albertans about health care is important. It's important particularly now as we start to define exactly what Albertans want from the system. Part of that, as I said before, is long-term, predictable funding. There are other ideas that will come forward from the public that the minister will then put into an Alberta health care act that will be presented to this House later this fall, and we'll be able to deal with Albertans' number one priority, which is health.

Dr. Swann: Well, what is very clear, Mr. Speaker, is that this government has no idea where they're going on health care. What Albertans have told us they need is more public long-term care, not expensive, privately run designated assisted living. Will the Premier commit to creating more publicly funded, publicly delivered long-term care beds?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the hon. member will be very pleased later next week and the early part of the following week as more announcements will be made on further capital projects for continuing care in this province. We know that we have to build at least 775, 800 new continuing care beds, and we will meet that commitment. In fact, I feel very confident that we will exceed that commitment. That is one way, again, of dealing with the number one priority of Albertans, and that is good quality publicly funded health care.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What Albertans need right now from their government is a plan and real action to ensure that every Albertan has a family doctor. How will looking at legislation for six months help Albertans to get a family doctor?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, long-term, predictable funding to Alberta Health Services goes a long way in providing predictability in the system. Once again, unfortunately, I can't give the details. The details will be in tomorrow's budget, as presented by the Minister of Finance and Enterprise.

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

Competitiveness Review of Oil and Gas Industry

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To get out of the recession, we need to get business going again. We need to get the oil and gas business going again, but oil and gas companies aren't going to start investing in long-term resources until there's some certainty over royalties. Albertans and the industry have been promised a competitiveness review that has been delayed and delayed and delayed and delayed again. To the Minister of Energy: what is the minister waiting for? Why don't you release the competitiveness review?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, it's interesting to see this opposition finally recognize that oil and gas is a significant driver of the economy in this province. Unlike the Liberal oil and gas policy that was released a couple of weeks ago, what we want to do is ensure that we have good interaction with industry that is continuing. Because this is more than just royalties – this is a competitiveness review – industry has said: take the time you need to do it, but do it right.

Mr. Taylor: Uh-huh; do it right. The former health minister now in charge of doing it right in Energy.

By delaying the release of this report, Mr. Speaker, does the minister see that he is doing Alberta's core industry no favours whatsoever?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, there's no delay. What we've been doing is working with industry to ensure that all of the issues related to a changed environment in the world are addressed, and we will do that in due course.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, I'm assuming here that the competitiveness review of the oil and gas industry is already sitting on the minister's desk. I can't imagine where it is if it's not. So why is it that Bill 1, which will lead to yet another committee to review competitiveness, is needed? I mean, how many times do you have to review the review the review the review?

Mr. Liepert: Well, just to correct the member, it is not sitting on my desk. The consultation, as I said, is continuing with industry, and that is happening as we speak. I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunity to debate Bill 1 during second reading and committee. Bill 1 is much broader than just the oil and gas industry, Mr. Speaker. As the Premier just alluded, Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, is to ensure that across all sectors of the economy in this province we are competitive.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Royalty Framework

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This PC government's new royalty framework has been the most damaging attack economically on Alberta since Pierre Trudeau's national energy program. Although the world economic downturn has not helped, the evidence

is irrefutable that thousands and thousands of Albertans have lost their jobs, hundreds their businesses, and our reputation as an attractive and stable place to do business has been severely compromised. To the Premier: will he apologize to the thousands of Albertans whose lives and prosperity have been harmed due to his government's disastrous energy policy?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, there's no doubt that all sectors of the economy are important to this province given the current economic downturn and especially the unpredictable drops in oil and natural gas prices. Especially as a result of the American market diminishing as quickly, it has created issues. That's why we introduced the drilling incentive program, to increase the drilling in the province of Alberta. We've also met with the oil and gas industry over the last number of months to ensure that we can find other ways of promoting more jobs in the industry across Alberta.

2:00

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, this Premier knows very well that industry, the hon. members for Calgary-Glenmore, Calgary-Fish Creek, myself, and many of his own backbench MLAs continually warned him of the harm this proposed royalty change would have on the economy before the new royalty framework was ever even introduced or implemented. To the Premier: why didn't he show true leadership by heeding the warnings of those who obviously understood the complexities of the energy sector far better than he did on this issue?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I don't have any backbenchers. They're government members. I actually find that term quite offensive.

Going on to the issue of the oil and gas industry, the framework was structured in such a way that it would, obviously, reward risk, but it would also share the responsibility of partnership, low prices and higher prices. Over the last number of months we've seen incredibly low prices in the natural gas industry, and that has been reflected in lower royalties paid at these prices. There is work to do at higher prices when and if we return to those, and that is part of the overall competitiveness review that's taking place at the moment.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, what's offensive is the thousands of jobs that have been lost to Albertans over the last year.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans are confused as to why this government would meddle with the economic engine of Alberta and Canada without doing a thorough competitiveness review before developing the new royalty framework rather than doing it after the damage has already been done. To the Premier: would it not have made more sense to conduct a proper competitiveness review prior to overhauling the royalties? Why is he doing this backwards?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, one of the things that the world-wide economic recession has taught all of us is that there is a huge global economic shift, number one, and, number two, that all countries are competing for investment and for people. It's a different world stage, and we must react to what has happened over the last 18 months. Our number one partner in trade was, of course, the United States, and we've seen that economy diminish somewhat, so we have to aggressively pursue new markets around the world. That means we have to diversify our markets to ensure that we keep growing the Alberta economy.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Provincial RCMP Services

Mr. Rogers: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Reducing crime is a high priority for Albertans, including those outside large cities. Crime in small communities does not seem to get the same attention as in large urban centres. Residents of these areas want to know what is being done to promote and enhance their safety. Most of these communities, including my constituency, are served very well, I might add, by the RCMP. My question is for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. What is the future role of the RCMP in Alberta after 2012?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is essentially asking me for a vision of policing in Alberta post-2012, so let me share that with him and with this House. We will provide policing through a spectrum of resources: community police officers, sheriffs, municipal police forces, First Nations police, and the RCMP functioning at the municipal and at the provincial level. Those forces will be sharing information, collaborating, and bringing unique strengths. We will be working together to make our highways and our communities safe and secure.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is for the same minister. It has been suggested that it would be more cost-effective and a better use of taxpayer dollars to move towards Alberta having its own provincial police force. Are you looking at this option, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Oberle: The short answer is no. It may be true that it is less expensive to deploy a sheriff, but that ignores the fact that the sheriffs and RCMP officers have different responsibilities, different levels of training, different overhead costs. It also ignores the fact that we would have significant infrastructure and start-up costs, and it also ignores the fact that we get 30 per cent funding from the federal government for our RCMP forces in our province. No, we are not considering provincial police, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and, Mr. Minister, thank you for that answer. My final supplemental, then, is: if the province is committed to continuing the relationship with the RCMP, Albertans want to know what the RCMP is bringing to the table to support the province's efforts to combat gang crime.

Mr. Oberle: They will be bringing what they have already been bringing and more of it. They'll be bringing expertise, training, equipment, special teams, all of which will be deployed in concert with and co-operation with other police forces in our province. We're working together for safe communities, Mr. Speaker, and will continue to do that.

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

PDD Funding

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since December of last year the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports has left disabled Albertans, families, and PDD service providers wondering what is

the future of their supports. To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: how is the minister protecting vulnerable Albertans when for the last three months everyone involved in PDD services doesn't have a clue of what's happening?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to make it very clear. The people who receive supports from our persons with developmental disabilities programs are a priority for this government. The Premier has said it over and over again, and we will maintain that they are a priority. We have a budget of approximately \$600 million that we are spending for 9,200 individuals. We're working through our boards and through our stakeholders to ensure that the supports and services that are vital and necessary to people in this program are provided.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. A minister communicating the decisions that they make is the honesty that Albertans expect, and they absolutely deserve it. Why did the minister not inform the public of these cuts through a press release showing how much was to be taken from PDD service providers?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, requiring the savings that we needed in the PDD program is an operational exercise. It's something that we're doing all the time. It's something that our PDD regional community boards perform. We do expect them to communicate with families and with the stakeholders. That's their job, and that's what, I understand, they have been doing.

Ms Pastoor: I'm not sure that that's exactly how they feel, but thank you for that. Will the minister commit right now to maintaining the funding for all individuals and agencies supported by PDD?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, once again I'll make it very clear. This is a very important program to this government and to the people of Alberta. The funding that we provide, around \$600 million, is what we use to ensure that the services and supports that our PDD clients receive stay in place, and there will be no removal of any vital services to our PDD clients.

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

Minimum Wage

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has announced that the minimum wage will not increase this year even though average weekly earning appears to be increasing. My question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. Why is this government re-examining a policy that has only been in place for two years?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is this government's and my ministry's priority to keep Albertans employed. There are about 20,000 Albertans right now who are earning minimum or close to minimum wage, and these individuals are in a very fragile position. Where the economy slows down, they are the most vulnerable and most likely to be laid off. It is my ministry's position that we want to develop a policy on setting minimum wages

that takes away that fear of losing a job and keeps our employers who employ these minimum wage earners at a stable position.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Some provinces, like Newfoundland and Labrador, announced significant increases to their minimum wages this year to assist in economic recovery. Why are we doing the opposite?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I can't comment on what my counterparts do in other provinces, but I can tell you that I will do what is best for Albertans. In Alberta in our current economy I will always take jobs before wage increases. At this point in time I want to make sure that the minimum wage is fair but also supportive of employment.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister: when can small businesses and those who earn the minimum wage expect a decision from government in order to plan ahead?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very soon I will be asking a committee to review minimum wages in this province. [interjections] The opposition would like to think that one size fits all and that this minister should be making those decisions. Since they are so vocal, I would really like to engage them in some capacity as an all-party committee and decide what is the right minimum wage for low-income Albertans and how it should be set from year to year so they don't have to be sitting there every year and screaming about the same thing.

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

2:10 Protection of Children in Care

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week we had another tragic situation come to light, drawing further attention to the ongoing problems in the Alberta children's services system. The minister's response: call for the latest in a series of internal reviews, which have more to do with the protection of the ministry than with the protection of the child. Unfortunately, simply changing ministers is not going to change the underlying issues in the children's services system. To the minister. We and many Albertans have called for greater transparency for the Child and Youth Advocate. When will the minister require the advocate to report directly to the Legislature?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you know, we did have a very terrible situation last week that the member has referred to, and yes, I did call for a review. There is an initial review that's done by a CEO when an incident comes to their attention, and then there is a case review that's done months later after a police investigation.

This review is completely different. It's going to fill in that gap, and I hope to have answers to that here by the end of February.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. The government's theme song, Mr. Speaker, is: we are reviewing the situation. By removing the hiring freeze and committing to sustainable funding, the minister could address the overwhelming workloads and insufficient supports that front-line staff face. When will the minister take this step?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have had a need for front-line staff. I can tell you very clearly that the children and family service authorities, when they do identify the front-line staff that are needed in the different authorities – we've approved 51 staff within the last few months. We will continue to do that as each of the needs arises. We know how critical those positions are.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. With up to 700 vacancies in Children and Youth Services to be filled, there is a lot of hiring to go on. What assurances can the minister provide that the American-borrowed outcome-based service delivery system is designed to serve the best interests of our children and youth as opposed to saving dollars at their expense?

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Speaker, I think that you're going to hear more in the Assembly here in the future about outcome-based service reviews. I can tell you that what the children and family service authorities are doing right now in looking at that outcome-based service is that they'll be bringing that back through the ministry, and I will then bring that on forward to you, hon. member.

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

PDD Funding

(continued)

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have met with many constituents about budget adjustments made to the PDD program. My constituents are expressing great concern about the removal of vital services and supports that are provided to those with the greatest needs among us. To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: can she assure me and all Albertans that the reductions to PDD won't impact the health and safety of the vulnerable people this program serves.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, let me make this perfectly clear: there has been no removal of vital services and supports to individuals supported by PDD, and no one has been put at risk. I have made it clear to the PDD community boards that if there is a health and safety concern, they are to discuss this with the agencies and the families and find a solution immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister: is the ministry still looking to find money from the PDD program?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to inform the hon. member that we have completed what we set out to accomplish, and

we have found the money that we needed through administrative efficiencies and savings. As you can appreciate, this was a very challenging task. It was very complex and very time consuming. I am pleased to say that by working with the boards and the stakeholders, we were able to find the funds with very little impact to our clients. This was a collaborative approach, and I do want to thank the people involved in working with our department to find those savings.

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

Water Allocation Management System

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Water is a critical issue for Albertans. Alberta has limited water resources, antiquated allocation, and an unfair water market process, which the government is stubbornly sticking to. The cost of this is that municipalities are being denied water for their citizens to drink. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Is this the best the government can do with a water policy?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I certainly hope not. I think I've made it pretty clear that the government is about to embark on a very broadly based review and update of the water allocation policy. I have spoken around the province talking about the need for us to update our water allocation policy, and we're committed to doing just that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Minister of Environment. Now, recently the municipality of Crowsnest Pass was denied their appeal on a water licence, and Okotoks is reaching their designated allocation. Why does this government persist in upholding its first-in-time, first-in-right approach when people's water needs are coming second?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I guess I have to remind this member yet one more time that there's only so much water to go around. You can't just issue a licence when water doesn't exist. That's what this process is all about. This is a process about respecting the historical rights of long-standing licence holders and at the same time allowing for the inclusion of new population bases in an expanding and growing economy.

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Minister, that's unacceptable. People's drinking water should come first.

This minister has said again and again that a new water policy is coming this spring, but I listened carefully, and there's absolutely no mention of it in the throne speech. How long do municipalities which are junior licence holders along with industry and any Albertans who want a clean glass of water to drink have to wait?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, that's the most ridiculous statement I have ever heard in this House. The fact of the matter is that Albertans are not waiting for a clean glass of water. There is not one municipality in this province that doesn't have an allocation of water that serves their needs. We're talking about the future. We're not talking about today.

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

Fiscal Accountability

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We've all seen this movie before: careless spending, a lack of clear priorities, reckless tax cuts for the most wealthy, followed by a drop in oil and gas prices, a burgeoning deficit, and then large cuts to the services needed by ordinary Alberta families. It was a bad horror movie then, and so is the sequel. How many times will this Premier and this PC government put Albertans through this painful cycle? How did you, Mr. Premier, let this happen again?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, a revisionist point of history there, but I'll perhaps allow the minister of finance to address the question.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I really think the leader of the third party should pursue a new career as a fortune teller because he seems to be able to preordain what the budget will be tomorrow. If he has those kind of powers, he should really be in another line of business.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You learn an awful lot by reading the minister's clips.

Albertans are still feeling the effects of cuts made in the '90s. Now we're on the brink of repeating the same mistakes. My question is to the Premier. Why didn't you take the necessary steps to ensure that Albertans never again had to endure massive cuts to the services they and their families depend on?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would hazard a guess that \$17 billion worth of savings, \$25 billion worth of expenditure on infrastructure, paying down all of the debt, putting us in the best financial situation of any jurisdiction in North America is probably doing that. But I think the hon. member might just want to wait and see what the budget has to bring.

Mr. Mason: So much fun we're going to do it again.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier has been a member of this government since the mid-1990s. Will he admit that he and his government have failed to learn from their mistakes and caused suffering on a massive scale as a result?

Mr. Horner: I will answer on behalf of my colleagues here that, really, when you look at what Alberta has today, we have the best financial situation of any jurisdiction in Canada, perhaps in North America. We have the best health system, I believe, of anywhere else in North America. We have the best postsecondary institutions in North America, possibly on the globe. We have the best K to 12 system in Canada, bar none, Mr. Speaker, and we have an economy that is the lifeblood – the lifeblood – of this country.

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

2:20 Northland School Division

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. "Paternalistic," "heavy-handed" are words I have heard used to describe the Minister of Education's actions in firing the corporate board of the Northland school division. Many of my constituents have children who attend schools run by the Northland school board, and they're worried and hurt and concerned about the future of their children's education and

their fundamental right to elect local school board trustees. My question is to the Minister of Education. Since 95 per cent of students who attend Northland schools are First Nation and/or Métis peoples, did you even bother to consult with or speak to First Nation and Métis leaders before firing a democratically elected board?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely, I took the opportunity to speak with the grand chiefs of Treaty 8 and Treaty 6 as well as the president of the Métis Settlements General Council and the Métis Nation of Alberta. We also contacted the members of the partnership council, which we've set up with First Nations and Métis in the province. I can tell you that I've had a lot of very positive feedback from right across the north with respect to the steps that we've taken. It's not about firing the board. The board are people who were elected and who serve on their local councils and do good work. It's about what we need to do for the children.

Ms Calahasen: A majority of the Northland school division is in my constituency. My constituents understand that change was needed and that Northland did have challenges, so why did the minister use a hammer to address the problem rather than using a scalpel when it was required? When you do this, the people feel disenfranchised by your actions, and they feel oppressed and silenced. Now that you're running the Northland school board from downtown Edmonton, what's going to happen to the locally elected school committees?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, it should be very clear that we're not running Northland from downtown Edmonton. In fact, the superintendent of schools is still in place, operating out of Peace River as per normal. The official trustee will be operating out of the headquarters in Peace River, and the inquiry team will be visiting each and every one of the 23 communities involved.

The locally elected boards are still there. No one was fired. We dissolved the corporate board and replaced it with an official trustee. Northland trustees are elected to their local school boards for each of the 23 schools, and they are there as elected representatives and remain there as elected representatives.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents are also very concerned about another item, as all Albertans should be, that the dismissal of the Northland corporate board is an omen of further provincial incursions into the jurisdiction of locally elected authorities. Northland was just an easy first target and a convenient testing ground. Is this not a sign that you're going to be getting rid of locally elected school boards? Who's next, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to be perfectly clear. This question has come up since the start of the Inspiring Education process. We have absolutely no interest or intent or plan to do away with school boards. School boards are a necessary connection between the education system and communities. It's absolutely essential that communities and parents be involved in education, and their connection to the system is through their schools and through the school boards. So that's absolutely necessary.

We needed to move in this particular instance to protect the best interests of the children, to make sure that we could make the change that was necessary, not on a slow or incremental basis but immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

School Closures

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since 2002 15 public schools in the Edmonton public school division have been closed, resulting in 6,900 student spaces disappearing from central Edmonton neighbourhoods. My first question is to the Premier. Given that Alberta Education and the government project that we are going to have 80,000 more students in the system in the next 15 years than we presently have, does the government not think that these school spaces that are closed and the proposed plans to close additional ones will be counter to the government's strategic plan?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are moving as fast as we can to build spaces for students where the students are. That obviously has implications for spaces where there are not student populations, and school boards have the obligation to rationalize their student spaces in the best interests of educational opportunities for their students. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that the Edmonton public school board has one of the best examples of this with the city centre school project where, indeed, they had to close some student spaces a number of years ago, but they created better opportunities for the students in that area, better educational opportunities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that McCauley school in downtown Edmonton is proposed for closure, how will that community and the students that live in that community be better served if that public school is closed forever?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the last series of questions I was answering why it's so necessary to have local boards to deal with the issues of local communities, and now I'm being asked about doing the local board's job. It is the school boards' job to make sure that the facilities that they have in place and the teachers that they have in place and the opportunities they have in place make the best possible educational opportunities for the students that they serve.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Education this time. Surely he knows that he calls the shots with the public boards. If he didn't, he would give them the right to increase their mill rate if they saw fit to make a flexible budget for themselves. Now, given that – and this is a direct quote from Alberta's 20-year strategic plan – the plan is “to maintain and improve existing schools to ensure they can deliver top quality education for Alberta students,” then why are you forcing Edmonton public to close another 5,000 student spaces in the central neighborhoods of this city? You're the political minister of this city, and you won't even defend it.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're not forcing school boards, either Edmonton public or any other school boards, to close schools. We're not forcing them at all. They have the obligation and the duty to make sure that they have the best educational opportunity for students.

When the hon. member quotes the strategic capital plan, surely he must understand that when we're talking about renewing and improving physical space, obviously it's physical space that has

value because there are students available to use that space. It makes no sense at all to read that to suggest that we fix and improve schools where there are no students.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Climate Change

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to media reports back home the Alberta delegation received more than its fair share of negative attention during the global climate change conference in Copenhagen in December. To the Minister of Environment: other than pointing fingers on the issue of growing global emissions, what was actually accomplished in Copenhagen?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, while there is no doubt that there certainly were some in Copenhagen that had an intent other than arriving at an agreement that would help us to address this issue of climate change, we had a number of objectives there. One was to engage in as many bilateral discussions as we possibly could, and I'm pleased to advise the House that we had a very positive response from the groups that we talked to when we told them about what we're doing here. At the end of the day we got an agreement that all nations signed on that gives us the flexibility we were looking for.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Alberta is investing significant resources to combat climate change, be it in carbon capture and storage, regulations to reduce emissions, consumer rebates, or other programs. These investments are occurring in the wake of climategate, where the science behind climate change was suggested to be fabricated. How can the minister assure my constituents and all Albertans that this government's investments and actions on climate change are necessary?

Mr. Renner: Well, there's no denying that there is some controversy around some of the science, but the fact remains that the overwhelming evidence clearly indicates that climate change is real, that human-induced climate change is something that we need to address. At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, it's our responsibility as responsible resource suppliers to the world to ensure that we develop our resources in a responsible, low-carbon environment.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Despite the leadership that the minister suggests, the oil sands continue to be criticized for their environmental record both from within and outside of Canada. Just this past week the federal Minister of the Environment demanded further leadership from Alberta's oil sands industry. How does the minister respond to the latest tough talk about our resources, and how will he ensure Alberta's story is understood?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I share the concern that was raised by the federal minister. I, too, hear the same kinds of concerns raised. We have a target in northern Alberta. We have a responsibility to do two things. We have a responsibility to share information about the regulatory regime that's in place in Alberta – this is one of the most highly regulated industries anywhere in the world –

but we also have a responsibility to continue to push the envelope to continue to hold industry responsible to ensure that they improve their record.

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

Political Minister for Calgary

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's recent cabinet shuffle added a couple of new cabinet ministers and a new portfolio to the political lexicon, the political minister. I know I'm the Justice critic, and therefore I assume I'm the political minister critic; however, I'm not exactly sure exactly what a political minister does, so my question is simple. To the Minister of Justice, the Political Minister for Calgary: what exactly does your new job entail? It'll help me do my job.

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if my hon. friend knows what his job is. Maybe he should talk to his boss about that. I'll say that I do know what my job is, and my job, in discussions with my boss, the Premier, is to ensure that we have an approach as part of a team leading this government to make sure that all communities and all people in this province are represented and have their voices heard around the government cabinet table. We will continue to make sure that happens.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you for that answer, but it didn't help me too much, Mr. Speaker, so I'm going to try. I've been searching the websites and searching elsewhere for more clarification on this, and I couldn't find an order in council or anything I get that made you this. How did you get this job? What are your qualifications? Did you apply for the job? What, really, is this all about?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure quite what this has to do with government policy, but I'm not surprised that my hon. friend didn't actually get the answer the first time. I would say that I know that my job in this government and this caucus is to be an effective voice for the city that I represent and the constituency that I represent, and I'll continue to do that.

Mr. Hehr: Well, Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that by adding the term "political" to a minister's title, it inevitably brings into question partisan politics, that in our system of government is supposed to be the purview of our respective political parties, not government departments. Accordingly, my question for the political minister is whether she is accountable to this Legislature or to the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, or at least the Calgary wing?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member just answered his own question, which is: if that's his view of my job, why is he asking questions in this House along those lines?

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

Integrated Traffic Units

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a frequent driver on our highways I can't help but notice the incredible number of drivers who seem to think our speed limits are a guideline. I've also driven by more collisions than I care to, and some of them are quite serious. My questions are to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Safety. Can the minister explain what is being done to get bad drivers off the road?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can assure this House and the province that speed limits are not guidelines, and I hope he wasn't referring to anybody within this House when he brought that up.

I'm pleased to announce today – I announced it at K Division just shortly – that the government of Alberta has chosen an integrated model with sheriffs and RCMP officers and will deploy 19 traffic safety enforcement divisions across the province. I'm confident that our integrated traffic units will help us reduce serious injuries and deaths on Alberta's roadways.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Isn't this just a reorganization of existing resources? How will integrated traffic units make our roads safer?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, I suppose this could be cast as a redeployment, but it would be one to provide more efficient and more effective enforcement.

This comes about as the result of some traffic enforcement pilots that were conducted in the last year integrating RCMP and traffic sheriffs in four different models. We showed clearly that it improved traffic safety, improved the quality of traffic investigations and enforcement coverage, increased enforcement visibility on the highways, and made it easier to hand off Criminal Code investigations to the RCMP, including impaired driving investigations. It's also critical to note that this will provide at 19 different locations . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: could you just explain how the 19 locations for these integrated traffic units were chosen?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, first of all, it was necessary to concentrate resources in 19 locations in order to provide a critical amount to staff special operations such as checkstops, vehicle safety checks, and those sorts of things. It was also necessary to disperse, to provide a presence across our province, and it's necessary to be visible. So this model is going to provide all of the above, and it was chosen by the officers themselves, not by the minister.

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

Fiscal Accountability (continued)

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Late last week the Premier issued new mandate letters to a shuffled cabinet, but one thing that seemed to be missing from these mandate letters was true accountability. The government of British Columbia announced that if the provincial budget was not balanced, then 10 per cent of the ministerial salary goes back to the taxpayers. My question is to the minister of finance. If the government of Alberta continues to run deficits, will the Premier and his cabinet demonstrate real leadership and real accountability and hold themselves personally and financially accountable?

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

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'd remind the hon. member that we've already done that. She actually was a member of the party when that decision was made.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, I'm not even going to answer that.

Mr. Speaker, last year the government pushed through a 35 per cent pay increase. Then the government turns to front-line agencies that help people with developmental disabilities and pressures them to break their contracts. My question is to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. How could she accept a 35 per cent pay increase but try to force some very lean service providers to accept another broken contract in December?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, we were looking for some savings, and we work with our PDD community boards because the funding that we have is distributed through the community boards to our agencies, to our families, and to our clients. By working with our community boards and our agencies and our families, we were looking for ways to be efficient and to have some savings. At the same time there were no vital services cut to any of our PDD clients.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: That's not the case.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans watch this government continue to break contracts and their word. It's hard to believe that this government could not find 1 per cent in their administrative budget to honour these signed PDD contracts. Will the minister show real leadership and find 1 per cent in her own administrative budget to protect PDD agencies?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, all PDD contracts were honoured. Only contracts that were agreed to were altered, and we have found the savings within administration and with the help of stakeholders, families, and service agencies.

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

Protection of Children in Care

(continued)

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to charges of sexual abuse against a foster parent the new Minister of Children and Youth Services told the media that incidents of abuse in care are very unusual. The minister's own reports, however, show 79 confirmed instances of abuse against 150 children in care between January and June in 2009 alone. So my question to the minister: is it the minister's view that these numbers are business as usual, or do they confirm that the government's record in this area is unacceptable?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can tell you that my comments were based around the situation that I learned of on Thursday morning, and I can tell you as well that that is very unusual, what I did learn in regard to this situation. I happen to agree with the staff that have brought that forward to me in the way that they explained the statistics. As I gather through this review further statistical data, I'll be able to look at it and ensure that we make changes if necessary following the review, based on this situation, hon. member.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the children's advocate defended the government, saying that it's just one of those things and that the best

screening the system knows how to do is already in place, yet in November the government's own review acknowledged that serious failures exist in screening potential foster parents. So why won't the minister move the children's advocate to her communications branch, where he'd be better suited and apparently believes he already lives, and replace him with an independent advocate who's able to represent children without fear of repercussion?

2:40

Mrs. Fritz: You know, Mr. Speaker, honestly, to answer a question like that – to say that the children's advocate, who works on behalf of the advocacy of children that are vulnerable and need protection and ensure safety, should be over in a communications branch: that's so disrespectful.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, it may be or may not be disrespectful, but it is indeed what the advocate said to the media this weekend. I was as shocked then, when I heard it, as you appear to be now.

Now, given recent charges of sexual abuse, 79 confirmed cases of abuse in care in six months, and internal reports saying screening is not up to speed, one would expect an advocate to sound the alarm, not defend the system as he did this weekend. So why won't the minister show leadership in her new post and finally join the rest of the country and do the right thing and make the children's advocate an independent officer of the Legislature?

Mrs. Fritz: Let me be clear, Mr. Speaker. I did not agree with you about what you said about the advocate being in the communications branch of this department at all. I've read all the advocate reports back over the last five-year period, and I can tell you this: he speaks very strongly for children and youth that need protection and need their safety ensured. As I said before, it's just a disrespectful question.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question period for today. Eighteen members were recognized today. Of the 18, eight came from the Official Opposition, four came from the independents, six came from the government, and that was 106 questions and responses.

In 30 seconds from now we will continue with the Routine.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Provincial Wheelchair Curling Championship

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend four teams gathered in Edmonton for the 2010 Alberta provincial wheelchair curling championships, two teams from Edmonton and two teams from Calgary. At the end of the round robin, Calgary's number one team and Edmonton's number one team played for the gold medal and the right to represent Alberta at the nationals in Kelowna, B.C.

Calgary's team B consisted of Glen Brunelle, coach; Dale Keith, skip; Bruce Matthews, third; Ron Pawlyk, second; Wanda Pizzinato, lead; and Curtis Junor, alternate.

Edmonton's team B was Wanda Crawford, coach; Don Donaldson, skip; Doug MacEachern, third; Don Munroe, second; Bonna Gerlitz, lead; and Marie Laframboise, alternate.

The silver medal winners were Edmonton team A: David Jerke, coach; Cliff Nuspl, skip; Warren Fleury, third; Mike McMullan, second; Shawna Walsh, lead; and Romeo Johnson, alternate.

The 2010 gold medal winners were Calgary team A: Tony Zummack, coach; Jack Smart, skip; Anne Hibberd, third; Martin Purvis, second; and Calgary-Hays constituent Bridget Wilson, lead.

Congratulations to all the athletes involved. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five copies of the victims services branch status report for 2008-2009. More than \$7.4 million in grants was provided to 97 organizations, an increase of 36 per cent over the previous year's funding. These programs reported providing services to over 43,000 people. Sixty-two per cent of those cases involved assisting victims of violent crime. In 2008-2009 more than \$11.6 million in financial benefits were provided to eligible victims of crime.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite number of copies of a report entitled A Foundation for Alberta's Health System, prepared by the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health and delivered to the minister in January 2010.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the benefit of the House a letter dated November 12, 2009, from the Capital Region Board to the chair of the Alberta Utilities Commission and to the former Minister of Energy, the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky. This letter is in regard to the heartland transmission project proposed by EPCOR and AltaLink.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table today a copy of the proposed schedule for the 2010 main estimates, as provided for in the standing orders. These have been circulated previously to Opposition House Leaders and representatives. I just want to say in tabling, if I may, that it's the same schedule as we had for last year, as I had indicated earlier to many people, with the exception that intergovernmental affairs now is scheduled for March 10 and Energy for February 16. There has been some concern about the scheduling of Energy for February 16, so I've indicated to parties that under the standing orders with agreement of the House we can move something from a policy field committee in the evenings as scheduled to an afternoon or to another time. I'm still open to that discussion, but I thought that in the best interests of having members understand the schedule, we should table this at the first opportunity.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I am tabling today copies of a new brochure that will be produced by the Legislative Assembly of Alberta entitled Page Biographies, Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 27th Legislature, Third Session, Spring 2010. I'm sure copies will be circulated to all members as well.

Is that it for tablings?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I should have mentioned that on this schedule, just so that people notice, under 59.01 the estimates for Executive Council will be heard in Committee of Supply in the Assembly on March 9 and that pursuant to Standing Order 59.03 the votes on the estimates are scheduled for March 18. It's on the schedule, but I just wanted to bring it to members' attention.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Ms Redford, Minister of Justice and Attorney General, pursuant to the Legal Profession Act the Law Society of Alberta's annual accountability report 2008.

Statement by the Speaker

Rotation of Questions

The Speaker: Hon. members, prior to the question period today I indicated that the rotation that we would use today would be that outlined in my memo to all members dated February 1, 2010. I indicated that at the conclusion of the Routine I would make a statement with respect to the position taken by the chair on the rotation and operation of question period for the Third Session of the 27th Legislature, and I'm pleased to do that now.

The chair provided members with notice of the rotation in a letter dated February 1, 2010, which is in a form sent at the start of every session every year by this Speaker. The one variation that I made is that a week ago, on February 1, I included in my letter, an operational letter that I send every year, a statement with respect to the rotation of question period. Normally statements on question period are made on the first day of the session, but as a courtesy to all members one week ago I included that in my letter, and the chair will now state for the record how the rotation has changed, why the changes were necessary, the rationale for these changes, and offer some comments about the development of question period. It will take a few minutes.

2:50

The need to revisit the rotation of questions during Oral Question Period arose because of changes in the composition of the various groupings since the Assembly last met. Very early this year two members of the government members' caucus joined the caucus of the Wildrose Alliance. As a result of this change in caucus composition, the standings in the Assembly at this time are as follows: Progressive Conservatives, 68; Liberals, 9; Wildrose Alliance, 3; New Democrats, 2; and one independent member, who is an independent by himself although the members of the Wildrose Alliance are also independents and the members of the New Democratic caucus are also independents.

The government caucus has been reduced in size by two members, and the Wildrose Alliance caucus increased by two members, making them the third-largest caucus in the Assembly. Accordingly, they are the third party in the Assembly. The Official Opposition has not changed in size, nor have the New Democrats, but they have lost their position as the third party albeit by one member.

In the interests of providing certainty to members, the chair distributed the rotation schedule in the February 1, 2010, letter. Until that letter went out, the chair had no knowledge of any House leaders' agreements or even meetings. It appears that the House leaders have been discussing the rotation in question period and other matters related to the apportionment of business associated with relative caucus size. The chair wants to encourage House leaders and all of the independents to keep working towards an

agreement that could work to the satisfaction, presumably, of all 83 members of the Assembly. The chair will always be guided by advice provided by all members in a consensus/unanimous approach. At this time, however, as of the time we arrived in here this afternoon, at 1:30, there was no agreement from among the various parties, and the chair does not want to assume that what might be acceptable to one party or group or individual would be agreeable to others as well. The chair is more than willing to revisit this issue of rotation and related matters but is extremely reluctant to do so in the absence of any agreement.

For those who might be wondering why the answer is not found by looking in the standing orders, there is nothing in the standing orders about the rotation of questions. By convention, history, and practice the rotation of questions is not found in the standing orders, nor should it be. This absence is due in part to a recognition that it is the Speaker's responsibility to recognize members to participate in debate and the question period. The chair is fully aware that it is the members themselves who make the rules through the standing orders, and this chair has given effect to House leaders' agreements, but it is ultimately up to the chair to recognize members during question period.

Parliamentary Practice in British Columbia, the fourth edition, just one of hundreds of different scholarly treatises published around the world, by one of the longest serving clerks to follow the British parliamentary form of government in the world, Mr. George MacMinn, addresses this very point at page 140, when he states:

The order in which Members are recognized in Oral Question Period is at the Speaker's discretion . . . and this discretion remains intact at all times. From Parliament to Parliament (and indeed, from Session to Session) informal agreements are proposed relative to the recognition of Members and the number of supplementaries, but such agreements have never been considered as binding the Chair to a rigid course of action on a particular day. In order for the Chair's historical authority to remain intact, his or her discretion must remain unfettered.

The chair in recent days has been invited to apply the same rotation that existed following the provincial election in 1986. If one reviews Speaker Carter's ruling of June 13, 1986, found at page 7 of *Alberta Hansard* for that day, one will see that there are many differences between the operation of question period then and now. That ruling provided for the then Official Opposition New Democrats to have the first two main questions and up to three supplementary questions and that the then third-party Liberals, which had achieved recognized opposition party status, be entitled to the third main question and three supplementaries while the two-member Representative Party or delegate was entitled to the fourth question.

After those questions the chair recognized members from "all parties in the Legislative Assembly in a fair and representative manner." Each member asking a main question could ask three supplementaries, and one supplementary could be asked by one member in each of the other parties. One member would ask a question, three supplementaries, then every other grouping in the Assembly, which in this case would have been four more, could ask supplementaries to the same question. I was there. We had about five members recognized during the 50-minute question period. The chair was implored to apply the 1986 precedent by the NDs in 2005, and the chair rejected it for reasons that members can see at pages 90 and 91 of *Alberta Hansard* for March 8, 2005. Of course, in 1986 the third party had achieved recognized opposition party status, which is not the case with either the third or the fourth party today.

In 1989 the first two questions went to the Official Opposition New Democrats, the third main question to the third-party Liberals, which had eight seats, and the fourth to a member of the government caucus. Speaker Carter indicated in his June 2, 1989, ruling, found

at page 9 of *Alberta Hansard* for that day, that "the remainder of question period will be conducted on a random basis." That meant that after the first number of questions were identified, members simply threw up their hands when they came into the Assembly, and the Speaker would sit here and look at 25 hands and make a list of the first 12 or 14. You can bet your bottom dollar that if 12 rose at the same time, he – it was a he at that time – had to make a decision, and those 11 members who weren't called were mad at the Speaker for being blind or not seeing them or a whole series of other things.

We made some changes. Some members – there are a few in this House – may recall that it was not until the House leaders' agreement of September 1993 that the practice of submitting lists was established. This measure gave greater certainty to members, and since then there has been no turning back to allowing the Speaker to randomly select members wishing to ask questions. Since that time, essentially, and the way it has operated since I have been the Speaker is that I receive from the various groupings in the House a listing of the members that they have decided should ask questions that day, and I apply that list. I have never changed the names unless there has been an error in communication, nothing ever deliberately to change the names.

In 1993 there were only two parties represented in the Assembly, so after the third main question, which was asked by the Official Opposition, the rotation was quite simple. It was not until 1997, with the return of the New Democrats, that a more complete rotation had to be developed to provide members with the certainty they desired as represented by the 1993 agreement. The chair – I was the Government House Leader at the time – was one of the signatories to that agreement, and I want to indicate that there was a strong desire at that time to avoid what some believed to be the arbitrary nature of selecting members to ask questions by submitting lists. In other words, it was not to be the caucus whip or anybody else who would say: you are a good boy or girl today, so you can be on our list. Hopefully, it would be a caucus workout to allow everybody, the greatest number of people within the various caucuses, to basically have an opportunity to ask a question in question period.

This simply serves as background and a way of saying that examples even from this Assembly prior to 1997 are not particularly helpful as the practices were different from what exists today. In other words, there's an evolution. The chair wants to assure members that he conducted extensive research on this subject and is more than happy to discuss this history with the members at a different time. But I can assure you that for 10 days in the month of January I scoured my memory and book after book after book, coming up with the conclusion that I reached on Monday of last week.

Based on the historical analysis and a sincere determination of what would be fair for all parties based on their size relative to the other groupings in the Assembly, the chair communicated the following rotation to members. The Leader of the Official Opposition or his delegate is entitled to the first three main questions, including two supplementaries, each day. As a note to that point, the Official Opposition has had the first three main questions since September 1993 despite the size of its caucus or that of the third party and the presence or absence of other groupings of members.

With respect to the rotation on days 1 and 3 the Wildrose grouping, the deputy leader or his delegate, would be entitled to the fourth main question and supplementaries. A member of the government caucus would be entitled to the fifth main question, the Official Opposition to the sixth, and it would then alternate between the Official Opposition and the government members until the 11th question, which would be asked by the fourth-party New Democrats. Members of the government caucus would be entitled to the 12th,

14th, and 16th questions while members of the Official Opposition would be entitled to the 13th and 15th questions. The third-party Wildrose Alliance would be entitled to the 17th question, the New Democrats to the 18th, and in recognition of their size members of the government caucus would ask any question past the 18th. That's what was outlined. That's what happened today, exactly the way it was outlined.

On day 2, which is tomorrow, the positions of the Wildrose Alliance and the New Democrats will be reversed. The leader of the New Democrats or his delegate will be entitled to the fourth main question, and as on days 1 and 3 a member of the government caucus will be entitled to the fifth, seventh, and ninth questions while the Official Opposition will ask the sixth, eighth, and 10th main questions. The Wildrose Alliance will be entitled to the 11th and 18th questions. The New Democrats can ask the 17th question. Members of the government caucus will be entitled to the 12th, 14th, and 16th questions, and the Official Opposition would, like on days 1 and 3, be entitled to the 13th and 15th questions. Members of the government caucus will be entitled to ask any questions past the 18th. So that covers days 1, 2, and 3.

3:00

Day 4 will be a bit different as the independent Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo would factor into the mix. On day 4, like on day 2, the New Democrats would be entitled to ask the fourth question. The independent member – although members of the Wildrose Alliance and members of the New Democrats are also independents – will be recognized for the fifth main question and supplementaries. The Official Opposition, like on every other day, would be entitled to the sixth, eighth, and 10th questions. Government members would be entitled to fewer questions on day 4 as they would not have their first opportunity to ask a question until the seventh main question, and the next opportunity would be the ninth question. The Wildrose Alliance would be entitled to the 11th and the 18th questions, and the New Democrats would be entitled to the 17th. Government members would be entitled to ask the 12th, 14th, and 16th questions and the Official Opposition the 13th and 15th questions, and once again members of the government caucus would be entitled to questions after the 18th.

Assuming that the Assembly reaches the level of 18 main questions – and this is not a wild assumption; we have accomplished it on many, many occasions, and I'll provide graphs and information to you a little later showing where this has become quite frequent – the Official Opposition would have 32 questions a week, the same as it had in the last session. No change. The New Democrats would have eight questions, which is also the same as the last session. The Wildrose Alliance would also have eight questions a week, which is a dramatic increase from the last session. The number of questions asked by members of the government caucus would drop, from 29 in the last session to 23 in this session. So the only party that actually has a reduction in questions is the government. The Official Opposition and the independent from Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo would remain with the same. The New Democrats remain the same as well, and the Wildrose Alliance has that increase.

The chair does not believe it is unreasonable to expect that there will be 18 main questions a day. Members will recall that on April 6, 2008, the chair indicated to the Assembly that there would be a 35-second time limit on questions and answers. For the First Session there were 18 questions or more in many question periods, and in one day there were 21 main questions. The average was 17.5 main questions. That was in the year 2008. Roughly speaking, there were 18 or more questions on two-thirds of the sitting days. As I said, I'll be circulating a series of graphs to members to demonstrate the number of questions asked in the first and second sessions of this Legislature.

The chair admits that there was a slippage in the past session, that is 2009, where the average dropped to 16.5 main questions a day. The 18-question mark, however, was reached one-fifth of the time. In order to achieve at least 18 questions per day, which the chair assumes is the will of the Assembly, there will be a more vigilant watch of the clock to ensure that questions and answers do not run past 35 seconds. My experience today was that the very person who I'm counting on most to have 35-second responses was the one who went beyond 35 seconds on more than one occasion.

The chair wants to assure members of the commitment to fairness in the proceedings of the Assembly. The role of the Speaker is to balance the competing and strongly held beliefs of members. In preparing the rotation, the chair was mindful that neither the third nor the fourth party has the requisite number of members to constitute a recognized opposition party within the meaning of the Legislative Assembly Act. There is no direct correlation between the number of questions and that number, but there is little doubt that it enhances the position of the party reaching that milestone.

Some have and may further draw reference to the Canadian House of Commons. The chair wants to advise members that those caucuses that failed to reach the required number of seats have little role to play in the question period. Members interested in this point may wish to review page 499 of the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, where it states:

Members of a political party not officially recognized in the House and independent Members are permitted to ask questions, although not as frequently as those Members belonging to recognized parties.

During the Thirty-Fifth Parliament . . .

That is the parliament of 1994 to 1997.

. . . when their numbers climbed as high as 17 . . .

That is 17 independents.

. . . over the life of the Parliament, the Speaker attempted to recognize at least one of them every other Question Period . . .

So every two days one of the 17 independents would get a question.

. . . if not every day, generally towards the end of the proceedings.

The number of members required to be a recognized political party in the House of Commons is 12. However, as this chair indicated in his March 8, 2005, ruling:

While this chair has always welcomed advice on procedures in other jurisdictions, it is fair to say that after 99 years of being a province, the Legislative Assembly of Alberta has developed its own practices and traditions, which we can draw upon. As the chair has noted, the practice across Canada with respect to question periods varies widely, with the length running from 15 minutes to one hour.

Now, some of these things have changed even since I made that 2005 ruling. As a result, the chair has had extensive research conducted on practices in other Canadian jurisdictions. Times have changed with respect to question periods, and they now vary across the country of Canada, from 25 minutes in the question period in Saskatchewan to 90 minutes in Nova Scotia one day a week on Wednesday. The other days of the week in Nova Scotia it's 60 minutes. In most Assemblies parties not having official status would not have as many questions as third or fourth parties here. However, the chair is mindful and respectful of the history and traditions of Alberta, which have seen several small caucuses over the years. As indicated above, the chair has attempted to strike a balance between the interests of the minority and those of the majority, and as always the chair would welcome the collective views of the House leaders on this issue.

Before closing, I want to make it very clear that it is a tradition in Alberta for all private members to be granted the ability to ask questions, and that includes members of the government caucus. The practice of this Assembly has been for private members on the government side to be recognized during Oral Question Period but not, certainly, in proportion to their numbers. The chair does not believe that he can or should depart from that tradition or the

principle that all members elected to this Assembly and not serving on the Executive Council have the right to hold the government of the day to account by asking questions, and the chair is not willing to depart from this basic tenet of representative democracy in the province of Alberta.

Hon. members, since I put this statement out last week, in essence, I've received a number of pieces of correspondence from members. I'm not sure I have to table them in the House or even refer much to them, but I did say on Wednesday last, in a written statement to the members of the New Democrats and the members of the Wildrose, that I would be amenable to an agreement being reached by all the parties and provided to me by Monday morning of this week. That was the request. I waited and waited and waited. I have not received such an agreement. The position that I hold is the one I've outlined. If the members want to continue working together to find an alternate to this, I'm open to that. I'm amenable to that. But it has to be in a kind of unanimous situation.

In addition to having a question with respect to the question period, it took a negotiation that seemed to go on forever just to deal with the chairs. You may not notice this, hon. members, but as a result of the movement of two members to another part, what had to happen here is that we had to deal with eliminating one desk from the government side, from seven to six. Okay. No big deal except that all the egos get into play to move that one desk from there to back there to back there. Then it meant that we had to move the Liberal desks down one closer to the Speaker. Now, the Liberal Opposition likes that because they want the Leader of the Official Opposition to be directly across from the Premier. So that was not a problem. They were happy. They haven't said anything. They haven't said thank you, haven't acknowledged it, but that was okay. That was no problem.

3:10

Then because we've now got three members of the Wildrose Alliance and because we have a physical concern and a courtesy concern and a concern of considerable merit to an hon. member needing additional space, that meant that we couldn't have the two members of the New Democrats side by side. So we had to move one member of the New Democrats behind the first, which didn't help their ego one darn bit and their self-worth one darn bit, in order to allow us to move up the deputy leader of the third party. One, two, three. The third party. Then, of course, well, fine. How would I place those three? Would I place them on the basis of longevity of service in the Assembly? Would that mean the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek should sit in the front, or should it be the deputy leader? Well, that took a lot of, you know, debate and discussion to make sure. The scenario was that it would be the Member for Calgary-Glenmore because he is the deputy leader of the party. Then you put behind him the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, and then we had the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere behind that hon. member. So it was symmetrical; it looked good. But then the request was made: well, can we move the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere up? Well, okay. That happened.

In the meantime the poor old Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo – well, I don't mean it that way – is an independent of exact equality, because the principle was to have equality among all the independents, but he's tucked away way in a corner. By the way, he shouldn't feel lonely there because when I first came to this Assembly, that's where I sat. I considered that a seat of honour – a seat of honour. But from the perspective of all the members perhaps if all independents want to be treated equally, the longest serving members of the independents should be the ones sitting in the first row – the longest serving members would be the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek and the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood

Buffalo – but that would have caused a whole series of more angst. So this is how we have arrived at this.

Solomon had it easy. He had one baby, and he had two mothers conflicting. Well, one was the real mother, and one wasn't. I have one basket with five parties. If you all want to agree on it, this is fine. You can't cut it up five ways. I want an amicable approach, and if all members recognize the manner in which it goes, we can conduct ourselves very, very well. In addition to that, if the members want to continue to evolve this question, I am very amenable to this, but right now here's where we're at.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: On what would you be speaking?

Mr. MacDonald: Standing Order 13(2).

The Speaker: Okay. The explanation one.

Mr. MacDonald: A further explanation to your ruling, please. You spoke about a milestone of having four seats, which is recognized as an official party in the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: Yes.

Mr. MacDonald: Will this ruling or decision or proposal today change if either the New Democrats or the Wildrose Alliance achieve official party status as determined by the Legislative Assembly Act?

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, it's a speculative question that, first of all, that would happen. It could just as well be the Liberal caucus. You know, five members there could go to another one. It could create another one, so let's not just pick on those. This matter will evolve on the basis of the change. If, as an example, five members were to say that they wanted to join the Progressive Conservative caucus, that would be five members less over there, so we'd have a different scenario to have to deal with.

But, absolutely, if a party assumes official party status with the four, they would be seated together in a grouping of four, and those less than four would move off the front rail. That would be a reality of the evolution of it all. No chair could deal with it in any other way on the basis of the historical and constitutional precedent.

Orders of the Day

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, given that the Order Paper discloses no business that's eligible for discussion this afternoon under private members' business, I would honourably request the unanimous consent of the House to waive Standing Order 8(1) in order to revert to Government Bills and Orders so as to allow for replies to the Speech from the Throne.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Mr. Bhardwaj moved that an humble address be presented to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To His Honour the Honourable Norman L. Kwong, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank Your Honour for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's truly a great honour to rise today and move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne given by the Lieutenant Governor, and it is an honour to do this on behalf of my constituents in Edmonton-Ellerslie.

I would like to begin by thanking the Lieutenant Governor for both his eloquent words and the honour of his presence. I would also like to thank him for formally beginning this Third Session of the 27th Legislature. Mr. Speaker, His Honour's career should be looked upon as a model of the virtues of public service. While the Lieutenant Governor stated that he felt privileged to serve his province, I would argue that it is us who are truly privileged to serve with such a graceful leader.

I would also like to extend thanks and gratitude to our hon. Premier. Under his leadership Alberta has poised itself to weather the economic downturn better than any other jurisdiction in Canada and has also taken steps to enable us to emerge from these difficult times stronger than ever. Mr. Speaker, making choices that will benefit the province in the long term is not easy. It requires conviction, dedication, and a strong vision for the future. After all, the true test of a leader is not in how they govern when times are good but, rather, how they respond when problems arise. I for one can say that during these times of uncertainty our Premier has had the confidence to lead Alberta with pride and passion. Therefore, I would like to thank our Premier for his dedication, his conviction, and his leadership and consider myself truly honoured to work with him during these exciting times.

Mr. Speaker, it is true that Alberta along with the rest of the world is in one of the deepest recessions seen in half a century. It is true that Alberta has a resource-based economy that has proven to be extremely volatile. What is also true is that this government had taken aggressive steps well in advance of this downturn to help cushion the blow. As His Honour stated, this government improved its fiscal position by almost \$50 billion, including paying off a \$23 billion debt and saving or investing nearly \$25 billion. Much of these savings went into the sustainability fund, a fund designed to protect the programs Albertans value most if provincial income were to suddenly drop. These are the actions of a government that recognizes that while resource income may fluctuate widely, the needs of its people do not.

These are the actions of a government that recognizes the need to continue to invest in public infrastructure now, even when the times are tough. Mr. Speaker, these are the actions of a government that recognizes that while other jurisdictions may cut back and grow their infrastructure debt, it is imperative that we plan now to support our future. The foresight exemplified by the reintroduction of Alberta capital bonds is an example of the planning that is required in times like these. After all, what better way to invest in needed infrastructure while at the same time allowing Albertans to invest in the future of their province, in infrastructure like seniors' accommodations and continuing care and supportive living facilities? Furthermore, as His Honour stated, Alberta has a triple-A credit rating, which enables us to offer Albertans one of the safest investments in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, while it is important to invest in the future during uncertain economic times, it is also important to step back and take a look at the government's overall fiscal position. Simply put, it is imperative that a government live within its means. As His Honour stated, Alberta must and will carefully manage spending while

focusing on priorities such as health, education, and supports for vulnerable Albertans. After all, health is one of if not the most pressing concern for many Albertans. Although health spending per capita is amongst the highest in the country, the results are not. Simply put, Albertans demand and deserve better value for their taxpayer dollars.

3:20

In recognition of this fact this government has initiated a dramatic shift in how we approach health care in this province. Essentially, as the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health recommended, health care in Alberta must become more patient focused, and to meet this goal, there needs to be a legislative framework in place. In recognition of this need the government will introduce the Alberta health act later this fall, after it has been guided by Albertans themselves.

Mr. Speaker, beyond legislative controls a successful health care system needs two things: one, to have access to predictable funding, and two, to be accountable to Albertans. Therefore I'm pleased that His Honour stated that there would be a stable, five-year funding plan introduced in Budget 2010 as well as the idea that health care will be accountable because of a commitment to performance consultation with everyday Albertans.

I'm also pleased how the Speech from the Throne highlighted this government's commitment to safe, strong, and caring communities. Commitments like adding 100 new police officers and creating 14,000 new child care spaces are among these highlights.

Mr. Speaker, this government recognizes that it takes more than enforcement to ensure that our communities remain safe. Rather, it takes an understanding that a truly safe community only comes with a commitment to social programs and to those in need, commitments like those highlighted by the Lieutenant Governor. As he stated, this government will continue to work toward its pledge of providing 11,000 affordable housing units by 2012, and this government will ensure that social programs become better integrated so that they focus on the people they were intended to serve. After all, a program is only useful if it successfully targets the people in need. The improvements proposed by this government will ensure that Albertans have access to the information they need to effectively transition from program to program at each stage in their lives.

Mr. Speaker, while I applaud this government's commitment to both health care and safe communities, I'm also intrigued and excited about how this government proposes to keep Alberta in the forefront of global competitiveness. After all, Alberta's competitive edge has enabled us to be the best place in Canada to live, invest, and ultimately succeed, and it is essential that we retain this edge. For this reason I was pleased to hear His Honour's statement that Bill 1 of this legislative session would be the Alberta Competitiveness Act, which will ensure that Alberta remains the most competitive jurisdiction in North America by minimizing the cost of doing business in the province.

However, Mr. Speaker, competitiveness means more than just having a strong business climate, which we do. It also means a commitment to education and innovation. This is why this government will continue to develop the Alberta Innovates program, to better reflect the needs of entrepreneurs and researchers in order to help ensure that Alberta's technology plays an ever-increasing role in the world economy.

Beyond the economy, education and technological innovations will also help us address the needs of our environment. As His Honour stated, our history of technological breakthroughs and engineering has gone a long way towards shrinking our environmen-

tal footprint. The drive towards cleaner energy is a welcome fact, welcomed by both the Alberta government and Alberta's strong business community. Mr. Speaker, the commitment by both the government and our business community is exciting, and this commitment will enable us to develop a well-thought-out and equitable approach to controlling greenhouse gas emissions while ensuring that our energy industry remains strong.

Finally, I would like to conclude on the same idea as His Honour, Alberta's place within Canada. I'm truly proud to be a Canadian, just as I am proud to be an Albertan and to serve the people of this great province. As the Lieutenant Governor stated, Albertans are proud to contribute to the well-being of our nation. We only ask to be treated fairly by federal programs. After all, Mr. Speaker, a sick or unemployed person is still sick or unemployed regardless of where they live. For this reason I'm pleased that our government is committed to working with the federal government to promote regional equality. After all, I believe that a strong Canada needs a strong Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, it has been an honour to rise today and move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne, just as it has been an honour to serve as the elected representative of the people of Edmonton-Ellerslie. In closing, I would again like to thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for his inspiring words and dedicated public service and, again, our hon. Premier for his strong leadership and noble vision. I believe that under the guidance of these two men and with the dedication and spirit of the people of Alberta we can make a future which we can all be truly proud of.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call on the next speaker, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank you and all of the hon. members for indulging me. Sahakarini is an NGO from Camrose that has been very active in India, Africa, and Central America. One of its project partners is the Kaqchikel Presbytery from Guatemala. We have guests here today from those two organizations. Above me in the members' gallery are Ronaldo Similox, who's a teacher and psychologist and also a Mayan spiritual guide, along with his wife, Noemí Cuellar, an oil painter. They represent the Kaqchikel Presbytery. They've been here on a speaking tour. This is their first exposure to snow and ice, so it's been a bit of a shock to the system, I think. Also with them is Alan Fielding, a noted Camrose volunteer and representative of the Sahakarini. I'd ask them to all rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat as well.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House two members from my constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat in southern Alberta, from Bow Island specifically, Mr. Jim and Anne Geldreich. I'd like to have them rise – they're seated in the public gallery – and receive the warm welcome of this House.

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

(continued)

The Speaker: The next two participants will be the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner to second and then the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and a privilege to rise today in this House to second the motion to accept the Speech from the Throne, eloquently delivered by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor. For five years the Hon. Norman Kwong has served Albertans with honour, humility, and dignity. His life accomplishments and dedication to public service are an inspiration to those who believe that Alberta truly is a place where you can achieve your dreams. In a remarkable life that took many unexpected turns, I know my colleagues and I are grateful for his continued service as Her Majesty's representative in Alberta.

As the proud representative of the constituents of Cardston-Taber-Warner it was an honour to accept the Premier's invitation to second the motion to accept the Speech from the Throne. Like Albertans across this diverse province, they have seen how quickly times can change. In a remarkably short period of time unprecedented economic growth gave way to the deepest recession the world has seen in half a century. Alberta, with its strong trading relationship with the United States, was not immune to the rapid decline in our economy. Throughout our history Albertans have faced similar challenges of economic uncertainty, and time and again we have united to face these challenges together to emerge stronger than before. Under the inspired and visionary leadership of our Premier I know we will do so again.

3:30

Forward-thinking leadership and prudent planning led Alberta to be the most prepared jurisdiction in North America for the economic recession. No other government in North America entered the recession debt free with substantial cash reserves. Of any jurisdiction in North America we are the best prepared to weather this recession and emerge stronger than ever. The \$17 billion sustainability fund will ensure that Alberta remains debt free and continues to provide quality education and health care for Albertans. Moreover, our Premier has committed our government to live within its means and to be back in the black within three years.

Mr. Speaker, few could have predicted the extent of the economic recession we currently find ourselves in. There is no question that our policies will help Alberta emerge stronger than any province in Canada.

I was very pleased to hear the throne speech address what has always been central to the Alberta advantage, our competitiveness in a global economy. In an increasingly competitive global economy we must continue to ensure Alberta continues to succeed. This includes ensuring our children continue to have access to a world-class education system that will prepare them for future opportunity, challenge, and success. In a 21st century economy with rapid developments in technology and innovation, we must continue to ensure Albertans have the tools they need to succeed. To this end, I was pleased that the throne speech outlined the government's plans to launch a new, modern vision for education, with improvements that will ensure learning in Alberta is flexible and ready to meet the needs of the next generation. Albertans are by nature innovative and entrepreneurial, and with the right tools there is nothing we cannot accomplish.

Mr. Speaker, a competitive economy also means ensuring that businesses have the freedom to thrive and prosper. Unnecessary

legislative barriers and regulations can stifle business and the economic potential of a province or nation. In a world that is increasingly competitive, we must continue to ensure Alberta remains the best place to conduct business. That is why I'm pleased that the Speech from the Throne outlined this government's intentions to aggressively pursue improvements to ensure we have effective regulations that are both clear and practical. Positioning our province for an even brighter future will be the objective of Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act. In a time when the world economy is positioning itself for a return to future growth and prosperity, I am happy with our Premier's resolve to ensure we are the most competitive jurisdiction in North America.

Our government's goal to become even more competitive includes a renewed dedication to what has always been a fundamental pillar of our economy for generations, agriculture. Indeed, the earliest settlers were farmers who came to Alberta and built the foundations of what is now one of the world's most productive agricultural economies. I am happy to say, Mr. Speaker, that both of my grandparents came to this province in the early 1900s, and our family has stayed here and been involved in agriculture ever since that time. I am now the third-generation rancher and farmer in our family, my son is the fourth, and I have a grandson getting ready to become the fifth.

After a century of hard work, sacrifice, and love for our province Alberta's farmers can be proud of a legacy of achievement. As the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner and a farmer myself I was proud that His Honour recognized the valuable contribution of Alberta's agriculture and agrifood industries in the Speech from the Throne. The history of this constituency of Cardston-Taber-Warner is rooted deeply in the legacy of farmers who arrived in the late 19th century whose bravery, entrepreneurial spirit, and can-do attitude continued to define us as Albertans.

Fleeing from religious persecution in Utah, 10 Mormon families settled nearby what is now the town of Cardston, named after their leader, Charles Ora Card. Using their agricultural expertise, they earned the respect of their neighbours and, due to the region's dry climate, developed the region's first irrigation system. Having seen that irrigation system as it was, I'm impressed with their engineering ability and what they were able to do with horses and what we would call today primitive equipment.

The innovative irrigation techniques pioneered by those first bold Mormon settlers continue to provide nourishment for the crops of southern Alberta. Today the greatest portion of irrigation in Alberta takes place in 13 irrigation districts in the South Saskatchewan River basin, providing half a million hectares of land with water. Seven of those districts, interestingly enough, lie in the constituency of Cardston-Taber-Warner. These irrigated lands produce a wealth of crops, including 113,000 hectares of barley, 97,000 hectares of wheat, and 90,000 hectares of alfalfa.

Across Alberta more than 20 million hectares of land are used for crop and livestock production, and in 2008 total farm cash receipts reached a record of \$10 billion, accounting for nearly 22 per cent of Canada's total agriculture production. Of this total, beef and cattle account for the largest category of farm income. In 2008, Mr. Speaker, cash receipts from beef and cattle accounted for nearly \$3 billion, or 30 per cent of total receipts, the highest in Canada. Furthermore, a healthy beef and cattle industry supports thousands of jobs in value-added agricultural production. These world-class products are then sold to consumers here in Alberta, across Canada, and around the world. As a matter of fact, Alberta exported roughly \$961 million worth of beef products and \$558 million of live cattle to international markets in 2008.

Indeed, our export markets are essential to the continued sustainability of our agriculture and agrifood industries. This is why

ensuring the health and competitiveness of our agriculture industry is more important now than ever. We must continue to build on our strength as a safe and reliable producer of high-quality products and break into new markets, as His Honour so rightly stated. Furthermore, we must work together to ensure that our products continue to compete favourably with other agriculture producers, including the United States.

Mr. Speaker, agriculture, like other industries, has not been immune to the global economic recession. However, thanks to the bold leadership of our Premier, I feel confident that we can face these challenges together and continue to build a sustainable agriculture industry for generations to come. Even before the recession began, this government launched the livestock and meat strategy, a blueprint for the future prosperity of our agricultural producers. It calls on government to work with industry to redirect resources to key priorities, revitalize livestock industry organizations, realize benefits from enhanced value chain relationships, and refocus efforts to achieve a competitive and sustainable industry. I am confident that these initiatives and our continued work will lead to a more competitive, prosperous agriculture industry and a stronger province.

Mr. Speaker, there's no question that we live in challenging times, but Albertans have never been a people to shy away from a challenge or to do what is necessary to succeed, and neither is this government. Together we will continue to build a province worthy of the hopes and dreams of those who came to this province and built it with sacrifice, hard work, and, above all, a compassion for our fellow citizens. Under the leadership of our Premier I know our brightest days are yet to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:40

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

Hon. members, the leader has up to 90 minutes to participate.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As Leader of the Opposition it's my duty and honour, indeed my privilege to rise today to respond to the Speech from the Throne. When he delivered the Speech from the Throne on Thursday, His Honour the Lieutenant Governor was quite eloquent in remarking on how much he appreciated the opportunity to travel this province and meet with so many amazing Albertans. Just as His Honour is grateful for his experience as Lieutenant Governor, so too am I grateful to serve as Leader of the Official Opposition. As I'm sure His Honour would agree, it's not the title or the privileges that make the job mean so much; it's the opportunity to serve our province and its people and, in the course of our duties, to meet so many fine Albertans, to experience every corner of this beautiful province, and to work for a better tomorrow for all of us.

I'd like to thank His Honour for five years of outstanding service to Alberta and wish him and his lovely wife all the best. They did a remarkable job, and Albertans are justly proud of the Kwongs. You could say that the China Clipper's term was one last touchdown for a great Albertan. Your Honours, thank you.

Like His Honour I've been impressed and uplifted by the spirit and compassion of Albertans. Though times are hard, people are still looking out for each other and working hard for a better future for their families and for the magnificent province we call home.

This past weekend I went snowshoeing with my brother in the foothills west of Calgary. The beauty, the serenity of the landscape reminded me again of why I am in politics today. I love this place. The snow blanketing those beautiful foothills, the trees, the wildlife all reminded me that Alberta and Albertans will be here long after all of us are gone, and that's why good governance and visionary

leadership is critical. We need to serve not only our own generation but all future generations to come.

Serving the public interest for the short term and the long term means a greater commitment to getting people involved in government initiatives. If the administration plans to massively overhaul health care or energy or education, then consultation with the most directly affected citizens and organizations is key, and I mean real consultation, not after-the-fact, focused consultation intended as a rubber stamp for decisions the government has already made. We must be beyond that now. We need to go beyond that.

If we want to preserve the beauty, the biological diversity of these foothills and the whole province that I enjoyed so much in these last few weeks, then we must also commit to using good science as our primary guide to public endeavours. Science – and I'm including all the sciences here – provides the essential data we need to make the right decisions on the environment, the economy, education, and social programs. We need the courage to use our best science and put our plans before the public for honest debate and improvements without pride or prejudice.

That's why I'm in politics, because this administration has not taken these fundamental principles to heart. This has created an undercurrent of grave concern among Albertans, if not distrust. People are hurting: thousands out of work, thousands more afraid that the public health care system and other crucial social services won't be there when they need them. Already vulnerable Albertans are facing diminished levels of service because of cutbacks.

Albertans don't ask for much from government, but they do demand a basic level of competence, a level of competence that the Premier's administration has failed to deliver. Politics in Alberta isn't about right versus left anymore. It's about right versus wrong, and this Conservative administration has become infamous for making the wrong decisions. Wrong decisions made by this Premier and his ministers have sown chaos in the health care system, have created instability and uncertainty in our oil and gas sector, the engine of Alberta's economy. They've damaged our international reputation and our environment, failed to enforce standards to address pollution and climate change, have allowed family farms to stagnate and wither, have failed to protect our forests and the forestry industry. Wrong spending decisions have frittered away the opportunity to save for the future and wasted millions of taxpayers' dollars on lavish perks for the elite, reducing support by 30 per cent over the last 20 years for Albertans most vulnerable to this economic recession.

I've always been from the good news first school of thought, so I'm happy to give the administration credit for a few good notions contained in this throne speech. Unfortunately, even the good news is tainted by the administration's long record of half measures and broken promises. As a believer in planning for the long term I applaud the Premier and the minister of health for providing Alberta Health Services with a five-year budget cycle, provided the allocation is actually sufficient to meet the system's needs. Considering all the damage done to our public health care system by this administration's catastrophic bungling, this is, at least, a small step towards restoring a smidgen of confidence to the health care professionals who have done their best while dealing with the consequences of this administration's mismanagement.

Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, is a step forward for efficiency. I've long advocated for less red tape for Alberta's business community, and I'm glad that this administration finally sees this as a priority. But speaking of competitiveness, what happened to the competitiveness review? Why has it been delayed? For that matter, whatever happened to the red tape review led by the new finance minister himself? The fact that the minister seems to

have dropped the ball here doesn't instill me or Albertans with great confidence. Did he lose it along with his briefcase a few weeks ago?

At a time when the oil and gas sector is desperate for stability, when they need confidence, this administration cannot provide it. Cleaning up some red tape is fine, but it's not nearly enough to erase years of mishandling in the energy portfolio. What we have here is, basically, a new panel with a vague mandate to speed up the process of establishing government initiatives and evaluating regulations. This Conservative administration has already set up a regulatory review commission with a similar mandate to the one being established in Bill 1. If they couldn't make it work with that commission, how can Albertans expect anything from this new initiative? This is the Premier's number one bill. Frankly, I'm underwhelmed. If this is the best you can come up with for your administration's top bill, Alberta is in even more trouble than we thought.

We're glad to see that the Premier's administration has heeded opposition and community calls for more police officers, but even the addition of a hundred officers will leave Alberta's two largest cities underpoliced. Per capita Calgary and Edmonton are two of the least protected cities in the country when it comes to crime. We simply need more boots on the ground to meet population growth. And what about Fort Macleod and the police college: whatever happened to that project? It's wrong to leave the people of Fort Macleod hanging, Mr. Speaker. They haven't forgotten this administration's promise.

Finally, I'm glad that the administration is at last starting to think about unfairness in the federal EI program. Alberta workers haven't been getting their fair share of rightfully earned benefits, and the opposition and labour groups have been raising this issue for months. I hope that the Premier can make some real progress and bring those benefits home to Alberta workers, working moms and dads who desperately need and deserve that assistance. I would suggest that the Premier should also do something about skyrocketing wait times for processing EI applications. Many Albertans live paycheque to paycheque. They can't afford to wait for months for EI benefits, nor can the Premier shift all responsibility to the federal government. Provincial income supports need to be examined to make sure that unemployed Albertans will have somewhere to turn when EI benefits are exhausted.

Well, Mr. Speaker, aside from these few bright spots, even by the rightfully diminished expectations of Albertans in this throne speech we see a new low standard for a government that is clearly out of ideas. The cupboard is bare: virtually no new ideas, no leadership, no vision, no inspiration, no imagination, and no plan. Given the Conservative track record many of these commitments will drag on for years and years without any real progress. The sheer emptiness of this administration's Speech from the Throne leads me to expect the worst from tomorrow's budget.

3:50

For years opposition parties, think tanks, journalists, and Albertans from all walks of life have implored successive Conservative administrations to change their approach when it comes to public spending. Instead, we have seen them stuck in a common pattern: spend lavishly during good times, indiscriminately slash vital public services when oil and gas prices fall. That's a hell of a way to run a car wash, Mr. Speaker, let alone a province. It's the complete opposite of how to sensibly manage public finances in a province with a cyclic economy.

After nearly four decades in power you'd think this administration would clue in at some point. Yes, the administration built up a sustainability fund, a Liberal idea I'll remind you, but it's a fraction

of the size it could have been, and it's not nearly large enough to maintain public services during a long recession. This administration's financial planning is based on a wing and a prayer that oil and gas prices will bounce back in the near future. Well, we all hope that will be the case, but that's not a plan. It seems pretty foolhardy to me and to a lot of other Albertans.

I expect that Tuesday's budget will bear more bitter fruit of Tory short-sightedness. Along with jobs and the economy, health care is the number one concern for Albertans. But aside from the five-year funding cycle promoted for Alberta Health Services in the throne speech, there's nothing that's remotely reassuring for Albertans. You say that input from Albertans is important. What will this be, then, the 17th or 18th consultation process in the last decade? Another report will be promptly filed away to collect dust. This administration has yet to show with detailed plans how they will protect public health care. This administration has yet to show that they have a plan to create more family doctors, to create more long-term care spaces, to improve emergency room access and wait times, and to address mismanagement and waste throughout the system.

Our vision for health care very simply calls for a return to regional delivery programs focusing on primary health care, a family doctor for every Albertan, home-care services to keep people well and in their homes as long as possible, and reinvestment in prevention programs and wellness programs to keep Albertans healthy and reduce costs. Let's get back to basics. We are spending more and getting less because of a lack of clear planning, practical patient-centred decision-making, and follow-through on those plans with ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

These are real problems that should be tackled now. Albertans have had their fill of studies and ad hoc decision-making. Pick the best ideas from the endless reports, and act on them. Even the five-year funding pledge means nothing if the funding isn't adequate to cover the system's needs. If this administration stays true to form, at best it might give health care professionals a head start on cutting back programs and services as budgets are being slashed.

The Official Opposition receives more mail, e-mail, and phone calls about health care than any other single issue. From professionals to patients to family members, the people of Alberta are demanding better management of this public health care system, not for reasons of ideology, not because they have a grudge against the government, but because bad decisions and misallocated resources are having real impacts: delays, complications, and increased costs. I'm going to read into the record just a few of the hundreds of horror stories that have been sent to us in the last few months. These letters, e-mails, and phone transcripts are edited only for length, to protect the jobs of health care professionals, or to omit the mention of names of members of this House.

Here's one example.

I am a medical Resident who works in Calgary. I have seen firsthand the devastation the health reforms and mismanagement of the H1N1 vaccination program has caused. Last month, I was working in the [Peter Lougheed Centre] ICU. 14 out of 16 patients in ICU were [there] with severe H1N1. Most were under the age of 40. Most were previously healthy. None had the opportunity to be vaccinated prior to the outbreak. We were fortunate, on ICU, to be encouraged to leave for our vaccinations the [very] first day they were available – most other staff, patients, and other front line workers were not so fortunate. Only a fraction of people were able to get vaccinated before the vaccine was pulled. After the vaccination schedule was "reintroduced," I witnessed seven nurses, waiting to vaccinate anyone who came to the clinic. No one came . . . for hours. [These staff] were paid to sit there, and wait, while patients upstairs were told to wait until the following week and then come downstairs to the clinic to get their vaccine. The nurses said that the vaccine that wasn't used by the end of the day would be discarded.

Another crazy scenario: Again while on ICU, we had a patient who had been waiting for transfer to the ward for so long that he was actually ready for discharge from ICU. Only he needed 3 additional days of oral antibiotics. We tried to give him a [prescription] for the drugs, but being homeless, he could not afford . . . the prescription. The in-patient pharmacy is now restricted in terms of giving meds to patients at discharge (ie. they can [only] dispense one day's worth, but not more – because of budget cuts). So this gentleman, with no medical bed (only an ICU bed) was required to stay in ICU for 3 additional days, because the hospital would not give him \$25 [worth] of antibiotics. (The Math: 3 x \$2,000/day . . . = \$6,000 cost, because we can't give him \$25 of free antibiotics). Here's another story from a health care professional.

I am a Registered Nurse. I have 15 years of work experience, and this is after attending a 4.5 year degree program here in Canada. The government and their arms (including Dr. Duckett) are seeing that I will no longer be a trusted front line worker. I am now a business expense. I am the reason the budget doesn't balance. I only exist to fight over the remaining managerial positions, and only after I orientate an LPN to [take over] my job. I used to love being a nurse. I used to think that I was a required resource. I used to think that I was part of the budget – not the expendable piece of waste that is being cut . . .

I immunized thousands of Albertans every week during the H1N1 campaign. I have been verbally abused, and threatened in the early stages of this debacle called the "Pandemic Plan" while the government stands by and says we are all doing our best. Bah! If you want my best, then let's all go read the Pandemic Influenza Plan that is on our internal website and see just how the plan was supposed to go. Then let's admit that it was you (the government) and not me (the Registered Nurse) who decided to ignore most of the parts that dealt with triage. Let's just say that the Alberta Government has embarrassed me, infuriated me, and led me to believe that another province may be a better place for me and my family . . .

Now of course, I can't sign my name, or even my place of work because I have a code of ethics that does not protect me when I have something to say to the public. So, you have to take my word that I am an RN here in Alberta . . . Big Brother is watching and has a copy of that code of ethics in hand to swat me with if I step out of line.

Here are a few shorter but no less shocking comments.

"I have been with the Calgary Health Region for 25 years, and never have seen things as bad as they are now."

"I have never been so concerned with the future of health care as I have this year and [I] have been working in the system [now] for 35 years. I hope that something can be done before it is too late."

"My mother (68 years old) was on the waiting list for a routine colonoscopy for two years before she was called for an appointment. The terrible thing about the situation was that she was diagnosed with colon cancer before she was able to get the colonoscopy."

"Was it not just 3 years ago that the colleges and universities in Alberta expanded their programs to accept more nursing students? And the 2010 graduating class now has a 40% chance of finding a job in Alberta. This is not planning for our future."

Mr. Speaker, this is just a small sampling of the typical concerns we receive in our offices every day. I'm sure that even government members are hearing the same kind of stories. Yet it's absolutely clear to me that this administration will never get health care right. You had your chance, and I have a feeling that Albertans are ready to move on.

The Speech from the Throne also talks about a new vision for education, but the only thing Albertans know about this administration's vision for education is that you keep saying you have a vision for education. Why not provide Albertans with something concrete? Why haven't you reported back on the Inspiring Education dialogue?

Why did you pull the new School Act from the agenda for this spring sitting? Is it because you're starting to realize that your vision for education isn't the same as the vision shared by Albertans? I don't see a vision for education from this administration, just another collection of wrong decisions.

It was wrong to violate the contract with teachers and then fight and lose the case in court. The Minister of Education's response to the ongoing teachers' wage issue has been less than inspiring. He was obviously completely unprepared for a verdict that favoured the teachers. It was wrong to claw back \$80 million from Alberta's public school boards. Can Alberta's students and parents expect even greater cuts to come? It's wrong to cut education funding, our primary investment in our future. By all means, look for efficiencies, but ensure stable, dependable funding for this vital public program, especially during recessionary times.

4:00

It's wrong to fire a school board without exhausting all avenues of understanding and board support. It's wrong that we have an administration whose only response to the social challenges faced by aboriginal communities is to fire their local school board. A short simple message repeated by many Calgarians has made its way to our offices. It reads: Alberta's continued prosperity will depend on the knowledge and skills of its future citizens; in these times more than ever it's important to continue to invest in our children's education, and as a concerned Albertan I urge you not to cut funding for our schools. End of quote. As ever, there is great wisdom in the direct, no-nonsense advice of Albertans. This administration should listen.

The throne speech contains a claim that the Premier's administration will build world-class universities. How can this be accomplished when the minister of advanced education has already admitted that the best-case scenario for postsecondary funding this year is a zero per cent increase. The University of Calgary is already laying off staff; the University of Alberta is considering the same. We should be investing in postsecondary education and research to move Alberta from a 20th century economy to a 21st century economy.

It's wrong, Mr. Speaker, to balance a budget on the backs of students. Students and their families are rightfully alarmed by the prospect of massive tuition increases. Now more than ever Alberta needs talented graduates to fill the jobs in the energy sector, the health sector, information technology, agriculture, et cetera. How can we ever address emergency room wait times and the need for greater capacity and long-term care without more professionals? How can we continue to keep the energy sector alive without new engineers and scientists? These short-sighted policies are driving away our best and our brightest.

The minister should say no to each and every request for tuition fee increases. It wasn't so very long ago that this Conservative administration promised the lowest tuition fees in Canada, an admirable goal that really would have increased Alberta's competitiveness and quality of life. Alberta's students and their parents know what those promises are worth.

Consider this letter from last month to the advanced education minister from Rithesh Ram and Natarie Liu, presidents, respectively, of the classes of 2012 and 2011 of the Calgary Medical Students' Association. In their letter they write:

We request that you consider the following when considering a change to post-secondary funding:

- Government deregulation of medical tuition in the 1990's led medical tuition to increase to triple that of other undergraduate programs.
- Tuition often exceeds maximum government student assistance intended for all education-related costs (housing, tuition, food).

- Deregulation has decreased the number of students from low income families from 35% to 13.5% [in medical schools].
- Medical school tuition is seen as a barrier to students from rural communities who are interested in pursuing a career in medicine.
- A survey of Canadian interns and residents from 2006 found that a first-year resident will have a \$158,000 debt that will continue to climb during residency; this value is [actually] higher in Alberta.

Please, do not create a system in which my educational and career choices are prescribed by my ability to pay.

In difficult times a responsible government would focus on protecting public services that Albertans depend upon while finding efficiencies to bring down the deficit. This administration claims to protect public services, but ask anyone who depends on PDD funding how they feel about this government's spending priorities. These people are desperate, and they weren't getting the help they needed even during the boom. Betraying their security and well-being is wrong.

Ask any of Alberta's seniors how they feel about this administration's priorities. Seniors deserve all the gratitude we can offer. People want the dignity of compassionate care in their golden years. It's wrong to leave our seniors without enough public long-term care, crowding in our hospitals, and placing incredible financial burdens on the few families lucky enough to be able to afford long-term care at private facilities. Why does this administration rely on selling bonds to build long-term care spaces for seniors? That should be part of the government's annual spending. It's not enough that Albertans buy bonds, another debt, by the way. Are you going to blame them for the lack of affordable housing as well?

The environment is another top issue for Albertans. We all want to protect our air, water, and land. We all want to participate in the fight against climate change to protect the health of our children and grandchildren and to ensure that Alberta's economy will remain prosperous in an increasingly competitive, environmentally aware world. It's wrong to play politics with our primary economic driver. We need a long-term plan that includes other provinces, forging a common approach to carbon reduction. Even the federal Tories are admitting that Alberta needs to do better, but all this administration offers us is carbon capture and more money for slick ad campaigns. That won't cut it.

My Energy critic and I spent months talking to oil and gas companies. We know that their leaders want to do their part. It's time to work constructively with industry and start working together to make our oil and gas sector not only the most competitive in the world but also the cleanest. It's time to protect and renew Alberta's reputation by ensuring the highest standards of leadership and a clean energy agenda.

A responsible government would realize that the term of the current capital plan should be extended. It took years of neglect by this administration to create Alberta's massive infrastructure deficit, but the plan to address the deficit was created during the waning days of the boom. Yes, Alberta's communities need new infrastructure, but surely we could roll out new projects more slowly now, distributing the impact on Alberta's books over a longer time period with the evident reduced construction costs that we're now facing. After all, new infrastructure does no one any good if the government can't afford to cover operating costs, and massive deficits pose exactly that risk. We're already spending at stimulus levels double the national average.

The most precious and potentially vulnerable citizens of all, Alberta's at-risk children, have been completely overlooked in this throne speech. There is no commitment here to improve services to at-risk children and youth. Bosco Homes, Boys and Girls clubs have already suffered devastating cuts, and the Children and Youth

Services portfolio has been rightfully criticized as the worst-run department in government right now. Children deserve all the love and support society can offer, and it's simply wrong not to make children and youth our very highest priority. The sustainability fund should be used to protect people and essential services, not the Conservative administration's reputation for balanced budgets.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, we see no vision, no imagination, no leadership in this throne speech, just a knee-jerk swing to the right to appease disgruntled Tories within the Conservative caucus and a few token patch-up jobs to cover oversights that a responsible administration would have taken care of years ago. When I was a young man growing up in Calgary, my parents set an example for me. Their words and their actions made it clear that a moral life meant following two essential rules: first, tell the truth; secondly, take care of each other. Elected officials are entrusted by the people with the power to make far-reaching decisions affecting every citizen in this province and beyond. When governments fail to tell the truth, when they fail to protect our common interests, everyone loses.

I have seen incompetent, negligent leadership ruin our health care system, the same mismanagement lead to the abuse and neglect of seniors, people we should be venerating not with words but with deeds that actually give them the dignity and care they deserve. I've seen this administration squander the legacy of our children by spending over 90 per cent of nonrenewable resource revenues, saving only a pittance for the future, a pittance that will soon be used up to weather this recession.

During my travels and work around the world I have seen what happens when governments become old and corrupt: dissenting voices become afraid to speak; waste gets worse each year; decisions are made without proper consultation or scientific analysis. Perhaps worst of all, the people in power come to feel a dangerous sense of entitlement. They come to feel that they are above public scrutiny. A responsible government would behave far differently than this current administration.

4:10

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, everyone should have a family doctor thanks to long-term planning, incentives for health care professionals, and affordable tuition to create a new generation of professionals. We would have hospitals that work, with nurses and doctors that aren't stretched to and beyond their limit. We would have seniors enjoy quality, affordable long-term care and prevention and wellness initiatives, including mental health, to help everyone lead healthier lives and lower the costs on the health care system.

A responsible administration would actually act on the advice of the Auditor General. They would work with the energy industry to hammer out a final royalty deal that serves our most important sector and the people of Alberta while protecting the environment. It would create the conditions to foster a flourishing upgrading and value-added sector in Alberta. It would reform the electricity system with the best interests of the consumers in mind, and it would repeal or amend all legislation that limits access to information, freedom of speech, and public consultation. Albertans have solutions, and this administration is foolish not to listen.

A responsible administration would stop spending millions on PR campaigns and actually protect our environment. It would create incentives to move to more clean energy sources and jobs related to energy efficiency, housing, and public transit. In my travels I've discovered that as proud as Albertans are of their province, many of us share a sense that we could do better. With the resources at our command – our natural wealth, our well-educated, well-skilled population, our can-do culture – we should be able to build a truly

world-class society, including hospitals, postsecondary institutions, and research centres. If we put our minds to it, we could build the world's first truly sustainable economy. We could be leaders in that race.

We must eliminate homelessness and dramatically reduce poverty in this province.

All this is possible with a government that committed itself to four simple principles: health, enterprise, foresight, integrity. This is a time for solutions. We need energetic, forward-looking leadership, a government that can adapt with changing times and new challenges. We need a government that makes decisions based on principles, not political expediency. We can do better.

As I snowshoed recently with my brother across Alberta's snow-covered foothills, I saw with perfect clarity what I and my caucus have been fighting for over many years of professional work and now five years, for me, in politics: a better way for our province, its economy, its environment, and most importantly for our people. My vision for tomorrow includes everyone who calls Alberta home, everyone who wants to return to the sensible centre, a return to common-sense government, government that listens honestly, works for the public interest, the common good, and a better future for everyone.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, under Standing Order 29(2)(a) there is a five-minute question-and-comment period should a member or members choose to participate. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition if he was surprised that the government in the throne speech made no announcement of a plan to deal with the \$1.2 billion accumulated deficit that has been rung up by Alberta Health Services in the short period of time that they have been administering our health care system. In fact, the budget is over \$9 billion. My question, specifically, to the hon. member would be: were you surprised that the government made no reference to that or did not provide any details as to how they're going to solve that \$1.2 billion deficit that was just rung up in a very short period of time?

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I think all Albertans were surprised to hear the rumours of such a huge deficit in one year as a result of the restructuring, a third restructuring in 15 years. Previous deficits in the health system were less than one-tenth of that, and there are still many questions being asked about where that cost went.

Once again an example of a government that is not forthcoming with its expenditures, not clear about where our money is going, and again we have to ask the government: open the books; let's get a value-for-money audit on this government. This is another example of very poor implementation if there was a plan and clearly wasteful spending that has left all of us reeling in a health care system that is the envy of our world and still struggling to provide value for the extra funding that we provide for health care in this province. Indeed, a real need for indicators of where we're spending, what we're getting for that spending, and greater accountability for a government that seems to lurch from one decision to another in the health care system and wonder why people are concerned about chaos, frustration, and now brain drain to other provinces.

The Speaker: Others to participate?

Then I will call on the next speaker and also identify four additional speakers after that. The next speaker will be the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. So the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise today and respond to the throne speech delivered so eloquently by our Lieutenant Governor, His Honour Norman Kwong. Before I dive into the merits of this timely speech, I'd like to thank His Honour for again coming here and sharing his inspirational words.

The Speech from the Throne highlighted many of the priorities of this government, priorities that include health care, the economy, the environment, and ensuring that Alberta remains a leader in global competitiveness. These are priorities that Albertans hold dear, priorities that will build on our strengths and lead us into the future. And while I believe strongly in each of these priorities, I'd like to focus my comments today on two specific commitments: safe communities and agriculture development. After all, Mr. Speaker, these two commitments, I feel, are of critical importance not only for my constituents but for each and every Albertan.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Safe communities are the backbone of our society and are essential for the continuation of our strong economy, our effective public services, and our overall well-being. As His Honour stated, "Albertans believe that safe, strong, and caring communities are important to our quality of life," and I'd be inclined to agree. To this end, I know that this government has pledged several initiatives to promote and develop safe and caring communities that assist those in need while protecting us from those who would do us harm, initiatives like the Alberta gang reduction strategy. Mr. Speaker, this strategy is comprehensive. It includes initiatives to improve enforcement while at the same time actively going into the community and addressing youth before they take up a life of crime. Moreover, our commitment to enforcement can be measured by boots on the ground. As His Honour stated, the government "will bolster the front lines of Alberta's police forces with 100 new officers, the fulfillment of a three-year, 300-officer commitment."

In addition, I'm pleased to note that this government will combat gang activity from a legislative standpoint, introducing legislation designed to protect witnesses. After all, if we can convince a witness to step forward, we could have a greater chance of putting away those who threaten our communities.

Furthermore, this government recognizes that creating safe communities requires more than enforcement initiatives. Rather, it also requires a commitment to those in need. To this end, the Lieutenant Governor stated that this government will meet and exceed its commitment to creating 14,000 new child care spaces and will continue to work to deliver 11,000 affordable housing units by 2012. This is wonderful news. Mr. Speaker, these are commitments that will not only improve the welfare of those in need but that will also improve the safety and the welfare of our communities.

4:20

A second theme covered by His Honour that I'd like to address is the importance of ensuring that Alberta remains competitive on the world stage, and I believe that this is most important when we look at our agriculture sector. After all, agriculture is one of the key

sectors of the Alberta economy and a sector that, I believe, stands to benefit greatly from improved access to both international and domestic markets.

To this end, one of the most promising ideas represented by the throne speech is the idea of creating a western economic partnership. Essentially, this partnership would include Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan and would create Canada's largest free trade and investment market. This market would then be able to work on joint trade missions overseas and market the goods produced in western Canada, goods like those produced by Alberta's agrifood industry.

After all, as His Honour stated, Alberta's agriculture and agrifood industries are a key and sustainable economic driver of our province. We are a responsible producer of safe, high-quality food products that are in demand all over the world. In fact, it is estimated that in 2008 the value of agrifood shipments was over \$11 billion, and while this figure is good, if not staggering, I believe that we can make this figure even better.

What the agriculture sector in Alberta needs is a commitment to break into new markets and aggressively sell Alberta internationally. Mr. Speaker, I'm proud this government is making this commitment. For example, 86 per cent of our exports are with our largest trading partner, the United States. We struggle to adjust to the seemingly ever-changing restrictions placed on our trade with the United States, and I'm pleased today to note that the United States has announced that Canada is no longer on the restricted list of countries for the buy America program, which previously kept Canadian companies and products out of the U.S. markets.

We are an exporting jurisdiction, producing more than we can consume, and we must have markets. Therefore, the three partners united in the western economic partnership will also be working together to expand trade in the growing east Asian market. After all, the economies of nations like China and India are set to expand dramatically, and it would be incredibly beneficial to get Alberta's agriculture products there at the ground level.

In addition, I believe we must work to add value to our agricultural products. Again, this is a sentiment shared by the Honourable Lieutenant Governor in his speech, specifically when he said that Alberta "will continue efforts to increase our competitive edge, foster value-added opportunities, and increase access to important international markets." Moreover, Mr. Speaker, adding value to an agricultural product could range from age verification on livestock to full meat testing to processing plants. Not only will processes like these make Alberta's agricultural products more valuable; they will increase our overall market access as increasingly more international jurisdictions are demanding value-added products.

Mr. Speaker, I applaud the government's previous actions on safe communities and agriculture development, and I'm excited that these issues remain a priority in the coming year. The Lieutenant Governor's words should remind us once again that together Albertans can accomplish anything. They should remind us of the value of hard work and forward thinking, and they should remind us of the power of Alberta's character. We have the freedom to create and the spirit to achieve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments and questions. Does any hon. member wish to take that five minutes?

Seeing none, I'd like to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In chapter 1 of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens provides us great

insight into his antagonistic protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, whom he describes as

a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone . . . a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.

Dickens also points out that “external heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge.”

Flash forward over a century and a half to 2010 Alberta, and recall the adage that fact is frequently stranger than fiction. While it is purely coincidental that our Premier shares the same E.S. monogram as Dickens’ fictional character, it is very disconcerting to acknowledge that according to the latest polling numbers 86 per cent of Albertans see similar character flaws in the governance of this province.

Due to this government’s lack of transparency and accountability Albertans have no idea how many of the original \$17 billion remain in the sustainability fund, which the government has frequently boasted puts Alberta in a much better position to weather the recessionary storm. Even if the government has squandered what remains of this fund, how can the Premier justify clawing back \$12 million from Alberta’s most vulnerable persons with disabilities, their families, and supporters? How can either he or his minister of employment, who didn’t blink at awarding themselves a 35 per cent across-the-board wage increase, begrudge a 12-cents-an-hour increase to individuals making the minimum wage while working for wealthy transnational corporations like McDonald’s and Wal-Mart? Is facilitating 12-year-olds’ entry into the workplace their solution to the 78,000 plus Alberta children who according to last spring’s StatsCan figures are living below the poverty line?

When it comes to the descriptors “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching,” one need look no further than the Minister of Education, who not only froze increases to special-needs children but cut \$80 million out of last year’s budget. As if that wasn’t bad enough, at this moment the minister is pleading poverty when it comes to the arbitrator’s awarding of the additional 1 per cent weekly wage increase that the government acknowledged was the way that not only teachers but school support staff and custodians would be compensated during the five-year agreement. Do the words “bargained in good faith” have no meaning for this government?

When it comes to the weekly earnings average, which determines MLAs’ compensation, what’s good for the government goose appears to be too rich for the Albertan working gander. If that is the case, why should members of the United Nurses association, the Health Sciences Association, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, or the Canadian Union of Public Employees, whose contracts are coming up for negotiation, have any faith in the government’s word?

The terms “secret” and “self-contained” could easily apply to the ministry of advanced education, whose actions or lack thereof would suggest that the government views education as a liability, an expense rather than an investment. With the passing of Bill 40, the opportunity to debate tuition increases in this Legislature was lost. The closed-door decision of the minister is what students in postsecondary institutions have been both dreading and anticipating for the past number of months.

This government doesn’t seem to understand that education and economy are inextricably linked. For every dollar invested in education, there is a \$3 return. The farce that is being played out to both the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta of tuition increases in professional faculties of between 47 to 60 per cent might at first appear comical if its potential reality didn’t have

such a devastating effect on students themselves and Alberta’s economy. Alberta already has the highest high school dropout rate in the nation and the lowest postsecondary enrolment. Twenty-five per cent of eligible students who have the required entrance grades and can afford the ever-increasing tuition costs, which are growing more disconnected from the quality of education they receive, are already turned away each year.

The way off the globally dictated nonrenewable resource funding roller coaster is through education and diversification. This reality should be even more obvious during a recession. Why would the government consider making access to a postsecondary education even more exclusionary than it already is? What happened to the increases based on inflation principle? Why does the government undermine its students and its institutions by not providing the necessary predictability and sustainability of operational grants? Why would the government break the backs of our most important natural resource, our students? When it comes to the importance of investing in advanced education, Europe is light years ahead of Alberta.

4:30

With regard to public education this government trots out the notion of choice, yet this government chooses to unfairly advantage private schools to the tune of almost \$200 million annually. Private schools, which are permitted to discriminate on a number of factors, including religious preference and affordability, not only receive 70 per cent of their public school per-pupil funding and additional infrastructure grants, but they are permitted to charge tuition, which in some cases runs into thousands of dollars.

The fact that the average age of Alberta’s public schools is over 40 years old, with minimal government infrastructure maintenance over the last 20, combined with the fact that due to the government’s space utilization regulations school boards have been forced to close more schools than they have opened should be a major concern to all Albertans, whose futures will be decided upon by the calibre of the students being educated today.

With what little time remains, I would be remiss to not at least touch on the series of ongoing problems within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Currently, due to the hiring freeze, up to 700 positions remain vacant. How can this possibly be considered in the, and I quote, best interests of children when their caseworkers are so overloaded as to make advocacy almost impossible? The turnover of workers in contracted-out children’s services due to wages, which are half or less than those of government workers, adds to the inconsistency in care and advocacy. Reducing qualifications for workers in the hopes of stopping the exodus does an even greater disservice to children.

Over 150 years have passed since Dickens penned his novel of redemption. In Alberta, however, when it comes to valuing or delivering critical public service, time appears to have stood still.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows five minutes for comment or question.

Seeing none, the chair shall now recognize the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s a tremendous honour to rise today on behalf of the Bonnyville-Cold Lake constituency to address this Assembly in response to the Speech from the Throne. My constituents have seen a lot of highs and lows in 2009 and have expressed many concerns in these trying times. I am dedicated to representing my constituents’ interests and to working hard to

promote sustainable development in my community in 2010. I am confident that this government is committed to doing the same.

However, my constituents need to believe in this also. They need to be shown that we as a government will come through for them in uncertain times. As a government we need to reach out to Albertan communities and communicate the ways in which we will foster growth and take action. We need to keep our communities strong and sustainable and encourage co-operation among them.

My constituency is extremely diverse, Mr. Speaker, as is Alberta. Our communities are made up of many different people from many different backgrounds, professions, and places. While it will be difficult to work together on every issue due to the conflicting interests, we must persevere to ensure that opportunities are being created and that all Albertans' needs are being met.

This past weekend my constituency had the distinct privilege of hosting the 2010 Alberta Winter Games. The chair of the Winter Games, Phil Kushnir, told the *Cold Lake Sun* that the games were one of the first things he has seen that has incorporated the town of Bonnyville, the MD, the city of Cold Lake, 4 Wing so comprehensively and that it's incredible what we can do as a region. Mr. Speaker, I, too, believe this is incredible.

It is an event like this that makes you realize how easy things become when we all work together towards achieving a common goal. My constituency has been struggling with its inability to work cohesively this past year, as I'm sure many areas across Alberta have as well. In late 2009 Cold Lake applied for a dissolution study due to revenue and sustainability issues and is waiting for the recommendation from our government. While opinions differ on this issue, I am happy to be part of a government that is willing to provide support to my community when in need, wherever that support might be. While our communities work together towards strengthening their relationships, we will see industries, markets strengthen in response to this.

I would like to see responsible development in 2010 in the two industries that impact Bonnyville and Cold Lake the most, agriculture and energy. Agriculture is the major area of concern for my constituents, Mr. Speaker. Many hard-working farmers across Alberta and in my community have passed their land down from generation to generation. However, it's getting harder for the family farm to yield a considerable profit, as they once had. Like all Albertans, farmers are worried about the economic downturn and how it has affected their finances and how they will be able to restore their business. We have been doing a tremendous job as a province in support of this industry, but we need to continue to move forward into new markets by limiting barriers to growth.

Development in all industries needs to occur in order to keep up with global markets, especially in the energy industry. The five major oil and gas companies in my constituency are working on ways to improve methods of extraction to increase productivity and limit their environmental footprint. For example, Imperial Oil's Cold Lake heavy-oil operation facility reached its one-billionth barrel mark in October of 2009. The facility joins three other facilities in Canada who have also reached this milestone. It is the first in situ operation in the country to accomplish this, and it happened in my constituency. Another example is Osum Oil Sands Corp., an emerging in situ oil sands company. It has recently applied for the Taiga project and is seeking approval for a 35,000 barrel per day in situ project in the Cold Lake region. This project will not involve mines, tailings ponds, or fresh water and will have a relatively small surface footprint.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents rely heavily on this industry, but at the same time we do not want to compromise the natural beauty of our land. By encouraging new and responsible development in this

industry, we can expect more environmental accountability from its key players. The recent development of our province's research and innovation system under Alberta Innovates will help to do just this. I am now a government liaison committee member of Alberta Innovates: Energy and Environment Solutions. This new system will help to strengthen markets, encourage growth and technological development, and allow our province to emerge as a global player in innovation.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents are also concerned about health care, its accessibility in rural communities, and the changes that have been implemented over the past year. Many families do not have family doctors in my constituency. Approximately 3,000 in Bonnyville alone do not have one. They are worried about the shortage of doctors in rural communities and the wait times that occur as a result of this shortage.

My constituents are also concerned about funding for priority services. A recent issue that my community struggled with was the funding for a nurse practitioner in Bonnyville. A nurse practitioner is vital to this area, and without one, patient care would suffer. We need to work hard as a government to ensure that health care remains patient focused and that the health and well-being of Albertans are considered first and foremost.

As a former teacher I believe that education needs to be a major priority of this government and that it's important to continue to act in the best interests of Alberta students. Our Education minister has proven that he will take action when student learning is affected. We need to continue to take steps to ensure that Alberta students receive the best possible education. Mr. Speaker, if we can commit to strengthening all of these areas of concern, I know that we can successfully support Albertans in need.

It has been a pleasure to be part of this government for the past two years. Even though times have been tough of late, we have the strength to band together to create positive developments for our communities. While Alberta is comprised of many different communities, we are all part of one very important one. This province binds us together through thick and thin, and I am confident in our ability to grow as many and as one.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

4:40

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for comments and questions. Hon. member, you wish to use five minutes?

Mr. Chase: Yes.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Something we share in common is our pride as teachers, having worked within the Alberta education system. Do you have concerns that the government's clawback of \$80 million and the unknown figure that may be clawed back this year to balance the budget have a potentially detrimental effect on children in the classroom?

Mrs. Leskiw: As you know, I've taught for 36 years, and I've taught classes of 36, taught a class of 39. The size of the class doesn't matter, but the makeup does. I've had a class of 18 that was worse than my class of 36. I also know that within the school systems alone – and I can only talk about the school systems I worked under – they themselves need to look into how they spend money. The government gives the school board money, but the ultimate decision of how they spend it is in the hands of the school board. Schools, the teachers, the school boards all need to look at how they spend the

money that is provided for them. I am confident that the education of our students will not suffer.

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

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a short question to my colleague. She mentioned in her presentation that there were 3,000 people in Bonnyville that didn't have a doctor. I wonder if she could enlighten us, firstly, as to the population of Bonnyville and, secondly, on the number of doctors in Bonnyville.

Mrs. Leskiw: The population of Bonnyville is over 6,000, but the doctors in the Bonnyville area also service the patients in the MD of Bonnyville, which is another 9,000. We have 12 doctors. They are right now recruiting three more. We did hire a nurse practitioner, and we're hoping that that will relieve some of the problems. But we are short of doctors.

Mr. Allred: Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton – help me out here – Calder. Sorry.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's all in Calder, sir.

To the hon. member. I've had many opportunities to enjoy the recreational amenities of your constituency, in particular both Bonnyville Beach and Floatingstone Lake, as well as some of the other amenities that you have, not to forget the aptly named Cold Lake. My question is not, however, about the fine body of water itself but has more to do with the dissolution of the community of Cold Lake. My question is: what is the impact that that's having on the local industry in the community? Are you seeing any loss of economic opportunity or any increased levels of unemployment or, you know, any other negative impact indicators at this particular time?

Mrs. Leskiw: Actually, our area is doing quite well. The oil companies are expanding every day.

In regard to the dissolution study I think that what Cold Lake was trying to do by applying it was for the government to take a real close look at how municipalities are funded across the entire province, the difference between rural and urban municipalities. It's a problem. It's not a problem that just occurs in Bonnyville. It's a problem that has to be addressed in the entire province. But we're doing just fine.

By the way, all things don't happen in Calder. They all happen in Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you. In 2003 with the Learning Commission report the government only lived up to half of the wage increase, which stuck the school boards, who are solely funded by the government, for the rest. Sixty-three different locals, approximately 50,000 Albertans, are going to be forced by the minister's decision to live up to the arbitrator's ruling. Do you have concerns about that effect on the school boards' budgets and directions you might suggest to the minister about bargaining in good faith?

Mrs. Leskiw: Well, I lived through the time when we teachers had to take a 5 per cent cutback, and that still is in my memory quite well. I believe that if the school boards take a closer look at what they're doing, they're going to be able to accommodate the increase

for teachers. I believe that teachers deserve the raise that they got, and I definitely am glad that it went in that direction.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, it's a 15-minute allocation for a response?

The Deputy Speaker: Right. Fifteen minutes.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. There we go. Mr. Speaker, I always listen to the throne speech for a couple of reasons: primarily to see how the government's vision for the upcoming year is going to affect the good constituents of the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre, and then, secondly, because I'm critic on a couple of portfolios. I'm looking specifically for what I can glean out of there around culture and around environment because those are the two portfolios I'm responsible for.

There were a number of things that came up for my constituents, and I've actually been seeking input from them for most of the previous month on Facebook and website and e-zine that I do and in just talking with people and responding to issues they brought up with me. You know, what are the concerns? What do you want me to bring forward on your behalf?

Here's what I'm hearing from people. The most dramatic one, I think, for a number of my constituents and their families was the cuts to PDD. The minister responsible will immediately respond that, "Well, these weren't cuts; these were administrative adjustments," and some other carefully crafted language that gets used. Frankly, my constituents were not led astray by any of the fancy footwork on the language there. These were cuts, and it has already been affecting them. I have heard a number of stories of people who were getting a specific number of hours of assistance that allowed them to live independently.

These are adults. These are persons with developmental disabilities. These are not children. Once individuals move out of the care of children's services, they usually move onto AISH or onto PDD. Where someone had enough hours of help to be able to exist in a roommate situation with another individual with PDD or special needs, their hours have been cut back enough that that was really in jeopardy. If they didn't have someone that could help get them up and get them dressed and get some food into their stomachs, they would not be able to exist in their home and they would have to move back in with their families. Frankly, their families just are not able to cope. In many cases their parents are of an age where they physically cannot assist their adult children and move them about. Even with some of the aids to daily living, which are available in a limited manner, Mr. Speaker, to assist them, that's still not enough to allow them to be able to look after their adult child.

There have already been cuts, and frankly I was offended when the minister was talking about the need to find administrative efficiencies. These not-for-profits already – they invented the meaning of administrative efficiency. They're already counting every single paper clip. Actually, they do without them because they're too expensive. They are already operating in a very efficient manner, and to say that they're not was really offensive.

The increases that have been experienced in PDD and some of the other social service sectors were to address the enormous wage gap that existed between individuals working for NGOs providing that service and contracted to government and government workers doing exactly the same job. We had a 25 to 40 per cent wage difference on that, and the government was slowly adjusting the grant programs to deal with that difference in wages. So to be saying, "Oh, they've

already had an increase,” or “They’ve had an increase of X per cent or X million dollars in the last couple of years,” is not true. Yes, they did, and it was for a very specific purpose. Frankly, for most of them, by the time the allocation got doled out, it was a difference of literally pennies an hour in their wage.

4:50

They have already been dealing with cutbacks in that sector and in the social service sector overall. What we’re seeing now is the government making it harder to qualify for programs. They get less hours of support. There’s more pressure on the NGOs to do separate fundraising to subsidize the cost of a program that they’re contracted by the government to deliver. So we have agencies fundraising to subsidize government programs.

There is a huge issue here around the government’s ability to protect vulnerable people and to allow them to engage in the full life of the province, and that continues to be an issue. I did not hear it addressed in the throne speech, and where I did, I have an argument with it. I mean, when you say that social programs will become better integrated and more focused, what I’m hearing is doublespeak for tougher criteria and that fewer people are going to get into the program. We already know that’s what is happening. The outcomes-based activity that they are moving toward in the whole social service sector is going to be even more of that: less money, more expectation that the not-for-profit delivers more service for less money. The people that really end up being unprotected in all of this are the Albertans that should be getting the service.

I want to talk about university tuition. Again, I’ve been hearing from students about the increase in tuition and the enormous struggle that it is becoming for them, especially those in so-called professional programs which are subject to the market modifiers. We’re talking medicine, obviously, law, and some other faculties that that would apply to. Here we have the situation where everybody is saying, “We don’t have family doctors; we need more family doctors,” yet at the same time the government is making it so that the universities have to make choices about raising the tuition rates, particularly on these professional programs, so that fewer people can afford to be going. We’re not seeing incentive programs that would get people to go to university and then serve as a family doctor in a rural area, and they would get, you know, part of their tuition paid. No, we’re just seeing the tuition go up. Where is the sense in that? How is that moving us along the road that we all know we need to go on?

I have a number of seniors in my constituency, and they continue to express concerns to me. They still feel that they tightened their buckles the last time the government got into trouble, in the mid-90s, and they lost a number of programs. Those programs were never restored to them, and they continue to struggle with that. The details around the pharmaceutical plan for seniors are still unfleshed out. My office phones the department of health about every six weeks and tries to get clarification on how this is going to work. I’m now being told that this is going to be an opt-in program; before I was told it was an opt-out program. How much is it going to cost them? Seniors are really worried about how much extra this new scheme is going to cost them, and they don’t believe that it’s going to save them much money. We’re not seeing the support for seniors that we expected.

There’s been a lot of talk over the last six months about the effect of government policy on mental health. We have now heard that they’re going to stop trying to shut down Alberta Hospital, but really the point that started all of this was that Alberta Hospital needed renovations. It needed upgrading. It needed modernization. We’re hearing nothing about that, even if it’s a long-term plan, even if it’s

this infrastructure amount will be, you know, rolled out over five years. Now we’re getting nothing. We’re told it’s going to be shut down, and then we’re told it’s not.

In fact, some of the seniors were moved from the Alberta Hospital to a new facility that was built by Caritas out by the Misericordia hospital. You know, Mr. Speaker, some of my seniors from the General hospital, which was also going to be renovated, were supposed to go to that Caritas facility. They can’t go there now because that space is now being taken up by geriatric mental health patients.

So a huge chaos has been created there, a great deal of uncertainty for people, and frankly two steps forward, three steps back is what we keep getting here. There has been no step up as to the provision of those programs in the community that would keep people with mental health issues stable with help with medications, with help with daily living, help with housing. All we know is we’re going to end up with more and more people with mental illness and addiction challenging our housing and homeless problems that are already pretty big.

I want to talk very briefly about minimum wage. I just find it so interesting that the rhetoric that came out of the government was all about helping small businesses. Mr. Speaker, small business doesn’t pay minimum wage. They can’t afford to. They pay better than minimum wage to people. They want to keep them in place there, and their employees are really key to them. They don’t want a high turnover. Who does pay minimum wage? Huge corporations, multinational corporations: Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, TacoTime, a lot of the fast food agencies, a lot of the megamall dwellers. That’s who pays minimum wage. I am truly curious as to how the government is going to explain to my constituents – a lot of them work in the service sector – why they are making it easier for multinational corporations like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s to get away with continuing to pay a lower rate to the people that work there.

You know, the other sector that pays minimum wage is the government itself. Here are the groups that are actually going to gain by what the government is putting out, not small businesspeople but the government itself and huge multinational corporations that actually do pay minimum wage. That’s not going to help my constituents.

I want to talk about the fact that, you know, as you drive through my constituency you see people lined up in the medicentres. Every single seat is taken. People are leaning against the wall waiting to get in, and that’s not a family doctor. I mean, maybe it’s a place where your file is still there the next time you come in, but it’s not offering primary care. Actually, the government stopped talking about primary care or primary care networks, and that is an important component that we need to continue to move forward on.

I’ve heard from people who are really concerned with, again, the doublespeak we’re getting from the government about debt creation, the sale of Alberta bonds, which is a creation of debt. Why is the government getting into that? Why can they not reorganize and find their own administrative efficiencies, stagger out the amount of infrastructure they’re spending over a longer period of time, for example, and cut some of the other expenditures that we’ve brought up time and time again? No, instead we’re going to have Alberta capital bonds being sold, which is debt creation, but it’s all being sold as though granny is going to get a roof over her head. Well, yes. But those same taxpayers, all of us, are going to be responsible for the interest rate that has to be paid on those capital bonds. So a few people will do well out of it, but every single one of us who are taxpayers in Alberta will end up paying that extra interest rate that goes out to pay on those capital bonds.

The government is moving ahead on revising the condo act, and it needs to be bigger, faster, and more wonderful on that one because we have more condos, not less. And we need revisions to that condo act to move along as quickly as possible.

I'm also looking to see how the government is doing on the creation of child care spaces, but I'm not hearing from them how they expect to deal with subsidizing the creation of child care spaces for the very large private providers of child care that we now have moving into Alberta and into our marketplace. I'm not sure why taxpayers have to subsidize private business for the creation of child care spaces.

On the cultural scene we need more venue spaces, and that, by the way, includes a request I've had from people in Jasper that they're looking for an acknowledgement from the government that they could use part of a large space vacated in the courthouse in Jasper for a Jasper arts centre. I'll talk more about that as the session goes on. I'm also hearing from the film industry here in Alberta, who are really struggling to remain competitive with the other provinces, and their request to the government to consider revising the streaming process that they have right now. I think that's an area where a little bit of investment would go an awfully long way, and we know that. We've learned this. We've learned this lesson, and still the government goes backwards on it. Frankly, that whole thing needs to be on a tax credit system, and I hope eventually that the government can manage to get there.

5:00

The other issues that I would like to raise are on the environment. Of course, our biggest worry is around water. It's around air quality. It's around cumulative effects. It's around reclamation and some pretty strong regulations around reclamation. You know, Mr. Speaker, we do believe that climate change is a reality, and it poses a significant challenge. We believe that we as a government, certainly the Alberta Liberals as a government, would act in good faith to reduce Alberta's carbon footprint.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of questions and comments. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I'd like to ask my esteemed colleague a question and provide a little bit of a background for the question. The question is: are you suffering from late 1990s déjà vu? The reason I say that is that in the 1990s in Calgary we lost half our hospitals. What I've been noticing is that at that point, as part of the qualifier, we didn't have a \$17 billion buffer in the sustainability fund. Are you seeing programs, health delivery, either complications or closures in Edmonton that approach the magnitude of losing half the hospitals? Is the government playing musical beds with the existing positions?

Ms Blakeman: It's not my area of expertise, but what I can tell you that we see in Edmonton are buildings being built but not being completed and not being operational. We have the Mazankowski heart centre being built and then huge problems with it being completed – again, is there the staff to actually operate it? – and secondly, the Stollery children's centre, where, again, we had kids being looked after in a tent outside for an extended period of time. After stop and start and stop and start, we seem to have now a commitment to move ahead on that. Then there's the Edmonton clinic, which is also in the wings, plus what needs to be done for the expansion of the Cross Cancer Institute. So there was a lot of

infrastructure that got started, stopped, with huge indecision around that. Work orders change, the money mounts up, and still the question of whether or not we would actually have the staff to work in it.

So am I seeing a déjà vu in programs? Yes, and here's an example. I remember talking to the minister of what was then employment, I think, or Alberta Works, who was the former Member for Lethbridge-West. He had participated in a study around cultural workers and that whole concept that, you know, investing in the arts and creating cultural workers was a cheaper way to create jobs and very long-lasting jobs. That whole project and the report that came out of it went nowhere, yet there was so much potential in it.

What we saw is a stagnation in what's happening in the arts. We had a bit of an injection the last couple of years, and we're now hearing that the government is going to give it a haircut. Well, frankly, a 15 per cent haircut in the cultural area is going to take us back to where we were in spending at about the end of the 1980s. So, yes, it's very much feeling like a déjà vu. Here we have programs and grants that we could be applying for federally for cultural career choices and promoting careers in culture, labour market agreements around culture, and we can't get any uptake on it in Alberta because we have no government policy on cultural workers and how that fits into our whole scheme of things.

So it's very much feeling like a déjà vu to me.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Liepert: I'd like to say that I was listening with bated breath to that speech, but that would not be the truth, Mr. Speaker. But I did hear out of the corner of one ear that the member wanted us to spread out our construction. So I'd ask the member for a yes-or-no answer. Would she also have had that same position with the construction of the art gallery in her constituency? Yes or no?

Ms Blakeman: If the timing had been the same, yes. I mean, to look at the Art Gallery of Alberta now and start to construct it now, knowing where we are, yeah, I would be advising that they stagger it out a bit longer.

Mr. Liepert: We'll remember that next election.

Ms Blakeman: Well, you asked me to tell the truth, so why don't you remember that as well?

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

Mr. Chase: Yes. An historical note: scalping is a Caucasian-introduced area. Would you suggest that the 10 to 15 per cent haircut is more like a scalping?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on the Speech from the Throne.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise in the House today to reply to the Speech from the Throne. It is interesting to note that the first Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, the Hon. George Hedley Bulyea, read the first Speech from the Throne on March 15, 1906, for the First Session of the First Legislature of the Alberta Legislative Assembly. Since then there have been over 100 throne speeches. I have heard His Honour deliver three in this Chamber in person, and I am saddened to say that not one of them mentioned me.

Mr. Speaker, in all seriousness, I would like to thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for his moving and inspirational speech. The throne speech acknowledged that despite difficult times Albertans remain confident when looking to the future, and we have every reason to be. It is because in times like this Albertans roll up their sleeves and work together to ensure a bright future, a future where our economy continues to flourish, a future where our health care is the envy of the country, and a future where our children are able to grow up and thrive in strong and safe communities all over this province.

Mr. Speaker, fiscally this province has a solid foundation. This government's fiscal management and accountability have elevated Alberta to one of the best fiscal standings in North America. Alberta has some of the lowest taxes as well as some of the most established saving plans for the future. Due to this excellent fiscal planning and a commitment to saving for a rainy day, this government has put itself in a fortunate position. Saving is of utmost importance to this government. For over the past three decades Alberta has been saving. Savings like the sustainability fund can provide a soft landing in economic down times. With the sustainability fund we have the tools to face any economic storm head-on and persevere.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans are deeply interested in our economy, and this deep interest is matched only by our passion for health care. Alberta's health care system will continue to be a leader as we spend near the top amount per capita in the country. The health of all Albertans is at stake. That is why it is imperative to assess and reassess health care in Alberta to make sure we are doing our absolute best. As His Honour has stated, "Your government will go beyond statistical measures . . . and seek input from Albertans themselves." The ability to plan ahead is integral to health care, and the Alberta government knows this. With the implementation of a five-year funding plan Alberta health care will remain stable and secure no matter what the economic environment entails.

His Honour also mentioned that our health care system will be accountable to Albertans, and accountability in health care is paramount to this government. Mr. Speaker, a key area on which Alberta Health Services will focus their efforts is in reducing wait times for procedures. As well, Alberta Health Services will do their utmost to ensure that health care is readily accessible to all those who need it. It is through public consultation that Alberta Health will provide added transparency, efficiency, and accountability. With a five-year plan implemented, Albertans will be able to say that we have one of the best health care systems in the country.

5:10

Along with providing better health care, we are committed to building safe and caring communities. Our quality of life depends on us having strong and safe neighbourhoods to call home. Reducing crime in a meaningful, long-term way is essential in creating great communities. The existence of criminal gangs threatens to upset the balance we have in our communities. Their criminal activities are a danger to our residents and our property. As His Honour noted, "the Alberta gang reduction strategy will provide a comprehensive, long-term approach to suppress gang crime in Alberta." Mr. Speaker, initiatives like this will make sure that the gang environment and lifestyle does not look like an attractive option for our youth. In addition, minimizing the number of gangs decreases the inherent dangers which gang activity can lead to. With fewer gangs and less crime Albertans can focus on the multitude of opportunities this beautiful province has to offer.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has been blessed with abundant natural resources. However, our most valuable resource is Albertans themselves. It is the industrious, innovative, and driven people that

make the most of our resources and of the opportunities our province provides. It is through them that our province remains in a fortunate position. The Speech from the Throne thoroughly confirmed that Albertans can genuinely look to the future with confidence, a confidence that ensures that our economy will continue to grow, confidence that our health care system will continue to be a leader, and confidence that our children will grow up in safe, healthy communities, free from the dangers of gangs.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to again thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor, Norman Kwong, who has represented Alberta exceptionally well in the last five years. His Speech from the Throne outlined and envisioned Alberta's continued and future greatness. A remarkable man once said: learn from the past, watch the present, and create a better future. I can proudly say that this is what our government is all about: creating a strong and stable future for Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods talked about the government's wisdom of saving for a rainy day. I would suggest that we have recessionary rain of Noah's ark epic proportions occurring in Alberta at this time. Unfortunately, the government has not saved very much over the last number of years, when we had billions of dollars of surplus. The heritage trust fund is worth less now than when Peter Lougheed left it.

I'm wondering two questions of the hon. member. Does he have any idea, even to the nearest billion, how much remains of the sustainability fund, that he has praised his government for setting aside? If there is a significant amount left in the sustainability fund, why is his government not using the sustainability fund to eliminate any cuts to public service provisions? I'll be glad to repeat them if necessary.

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

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the question by the hon. colleague. I'd like to repeat the principle: this government's fiscal management and accountability I believe elevated Alberta to one of the best fiscal standings in North America, and the Premier's intention of making this province one of the best places to live, work, and play is basically related to the fiscal management of this government.

I beg to disagree with my colleague in that he does not believe that this government is doing a good job on our savings system. The fact of the matter is that we were able to pay through this Conservative government the deficit that we had, \$21 billion. In addition to that, we have savings in our sustainability fund of \$17 billion. This is just like using the money that we have, the interest that is supposed to be received from that money, for the deficit that this government will be incurring for the next few years. So it's money, from the left, but it is our own money that we are using at the same time. I'd like to remind our colleague that Alberta has some of the lowest taxes as well as some of the most established savings plans for the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you for your enthusiastic support of your government's ability to save. I hope the minister of finance will reveal the figures tomorrow. We keep hearing about \$17 billion in our sustainability fund, but Albertans have no idea how much of that \$17 billion remains and how that money will be used to preserve public service programs. I asked you if you had any knowledge, and apparently you firmly believe and have stated in this House that there's still \$17 billion in the fund. What good is a large bank account if your house is falling apart, if your children require clothing and you can't afford food?

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

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think this is exactly the reason why we have the sustainability fund. In times of crisis this government is using that money to meet the expenses. I think what our colleague does not understand here is the fact that that money, that we are using in this time of need of our province, is really there. You know, knowing what the balance is, for me, is not really the important issue here. But knowing that the government is using that money to sustain our need, to pay the hospitals, to build the schools and the infrastructure of this province and meeting what other – you know, that this government thinks it's very relevant to forward us into the future, I think, is the issue that we should be discussing here.

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been very interested to hear the hon. member's response to the throne but also the comments that he was making as it related to the answers to the questions. I'd be interested to know how he feels this kind of throne speech will be received in his constituency.

The Deputy Speaker: We ran out of time, so I will recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm privileged to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne. I would like to commend His Honour for his service to the province. For the past five years His Honour has shown his love for this province and its people. Thank you for your dedication.

I would also like to commend our hon. Lieutenant Governor for delivering the Speech from the Throne and providing us with a vision for this upcoming legislative session. The priorities are centred on rededicating our Legislature to ensure that Alberta remains a leader in Canada. These priorities focus on Alberta's fiscal advantage; improving health care; building safe, caring communities; remaining competitive in a global economy; ensuring a clean energy future; and, as stated, securing Alberta's place in Canada.

Since I arrived in Alberta in 1970, this province has undergone many changes. No matter these changes, the people of this province have demonstrated resolve and passion to further themselves and their communities. Although our province has changed over the course of time, our unique values such as fiscal responsibility, entrepreneurial spirit, and self-dependence still resonate among Albertans today. The people of my constituency, Calgary-Hays, believe in this province. This positive attitude is reflected throughout Alberta. Albertans have a determined attitude, and their positive work ethic contributes to making this province a pre-eminent leader

in Canada and throughout the world. I am enthusiastic about the agenda that has been set forth for our Legislature, and I am encouraged to work with all of my colleagues to meet the needs and priorities of Albertans.

5:20

Mr. Speaker, I am encouraged by our government's commitment to improving Alberta's health with the creation of a new Alberta health act and engaging Albertans in a conversation on health. Health care is on the minds of many Albertans, and I believe that by making the health care system more patient focused, we will be able to better meet the needs of our constituents. Calgary-Hays will soon benefit from the service of the new South Calgary hospital, ensuring that all Calgaryans have timely access to medical facilities. I look forward to the grand opening and to future investment in this hospital as it grows to serve the needs of Calgary and the surrounding regions.

Albertans are experiencing the impact of a continually changing economy. Our government has a great opportunity to continue forward momentum of needed infrastructure. This past year the government has made immense investments to meet the infrastructure needs of all constituencies in this province. I am optimistic that this investment to strengthen infrastructure will continue and that the construction of the southeast Calgary ring road will progress. The extension of the Calgary ring road is important to my constituents and serves multiple purposes such as reducing commute times, improving safety conditions, and decreasing the depreciation of our roads.

I would also like to comment on the objectives in the throne speech that focus on building a stronger Alberta. Mr. Speaker, this government has a goal to ensure that Alberta is the most competitive market in Canada as well as in North America. We are in an enviable position to have an opportunity to build on our successes by developing alternative energies and focusing on environmental sustainability. This includes continuing to develop a sustainable and competitive economy that is diversified in order to extend the longevity of Alberta's prosperity. We will continue to diversify our economy and energy sector and strive to reach our full potential. There is great opportunity in renewable energy sources such as bioenergy, wind, solar, and hydroelectric, all of which are examples of our alternatives that represent a stronger, more diverse energy sector.

Securing our place in Canada also includes seeking fair treatment for Alberta under universal federal programs. This province has contributed to the success of the nation, and it is only right that we receive fair treatment.

Mr. Speaker, providing safe and secure communities is a priority that I believe in strongly. As a 25-year veteran of the Calgary Police Service I have always believed that we need to make a concentrated effort towards crime prevention and reduction. We need to continue to protect our communities from illegal and unsafe activities, ensuring that our cities and towns are filled with an atmosphere of co-operation and safety. Reducing hostility and violence in our neighborhoods is an objective of utmost importance. We should strive to continue to provide sufficient support for our police services in their efforts to secure our communities. Therefore, I am pleased with the priorities that have been put forward.

This government's priorities include ensuring that our communities are safe and secure. In the past two years this government has enacted the safe communities strategy and is continuing to strengthen the strategy in the upcoming session. I am encouraged that the new initiatives will strengthen our police forces by adding 100 new front-line police officers. In addition, the Alberta gang reduction

strategy will address the ever-growing problem that many cities are facing.

Mr. Speaker, the priorities outlined by the Lieutenant Governor reflect the desires of Albertans. I believe that our priorities represent the many special individuals throughout Alberta, and I applaud this government's continued support for them. Some of these individuals include those who have chosen to join the Canadian armed forces. These men and women are choosing to make the ultimate commitment as a citizen. I believe we have an obligation to support these dedicated Albertans, and I want to acknowledge their selfless sacrifice to assisting those in distress, despair, and fear.

Having served myself for 11 years with the Canadian armed forces, I personally understand the diligence and loyalty to our country that our military personnel demonstrate both as full-time and reservist soldiers. Currently I have four family members serving in the forces: a niece serving here in Edmonton, a nephew serving in the navy in Esquimalt, and another nephew and my brother in Kingston, Ontario. They along with all members recognize the need to volunteer their services for the betterment of our province and our country.

The dedicated men and women of our armed forces face dangerous challenges abroad. I commend their efforts and would also like to acknowledge the competent individuals in our police service who are engaged in the effort to address the safety and security concerns in our communities here in Alberta. Their jobs can often be thankless, stressful, and demanding, but they carry out their duties because they have made a commitment to the people of Alberta.

The hon. Lieutenant Governor's Speech from the Throne highlighted priorities that reflect what Albertans feel are the most important to them. The speech provided a thoughtful, comprehensive account of our ambitions for this Legislature, and I am sure that this government will continually strive to fulfill these priorities. I am honoured with the opportunity to diligently work every day to ensure that Albertans can continue to realize the benefits and experiences that this province affords us all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for comments or questions. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I very much value and appreciate the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays' military and police background, his service not only to the city of Calgary but his service to the nation.

I have four questions. I know that the hon. member tried to bring forward a private member's bill with regard to distracted driving legislation, so I would like to hear his opinion on what the chances in the near future of that actually coming forward, possibly as a government bill, might be.

I'd also like to know how he feels about the delay in the Fort Macleod police college and his reflection on what has happened with part of that community and crime legislation, which saw the property of a mother seized because her son used her address as part of a fraudulent activity. Now, the court has since overturned that decision.

So distracted driving, delay for Fort Macleod police college, and how effective the community and crime legislation is if it's wrongfully seizing houses where an innocent person had nothing to do with it other than her address being used and abused.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, if you wish.

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The distracted driving legislation is still in the process, so I have every confidence that it

will pass eventually. It is back, I believe, in the agenda and priorities, and we're still working on it. I do agree with Minister Ouellette sometimes, and this time I do agree with him that at least we've got it right. I wasn't totally happy because when I started working on this, we would have been third in Canada with the legislation. We may end up being last, but I think we're going to get it right. We're taking a long, hard look at it. I have spoken to people on this, and they feel it's much, much better to get it right, pass it eventually, and it'll be excellent legislation, I feel.

The delay in the police college. I believe it was announced two and a half years ago. Since that time we've obviously had a recession, and that affects not only Albertans but Canadians and everyone in North America.

Mr. Liepert: They want to stretch it out anyway. They want to stretch capital out anyway.

Mr. Johnston: Yeah. I was going to say that it hasn't been cancelled, so I'm still optimistic. Until it's announced that it's being cancelled, I'm optimistic that it will come forth in the future.

Now the appeal process. I wasn't aware of this case that you mentioned where someone, a lady – I believe it was her address that was used. If her son used that in a criminal way and it was caught, then the appeal process worked because you have a judge that appealed that process, looked it over, and rescinded the decision. Therefore, the system worked. It's no different than when I was on the drivers' review board. You would have someone use someone else's driver's licence or use a name or whatever, and the appeal process worked. They'd come before us, and we'd make a decision in that person's favour. So, as I said, I'm encouraged that this appeal process works.

5:30

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays, I did a little math. I understand that you served 11 years in the Canadian armed forces in addition to 25 years in the Calgary city police for a total of 36 years of public service, not to mention the fact that you were elected to this Assembly in 2004, I believe, which, if we add that on, would give us some 42 years of direct public service. I'd like to say, hon. member, that I have always found you to be a glass-half-full, not a glass-half-empty type of individual, and you're very true to your cause. So whether today is a saving day or a spending day I'll leave to others to determine.

I would like to ask one simple question of you. In terms of the additional policing resources that are arriving in the city of Calgary, are you satisfied that the deployment of them is being done in a timely manner?

The Deputy Speaker: Sorry. Time is up. You can answer the hon. member at conversational time.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and join with my fellow members to respond to the Speech from the Throne delivered by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor Norman Kwong. Before I begin, I would like to thank His Honour for his years serving Alberta as Lieutenant Governor.

Mr. Speaker, every year I along with many Albertans am renewed and encouraged to hear of the successes of our government over the past year and our plans for the future. I was pleased to hear of several of the priorities planned for 2010, priorities like health care, where this government is committed to making our publicly funded

health system more patient focused, or priorities like ensuring that Alberta remains competitive in the global market. As His Honour stated, Bill 1 of this session, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, will signal our government's resolve to make Alberta the most competitive jurisdiction in North America. While I look forward to the success of all of these priorities, I would like to focus today on this government's commitment to striking the right balance between responsible spending and effective service delivery to all Albertans.

Right now is the time to invest in public infrastructure. Currently, as a result of the global economic downturn, many construction projects cost far less than they did a little over a year ago, so jurisdictions with money in the bank would be able to take advantage of these reduced prices and essentially get more value for the taxpayer dollar. Alberta is one of those few jurisdictions in the world that has money set aside to spend when construction prices provide better taxpayer value. As His Honour stated, this government took aggressive steps to create a cushion for the downturn and improved the fiscal position of the province by almost \$50 billion while maintaining low taxes. A \$23 billion debt was paid off, and nearly \$24 billion has been saved and invested.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, \$17 billion of these savings went into the sustainability fund, a fund designed to be used if the province ever experienced a sudden drop in income. This cushioning fund enables this government to continue to protect core programs from the cuts seen in other jurisdictions. In addition, this fund allows us to continue to spend on infrastructure. As the Lieutenant Governor stated, the sustainability fund enables Alberta to keep investing in the public infrastructure that we know we will need for tomorrow at a time when we can take advantage of lower costs. Essentially, this government's good planning has left us in a situation where we're able to take advantage of low prices and get the best deal for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, this good planning can also be seen by the proposal to introduce Alberta capital bonds. Alberta capital bonds will be available only in Alberta and only to Albertans. Moreover, capital bonds give Albertans the opportunity to invest in their province and support its future growth. In addition, because of Alberta's triple-A credit rating Alberta capital bonds are also an incredibly safe investment. This is particularly attractive considering the current economic climate.

Mr. Speaker, these capital bonds will function in a similar way to our sustainability fund; that is, the money obtained from the sale of these bonds will be used to finance needed infrastructure projects. As His Honour stated, "proceeds raised through this sale of bonds will go toward building accommodations for Alberta seniors, including continuing care and supportive living facilities." Essentially, capital bonds will ensure that those most in need will have the infrastructure in place to support them both now and in the future. In this way infrastructure spending is actually complementing this

government's commitment to both social programs and to supporting those in need, commitments like the goal of creating 14,000 new child care spaces or continuing to develop 11,000 new affordable housing spaces by 2012 or, as the Lieutenant Governor stated, commitments like integrating and focusing our social programs so they effectively target those who need them most.

I'm also looking forward to another goal described by our Lieutenant Governor, improving our global competitiveness through education. One step towards this goal is creating a western economic partnership, as mentioned by His Honour. Another important step is ensuring that we have the skilled and qualified workers that the world demands. As His Honour stated, "our province must be a magnet for the talented individuals and businesses its economy needs." After all, Mr. Speaker, a skilled workforce is a result of a government dedicated to education, and I'm proud to say that because of our sound fiscal planning we're in a position to do just that. Instead of having to cut back or reduce like other jurisdictions, Alberta can continue to invest in its future by supporting our invaluable postsecondary institutions. Institutions like Red Deer College in my constituency of Red Deer-South will be instrumental in training the workers of tomorrow not only in central Alberta but, increasingly, in the world as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, because of our sound planning we are set to position Alberta and its workers in the global economic spotlight, we are set to expand the infrastructure Albertans need most, and we are set to effectively support those who need it most. These are the actions of a government that takes a long-term view of our province. These are actions that recognize that sound planning is critical not only now but for our future and the future of our children.

In closing, I would like to once again thank His Honour for his encouraging words and once again applaud this government for its sound planning and long-term vision. I believe that the strength of this province has always resulted in the character of its people and that with a long-term plan for the future Alberta and Albertans can accomplish anything.

Thank you.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, I would like to move to adjourn debate on the throne speech.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

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

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that the House now stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:40 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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