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The 27th Legislature
Third Session

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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.

Tuesday, February 16, 2010

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. From our forests and parkland to our prairies and mountains comes the call of our land. From our farmsteads, towns, and cities comes the call of our people that as legislators of this province we act with responsibility and sensitivity. Grant us the wisdom to meet such challenges. Amen.

Hon. members, today Mrs. Judith Garcia will lead us in the singing of our national anthem. Mrs. Garcia is a talented artist in voice, piano, ballet, and flamenco dance and resides in Westlock. Mrs. Garcia won 26 awards, a world record, at the 2008 World Championships of Performing Arts held in Hollywood, California. I would ask 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: Thank you, madam. [applause]
Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mrs. Linda Kroetsch. In March 2009 Linda volunteered to have her head shaved and donated her hair to Locks of Love, which is a nonprofit organization that provides hairpieces to financially disadvantaged children under age 21 suffering from long-term medical hair loss from any diagnosis. The community responded, and Linda raised over \$7,000 for the Stollery foundation and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Linda was crowned Jarvie queen in August 2009 for her dedication to the community and her efforts toward this worthy cause. She is accompanied this afternoon by her husband, Mel Kroetsch; her daughter Gloria Byer; her brother and sister-in-law Carl and Audrey Byer; and her friend Cathy Hemmings. They are seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, this afternoon, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much. Today it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly some people from my ministry, Housing and Urban Affairs, people who all have been instrumental in forwarding our province's agenda to increase affordable housing and end homelessness within 10 years, which, I may add, is the only province in Canada to push this goal. Today we have with us the deputy minister of my ministry, Ms

Marcia Nelson. I'd ask that you please stand as I read your name. Ms Nelson is joined in the members' gallery by her executive team: Mr. Robin Wigston, the assistant deputy minister, homeless support and land development; Mr. Mike Leathwood, assistant deputy minister, housing development and operations; Ms Barb Korol, director of communications; Mr. Arthur Arruda, executive director, strategic corporate services; Ms Line Porfon, executive director, policy and urban affairs; and Ms Sandra Kraatz, director of human resource services. Mr. Speaker, all of these people give me perspective as I carry out my duties in this ministry. I would ask all members to please give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly some of my family, coming all the way from Cardston, Alberta. Today we have visiting with us my daughter Jolene; her husband, Jeff Strang; and three of their children: Ashlyn, Dylan, and Camden. They're accompanied also by my lovely wife, Linda. I'm pleased to have them here today. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm response of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two people: my very good friend and constituent, the executive director of Homeward Trust, Ms Susan McGee, and Mr. Ed Lavallee, who is an elder for the Bissell Centre. Ed, I'd like to add, has also recently won a ROOPH award for outstanding contribution to members of the aboriginal community. Now that they're both standing, I'd ask you all to please give them the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today and introduce to you and through you a good friend, Mr. Preetam Sharma, president of the Council of India Societies of Edmonton. I will be doing a member's statement this afternoon to recognize his contribution to the Republic Day of India, which was celebrated this past Sunday at the Jubilee Auditorium. At this time I would ask Mr. Preetam Sharma to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two Red Cross representatives, Nancy Beasley Hosker and Jackie Specken. Nancy is the provincial manager, communications and strategic relations, for the Red Cross, and Jackie is the central and northern Alberta regional council president. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly. We thank them for joining us today.

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

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour for me to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly approximately 50 very bright young students from

Donnan elementary school in my constituency. Besides the great visit they're having today, they also had the pleasure of meeting the great-grandchild-in-law of Mr. John Donnan, after whom the school is named. I would ask them along with their group leaders, Fiona White, Larry Goodwin, and Bernice Abraham, to please rise and receive the wonderful applause of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's always a thrill to introduce students who come to visit the Legislature. Today it's my pleasure to introduce 26 students. They're in grade 6, and they're at Malmo elementary school in Edmonton-Riverview. They're participating for a week in the School at the Legislature program, and I hope that some day some of them might even become MLAs and sit on the floor of the Assembly. Today they're accompanied by their teacher, Samia Sassi, and parent helpers. They're seated in the members' gallery. I would ask them to please rise and ask all MLAs to give them a warm welcome.

Thank you.

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

1:40

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Jim Gurnett, who is the new chief of staff for the NDP caucus. Jim is no stranger to the provincial Legislature. He was elected in the 1985 by-election to represent the people of Spirit River-Fairview. He was named as one of Alberta's 50 most influential people by *Alberta Venture* magazine in 2007 and has a long history of community activism. He recently completed a lengthy term as executive director of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. Jim's work has been recognized by numerous organizations including the University of Alberta with a distinguished alumni award, by MacEwan University with an honorary diploma in community studies, and by the Edmonton Social Planning Council with its social justice advocacy award. We are very pleased to have Jim as part of our team. Jim is seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, and I would now ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

ROOPH Awards

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 2 I attended the fifth annual recognizing outstanding organizations and people in housing awards, also known as the ROOPH awards, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs. The keynote speaker, Mr. Iain De Jong, said, and I quote:

As a nation, if we are going to make the shift from managing homelessness to ending homelessness, we need to look to Alberta for leadership and proof about what works. Yes, there are pockets of innovation and commitment elsewhere in this great country of ours, but no other province is showing the kind of aligned leadership between the province and the cities. Indeed, as the late Peter Drucker told us, there is a difference between management and leadership. Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.

The awards celebration, which was hosted by Edmonton Home-ward Trust, highlighted the success stories within the housing and

relative support services sectors and demonstrated what can be achieved when the community works together. The 2010 ROOPH award recipients were Mr. Jim Gurnett for the Larry Shaben award for outstanding service in the housing sector; the city of Edmonton Youth Council homelessness subcommittee for partnerships for success; HIP Architects received the excellence in building design for Immigration Hall; Direct Energy, the Edmonton office, received the exceptional volunteerism in housing award; and the gentleman I introduced earlier, my honoured friend Mr. Ed Lavallee, received the outstanding service for the aboriginal community award.

I would like to congratulate all of the 2010 recipients. They have truly demonstrated their commitment to helping Edmonton's most vulnerable. I am confident that this government will continue to work with these community-based organizations to put an end to homelessness and to ensure that affordable housing is available to all in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

India Republic Day

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On Sunday, February 14, I was honoured to join several of my MLA colleagues and thousands of Indo-Canadians at the Jubilee Auditorium in celebration of the Republic Day of India. The Republic Day of India, which is recognized internationally on January 26, is a day that we pay homage to the historic events that led to the Constitution of India officially becoming India's governing document 60 years ago. Sunday's event was hosted by the Council of India Societies of Edmonton, whose organizers I introduced earlier. I'm very happy to say that the event was extremely well attended by the Indo-Canadian community of Edmonton.

Mr. Speaker, the Council of India Societies of Edmonton is an umbrella organization that is comprised of membership from every single state in India. The organization exists to provide services to the community in many ways. A few examples include settlement of immigrants, safeguarding the welfare of senior citizens, counselling for vulnerable groups such as abused women, assistance to Indian students in Edmonton, and much more. I would like to take this time to thank the Council of India Societies of Edmonton and its president, Mr. Preetam Sharma, for providing a valuable service to both the city of Edmonton and the Indo-Canadian community of Alberta.

I would like to thank all of my colleagues in the Legislature for joining me in congratulating 90,000 Albertans of Indo-Canadian origin and over 1.3 billion people of Indian descent world-wide on the 60th Republic Day of India.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

School Closures

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Edmonton public school board voted to start the debate on the closure process for at least five public schools in central Edmonton. No community should lose its public school so another community somewhere else can have a school built. Next year the government plans to open 18 public schools across the province at a cost of over \$1 billion over 30 years. Nine of these schools will be located in communities recently developed here in Edmonton. Because of the provincial school utilization rate these new schools force the Edmonton public school board to close older schools in mature

neighbourhoods. This provincial government formula discriminates against older schools in mature, established neighbourhoods.

Since 2002 the Edmonton public school board has closed 15 schools in central Edmonton. These closures have resulted in the elimination of over 6,500 student spaces. The Edmonton public school board plans to close at least another 5,000 student spaces if they get their way. According to the Edmonton public schools student enrolment is going down, way down. Meanwhile, this government's 20-year strategic capital plan projects that in four years there will be more students in the system than we've ever had before. In fact, Mr. Speaker, they're projecting 80,000 additional students.

Which projection are parents and taxpayers to believe? Until we find out the truth, we should stop the closure process in Edmonton and any other community that's affected by it. If the city of Edmonton increases population density in the central neighbourhoods as planned, we will need the student spaces now being considered for closure.

I urge the province, the city of Edmonton, and the Edmonton public school board to sit down, to work together, and to plan once and for all for the future. No neighbourhood should lose its school so that another one can have one.

Thank you.

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

Municipal Climate Change Action Centre

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Using less energy means spending less money, no matter if you're running a city, a company, or a household. Energy efficiency is also a win for the environment as much as it is for the pocketbook, which is why it is an important plank in our government's climate change strategy.

During extensive consultations with Albertans leading up to the strategy, we heard from many stakeholders. One of these groups was municipalities. Local leaders told us that they wanted to assist with addressing the issue of climate change by being more energy efficient but that they needed our help. Mr. Speaker, this is why over the past two years Alberta Environment has worked with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties to create a Municipal Climate Change Action Centre for their members.

Last Thursday the Minister of Environment announced funding of \$2 million over three years from the government of Alberta to support this initiative. This centre will help the cities, towns, villages, and municipalities of Alberta reach further out towards a cleaner energy future, and it will build on the tremendous climate change leadership being shown at a local level across the province. What this means is that if municipalities need advice on what climate change policies can have the most impact, they'll get it; if municipalities need to know what could happen to their community in a changing climate, they'll find out; and if municipalities want to improve their operations and save money by being more energy efficient, they'll be helped.

I want to thank the two municipal organizations for their vision and willingness to work with the province to make it happen. I look forward to seeing the results of this partnership that delivers on one of Alberta's climate change commitments.

Thank you.

Oral Question Period

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

Sustainability Fund

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta spends more than it makes in stable and reliable revenue. What we're using to fix that gap is the rapidly shrinking sustainability fund. At some point this government will have to increase its revenue or lower its spending. Every new finance minister seems to see the problem clearly, but none actually do anything about it. To the Premier. I'll ask again: what is this Premier doing to fix our problem of spending more than we collect through stable revenue?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we are not spending money we don't have. We have a large sustainability fund that we are using to cushion the blow to our revenue stream. It's in the amount of about \$17 billion. We also have an additional savings fund, the Alberta heritage savings trust fund, which is a separate fund, and that fund is there for our grandkids and our grandkids' grandkids. So, again, two funds. We've put the savings in place just to deal with dropping revenues like we've seen lately.

1:50

Dr. Swann: Last August the finance minister said that this government would not allow the sustainability fund to be drained, yet that's exactly what's happening now. Where will the government find the money to balance the books when the sustainability fund is gone?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we are using the sustainability fund to cushion the blow to our revenues. We want to be back in the black by 2012-13, and we will be. We will be replenishing the sustainability fund for, again, sometime in the future that we see another drop in revenues or another economic downturn.

Dr. Swann: Surely the Premier doesn't manage his farm that way.

The volatility of oil and gas prices will not go away. Something needs to change here. Why does the Premier continue to ignore the fact that using our savings account to cover shortfalls again this year is simply a Band-aid? It does nothing to address our unstable funding.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, again, I think the hon. leader perhaps isn't fully aware of what we've done as a government. We're the only jurisdiction in Canada to set aside a separate fund, a cash surplus fund, to help cushion the revenues. We are not adding to our debt. We're the only jurisdiction that, even though we're running a deficit, is not adding to our debt. That is substantial. We will be the first to come out of this, leading Canada out of the recession.

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

Private Health Care Services

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Today this government announced it was holding the Royal Alex orthopaedic centre to an increase of a mere 16 extra knee and hip procedures. In comparison, it's giving a for-profit corporation subsidies for an extra 180, more than 10 times as much money for corporate medicine as for a public hospital. To the Premier: why is this government letting the state-of-the-art public orthopaedic facility at the Royal Alex sit underutilized while it pours huge subsidies into corporate medicine?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we're the only jurisdiction to commit to a five-year increased funding to a publicly funded health care system, and we remain committed to that goal. We also remain

committed to the best-performing publicly funded health care system in Canada.

Dr. Taft: Well, I hope everybody in Alberta is noticing he's not saying publicly delivered because it's going to be delivered through private, for-profit corporations. In fact, this government is providing 750 extra cataract surgeries at for-profit private providers and only 175 at the public Royal Alex centre. To the Premier: why is this government pouring more money into private, for-profit cataract surgery instead of into public services?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day it's access and it's quality, and that is our goal here, to increase access and the quality of care in this province. Once again, we're going to show leadership with a five-year funding commitment to a publicly funded health care system.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the Premier should know that every single assessment I've seen of Calgary versus Edmonton on cataract surgeries shows that Edmonton delivers better value, higher quality, and lower cost. My question is to the Premier. How is this government going to responsibly hold to account the funding it's providing to for-profit, corporate health care?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, this is just an example of very selective reading on the part of the hon. member asking the question because what he forgot to tell people is that there are 175 cataracts scheduled for the Royal Alex, there are 60 colonoscopies scheduled for the Royal Alex, and there are a number of hip replacements and knee replacements and robotic urologies all scheduled at the Royal Alex. This numbers well over 200. Regardless of where the services are provided, be they in a public setting or a private setting, they are publicly funded by this government.

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

Cabinet Travel to the Olympics

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The all-you-can-eat Tory buffet is now airborne. Taxpayer travelling-trough tickets to the government of Alberta's version of gravy trains, planes, and automobiles have been doled out to the Premier and half his cabinet. Competing in the frequent-flyers-of-Olympic-excess event are our Premier and intergovernmental affairs minister. In the who-can-luxuriate-the-longest competition we have the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit facing off with the Minister of Tourism, Perks and Vacations. To the Premier: are you not concerned about the Olympian optics of your high-flying excesses during a time of recessionary lows?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, you know, there is some negativity on the other side of the House, but I can tell you that on this side of the House there is a huge amount of optimism. I'm looking forward to Canada's Vancouver Olympics. I mean, all roads to Vancouver lead through Alberta. What better way to promote this great province than at Alberta House, Alberta Plaza, right in the city of Vancouver, during the world Olympics? By the way, 3.5 billion people are watching the Olympics – 3.5 billion. What better market than right here in Alberta?

Mr. Chase: Again to the Premier: did you and your cabinet not receive the memo that going for the gold refers to the athletic

competition and not your personal withdrawal from the public purse?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, as Albertans we're very, very proud of the role that we are playing in the Vancouver Olympics. We've supported the Olympics over the last three years by making improvements to the Calgary Olympic Park. We've also sent hundreds of volunteers that have supported the Vancouver Olympics over the last number of years in preparation for this huge event.

You know, it's difficult for our Alberta athletes to be enthused and want to do their best when this side of the House constantly wants to drag them down – drag them down – and not have them do better.

Mr. Chase: While showcasing Alberta athletic and artistic talent has value, political pandering does not. Given the budgetary restraints you have placed on PDD, children, seniors, and postsecondary students, how do you justify your partisan expenses?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, there are all kinds of positive messages that can be delivered by elected officials or volunteers, all Albertans. I invite this House, all political stripes, no matter where they sit in this House, to take part in these events. If they want to participate at Alberta Plaza and Alberta House, so be it. We'd gladly support any political party in terms of selling and promoting the province of Alberta because, again, we are very, very proud of our province.

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

Surgery Wait Time Reduction Strategy

Mr. Hinman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The funding of Alberta's health care system is a significant investment made by Alberta taxpayers. Recent court decisions have told governments across the country that access to a waiting list is not access to health care. It appears this government has finally realized this also. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Will you please tell us how much overtime medical staff will be expected to put in in order to deliver on this government's six-week wait time reduction push, and have the health care workers agreed that they are able to take on this added workload?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A very good question. In fact, as a result of a lot of cost savings which Alberta Health Services have realized, not the least of which is us covering their deficit, which yields a bunch of money saved because they don't have to pay the interest on that deficit, we will immediately earmark \$8 million, starting today, so that a number of additional surgeries can be performed. We are also going to talk with, and already have, the persons who are providing part-time work and see if they will increase their time to help out. They said they would, so we feel confident about the plan.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I hope that confidence works out.

Mr. Speaker, the money invested in health care is not the government's; it belongs to hard-working Albertans. For that investment they expect results and accountability. If these new procedures only cost \$8 million, it's hard to understand why they didn't find this money within their existing \$15 billion budget. Can the minister of health please tell us who was negligent for not implementing this plan sooner: the previous minister of health, the government, or Alberta Health Services?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, no one was negligent about anything. The fact is that circumstances have changed. We have half a million more people in this province than 10 years ago, and we have new services, new techniques, new procedures, new equipment, new pharmaceuticals, and the like, all of which are good things, but they're driving up the cost. So what we've said is that we want some results immediately. Alberta Health Services has come up with that plan, and we're going to deliver the health services that people require, starting right now, in a more improved way.

2:00

Mr. Hinman: Mr. Speaker, this should have been done years ago and not waiting now to all of a sudden say: oh, we can do something.

There are many changes that we can make in how Albertans receive health care while staying completely within the Canada Health Act. In today's announcements the government is telling Albertans these treatments and procedures will be completed by the end of March, but experts are questioning that capability. My question again is to the health minister. Do you have an agreed-upon and executable plan that will be completed in the next six weeks, or is this another case where the government fails to plan and ultimately fails Albertans?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, of course there's a plan. You don't announce something if you don't have a plan. We have the people, we have the money, and we have the results earmarked based on input from the Health Quality Council, based on input from the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health, and based on the dashboard indicator project undertaken by Alberta Health Services. The bottom line is that Albertans want, deserve, and expect better services, and they're going to get them.

Mr. Vandermeer: Along the same lines, Mr. Speaker, the constituents in my area have expressed many concerns and frustrations with respect to wait times for certain health services. Being on a waiting list for months for an important surgery is simply unacceptable. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: if we are paying more money per capita than any other province, why aren't we getting the results that Albertans expect and deserve?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question, and I share the frustration that the member has just expressed. I'll bet you everybody here and I'll bet you every Albertan shares it as well. The point is that I want to tell you what we are doing about that. Starting today, through Alberta Health Services we are adding 2,230 new spots for surgeries to be performed as part of the first six weeks of a longer term plan. That will help to address the issues that the member has alluded to, and this is just the beginning of the longer term plan toward helping Albertans achieve the access they're after.

Mr. Vandermeer: To the same minister. My constituents are equally frustrated with having to wait too long for an MRI. What's causing the delay, and how are you going to fix that problem?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, I know others who share that frustration as well, including this hon. member. However, that's another reason why today I announced that we are adding 3,500 new spots for MRI and CAT scans to be performed immediately, within the next six weeks, again as part of the longer term plan.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Albertans have heard these stories before. Can the minister tell us what is going to be different this time and why we should believe this new plan will actually work?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, what is largely different this time is that we have a five-year funding plan that provides predictability and stability to accomplish the objectives that we have just enunciated. Those figures are based on some increases that include inflation, that include an aging population, that include a growing population and all of the stuff that I mentioned a little bit earlier in terms of new innovations in the system. We will get there because we're on the right track.

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

Government Liabilities

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Progressive Conservative government's balance sheet indicates that the government liabilities will increase by over \$10 billion in the next three years. My first question is to the Premier. Why are liabilities increasing by \$10 billion in such a short period of time?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. President of the Treasury Board can probably provide a better response.

Mr. Snelgrove: He might as well get to his next question. It'll be the same one.

Mr. MacDonald: Ten billion dollars on the hook, and he's got no answer. That doesn't surprise me. That doesn't surprise taxpayers either. Again to the Premier: what is the government's plan to address this \$10 billion liability?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, there are two sides to a balance sheet, expenditures and assets. We're building in Alberta some of the most forward-thinking, some of the most economic-enabling assets this country has ever seen. We believe that by growing the economic pie, there will be more money for Albertans to do the good work that they want us to do. So when we build a road, when we build an overpass, when we build a government building, when we build a hospital, it shows on our balance sheet as an asset. If you only look at expenditures, you won't get a true picture of the assets in Alberta, and our assets per Albertan compared to the rest of Canada are multi, multithousands of dollars more.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. It's interesting to note that the President of the Treasury of Board only reads one part of the balance sheet.

Now, again, to whoever can answer over there: where will the money come from to pay for the \$10 billion increase in liabilities? Are you going to pick the pockets of the poor again?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, we've explained as slowly as we can explain, and we've put it in documents that are hundreds of pages thick about how we intend to use the sustainability fund, which is our savings account which we put there as a rainy-day fund to carry Alberta's economy through to the next expansion situation, that

we'll be in far ahead of the rest of the country. In here it very clearly explains that we will use our sustainability fund. Our economic growth is based on very sound projections of energy and the Canadian dollar, interest rates, and it shows clearly how we'll be back in the black in 2012-13. It's simply explained in the budget. Read it.

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

Federal Housing Finance Regulations

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced new mortgage regulations for Canadian homebuyers intended to prevent the type of housing collapse we saw in the United States. My questions are to the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs. What do these new regulations mean for Albertans making the ultimate transition to home ownership?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This member raises an important perspective. Home ownership is very important in this province. We want to make it as affordable as possible. Now, of course, the federal regulations announced today are aimed at protecting homeowners from future interest rate spikes and also limiting purchaser debt to a reasonable level.

I recognize that housing affordability continues to be a challenge in Alberta. We are one of the most expensive jurisdictions in which to own a home in Canada. That is why our government provides rent supports and community housing and affordable housing, having over 6,000 affordable housing units and providing support to 80,000 people monthly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Among the new rules the one that should most concern the minister is the increased down payment regulation: 20 per cent down for investment and non owner-occupied properties. The government plans on having 11,000 new affordable housing units in place by 2012, but it would seem this new rule will seriously discourage investors from building these types of properties. To the same minister: how much of a hit does he think the government's 11,000-unit plan will take because of this new rule? What does he plan to do about it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I want to thank the hon. member for that question. Our government has anticipated that this may happen, and that's why the financing that we looked at for these 11,000 units is completely different from the financing that would apply from the announcement today. So the short answer is that we're still going to be on track for the 11,000-unit plan by 2012.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The final question to the same minister. Before these regulations were announced, prices were increasing and housing starts were reaching record levels.

What will be the impact of these new regulations on Albertan house renters?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. This member has raised another interesting point. The increasing supply of rental properties is a challenge. We'll be providing 11,000 units, again, by 2012. I would also like to mention that through our rent supports 800 new people are assisted every month as we move people through the system, helping those most in need.

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

Signage on Highway Rights-of-way

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. People in Peace River don't want a nuclear plant in their backyard, but they aren't allowed to express themselves. They have put up signs protesting the proposed nuclear plant, but Transportation officials have taken these signs down. To the Minister of Transportation: why are Department of Transportation officials targeting antinuclear signs?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, the policy within this government, as everybody knows, is that you have to have permits to put signs up within the highway rights-of-way, strictly for the safety of motorists. Therefore, our policy is that if there are people that put signs up within our rights-of-way, we take them down or they get a letter to take them down. If they're not removed, we remove them. I understand that that policy was followed.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is that policy was not followed. Transportation officials are out there to make the highways safer for Albertans. To the minister again: is targeting antinuclear science an indication that this government only respects free speech when it is convenient?

Mr. Ouellette: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. We respect free speech all the time, but we cannot allow people to put things in the right-of-way. Our maintenance contractor's job is that if they see things in the right-of-way, they have to go remove them. That policy is there for the safety of Albertans.

Mr. Kang: Well, Mr. Speaker, by going over and taking those signs down, I think those officials were trespassing on private property. To the same minister again. We are spending millions of dollars selling Alberta's image at the Olympics, yet back at home this government can't uphold basic rights of free speech. What is the minister doing to ensure that this doesn't happen again?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, there was one sign. I agree with the hon. member that there was one sign that was on private property. I'm just going by hearsay, trying to get to the bottom of everything that happened there, but apparently someone was asked by the maintenance contractor if they wanted that sign to go also, and they had said yes, so they removed it. When I found out about it and when our department found out about it, immediately they made a new sign and took it back to that private property, the one that was on private property.

Design Process for New Schools

Ms Woo-Paw: Mr. Speaker, government is using different ways to fund its new school buildings, including P3s. I've heard concerns that they are taking a cookie-cutter approach to the design of schools. I'm especially concerned that the government's plan, which includes four new high schools for Calgary, Edmonton, Sherwood Park, and Spruce Grove, will not meet the diverse learning needs of students. My question is for the Minister of Education. Did school boards have any input in the design of the four high schools to ensure that they meet students' needs?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker. It should be clear that partway through the process we separated out the high schools from the elementary-junior highs. The high schools actually have proceeded on a design-build project. The school boards have been involved with Infrastructure and Education through the design process and have had ample opportunity to ensure that those school designs meet the educational programming and educational needs of the students in their areas.

Ms Woo-Paw: To the same minister: in regard to the ASAP schools how involved are parents and community groups in the design process for the high schools? Does the government have a genuine interest in hearing their input?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, with respect to the high schools the school boards would have had meetings in their communities with respect to those schools to discuss with the communities what was going into the schools, and they would have had an opportunity through the school boards to get input in that way. This isn't the traditional build process, which would have started through community meetings, et cetera, but there is certainly ample opportunity for communities to be involved.

With respect to the ASAP school projects we do have a standardized school design, which was developed with the input of a number of different groups, but even in that circumstance school boards have had the ability to meet with their communities and to adapt the designs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you. My final question is this: is the design process based on any research or studies that identify how other groups, key stakeholders, can be involved in the design process of schools? Was it an arbitrary process?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, over the last number of years Infrastructure and Education have worked with organizations such as the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta School Boards Association, the School Business Officials of Alberta, the Council of Educational Facility Planners, school plant officials, and others to develop what we call standard designs for the K to 3, K to 6, and K to 9 schools. Those standard designs are used as a starting point with the school jurisdictions, and the school jurisdictions have had the opportunity to work with those designs so that they enable them to develop the educational opportunities that they want for the students in their area.

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

PDD Funding

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm still receiving many, many inquiries about the PDD. Last Thursday the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports stated that people on PDD will not be reassessed for eligibility for PDD but that funding and the support that they receive will be reassessed using the supports intensity scale. My question is to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. Will the minister tell the Assembly how many different ways were being used to determine how much funding support disabled Albertans were entitled to before the introduction of the supports intensity scale?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The PDD program is very important to me and to this government and to the 9,200 people that it serves. We have implemented a supports intensity scale, but I'd like to make something very clear: it's totally and completely different from the eligibility requirement. Once somebody passes the eligibility requirement, which are two criteria, they are in the PDD program. Once they are in the program, we need to determine what kinds of supports and services they need. We need to be clear about that, and we need to be consistent throughout the province.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that. And, yes, I do understand the distinction, but there still are many questions.

Can the minister tell the Assembly what the supports intensity scale actually measures and how this would be different from how staff and funding are currently allocated?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The important thing about the supports intensity scale is that it looks at many things. One of the things that it builds on is the natural supports that a person might have, so it won't necessarily change the way services and supports are given to a PDD individual at this time. What it will do is that it will ensure that the supports that we do provide for PDD clients are consistent throughout the province for the same sorts of disabilities.

Ms Pastoor: Last Thursday the minister stated that if a disabled Albertan is currently receiving the correct level of supports, that will not change, but the obvious question is: could someone's supports be decreased after the reassessment using the supports intensity scale?

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, it's really important that when we have a program that's a provincial program, we treat everyone equitably and fairly across the province. It is possible that there may be somebody in a corner of the province that is receiving perhaps more supports than somebody with that certain kind of disability really needs, and that's not doing a person a favour when we give them more than they need.

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

Surgery Wait Time Reduction Strategy

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Today's health announcement by the Minister of Health and Wellness about funding for elective surgeries is one of the most short sighted I've ever seen

from this government. Spending \$8 million on a six-week surgery party at Alberta hospitals will do nothing to eliminate surgery wait times in the long run. Albertans need to know that the extreme wait times for elective surgeries and even cancer treatments in this province will become a thing of the past forever, not just for the next six weeks. Will the minister stand and tell the House how long he expects people to wait for important surgery in this province? What's the plan, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, we don't expect Albertans to wait any longer than they have to, obviously, and that's why the announcement today is so important toward reducing wait times and to reducing wait lists. There is a fundamental difference there.

The bottom line is, Mr. Speaker, that this is just the beginning, and it says that right in the release. I've said it earlier today in the House. I'm surprised the hon. member doesn't catch that because I also said that this is part of a longer term plan. We will get that plan moving very quickly. As soon as these six weeks are over, the rest of the plan kicks in.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, will the minister please tell us what the rest of the plan is? It's fine to fund something for six weeks, but that's a minuscule amount of time, and it won't solve the basic problem. If such a plan for the long-term health of Albertans actually exists, Mr. Minister, when will you make it public?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, there are a few plans that are being finalized right now. They will come out early in April. For example, the long-term capital plan for health facilities will be ready on or about March 31 when the clock strikes 12. We'll also have more details on the five-year funding plan, and there will be additional plans on a per-area basis available at that time.

Right now we've just done the first part of a much longer term plan because people need those services right now. They've been identified as a high priority.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, it sounds like the minister has more plans than he has news conferences, but none of them are public yet.

I'd like this minister to stand up and tell Albertans when we're going to see a comprehensive long-term plan for the health care system in this province and what he's actually going to do to consult Albertans about these plans.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I could have sworn I just said that the long-term plan in various areas, including the one he's asking about, will be ready early in April. In the meantime we have an extremely good consultation process going on right now because that's what the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health said and that's what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has pledged to deliver. It will include a blueprint for action on the Alberta health act, on the patient charter, and on a number of other things prior to September 30.

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

2:20

School Closures

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have heard many of my constituents tell me that if you close down a school, you

damage the community. Well, there have been lots of rumours about school closures, not just in the teachers' lounges but right here in the Legislature. My question is to the Minister of Education. What are you doing to keep schools open and keep Alberta's communities from further damage?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously it's important to have schools in communities where kids are. It's important to have schools in communities because schools are oftentimes the core of the community, but it's not possible to keep schools open if there are no kids for them. We asked the school boards. The school boards have to make the most appropriate judgment, in their judgment, as to what is the best educational opportunity for the children within their jurisdiction. They have that authority, they have that ability, and they do it well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's population has been growing over the past few years, especially in areas like my constituency of Edmonton-Ellerslie in southeast Edmonton and other outlying areas. To the same minister: what is the government doing to deal with this population growth?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, in fact, that is the problem that we face because under the ASAP program we are building 18 schools in Edmonton and Calgary, one of them in the member's constituency. That is good for those communities because we don't have to bus those children to other schools. I would say that that does not mean that all the schools in the inner city or other neighborhoods have to be closed. In fact, the Edmonton public school board has provided one of the best models in the country with respect to the city centre school project, where they provide better educational opportunities with fewer schools but better schools for those students.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister: are there any plans to examine the regulations surrounding the school closures?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are, obviously, with our Inspiring Education project looking at everything right from the very top with respect to how education is delivered in a 21st century model, how we make sure that we have the right kind of educational opportunities for students, and part and parcel of that will be a re-examination of what kind of physical platform we need to deliver education in communities. So we will be looking at that, and in the meantime we are looking at our school closure regulations, and we're working with municipalities to make sure that school properties can survive a closure and live to be of community purpose until they're needed again as a school.

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

Renter Assistance

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs has stated that the \$13 million cut to rent supplements reflects the fact that fewer people require assistance. The direct-to-tenant rent supplement program has a one-year expiry date, and seeing that the program started last April, support is running out. To

the minister of housing: while the rent subsidy is only one year long, the wait-list to get into affordable housing is almost three years long. How are people supposed to pay their rent without support while they wait another two years for affordable housing?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member for that question, but what he doesn't recognize is that we're supporting those most in need. There are always people who may be in need, but at the same time we have to set a guideline because we want to be compassionate most to the taxpayers but, as well, to those in need. We will continue to support those most in need of rent assistance.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess, you know, we're talking in a sense about rationing. One way to reduce wait-lists is to reduce the number of people who qualify for support. It sounds like that's what he's done. Will the minister explain the changes which have been recently made to tighten up the qualifying criteria for rent supplements and affordable housing?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, it really saddens me, the approach that this member has taken to such an important program. The means test that we have had over the last several years remains the same. It is more stringent than other provinces', but that enables us to target hard-working taxpayers' money to those most in need.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I see no reason for the minister to get sad. All the minister needs to do is answer the questions. With fewer people qualifying for assistance and more people running out of rent supports, has the minister given up on the Housing First policy and now back to the old approach of merely managing homelessness?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, there's one government in the country that has a 10-year plan to end homelessness, and that is the government of Alberta. That's the plan that we will continue on forward.

Thank you.

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

Edmonton Ring Road

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents have expressed their enthusiasm for this government's renewed commitment to infrastructure and transportation in the 2010 budget. My first question is for the Minister of Transportation. Can he update this House on the ongoing work to complete the Anthony Henday ring road?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, this budget positions Alberta well for the future. We know that investing in infrastructure supports jobs today and lays the foundation for economic growth and competitiveness in the future. This year's capital plan is nearly \$1.9 billion, and we'll continue to build and take advantage of our lower construction prices. Construction on the world-class Edmonton ring road continues, and the 21-kilometre northwest Henday is going very well and is set to open in the fall of 2011.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For many of my constituents the intersection at the traffic lights on Anthony Henday leads to frustrating delays and unsafe driving conditions. My first supplemental to the same minister: can he tell my constituents when they are going to complete the Cameron Heights overpass?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Ouellette: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I can assure you that, yes, the planning and development of the Cameron Heights interchange is most definitely progressing. We've completed the functional plan work, and we're set to complete the detailed design work later this spring, with construction already under way on the three other interchanges in his area. The province recognizes the importance of having all of Anthony Henday free flow, and our actions support that.

Mr. Xiao: My final supplemental to the same minister: can he assure all Edmontonians that he will eliminate all the intersections and the traffic lights on the Anthony Henday and when?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure this hon. member knows that our province has set the goal of 2015 to have the complete ring road done, which means that would be free flow, and it would remove all traffic signals on the Anthony Henday. I think the hon. member should drive by there every day and maybe go out and have a coffee with some of those guys and watch that work being done, and then he'll believe us all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Land-use Framework

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The land-use framework progress report was released last week, and despite the report being labelled a progress report, I can see very little progress that has actually happened. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. It's been well over a year since the land-use framework was created, and only two regional plans are in the process of being established. When can we finally expect to see anything concrete come out of the land-use framework?

Mr. Knight: Well, Mr. Speaker, the land-use framework initiative, of course, is extremely important for all areas of Alberta. But let's be reasonable about how we're going to approach this thing because I don't think that it would be in anybody's interest, particularly not in the interests of Albertans, to go out there with a shotgun approach and try to develop a land-use framework for all seven regions at the same time. We've done some very, very good work in the lower Athabasca, and that plan is moving ahead now very nicely. The regional advisory commission have most of their work together, and we are expecting a report from them at the end of March.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister: has there been some meaningful consultation done with the Métis communities in those areas?

Mr. Knight: Yes, Mr. Speaker, in fact, they have. There are aboriginal people involved in the regional advisory committee, so they have representation on the committees and are responsible for taking that information back to their own communities. We know that this is one of the areas that in order for this to be successful, we will continue and we have to continue to have meaningful consultation with aboriginal groups.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. Developments in Sylvan Lake are currently happening that will have a major impact on the Red Deer regional plan that is being created. How will these developments, that are going forward as we speak, be dealt with by your department without the actual implementation of the land-use framework having gone through yet?

2:30

Mr. Knight: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is one issue of many. Of course, as the member opposite would very well understand and realize, you cannot stop the development of the province of Alberta while you develop a land-use framework and then start again. The natural gas industry in Alberta is again, you know, going to come to the fore. The development of forestry continues. The development of communities across the province continues. The land-use framework will have to take into account all of those developments as it moves forward and as we get the plans in place.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Utilities Consumer Advocate

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some constituents in Edmonton-Decore have expressed their deep concern about the effects that Bill 50 will have on their electricity bill. Specifically, they have been asking me what role the Utilities Consumer Advocate has in protecting and educating consumers of the electricity market. My first question is to the Minister of Service Alberta. What power does the Utilities Consumer Advocate have to protect Alberta consumers from unwarranted charges on their energy bill?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The main role of the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office is to answer consumers' questions, to provide information, and also to intervene for consumers at rights hearings. This past year we had approximately 50,000 phone calls in the UCA, intervened in 90 hearings. So the work UCA is doing when consumers call the line is excellent.

Mrs. Sarich: Well, Mr. Speaker, I obviously agree that there is a great need for the Utilities Consumer Advocate; however, my concern is that the UCA directly falls under the control of the government of Alberta, the same government that controls energy policy, specifically the creation of Bill 50. So my next question is to the same minister. Has Service Alberta ever considered reinventing the Utilities Consumer Advocate as an arm's-length organization outside government control?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of the 50,000 people who did contact the UCA, that concern was not raised at all. The

bottom line with the UCA is the input we get from Albertans and the good work it does. We know it's providing good service to Albertans as well as maximizing the services and benefits that are available in Service Alberta so we can work together and they can get the answers quicker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the same minister. How do you measure the effectiveness of the current model?

Mrs. Klimchuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the best ways is about the people who contact the UCA information line. Over 80 per cent of the people who contact our line are happy with the services provided, and they will recommend it to a friend for them to contact as well. That's really important to me as minister.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Government Borrowing

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Budget 2010 projects this PC government will add roughly \$6 billion in debt by 2012, up from zero when this Premier took over. In order to sell this bad-news story to Albertans, part of this debt has been packaged up and sold to the public as Alberta capital bonds to be used for seniors' housing. The fact is that it's just plain, old-fashioned won't live within our means, so we'll get our kids to pay for it debt. To the President of the Treasury Board: why is this government heaping billions of debt and related servicing costs on our kids' backs when we still have money in the sustainability fund?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, you don't have to take my word for it; you can go to the Auditor General, who says that in his opinion "these consolidated financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of the Province of Alberta." It goes on. He's done that for eight years. We have accounted for the capital expenditures in this government on a consistent basis for at least 20 years or more. Every single penny that we spent is accounted for in these books, and the Auditor General is an officer of the Assembly. TD financial group says exactly the same thing: the accounting of the provincial government's capital plan rightly split outlays of capital investment and expenses for capital purposes.

Mr. Anderson: That had nothing to do with the question I just asked, Mr. Speaker.

It's bad enough that this government is using the plight of seniors being unable to find housing as a way to sell a return to debt financing; it is also a fiscally foolish thing to do. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation noted last week that the government would save \$17.6 million in interest by simply taking out a regular loan rather than offering a comparatively higher rate of interest for capital bonds. To the same minister: if he is going to borrow money, why would he not borrow at the lowest interest rate possible?

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I do hope that they develop a strategic kind of alliance between that party and the Taxpayers Federation and then publish some of the discussion that they'll have. It'll be worth the comic relief that comes out of it.

Mr. Speaker, what we are trying to do is give Albertans an opportunity to invest in things that they feel very strongly about, and

that's caring for seniors. While it is debt, it's very effective debt. Most of the money that we're raising through bonds will be leveraged at least once or maybe twice to build hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of seniors' facilities for our parents and grandparents.

They, quite honestly, need to be honest about it. They really don't care about anybody except themselves.

Mr. Anderson: This caucus does have a relationship with the taxpayers of Alberta; the caucus over there does not.

One commentator noted that the government borrowing in this way is like having a million dollars under your mattress and then going to the bank and asking for a high-interest loan to buy a new car. It just doesn't make sense, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will this government put off issuing additional capital bonds until he can justify to Albertans why he isn't borrowing at the lowest rate possible for Alberta taxpayers? It's a simple question.

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, by and large the greatest amount of money that we're borrowing for capital projects in Alberta is at the lowest rate in the country. As a matter of fact, Alberta's triple-A plus credit rating has allowed us to borrow money for these projects far cheaper than any other province in Canada. That's not from bad management; that's from good management. Giving Albertans an opportunity to invest in their province is what we're doing: 3.3 per cent is not a gift; it recognizes that many seniors would like to have a long-term, stable income come into their homes. So let's be clear: they care about themselves.

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

Oil Sands Emissions

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Energy minister recently announced a plan to indoctrinate school kids about oil sands and carbon capture plans. It appears the minister is worried about media stories that are saturated with embarrassing scrutiny of his government's failure to protect the environment, and his plan is to turn a blind eye to the black one they have created in the oil sands. Now, instead of using propaganda in schools, why doesn't the Energy minister educate oil sands companies about protecting our environment by forcing them to reduce actual emissions instead of paying them to bury the problem underground?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I have to chuckle because we have been successful at one thing: we have convinced those two members over there to call it the oil sands. So our education program is already working. Schoolchildren in this province are not going to take as long to learn as those two members over there.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess this just goes to show why propaganda is something that ought to be carefully controlled.

Instead of introducing said oil sands propaganda into the classroom – we know it will not stop the growing criticisms of this government's failure to responsibly manage our environment. So instead of playing Big Brother, why doesn't the Energy minister teach kids a lesson in responsible governance and force oil sands companies to clean up their act and reduce emissions?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that is very important is to ensure that – and this might be a better question, actually, to be placed to the Minister of Education. As our Educa-

tion curriculum continues to unfold to changing circumstances, it is important that we ensure that students in our classrooms are apprised. Unlike what the member would like to lead this Assembly to believe, there's no propaganda involved here. This is a situation where, you know, when curriculums were developed a number of years ago, the oil sands was not in existence.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I doubt the Energy minister's plan to infiltrate classrooms will include a frank discussion about the pitfalls of carbon capture, I doubt it will teach children about global warming and the effects the oil sands are having on our environment, and I doubt that it will teach kids about lobbyists and how oil sands companies can increase political influence. Why won't the Minister of Energy admit that this Orwellian plan isn't about educating but, rather, about hiding his government's failure to protect our environment today and for the very kids he's going to propagandize to?

2:40

Mr. Liepert: Well, what it will talk about, Mr. Speaker, is the tremendous activity that's gone on in the oil sands area relative to reclamation. It will talk about and put in real terms the emissions from the oil sands relative to not only the rest of the country and to the world, but it will also probably talk about things like how many jobs in Quebec come directly from the oil sands. I'm glad to see that the Premier of Quebec has realized this and is now planning a mission to Alberta to encourage Alberta oil sands companies to buy products from Quebec. These are the kinds of things that we want to ensure, that Alberta students have the real facts.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there were 18 members who were recognized today, 108 questions and responses, 12 members recognized from the opposition parties and six from private government members.

In a few seconds from now we will continue with the Routine and continue with Members' Statements, but in the interim might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just noticed that several people I know have joined us in the gallery today. All, I believe, are from Calgary: Jeff Gaulin, if you could please stand, as well as De-Anne Carson and Rob Schaefer. Would you please give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Oil Sands Image

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The oil sands capital of the world has been my home for the past 30 years. Our city slogan is: We Have the Energy. It captures the spirit of who we are, what we do, and how we do it. This past week I took issue with the leader of the government of Quebec, Premier Jean Charest, for his comments about my home and the oil sands of Fort McMurray. The headlines read: Quebec hypocrites when it comes to the oil

sands. In actual fact, we think that of the Albertans and the many workers who have come from provinces across Canada to find work and who have built the oil sands over the past 30 years, the real hypocrite is Jean Charest, not his workers. He knows better, having served in the federal Parliament and at the time having served as Minister of Environment, that Alberta is always open for business.

The Charest government promised to subsidize expenses for businesses who are going to be attending an important mission on the oil sands opportunities of \$200 billion in March. We celebrate that. But at the same time he speaks about criticizing the oil sands in Copenhagen.

We are entrepreneurial as Albertans. We welcome those who share that same spirit of competition. But as Albertans we do not like or take too kindly to a Premier who talks out of both sides of his mouth.

So do the right thing, Jean Charest, the same as Shane Koyczan said in his poem at the Olympic opening ceremonies in Vancouver in defining Canada, entitled *We Are More*. We are certainly more than what Premier Charest has said about our oil sands. The poem goes on: you might say “the home of the Rocket and the Great One who inspired little number nines and little number ninety-nines . . . and some say what defines us is something as simple as please and thank you” and you’re welcome, too.

So, Premier Charest, do the right thing and tone it down. Come visit my home. Come visit the oil sands and my two and a half year old son, who breathes that air every day.

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

Alberta Red Cross

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At a Canadian Red Cross luncheon in January the secretary-general spoke about the work being done in Haiti following the January 12 earthquake. He commended the generosity of Albertans and of the Alberta government, among others, in helping after the devastating disaster. He also talked about the strong connection between the work of the Red Cross in Haiti and right here in Alberta, and it is the Alberta Red Cross presence that I wish to speak about today.

The Canadian Red Cross has become an important part of the Canadian fabric since 1885, providing education in injury prevention, water safety, violence and abuse prevention, as well as medical equipment loans. The Alberta Red Cross is a network of 2,000 paid and unpaid personnel across the province standing prepared when disaster strikes, a quiet professionalism and service that doesn’t always make the news.

Mr. Speaker, because of the tireless efforts of these volunteers, any citizen of Alberta facing a disaster, whether it’s a house fire or a flood, can get help. Alberta disaster response volunteers provided more than 4,000 hours of direct service to Albertans plus an additional 22,000 hours on call last year. Over the last three years the Canadian Red Cross has responded to 521 disasters across our province and has helped 2,500 people.

Mr. Speaker, we are fortunate to have such a strong partner as the Canadian Red Cross in service of vulnerable people here in Alberta during times of disaster. I want to commend our government’s own Alberta Emergency Management Agency for the strong ties it has and continues to build with this outstanding provincial, national, and international organization, and I want to thank the volunteers and staff of the Canadian Red Cross for ensuring that Albertans receive the help and hope they need during times of vulnerability. This is the power of humanity in action, and I’d like to thank the representatives from the Red Cross for their patience today.

Thank you.

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling the first of a series of pages of petitions coming from residents of Carstairs, Crossfield, and Didsbury. They are petitioning the Legislature as follows: we the undersigned residents of Alberta petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to consider providing increased funding to Midway school to ensure that various programs continue to be available to its students, teachers, trustees, and parents.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I’d like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Mr. Joel Crichton. He writes to express his concern that Alberta schoolchildren will not receive balanced and accurate information about the oil sands from this government.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I’d like to table correspondence from Dean Goodine, who is a property master for the film and television sector. He’s writing that he started working in the Alberta film industry in 1986 after attending SAIT and has worked on a number of films made in Alberta. The twist is that he no longer lives in Alberta because it is not a competitive place for film. He is currently working on *Human Target*, being filmed in Vancouver, with another ex-Edmontonian producer, Grace Gilroy, and he hopes that we can become more competitive.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I have three sets of tablings. The first is the program from An Evening to Celebrate Catholic Education: 125 Years of Calgary Catholic. Mr. Speaker, as a former teacher you would have been terrifically impressed by the talent shown by the Catholic youngsters of Calgary.

My second tabling is the fall 2009 edition of the Independent Living Resource Centre of Calgary’s newsletter.

My third is the most recent Momentum: Developing Productive Futures annual report.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Orders of the Day

Transmittal of Estimates

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I have received a certain message from His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Lieutenant Governor transmits supplementary supply estimates of certain sums required for the

service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

2:50

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When a second or subsequent set of estimates is to be tabled, section 8 of the Government Accountability Act requires that an amended fiscal plan be tabled. On February 9 the Minister of Finance and Enterprise tabled the 2009-10 quarterly budget report for the third quarter, which serves as the amended fiscal plan. The quarterly report tabled by the Minister of Finance and Enterprise provides the framework for the additional spending authority for nine departments of the government.

Mr. Speaker, I now wish to table the 2009-10 supplementary supply estimates. These will provide the additional spending authority to nine departments of the government. When passed, the estimates will authorize an approximate increase of \$920.5 million in voted expense and equipment/inventory purchases and \$4.7 million in voted capital investment. These estimates will also authorize an approximate increase of \$32.9 million in voted nonbudgetary disbursements.

Government Motions

8. Mr. Snelgrove moved:
Be it resolved that the message from His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, the 2009-10 supplementary supply estimates for the general revenue fund, and all matters connected therewith be referred to Committee of Supply.

The Speaker: Shall I call the question on the motion put forward by the hon. President of the Treasury Board?

Hon. Members: Question.

[Government Motion 8 carried]

9. Mr. Snelgrove moved:
Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 61(2) the number of days that Committee of Supply will be called to consider the 2009-10 supplementary supply estimates for the general revenue fund shall be one day.

[Government Motion 9 carried]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 1 Alberta Competitiveness Act

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

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to stand before the Assembly today and move second reading of Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act.

In the wake of profound economic changes the face of business is changing. Bill 1 acknowledges this and resolves to see Alberta adapt to the shifts in our global economy with diligence and innovation. Mr. Speaker, over the past several years this government has made changes to our services, programs, legislation, and regulations to support our province and its prosperity. Initiatives such as Productivity Alberta, the western economic partnership, and Alberta Innovates are examples of major resources made available

to Albertans and those wishing to invest in our province. However, they are all branches of one tree, competitiveness. Bill 1 will bring us back to our roots by engaging industry and business in a collaborative process with government to analyze our circumstances and to enhance our strong economic foundation.

Mr. Speaker, we are truly fortunate here in Alberta. We are blessed with a very hard-working population, which is a driving strength in our economy. Bill 1 draws on this resource and gives the Lieutenant Governor in Council the ability to strike a body for the purpose of improving Alberta's competitiveness. This body will discuss and work to develop the best methods to increase our province's competitive edge. For example, our province's forestry and agriculture sectors have a deep-seated history as well as an incredible potential for a prosperous future. The committee will be able to advise on the best ways for our province to move forward by fostering value-added opportunities and increasing access to emerging international markets. These goals are best achieved by continued focused collaboration with industry stakeholders as well as with other government ministries such as Advanced Education and Technology.

This body will also be apprised of the province's competitive review. This review investigated components of conventional operations such as regulatory efficiency, taxation, and the availability of labour. In order to continue attracting investment, it is important for us to remain aware of how our province's regulations and royalty regime affect our businesses. A thorough understanding of these concepts requires communication and collaboration among industry stakeholders and government. The body that would be established under Bill 1 would be aware of the necessity of this relationship and will work closely with industry stakeholders to better understand these issues. They will be able to determine the regulatory impact and what can be changed to attract investment while maintaining safety; in essence, finding the balance.

Mr. Speaker, in many ways this work is already being done. This government is aware of the importance of regulatory reform, which is why we have the Regulatory Review Secretariat, chaired by the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, who, by the way, is doing an outstanding job. This body reviews regulations, usually when their expiry date comes up. At this time the cost of the regulations to both government and industry are assessed, and changes are made to ensure that we continue to attract investment and promote efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, not all regulations have expiry dates; in fact, 30 per cent do not. This can result in their becoming outdated before they are reviewed. We are changing this to ensure timely review of our province's regulations. Furthermore, regulations often expire approximately 10 years after their inception. However, we have noted that in rapidly changing industries they may need to be reviewed sooner. Therefore, we will be making efforts to see these regulations expire sooner, for example after five years rather than 10, thereby ensuring that they are reviewed in a more timely manner.

In addition, Alberta is employing a one-window application system known as BizPaL, which will contribute to our province remaining competitive. This means that when industry is required to adhere to regulations while working on projects that involve several levels of government, they are only required to submit one application to one level of government for their project to be approved. The approval of the other levels of government will happen behind the scenes through a collaborative process between governments. In essence, we are streamlining the application process and making it easier for industry to come to Alberta with their investments.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 1 will embrace these developments in our regulatory review process, and the body that the bill will establish

will have the best understanding of our regulations as well as our royalty structure and how these compare to our competitors in such places as Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Texas. By this mechanism they will be able to advise government on the future of our oil and gas sector. This advice will include considerations for infrastructure and transportation improvements within the province and specifically within the north.

Further, as part of their work the body will integrate the First Nations consultation policy and guidelines on land management and resource development. Mr. Speaker, it is important to Albertans that we continue to work with all land stewards while respecting the heritage of our province. Bill 1 embraces our legacy and will ensure that, going forward, the initiatives regarding land management reflect the respect that Albertans have for our history.

Mr. Speaker, the body will of course put efforts into our province's world-class integrated petrochemical hub. This is currently an area where increased collaboration among industries and government can have a substantial impact on our province's economic diversity. By promoting co-operation between the oil sands and our province's refineries, significant cost-reduction mechanisms could be identified and employed to a point where Alberta's petrochemical products are even more competitive than they currently are.

Another industry that can have a significant impact on Alberta's prosperity is research and development. Recently Alberta Advanced Education and Technology reinvented our province's research and technology system. The system, now known as Alberta Innovates, is designed to ensure a more co-ordinated approach to research in the province, ultimately providing new opportunities to Alberta researchers and entrepreneurs. The system includes an international advisory board and five provincial agencies, including Bio Solutions, Energy and Environment Solutions, Health Solutions, and technology commercialization. This new approach will help to ensure that Alberta remains on the cutting edge of research and technology advancement.

Furthermore, under Bill 1 Alberta Innovates will be given the unique opportunity to collaborate with other industries in the province such as our forestry, agriculture, and oil and gas. Together these industries will have the ability to foresee and anticipate unique areas of opportunity in the province and ensure Alberta's competitive edge.

3:00

Mr. Speaker, another important initiative of government going forward is Productivity Alberta. The web portal, which was launched earlier this month, is an online resource for Alberta businesses to use in order to improve their productivity and global competitiveness. The site includes best practices and strategies along with assessment tools for companies to measure their progress. This site can be used by businesses and industries such as forestry, ag, and oil and gas, and Bill 1 will help to integrate this initiative with all the other work that is going on within the province.

Overall, the act will promote co-operation amongst all these industries, businesses, and government in looking at the competitiveness of our province on a global scale. The body will develop an overall strategic approach to competitiveness, recommendations of priority actions within the province as well as establish benchmarks to measure our accomplishments. Further, they will be responsible for reporting to the Premier on the status of Alberta's competitiveness, making clear recommendations and thereafter preparing annual reports on progress.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly believe this province has a tremendous capacity for competitiveness. We have the greatest resources in the

world, from the wheat fields in the south to the oil sands in the north and, most importantly, the people who drive our economy, and all of this is built upon a solid foundation of low taxes.

There is no doubt that in coming out of this global economic recession, the world of business is changing, and it is impossible for one single person to thoroughly understand the face of this change. Rather, it requires several knowledgeable individuals in both the public and private sectors coming together in the same room for us to assess the directions of our global economy. This is what Bill 1 will permit. Ultimately, the Alberta Competitiveness Act is about adapting to these changes.

Mr. Speaker, the 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, said, "Wise and prudent men" – and I'm sure he meant women – "have long known that in a changing world worthy institutions can be conserved only by adjusting them to the changing time."

An Hon. Member: You can't assume that.

Mrs. McQueen: Absolutely I can assume that.

This government has the ability to recognize the truth in this saying. We must adapt to the changing markets and directions of our provincial, national, and international business partners. Bill 1 will legislate the best possible way to do this by bringing together those who can most accurately paint the picture of our future. Through Bill 1 and the strong leadership of this government and the incredible work ethic of Albertans I have no doubt this province will become one of the most competitive jurisdictions in the world. For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand before the Assembly in support of Bill 1.

I would now like to adjourn debate. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 2

Professional Statutes Amendment Act, 2010

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

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and move second reading of Bill 2, the Professional Statutes Amendment Act, 2010.

Before us today we have proposed legislative revisions to six acts along with updated wording to another two acts. These revisions, if approved, would require professional regulatory organizations to consult with the minister responsible for the act itself and the minister responsible for parts 1 to 3 of the Post-secondary Learning Act. Currently the ministries responsible are Employment and Immigration and Advanced Education and Technology.

I suppose you could say that there are two main reasons for this amendment act. First, this government wants to ensure that the qualifications asked for – for example, either courses, diplomas, or degrees required for an individual to practise in a certain profession – are reflective of the true requirements to do the job. While we encourage continuing learning for all Albertans, sometimes these increased standards may be unnecessary for the individual to perform the work. Likewise, we would ask to be consulted if there's a proposal to reduce educational requirements.

Second, this government wants to ensure that we are consistent with the Health Professions Act, which has had a similar provision in place since 2001. These proposals would mirror the piece of legislation and add a clause to the Architects Act, the Engineering, Geological and Geophysical Professions Act, the Land Surveyors

Act, the Professional and Occupational Associations Registration Act, the Regulated Accounting Profession Act, and the Veterinary Profession Act. If passed, the amendment act will update a similar clause that's been part of the Agrology Profession Act since 2007 and the Regulated Forestry Profession Act since 2002.

In essence, the clause will read that for the professional regulatory organization or institute or college, depending on the specific language of each act, the government body must consult with the ministers responsible for the acts and must consider the comments received from those ministers. Mr. Speaker, I understand each professional regulatory organization has been advised of Bill 2 and are understanding of the reasons behind these proposals.

In closing, this legislation ensures that government has a chair at the table and is kept in the loop. It is helpful for government to know what's being discussed and to be involved at the earliest stage possible, especially when we're talking about any potential changes to postsecondary curriculum. Most importantly and in addition to providing greater consistency among similar legislation, Bill 2 enhances a strong, proactive relationship with Alberta's professional regulatory organizations. I'm proud to carry the Professional Statutes Amendment Act, 2010, and I encourage all of my colleagues in the Legislature to support it.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to move to adjourn debate at this time. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 3 Fatal Accidents Amendment Act, 2010

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

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and begin debate on Bill 3, the Fatal Accidents Amendment Act, 2010. This bill proposes two amendments to the current act. The first amendment relates to section 8 of the Fatal Accidents Act. In 1979 the Alberta Legislature enacted section 8 to allow certain surviving family members – a spouse, an adult interdependent partner, a child, and parents – to recover damages for the emotional suffering and grief caused by the wrongful death of a close family member. This law ensures that family members do not have to litigate in order to receive damages for their grief. In other words, bereavement damages are automatic, and the amounts are set by statute. There is no need for family members to testify in court about the grief they suffered as a result of the death of a spouse, a child, or a parent.

Presently the act limits the class of family members eligible to receive bereavement damages. These damages may not be awarded to parents if their deceased child was married or had an adult interdependent partner, and damages may not be awarded to a child for their deceased parent if the child was married or had an adult interdependent partner. Mr. Speaker, the passage of Bill 3 will broaden the eligibility for bereavement damages by opening up eligibility to a child that is married or has an adult interdependent partner. This change will mean that parents may be awarded damages regardless of the marital status of their deceased child, and a child may be awarded damages for the death of a parent regardless of the child's marital status. This amendment is consistent with the rule of law and court decisions that there should be no restriction on bereavement damages based on a child's marital status.

Mr. Speaker, the second amendment removes the reference to a child as including an illegitimate child. An illegitimate child refers to a child whose parents are not married. Distinguishing between

legitimate and illegitimate children is no longer appropriate in legislation. It is also out of step with modern-day family structures and dynamics. All children should be considered equal regardless of the marital status of the children's parents. This amendment is consistent with Alberta's Family Law Act, which focuses on the relationship between the child and the parent rather than the relationship between the children's parents. This is also another step towards removing the final vestiges of illegitimacy remaining in Alberta's legislation.

Mr. Speaker, these amendments reflect the rule of law and current demographics in Alberta. I encourage all members to support Bill 3.

I would like to adjourn debate at this time. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

3:10 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.

[Adjourned debate February 11: Mr. Hayden]

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

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise in the House today to reply to the Speech from the Throne. I would like to thank His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for his poignant and stirring speech. The throne speech acknowledged that despite tough times Albertans remain optimistic when looking into the future, and we have every reason to be. Over the years we have all seen many ups and downs in the Alberta economy, but Alberta always bounces back better than ever.

Our economy is the powerhouse that will lead Canada out of this recession, and our health care will be the future envy of the country. Mr. Speaker, fiscally this province has a solid foundation. We have high employment, we have low income tax and corporate tax rates, and we are the only province in Canada that has no sales tax. Alberta has the lowest fuel tax in Canada and the lowest general corporate tax rate. In addition, Alberta businesses and financial institutions do not pay capital taxes. Moreover, they also benefit from the absence of a payroll tax, which is levied in Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador. If Alberta had the same tax system as other provinces, Albertans and Alberta businesses would pay between \$10 billion and \$18 billion more in taxes every single year. That works out to about \$3,000 to \$5,000 per person.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, Albertans pay low personal income taxes, and we are enriched by the largest personal basic tax exemption in Canada. This exemption allows individuals to earn more than \$16,000 before having to pay one cent of provincial income tax. These facts allow everyday Albertans, like those in my constituency, to keep more of their money in their pockets. This in itself can help spur the economy and keep it strong. Alberta is the envy of the whole country when it comes to taxes.

On top of this, Mr. Speaker, we have savings. In fact, we are the only province in the country with not one savings account but two,

savings like the sustainability fund, which can provide soft landings in economic down times. With the sustainability fund we have the tools necessary to face any economic trials and tribulations head-on and persevere through this global recession.

The heritage savings trust fund is not just a rainy-day fund but an investment in our future, an investment put aside for future generations that may not have the security we have in our nonrenewable resource revenues. Mr. Speaker, Albertans themselves are the engine that keeps our economy moving forward, and this is why the Alberta health care system aims to keep Albertans healthy and thriving. With the implementation of a five-year funding plan Alberta health care will remain stable and secure no matter what the economic environment entails.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's health care system will continue to be a leader in this 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. Accountability in health care is paramount to this government as we need to ensure that the budgetary increase directed towards health care pays off in measurable outcomes. As His Honour stated, "Your government will go beyond statistical measures . . . and seek input from Albertans themselves." It is through this public consultation that Alberta health care will provide added transparency, efficiency, and accountability.

The ability to plan ahead is integral to health care, and the Alberta government knows this. With the implementation of the five-year plan Albertans will be able to say that we have one of the best health care systems in this whole country.

Mr. Speaker, all Albertans have a right to equitable and consistent services, especially people with developmental disabilities. This government will do the utmost to make sure all Albertans receive the care and support they need and deserve.

Mr. Speaker, social programs for Albertans will become better integrated and more focused on the people they were created to serve. These improvements will make it easier for Albertans in need to access information and assistance. Furthermore, every effort will be made to make sure the transition between programs as they move from childhood to adulthood to their senior years will go as smoothly as possible. Our health care system along with our social programs are in reliable hands.

This enables Albertans to focus on the multitude of opportunities and attractions this beautiful province has to offer. In my own constituency of St. Albert thousands of children and parents gather from all over northern Alberta every spring for the International Children's Festival. This year it will be held June 1 to the 5th. It is a sample of what is best about Alberta: people working together for a common goal.

When I think about Alberta's bright future, I cannot help but reflect on its glorious past. Mr. Speaker, St. Albert is the oldest nonfortified continuously inhabited settlement in Alberta. Next year, in 2011, we will celebrate the sesquicentennial, or 150-year anniversary. What a long way we have come in 150 years.

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.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for questions or comments if there are any.

Hon. members, I'm going to recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall today, and something will happen in the Assembly

that very infrequently happens. In our Assembly two languages, the official languages of Canada, are recognized as the spoken languages of this Assembly, but in the time that you've honoured me with the opportunity to be your Speaker, I've also recognized a multitude of other languages. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall today wishes to give his remarks to the Speech from the Throne in Punjabi, and I'm accepting that. You should have on your desks a copy of the speaking notes, the complete speech, with respect to this.

To the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, I'm very pleased as part of the reflection of the diversity of Alberta to permit that, probably the only Parliament in Canada that would permit such. I hope it's understood, the uniqueness of this opportunity.

Secondly, sir, I trust, I pray, I hope that the speech given in Punjabi will mirror word for word the English translation that is on the desk of all individuals. The member should know that if it is not, I will hear, and then, unfortunately, we will have a discussion and consequences.

Proceed, please. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm greatly honoured to rise today to offer my thoughts on the Speech from the Throne. I'm proud to be a Calgarian, an Albertan, and a Sikh. I'm also proud to offer these remarks in Punjabi to reflect the diversity of this Assembly, the diversity of my constituency, Calgary-McCall, and the diversity of this wonderful province we all call home.

When I came here 40 years ago, few could have imagined that this Assembly would feature so many different kinds of people from such a wide range of diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. It is a wonderful thing to see.

[Remarks in Punjabi] My response begins with a note of gratitude to His Honour Norman Kwong, our Lieutenant Governor, for five years of dedicated service to the people of Alberta. His Honour did a magnificent job, and he makes us all proud to be Albertan. The people of Calgary-McCall are a hard-working bunch, Mr. Speaker, full of optimism and hope for the future. They believe in Alberta. But many of the citizens who visit, call, or e-mail my office are concerned with the direction of this administration. Thousands of people are out of work. Thousands more are deeply concerned about this administration's mismanagement of our public health care system and cuts to vitally important social programs. 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. [As submitted]

3:20

Politics in Alberta aren't about right versus left anymore; they're about right versus wrong. And this Conservative administration has become infamous for making all the wrong decisions.

[Remarks in Punjabi] 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; have damaged our international reputation and our environment; have failed to enforce standards to address pollution and climate change; have allowed family farms to stagnate and wither away; have failed to protect our forests and the forestry industry from the pine beetle; have left Alberta's most vulnerable citizens more vulnerable than ever; have created transportation bottlenecks and headaches. [As submitted]

Wrong spending decisions have frittered away the opportunity to save for the future, have wasted millions of taxpayer dollars on lavish perks for the elite, have reduced support by 30 per cent for Alberta's most vulnerable citizens, now more vulnerable than ever.

The throne speech features a few positive developments, but even

the good news is tainted by the administration's long record of half measures and broken promises.

[Remarks in Punjabi] Providing Alberta Health Services with a five-year budget cycle is a good idea. Considering all the damage done to our public health care system by this administration's catastrophic bungling, this is at least a small step forward to restoring a smidgen of confidence to the health care professionals who have done their best while dealing with the consequences of the Premier's mismanagement. [As submitted]

We're also glad to see that the Premier's administration has heeded opposition and community calls for more police officers, but even the addition of 100 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 street to meet population growth.

[Remarks in Punjabi] 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. [As submitted]

I hope that the Premier can make some real progress here and bring these benefits home to Alberta workers, working moms and dads who desperately need and deserve the assistance. I would suggest that the Premier should also do something about the skyrocketing wait times for processing EI applications. Many Albertans live paycheque to paycheque, and they can't afford to wait for months for their EI benefits.

[Remarks in Punjabi] Aside from those few bright spots, even by the rightfully diminished expectations of most Albertans this throne speech sets a new low for a government that is clearly out of ideas. The cupboard is bare: virtually no ideas, no leadership, no vision, no inspiration, no imagination, no plan. And given the Conservative track record many of these commitments will drag on for years and years without any real progress. [As submitted]

The speech 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 more 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 most Albertans?

[Remarks in Punjabi] 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. [As submitted]

It was wrong to claw back \$80 million from Alberta's public school boards. Can Alberta's students and parents expect even greater cuts? It is 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. It is wrong to fire the school board without exhausting all avenues of understanding and board support. It is wrong that we have an administration whose only response to 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. "Alberta's continued prosperity will depend on the knowledge and skills of its future citizens. In these times more than ever it is important to continue to invest in our children's education."

[Remarks in Punjabi] "As a concerned Albertan, I urge you not to cut funding for our schools." 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, and the University of Alberta is considering the same. We should be investing in postsecondary education and research and development to move Alberta from a 20th century economy to a 21st century economy. [As submitted]

It is wrong to balance the budget on the backs of students. Students and their families are rightfully alarmed by the prospects of massive tuition increases. Now more than ever Alberta needs talented graduates to fill jobs in the energy sector, the health sector. How can we ever address ER wait times and the need for greater capacity in long-term care without more doctors and nurses? How can we continue to keep our energy sector alive without new engineers and scientists? These short-sighted policies are driving away our best and brightest.

[Remarks in Punjabi] 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 the 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. No vision, no imagination, no leadership: that's what this throne speech offered Albertans. [As submitted]

As proud as Albertans are of their province, many of us here sense that we can 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 in fact be leaders in that race.

[Remarks in Punjabi and English] We could eliminate homelessness. We could dramatically reduce poverty. All these things are possible if we had 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 to changing times, new challenges. We need a government that makes decisions based on principles, not political expediency. We can do better.

3:30

In conclusion, I would like to thank Mr. Manjit Singh Piasa for helping me translate my response to the throne speech from English to Punjabi.

[Remarks in Punjabi and English] Pure: the true believer belongs to the Lord, and the victory also belongs to the Lord.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is now available. The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the hon. member. [Remarks in Punjabi] I have just said in Punjabi, of course, "Thank you for your speech, hon. member, but I don't agree with everything you've said, and I would like to ask you one question." Do you agree with the significant investment that we are

making in health care as announced in the Speech from the Throne, as backed up by the business plan and the budget that was introduced last week so that we can seek and find the kinds of improvements to health service delivery that we have promised Albertans and that they rightfully deserve and requested?

Mr. Kang: [Remarks in Punjabi]

Secondly, you know, we are glad to see more funding for the health care. I agree with you there fully. But it remains to be seen if it will be publicly delivered, publicly funded. So far we are not seeing that happening. I think it still can go towards a private system. Those are our concerns. It remains to be seen how successful we will be even with throwing all that money at health care.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [Remarks in Punjabi and English] Dear Uncle, I'm very happy and pleased to hear about very important issues in our mother tongue. I'm acknowledging in your speech how we're going to address the emergency wait times and long-term care and the doctors and nurses issues. We're training more doctors and nurses than we've ever trained before. The emergency wait time is the number one performance measure for Alberta Health Services and Dr. Duckett. Dear Uncle, how can you say that we're not addressing this? We have first offered a vision in the Alberta health act. We've spent and invested so much in providing care. We have one board to implement that job. If you could please answer that question, I would appreciate it.

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

Mr. Kang: Thank you. [Remarks in Punjabi] I think that before we had 24 health boards, and we reduced them to 17. Then we brought them to nine. Then we brought them back to one. [Remarks in Punjabi] So it remains to be seen. [Remarks in Punjabi] You know, we were training more nurses; we were training more doctors. Then all of a sudden there was such a big uncertainty, and those nurses and doctors were not even sure, you know, that they would have jobs here in Alberta.

With the new funding some certainty has come into the health care system. Increasing the long-term care beds will help the hospitals to reduce those wait times. You know, everything is in progress, but it remains to be seen if all the money the government has put into the health care is going to grow the situation in six weeks, in three months.

Mostly, it has been mismanagement, but it's not on the delivery part. The health care we read about in the papers, you know: we've got the best service providers in the hospitals. I commend all those hospital front-line staff, who provide the best service. But somehow there is something up in the management part with the delivery of the system. So it remains to be seen how we're going to improve this.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm extremely proud . . .

The Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. member, but I'm sorry; the time has expired.

For those members who participated in Punjabi, if you get a request from the *Hansard* people in the next couple of minutes about

a translation or the proper text, do not hesitate to respond very immediately because it's a very, very tight schedule that we produce this *Hansard* with. So if you get the request, bang back right away, please.

The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While I did grow up in northeast Calgary just outside of the hon. member's constituency and just outside of mine, I definitely will not be participating in this debate in Punjabi, so we don't have to worry about that.

I do want to say that it's a pleasure to rise and speak to the Speech from the Throne that was delivered by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor just a few weeks ago. Again, it's always an honour to be in his presence. He's such a great Albertan. It never ceases to amaze me the dignity and sense of humour that he delivers such speeches with.

[Mr. Mitzel in the chair]

What I would like to do, Mr. Speaker, is just go through some of the major points in the Speech from the Throne and try to equate that to what it means for my constituents and what they have to be excited about. First of all, I think what was clearly outlined in the Speech from the Throne was the unique fiscal position that our province is in right now compared to any other jurisdiction not just in Canada but right across North America.

I had the pleasure earlier in this year of travelling to both the state capitals in Washington and Idaho on behalf of the Pacific Northwest economic delegation, and it became very apparent to me that we're very fortunate to live in the place that we do. These people are having to grapple with some of the most difficult decisions of cutting substantial amounts out of their budgets. But here in Alberta we don't have to do that because we do have this thing called the sustainability fund.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, I think that we should maybe change the name. It should be called the stability fund because that's exactly what it provides Albertans, stability in times when there is some uncertainty around revenues and some uncertainty around the potential for economic growth. We do know that we are going to come back to a time of great economic growth and prosperity, and it's probably not too far around the corner. But we do have this \$17 billion that was put into the sustainability fund that will get us through these times. I believe that this government does not have to be bashful about putting this in place and using it appropriately in this past year and in the next few years to come as we find ourselves back in the black in the fiscal position.

You know, I guess, the speech did talk about Alberta's relative position as having the highest incomes and the lowest taxes and the most advanced public infrastructure in Canada. That's something to be very proud of, Mr. Speaker, and I just want to speak briefly to this idea of having the lowest taxes. While I'm very proud of being in the province that does have the lowest taxes, we need to be very cognizant that we need to continue to push the envelope. I was elected to this Assembly because I really believe that we as politicians and members of this Assembly have the obligation to deliver the services that people require as well as to make sure that we're doing it in a way that's the best value to taxpayers and in a way that allows us to put more of the hard-earned money of the average citizen back into their pockets so that they can spend it on the things that they believe are important in their lives.

3:40

I want to make sure that we are continually looking at making sure we do have the lowest taxes because it does create a better opportu-

nity for investment and economic growth – that’s no secret – but from a moral standpoint it does put more money into the pockets of the average hard-working citizen so they can make the choices themselves instead of having government make choices as to where that money should be spent. I really believe that as we move forward in using the sustainability fund and move forward into, you know, 2012, when we are back in the black and are in a surplus position, we should continue to look at ways to invest our surpluses so that we can continue to lower taxes in our jurisdiction in a way that’s sustainable for not just this current generation but future generations. I really believe that we do have the opportunity to allow that we do have the lowest taxes in Canada and right across North America not just now but for future generations of Albertans. I think that’s very, very important.

The second thing that was very prominent in the throne speech, Mr. Speaker, was health care, and we can see that just last week, with the delivery of the budget by the hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise, health care is a significant concern of our government. We’ve seen the follow-through of what was in the throne speech, a five-year committed spending plan on health care. I think this is very important because, again, I believe this provides stability to the health care system, which is what Albertans are wanting, and I think that this is an appropriate time to provide that stability. Why, Mr. Speaker? Because I think we’re at a very, very important crossroad with our health care system. I was very excited about the report that was released by the committee that was chaired by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford and the opportunity that Albertans are going to have to have input on the future direction of health care at a very, very broad level.

Mr. Speaker, it was only about early October, I believe it was, when I convened a round-table discussion of about a dozen members in my community. I might get some jeers from the opposition here across the aisle, but this was a very broad spectrum of people in my constituency. There is no doubt about that. There were probably at least half of those people in that room that did not vote for me – hard to believe – in the last election. This was a very broad cross-section of the diversity that’s in my constituency both from a business standpoint, an age standpoint. We had students, seniors, business people, social activists, immigrants, those types of things.

We had about a three-hour discussion about health care, about the government’s plans for health care and what these people would like to see moving forward, and I really got the sense that there is a huge appetite for Albertans to enter into dialogue about the future of health care in our province. I don’t mean, sort of, the ins and outs about how many nurses or how many doctors but a very, very high level about what we cherish about our public health care system.

I think all Albertans realize the tremendous pressures and strains our current health care system is under. We know that when it comes to pharmaceuticals, when it comes to the aging demographics of our population, when it comes to the technological advances we’ve seen in our health care system over, let’s say, you know, the last two decades, people are living longer. Children that would normally not have lived past a certain age are living longer and with a greater quality of life, and the supports are there to provide them that. The problem is, Mr. Speaker, that these are very, very expensive.

A number a decades ago, when public health care was brought in by Tommy Douglas, I’m not sure he really imagined the types of escalations in cost to the public purse that health care would have. We’re now sitting at very close to 40 per cent of the actual provincial budget on health care. I know that it’s over 50 per cent in Ontario. That’s certainly concerning.

Albertans from right across the political spectrum want to have the discussion about what that means for them moving forward. Does that mean that we might have to change some of our thinking around our public health care system?

You know, Mr. Speaker, it was baffling, just mind boggling, particularly over the last two days, that we had members of the Official Opposition make comments about this government’s wanting to give health care money to for-profit enterprises or companies or people. What I don’t understand is that I haven’t met a nurse, I haven’t met a doctor, I haven’t met anybody involved in the health care professions that would do that job for free. What I don’t get is that we sometimes like to think of our health care system as something that’s free, that’s just always there, but the money comes from somewhere. I know that our doctors and our nurses and all of our health professionals want to be fairly compensated for the work that they do. Those are the types of things that we need to have conversations about, as to how to best deliver them. We need to get past this debate about for-profit or not-for-profit and what that means to public health care.

When I brought this group of constituents together in my constituency, the one amazing thing was that I was a little worried that we’d evolve into this very partisan, heightened political rhetoric about, you know: you’re going to privatize health care or, no, you’re not going to privatize or we need more privatized health care or we don’t. That’s not what happened, Mr. Speaker. When we really sat down as a group, a community group, knowing that we were all in this together, we had very, very articulate, very thoughtful debates about what is the role of the private sector in health care and what is the role of government in health care. All people want are the proper assurances that those roles will be there when they need them.

Mr. Speaker, I really believe this whole idea right from the throne speech that Albertans themselves will be engaged in the evolution of the health care system from its first steps is key. I think that’s what Albertans want. I know that that’s what people in my constituency want. They told me that when we had that round-table meeting.

Mr. Speaker, the final thing that I want to address in the throne speech is this whole notion of increasing Alberta’s competitiveness, not just in Canada but right across the world. There are many different facets to this, obviously, but the one that I find most interesting is this whole idea around regulations and red tape. You know, I have to admit that since I’ve been elected, the feedback that I’ve received from a number of my constituents, not just businesses but constituents that are involved in the social sectors and that sort of thing, is that there are too many hurdles to go over and hoops to jump through just to do what they’re passionate doing. Whether it’s helping out someone that is a PDD client or whether it’s delivering a service as part of their small business, they believe that government has put obstacles in their way. As I say, it actually goes against our slogan of the freedom to create because, really, these people feel that they don’t have the freedom.

I’m very much looking forward to how this rolls out over the next year because I believe there are a lot of things that we can be doing. I’ll provide one example. Just the other week, Mr. Speaker, I read an e-mail from a constituent, and he had some concern about a gentleman in Ontario that, for whatever reason, thought it would be okay to keep a tiger as a pet. I find that very peculiar myself, but the conclusion of the story was that this individual that decided to keep the tiger as a pet ended up being attacked by his pet and dying. My constituent thought it was very, very important for us to create a law to keep people from keeping tigers and other dangerous animals as pets.

3:50

Well, I don't know, really, whether we as a body, as an Assembly need to protect our constituents from just common-sense type things. I think at times governments, not just this one but governments right across the world, try to protect their citizens from stuff that is just common sense. I'm not going to sit here and say that this individual that had the pet, you know, deserved that fate or whatever. I guess what I'm saying is that we need as governments to be very focused, to let people use their creativity and imagination to be not just the best businesspeople, the best workers, but the best citizens and the best neighbours possible. I'm, again, really excited about this idea of the government seriously looking at what kind of burden it's putting not just on businesses but on average citizens, my constituents, through its requirements of regulation and red tape and all of the hoops and the hurdles that they have to go through.

Mr. Speaker, just one last thing. I have to say that, you know, I'm coming up to the sort of two-year mark of being elected to this Assembly, and it's been such a great honour to serve with all of the colleagues in here on both sides. It's been an honour to serve my constituency. I think we have a great opportunity right now here in Alberta to come through what was – you know, a lot of people were saying that they could foresee what happened with the economy, but I'm not sure that a lot of people were able to envision how it unfolded. We have an opportunity right here to emerge as the best place to live, to work, to play, to invest, and to raise a family. That's what I'm going to be dedicated to doing for my constituents in Calgary-North Hill over the next year.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to make a quick comment. I appreciate the hon. member's speech. In fact, I too share his passion for Alberta somehow getting on a more sustainable track in the future.

I heard your talk at the beginning, more on us being prepared in the future to be able to keep taxes low and for people to keep investment going here in Alberta, and I agree with that. I think that primarily the best way to do that is through what the Mintz report suggests, where we're almost saving 30 per cent of our royalty resources through good or through bad times or whatever the deal be and for us to get off this roller coaster.

I know it's easier for me as an opposition member to say that, but I noticed that earlier, in the Lougheed era, I guess, you would see 30 per cent as a general rule just come off, from '71 until about '79 or maybe even sometime after. I'm just asking what your proposal is to sort of ensure – I see the way for us to be able to get to that perpetually low tax base is for us to save over the short term in order to build up that revenue because we're not going to have the petroleum resources, which I see as giving us our competitive advantage, at that time.

I'll let you take the floor. That's sort of the basis of my question.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that question from the hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* because I think that's a very important one. I know that the hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise has talked over the last couple of weeks about developing a savings strategy or some sort of legislated savings strategy. I'm pretty sure that he is sort of in the primary stages of looking at what that might look like. I do know that our Premier did provide that direction to the former Minister of Finance and

Enterprise, and she had the challenge of trying to address that in a time where the fiscal, I guess, capacity of this province fell out of the bucket.

You know, we're going to get there. I truly believe that. I have the honour of being appointed chair of the Cabinet Policy Committee on the Economy, which the Minister of Finance and Enterprise falls under, and I know that we've had some preliminary discussions about how we can maybe bring forward some of the ideas, to have discussions amongst our caucus members, to eventually bring something to this Assembly. I think that's very important. It's something that I know this government is looking at. I would suggest probably staying tuned. It's probably not too far down the road.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I wish I could remember who came up with the quote that the only certainties in life are death and taxes. That seems to be part of today's conversation. With regard to Alberta having the lowest tax regime in Canada, I would suggest that the flat tax puts an unfair burden on our middle-class taxpayers. If you compare the tax rates that people in the upper echelon of our middle class pay versus other provinces, I think you'll find that other provinces using a progressive tax rate have breaks for their middle-class individuals.

With regard to health care and the delivery and costs the member used the 40 per cent figure. The reality is that as a portion of our GDP health care spending, whether it's in a recession or in a boom time, has never exceeded 7 per cent of our gross domestic product, so be careful when you use that 40 per cent figure. Also, be careful when you talk about Tommy Douglas and universal health care. Universal health care has three pillars. Publicly funded is just one of them. Publicly administered and publicly delivered are the other two pillars that are extremely important.

In terms of taxes, in Alberta we pay a terrific amount of hidden tax, and one of those hidden taxes would be the amount of interest we pay for P3 projects, which this government refuses to transparently and accountably put forward. We just had a meeting this past week with the Ministry of Transportation, and they refused to provide the interest rates that we're going to be paying for the next 30 years on road projects. We've been unable to get answers for how much they're spending on school projects.

So when it comes to rah-rah Alberta, there are a lot of things to cheer about, but get your costs and your taxes straight.

The Acting Speaker: Any other members wish to speak? The hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration.

Mr. Lukaszuk: EI, Employment and Immigration. It's not the beginning of a song. It's not ee-eye, ee-eye oh; it's just EI.

The Acting Speaker: This is the throne speech.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Honoured to be over here. It's definitely hard to compete with some of the speeches, nor will I do a reply in Punjabi, but I really appreciate the fact that in this Assembly members can express themselves in their native language. I think it reflects the nature of this province and how open and welcoming we are to newcomers in this province and how proud we are of our heritage. So congratulations to the member for delivering his comments in Punjabi.

Mr. Speaker, first of all I would like to express my appreciation to His Honour the Lieutenant Governor and his lovely spouse for

being such vital contributors to our province and for representing the Crown not only within the province but also outside of Alberta in such a dignified way as they have. I can only imagine how onerous the task of being a Lieutenant Governor is, yet this Lieutenant Governor has always fulfilled all of his obligations and has done it in a top-notch manner. I really take off my hat to him.

The Speech from the Throne really gave Albertans an outline of what this government's values are, and I firmly believe that these values very closely reflect those of Albertans. First of all, Mr. Speaker, it also builds on the fact that the government of Alberta has worked very hard with Albertans – actually, probably most of the heavy lifting was done by Albertans – to put us in the position that we're in right now to make us able to respond to any adversity that may fly our way without advance warning.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, the recent economic downturn was a phenomenon that was felt world-wide. No economy on this planet has not felt the repercussions of the economic downturn. We saw it down south in the United States, an economic superpower relative to other economies. We saw it in Japan. We saw all of the European Union and their economies literally shrivel overnight. Yet in the province of Alberta, a province that perhaps not enough people know about outside of Canada, outside of North America, we have managed to cultivate an economy and a fiscal regime that managed to a large degree to shelter us from this economic downturn. No, we can't say that we escaped it unscathed. This budget that has been tabled shows the fact that we had to adapt and that we had to bring in measures that are reflective of what a responsible government would do. However, you will see over the next few months, as other provinces from coast to coast will be delivering their budgets over probably the next three to four months, how tempered our measures were compared to what you will see in other budgets. That is because (a) Albertans expected us to be fiscally responsible, and (b) we have managed to, for lack of a better term, sock away money for a situation exactly like this one. Although we cannot say that we expected this to happen, we were always ready for when it happened. Much like an insurance policy: you don't buy your house fire insurance policy because you expect a fire to occur, but you have one just in case, and when it does occur, you're happy you had it. This is exactly the situation.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, compared to other provinces and states and countries throughout the world, as opposed to borrowing money from outside banking institutions or financial houses at a certain rate of interest, we were able to actually borrow money from ourselves, our own money, and balance our budget to a larger degree than what you will see in other jurisdictions. That's something that I think not only this government but predominantly Albertans should be proud of because it was they who expected it to happen, and it was they who allowed us to do it as government. Frankly, they wouldn't be supporting this government if they didn't want us to do exactly what they told us to do.

Our financial advantage, Mr. Speaker, as the budget clearly indicates, is not only benefiting us right now but will also benefit us in the future because some analysts will tell you that we are already in the recovery phase of this recession, but Alberta will be the first one to be able to go out and say to the world: "We're open for business. We have rebuilt our economy. We have in the meantime built up our infrastructure, which is now ready to receive an influx of investment, and we have a young, skilled, educated workforce ready to perform in a new, robust economy."

That will be something that not many provinces will be able to say because as their economies are shrivelling up and they are cancelling

construction projects and cancelling infrastructure projects, which will be needed in a recovering economy, this province is actually doing the opposite. We are investing in our infrastructure, and we are investing in construction so that we will be ready to accept a new, robust economy. I would like to again thank Albertans for giving us this initiative and for supporting us in doing so.

Mr. Speaker, another very important aspect of the speech – and it appears at the very front of the speech – is our health care. As you know, we have a minister who, as I just said a couple of days ago in a radio interview, probably hasn't slept for the last month or so but, like this government and like Albertans, is committed to making sure that we get the best possible health care system for the money that our taxpayers pay. Let's face it. Again, there is always lots to be desired. Albertans should be commended on the fact that they have high expectations. They should have high expectations because they pay for the system, and they should expect to get the best outcomes possible from our health care system.

I had some personal experiences with the health care system through my family, and I have to tell you that when called upon, the system responds very well. Our nurses and staff in our hospitals are working very hard, and we have some very good professionals delivering the best that they can. However, we should always strive for more. I know that our goal is simply reflective of that of Albertans. We want the system to be as good as possible, just like Albertans do, not because we want this for political reasons. We want this because these are our family members, these are our constituents, these are our friends who end up in these hospitals, who end up at these doctors' clinics. We want them to get the best possible treatment that is available and that could be made available through our expenditures and our management of the health care system.

Mr. Speaker, the name of Tommy Douglas has often been tossed around. A bit of a personal connection, actually: a member of my family went to college with Tommy Douglas. Every time we have a family gathering, I get a lengthy lesson on Tommy Douglas, what he stood for and what his ideas were. If you read any of his writings and any of his speeches – and I think the members who tend to toss his name around the most probably have read the least; at least, it would appear so.

Mr. Tommy Douglas's idea of publicly funded and publicly delivered health care had nothing to do with the system we have in place right now. Mr. Speaker, his idea was to provide emergency care for those who need it most. It has grown since, and even though the ideas are still in place, this is not what we would want to go back to. Propagating the ideas of Tommy Douglas and asking us to follow them right now would take us back decades. I think Mr. Douglas would be quite surprised that we took his idea from there to what we have right now.

Mr. Speaker, another aspect of the Speech from the Throne talks about building safe and caring communities. That is something that I hear about very often in my constituency. Our constituents expect to be safe, and they expect the law to be on their side. They expect that the victims, not the perpetrators, will receive the benefit of the law and that the government of Alberta will do anything it can within its realm of influence to create as safe communities as possible. Needless to say – and that's not passing the buck – a great deal of the jurisdiction that deals with the criminal element lies within the Criminal Code of Canada, being the federal government. But I can tell you that as a member of government I see no effort spared among my colleagues who are involved with the delivery of justice and with apprehending some of these individuals.

If you look at the track record of this government over the last two years, Alberta is not exactly a welcoming province for the criminal

element. If one were to be a criminal – and I'm not encouraging them to look for more competitive markets – Alberta is not the place to start business. We are tough on our criminal element. We seize any proceeds of crime that they have. We apprehend children who are witnesses to or in the realm of drug dealers, and we support our police force and our judiciary in doing the work that they do.

Observing, Mr. Speaker, as a government member the work of my colleagues, I see a great deal of collaboration also with our federal colleagues. I know that this is one of the common areas where we feel that no effort should be spared in making Albertans safer in their communities. Again, why do we do it? Not for political reasons. We do it because we live in these communities. Our friends, our colleagues, our neighbours live in these communities, and we want Alberta to be safe for everyone.

That sort of takes us, Mr. Speaker, to being competitive. We live right now in a very competitive world. Investors will invest anywhere as long as they get a good return on their investment. Skilled workers and scientists and developers also will move and live anywhere there are possibilities for starting up a business or investing. So part of our competitive advantage is not only to have a competitive economy, going back to my initial comments, but also in creating a welcoming province in which people want to live, do business, raise their children, raise their families. Safe communities is part of that.

Also part of that, Mr. Speaker, is creating quality of life. Through our Ministry of Culture and Community Spirit Alberta has invested a great amount of money into diversifying our culture, into enhancing our culture, our arts. Those are very important components in a competitive economy because if we want to attract the bright minds and the hard workers to this province and if we want to encourage our homegrown talent to stay in this province, they expect a quality of life. That's where our parks, museums, art galleries, and concert halls come into play.

I know that there are individuals on the opposite side that think this is not a wise way of spending money. They calculate everything in dollars and cents. What gives you the best return? What is cheaper? They like to quantify everything mathematically. But there are aspects of life, Mr. Speaker, that government is involved with that simply can't be quantified by dollars and cents. Those are the qualitative aspects of governance and of our life that are reflected only by the individuals that we bring into this province enjoying a good quality of life.

4:10

Mr. Speaker, last but not least, it is important to highlight the fact that the Speech from the Throne also reflects Alberta's position in Canada. One would probably have to live only for one day in this great country of ours to realize that Alberta has become a tiger – my reference to a tiger; it seems like "tiger" is the word of the day – within Alberta's economy. What is good for Alberta is good for the rest of Canada. I'm very encouraged that maybe the Premier of Quebec has read Alberta's Speech from the Throne now that he is coming to Alberta and is soliciting investment from Alberta in Quebec following some disparaging remarks made not very long ago about Alberta's economy.

Let's face it, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has some 3 million people, but the economic spinoff from this population and from this province reaches from coast to coast to coast. The steel that we use over here to produce our rigs and to extract our oil comes from Ontario. A lot of the labour force comes from the Maritimes and Quebec. The research comes from virtually all provinces. Most importantly, the consumption of our product is done by all provinces. So all of us benefit from it equally.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I would like to say that the Speech from the Throne shows that this government is on the right course. This government is on a course of balancing our budget by 2012. This government is on a course of making sure that Alberta will be and continues to be the most competitive economy when the recession ends. This government is on course to ensure that we will get not a tiger's but a lion's share of investment from throughout the world into this province and, also, to provide Albertans with the best quality of life.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to ask the member if he could comment a little more – both he and I represent urban constituencies – on how the safe communities initiative is impacting his constituency.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much. Actually, there is a great partnership right now among the residents of my constituency – and I know that the same thing is happening in Calgary and other urban settings – where our constituents, our citizens, are saying: "Enough is enough. We want to collaborate with government, and we want to own our communities. We're taking our communities back."

I will use this opportunity to highlight one particular program, which is supported by the government of Alberta but also by the Edmonton Police Service, called the NET, neighbourhood empowerment team, where through both provincial and municipal funding a team of police officers and social workers will enter a community where crime stats are above average and will do great proactive work. What they will do is identify hot spots, inform residents of crime occurring in their neighbourhood, and make the neighbourhood as unwelcoming as possible to the criminal element. Combating crime is a team effort. The government of Alberta and other agencies can provide the expertise and the resources, but it is also important that the citizens of Alberta engage in this process, report crime as often as possible, and take measures to prevent crime from happening.

In Edmonton, Mr. Speaker, to answer this member's question, there is a great amount of collaboration that I'm seeing. I'm very proud, in particular, of the constituents in my riding who are taking their personal time to take their neighbourhoods back and push out the criminal element. It works.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I do appreciate hearing the thoughts of the hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration, but I take exception to his use of the term "tempered." He talked about tempered measures that the government had taken. I equate "tempered" with "balanced," and the cuts to PDD, children's services, public education, postsecondary, parks, environment, SRD, and seniors do not show temperance, do not show balance. I believe in a balance where energy and environment are bookends of balance; if you go forward in energy, you also have to go forward in environmental protection. You can't have one without the other.

Likewise, infrastructure and operational funding. What good is an empty building if you don't have the staff and the operational budget

to keep that building functioning? Likewise, education equals economy. Other sets of bookends: you have to have a strong public education system, a strong postsecondary education system if you're going to develop your economy.

We are not in a balanced situation in this province. When the sustainability fund runs out, we're back to riding our nonrenewable resource roller coaster. I would like to see the type of temperance and balance that the hon. member put forward, but as yet it hasn't happened. If the hon. member would like to provide other examples of what he believes is a balanced approach, I'll leave him the remainder of the time to do so.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I sit over here and look across the aisle first thing before question period, I try to figure out: will it be a spending day or a savings day? They tend to be altering from day to day. Right now the Member for Calgary-Varsity has listed a whole bunch of ministries where he would not cut out any money, yet in the same sentence he's arguing that our sustainability fund will run out and that we will be again relying on natural resources. Well, give me another list. Give me a list where you would cut out the budget so we don't have to rely on the sustainability fund and perhaps one day on natural resources. That list never appears.

What we hear are one-offs: "You're spending too much money on this" or "You're not spending enough on that." Bring it into balance, and tell us: what would you cut out? Don't tell me about Horse Racing Alberta because you've spent that money 55 times over already on everything else that you pointed out, which we don't spend anyhow. But every time you say that we should spend more money in something, give me the other thing that you would limit or diminish spending in. That I have never heard yet.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available.

Seeing none, the next speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, to the Speech from the Throne.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to respond to His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech from the Throne and the government's plans for the upcoming session. I'd like to extend a personal thanks to His Honour, Norman Kwong, and to Mrs. Kwong for their years of dedication and service to this province.

First, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take a quick look back at how far we've come since this government's last throne speech, and a quick look it will be because, frankly, it looks like this government has been standing still. The words in last week's Speech from the Throne do not match the urgency required to protect working families in this economy. Albertans were counting on this government to take bold, strategic steps. At this time last year the government begged for Albertans to have confidence in their actions. What they said then we can say again today: this Progressive Conservative government has done nothing but inspire scant hope. This session's throne speech offers no clear direction for our province's future. In my years in politics I've never seen a throne speech as vague as the one that was delivered last Thursday.

Three major issues have Albertans struggling to sleep at night, but this government keeps ignoring them. They are health care, the environment, and jobs and the economy. It will take more than platitudes and glossy reports for Albertans to regain faith in this failed government. The NDP believes in a strengthened, publicly delivered health care system for all. We believe in fighting for

Alberta workers, their families, their jobs, and their communities. We believe in a just government and one that encourages prosperity for all its people.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to lay out the priorities that we see for this province in the next several years. First, let's invest significantly and sustainably in our health care system. Albertans want to hear that their health care will be publicly delivered, not just publicly paid, and that it will be there when they need it instead of hearing promises of five years of underfunding. Albertans will not tolerate five years of bed closures, hiring freezes, nursing layoffs, and increased user fees. Frankly, hearing the new health minister muse about user fees in emergency rooms is unacceptable. Albertans already pay more out of pocket for health care services than those in other provinces. This is wrong, and we all deserve better from this government.

4:20

My colleague the MLA for Edmonton-Strathcona and I toured the province last fall, and we met with Albertans in seven different communities to hear their concerns with our public health system as well as their suggestions for how we can strengthen the current system and move it forward to meet our needs. The stories we heard focused on four principles of health care, which I urge the government to adopt.

First of all, people want high-quality care focusing on best practices and education and training.

Secondly, they want accessible health care, and that means ensuring that beds and basic services are available throughout the province in urban and rural areas, not concentrated just in Edmonton and Calgary.

Thirdly, they want affordability. People know that they pay for their health care. They know that it's not free. They know that they have paid taxes to sustain it, and they don't want to be charged again when they go to an emergency room or when they go to a doctor or when they have some surgery.

Most importantly, I think, Mr. Speaker, they need timely care. We were told loud and clear that 14-, 18-, 20-hour waiting times in emergency rooms are unacceptable. Six months' waiting time for cancer surgery is unacceptable. Yet in today's system under this Progressive Conservative government these things are commonplace.

Public opinion polls show time after time that Albertans value their public health care system and that it should be maintained and strengthened, not dismantled and privatized. Albertans know the value of health care and need to know that it will be there when it's needed. We heard from Albertans across the province who feel that this government is working towards dismantling the public health care system. The first recommendation in our health care report What People Want is that the government release all planning documents relative to health care reform. We heard the minister today in question period indicate that he has a number of plans in the works. Well, I call on the minister to publicly release all of the planning documents that are currently in the department's control so Albertans can see what's being considered.

Any potential changes should be discussed openly and honestly with Albertans. Public input should be valued instead of squelched. We see in this throne speech a move towards attempting to solicit the input of Albertans, and we'll hold the government accountable to ensure that this happens. We need to hold them accountable so that decisions like the recent decision to close hundreds of beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton are made openly and with the interests of those who will be most affected taken into account.

Albertans found out what this government means when they refer to community-based care. What that phrase really means is less

public services, leaving individuals and families with fewer options and supports. Albertans rallied with groups like the Friends of Medicare, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, and Alberta's NDP opposition. The government has temporarily backed down on the closures. They are still closing 108 beds and moving these patients to a long-term care facility. Again, let me be clear. What this really means is that the government has taken away another 150 long-term care beds, that are desperately needed for our aging population. In light of this, the throne speech should have looked at alternatives to the closure of Alberta Hospital Edmonton such as the redevelopment of the facility so that it could serve the community more effectively in the future.

While more than 1,700 Albertans have been assessed as needing long-term care, this government's solution is to take beds away and break its election promise to build 600 new beds. This demonstrates this Progressive Conservative government's complete lack of respect for the promises they make to their constituents.

Our caucus uncovered this government's real plan for seniors' care in the fall, and the truth is that they were planning on having three times more designated assisted living beds than long-term care beds. The same leaked government document talked about increasing fees for seniors to entice more private investment. This is certainly no way to treat those who helped build this province and who paid their taxes their entire lives. Now, when they turn to their government for promised care and support, they often end up in emergency and acute-care hospital beds when they and their families can no longer cope. This leads to a backlog in our hospitals and, in particular, our emergency rooms.

The updated wait times were released last month, and the numbers aren't good for Albertans, Mr. Speaker. The typical wait in Edmonton and Calgary was more than 14 hours this past year. It is unacceptable that we make those who are sick wait that long before they are admitted. The waits would be reduced if there were open acute-care beds, but there aren't. Fortunately, the announcement to close 300 acute-care beds has been reversed, but it's absolutely absurd for a government to address long waiting times by closing beds.

This throne speech should have offered clear, positive moves regarding public health care. It should have made specific recommendations that will benefit all Albertans. Instead, this government is creating an Alberta health act which threatens to undermine the very fabric of the Canada Health Act, which is the foundation of our public health care system.

Mr. Speaker, the second priority that I'd like to talk about is providing meaningful and proactive solutions for an ongoing and vital concern for all Albertans, their environment. Alberta innovation can make us leaders in renewable energy and create green-collar jobs, and we need to begin investing in these technologies not now but yesterday. One of the prevailing barriers to easing the stresses of Albertans regarding our environmental future is the issue of a government that still refuses to support an economic transition to renewable energy. We still rely on fossil fuels.

Now, I'm happy to hear that the government has finally heard that there is a real risk to our province's prosperity; that is, a potential boycott of oil sands oil due to the environmentally irresponsible policies of this government, something we've been warning this government about for several years now. The government has finally taken the first step, admitting that tailings ponds are a negligent means of disposing of toxic waste.

Alberta's NDP opposition has been warning for several years that unless the government got serious about cleaning up the oil sands, Alberta ran a real risk of being unable to sell its oil in the world market. Now the government says that it will eventually eliminate

tailings ponds. Well, Albertans and consumers of oil sands oil do not want to hear terms like "eventually." This black eye needs to be resolved, and it needs to be resolved quickly. New projects should use dry tailings technology, and trafficable tailings need to be a priority for existing ponds. Eventually isn't good enough, Mr. Speaker. Abandoning compliance for projects at the approval stage and moving towards compliance after the fact for companies accessing land for oil and gas development certainly isn't good enough and is definitely unacceptable. The result will be more environmental degradation and more damage to Alberta's environmental reputation internationally.

The answers we get to questions regarding environmental mismanagement. Well, we get carbon capture and storage. Despite concern and criticism world-wide and here in Alberta regarding carbon capture and storage, an unproven and expensive technology, this government is pushing forward with its plans by handing \$2 billion in taxpayers' money to the energy giants for implementation. Most Albertans agree that industry should be paying the cost for the environmental degradation that they are causing, not the taxpayers. Albertans should take no solace in these veiled attempts to position us as energy leaders and environmental conservationists. Alberta's NDP has long since argued for a shift to renewable energy sources, with wind energy and solar power to be on the list, to name a few. These are technologies that have minimal impact environmentally and maximum benefit overall.

The third priority, Mr. Speaker, but not the least one is to commit to making strategic investments in ensuring economic prosperity for all Albertans. The boom and bust goes over and over again. As a result, this time 78,000 full-time jobs have disappeared. Thousands of families have been left to access food bank services and rely on the charity of their friends and neighbours. Last year I warned of the job losses that were impending, and I urged the government to consider stimulus spending initiatives to keep families with jobs and roofs over their heads. Instead, the government decided to implement a hiring freeze and asked agencies to return money that was already committed to those most in need.

On Friday we heard that they decided the minimum wage would not be increased as promised. Approximately half of those earning minimum wage in Alberta are over 24, and two-thirds are women. These cuts across the board are impacting families negatively, and this government doesn't seem to care. This government failed to plan for the bust, and families are paying the price. Alberta's NDP caucus has long been advocating for a living wage policy, one that would ensure that families could keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

We've also seen yet another broken promise that this government has made; that is, eliminating the sale of unrefined bitumen from this province. Processing of our bitumen here in Alberta would create thousands of jobs in construction and would result in long-term jobs in the operation of those facilities. Again, this is an issue that Alberta's NDP opposition has been arguing for for some time, yet despite the addition of the new bitumen processing plant in Alberta's Industrial Heartland we are still witnessing the mass export of this raw resource, and tens of thousands of jobs are popping up south of the border instead of here at home.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to touch briefly on Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act. This legislation will establish another committee, yet another empty gesture. The bill is a public relations exercise. This committee will do nothing to help Albertans who are struggling in this recession. Bill 1 should have been used to strengthen universal public health care, it should have focused on public delivery and access to health services throughout the province, and it should have ensured that communities have a say in

regional health delivery by electing representatives to their community health councils.

4:30

Bill 1 is further evidence that this government's priorities are misguided. Alberta's NDP opposition will continue to fight for this truth. The government's plans keep surfacing in brown envelopes, and we will continue to expose Tory secrecy and patronage. We will continue to demand openness and will forge on to protect public health care, jobs, the environment, and public services. Mr. Speaker, this is a government that has lost its way, and this throne speech is simply more proof of that. We will not waiver in our fight for Alberta families. They deserve better from this government, and for that reason Alberta's NDP opposition will not be supporting this throne speech.

That concludes my remarks, Mr. Speaker, and I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 1

Alberta Competitiveness Act (continued)

[Adjourned debate February 16: Mrs. McQueen]

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate on Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, this afternoon. I was listening with interest to the comments from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Certainly, I was sitting listening to His Honour deliver the throne speech. I waited with interest for this bill to be tabled, and I was surprised that this was it. In the time that I have had the privilege of sitting in this Legislative Assembly, I have seen significant legislative initiatives come forward as a result of legislation from the Premier or from the Premier's office, but this bill certainly wouldn't be included in that group or that assessment.

If this legislation was a fuel indicator in a car, not only would it be near empty, but the warning light would be on that you only have five litres left. This bill is totally unnecessary at the time.

An Hon. Member: They're running on fumes.

Mr. MacDonald: They're running on fumes and, as the rock band would say, running on empty. I cannot remember the name of the band.

Mr. Hehr: The Eagles.

Mr. Campbell: Jackson Browne.

Mr. MacDonald: Jackson Browne. Ah, yes. Absolutely. The people in Hinton certainly have rock 'n' roll stations there, and they listen to them more keenly than the people in urban Calgary from the sounds of that. But it was Jackson Browne, *Running on Empty*. Absolutely this bill reflects that this government is running on empty.

When we look at this bill and we look at past initiatives of this government, there is simply no need for this legislation other than that perhaps at some time, Mr. Speaker, we're going to create

another board or another committee that we can put our loyalists on through order in council and ensure that they receive a per diem or they get an honorarium or they are looked after in some way.

I was listening to speeches previously, and there was mention of a hiring freeze. I look at the supplementary supply, and I see a transfer of money, \$30 million, to provide separation payments for some individuals in the civil service who may be retiring early. I don't know what exactly is going to happen, but I look at those sums. Of course, we're told there is a hiring freeze, but one only has to look at the *Alberta Gazette* to see that as the orders in council come through, there seems to be appointment after appointment after appointment. A constituent came into our office last Friday and asked to see one of the *Alberta Gazettes*. I showed this individual online the *Alberta Gazette*, and that individual was surprised at the number of appointments this government is continuing to make, and he wanted to know who they were.

I thought: well, if this government was really open and transparent, their number one bill would be an open and transparent process for all those appointees. Also included in that, of course, would be a book or a log where individuals such as the gentleman who came to our office last Friday could look and see which appointments are coming up for renewal, which ones are vacant, which ones he may be interested in applying for himself, how much he gets paid if his appointment was to go through. There could be any number of information points put forward so that taxpayers, if they were interested, could apply. But, of course, none of this happens in public. It's all done behind closed doors. There are whispers and quiet phone calls made, and, bingo, you're selected.

That would be an alternative that I would think that we could have to the Alberta Competitiveness Act. That certainly would be a start toward instilling some confidence in the taxpayers in this government, because it is not open, this government, nor is it transparent. That's one of the suggestions that I would make. Certainly, the government, if they wish, could use that idea because I think its time has come in this province.

It's interesting that this document is not even a year old. It's last May, May 2009. It was a document gathered by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the Alberta Finance and Enterprise department, and it's titled Alberta Industry Sector Performance and Prospects. We're dealing already in this government with ideas as to how we can become more competitive.

There are ideas in here on everything, everything from oil and gas extraction to industry energy services to primary agriculture, agrifood industries, forest products—and we all know, unfortunately, how difficult times are in that industry—industrial manufacturing, plastic product industries, construction and engineering, transportation and logistics, financial services, tourism. By tourism we don't mean going to North Vancouver, hiring a train that a former leadership candidate is on the board of directors of the company that owns the train—yes, the Minister of Education is looking at me puzzled, but it's Mr. Dinning. My research indicates that he's on the board of the company that owns that gold leaf service. That's not my idea of promoting tourism, nor is it the taxpayers' of this province.

Mr. Speaker, there are any number of industry sector analyses already completed, including education services, culture, biotechnology and medical devices, and health care services. Already been done. There is an executive summary—it's on the Alberta Finance and Enterprise website—and there are some very, very good ideas in here. It surprises me that the government is not working on these suggestions already and why they would come forward with this bill. There's no need. It's redundant. The work has already been done. Unless this government was so desperate for ideas at a time when

they were essentially fighting among themselves that they decided, “Ooh, we’re out of time; the throne speech is coming along, and we need to come up with a bill for the Premier and for the Premier’s office,” and this was the idea, the Alberta Competitiveness Act.

4:40

Now, we can certainly make ourselves competitive by having a good, solid fiscal regime. We had one here, but the last couple of years it’s been everyone else’s fault but our own spending habits. This government was quick to take credit when oil was at \$147 a barrel, very quick to take credit for that, Mr. Speaker, but now that we’re in a difficult financial situation, well, of course, it’s someone else’s fault. That is just so far from the truth.

With Bill 1, of course, we heard earlier that we’re going to have an intent to increase collaboration between government, business, and industry to improve Alberta’s competitiveness. As far as I know, that’s already going on. There are some people that have issue with that but certainly not this member. How it’s conducted is another issue. The fact that people talk and they try to work things out is no problem, but those talks always should be in public because we have no idea if the taxpayers’ interests are being met.

Now, certainly Bill 1, as we heard, also allows for the establishment of a board or committee – and I talked about that earlier – with a general mandate to identify actionable areas for increased competitiveness to quicken the implementation of government competitiveness initiatives and to establish benchmarks to measure Alberta’s competitiveness.

Well, one benchmark that I would like to mention is one that we used to always have a look at in the Energy estimates. It was the amount of oil royalties that we were to collect as a percentage after all the deductions had been calculated. The target was 20 to 25 per cent, and it would range, depending upon the year, anywhere from 15 per cent to close to 20 per cent. But this year in the budget I had a look at that performance measure, and it had been removed or eliminated, and another one had taken its place because the government knows that that performance measure is not working.

Another example of this government’s performance measures and their ability to press the delete button, Mr. Speaker, is in electricity prices. Years ago we would have in the Assembly, of course, a chart indicating the cost of electricity in Alberta, whether you’re an industrial user, a commercial user, or a residential user. It would be in the business plans. You could have a look at it, and you could see for yourself how we ranged with electricity prices in comparison to our neighbours.

We had before deregulation some of the lowest cost electricity in North America. We all know that’s no longer the case. We have some of the highest costs for our electricity. I know the other side is very keen to blame the high cost of natural gas for electricity prices going up. Natural gas prices, as we know, have moderated substantially, but the price of electricity hasn’t gone down on a consumer’s bill. Certainly, the wholesale price has gone down significantly, but bills keep going up and up and up.

All that information used to be provided. I think the President of the Treasury Board was so guilty about the failures of deregulation that he suggested that that performance measure be removed from any of the government documents supporting their budget estimates. I’m sure it would have to be the President of the Treasury Board, but I’m not certain. I am certain that it did happen; it was removed.

That’s an example of a benchmark that measures Alberta’s competitiveness that this government doesn’t want to deal with because they know that after health care their electricity deregulation plan has been a spectacular failure. We know all the promises. We know the promises weren’t kept. We know the frustration Alberta

consumers have every month when they open their power bill. Some people tell me they don’t want to even open it because they don’t even know if they can afford to pay it. But it is another point to make on how this government has to date established benchmarks to measure Alberta’s competitiveness and how they conveniently change them when it suits their propaganda campaigns.

Now, when we look at the bill and we follow from the day the throne speech was delivered, a week ago last Thursday, the underlying principle behind the bill is to increase collaboration between the government, business, and industry, but again there are no specifics, and it’s difficult to determine what, if any, impact there will be. The government news release on this bill states that throughout the next year benchmarks and goals will be established. I’m sure others will be deleted because the embarrassment bar will be very high, and this is a government that doesn’t want to be embarrassed. There’s no reference to completion or when action on these benchmarks and goals will take place, nor is there any reference to specific action that will be taken now. The only reference that I can see to anything specific, both in the bill and the news release, is the government’s oil and competitiveness review and the western economic partnership between B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan.

The oil and gas competitiveness review: I have no idea. That’s going on, as far as I know, behind closed doors. I know nothing about who’s involved, what’s going to come out of it, but I do know that our research indicates the review is being delayed. I heard in question period last week that it was on the minister’s desk, and I know the minister’s desk has got a lot of paperwork on it. There will be paperwork on there from when the hon. gentleman was in the health department, and included in that paperwork would be a huge pile of bills from the debt that this folly Alberta Health Services created, \$1.3 billion worth, to be precise.

Mr. Speaker, I don’t want anyone to be suggesting that I’m getting off the topic of Bill 1, so I will continue. Establishing benchmarks, reporting explicitly through annual reports, collaboration between ministries and with key players in industry are all important and positive steps towards improving Alberta’s competitiveness, but this bill does not take any real action towards making any of these things happen. There are no details. There’s no time frame. Everything is stretched out. It’s politically convenient. No end goal other than the elusive phrase “increase competitiveness.” All this bill does is legislate an idea. The government’s own news release states that benchmarks and goals to increase competitiveness will be released in a year, with no indication of how long after that year action will take place.

The government, it is worth noting, already has a Regulatory Review Secretariat with the following mandate:

The goal of regulatory reform is to identify opportunities to reduce and simplify the regulatory burden of government on the people and businesses of Alberta. Supporting the development of good regulation creates the conditions for business to thrive and [to] enhance productivity towards sustainable prosperity. Alberta’s regulatory reform places stakeholders at the center of its regulatory activity to uphold the regulatory environment to a standard of excellence. Regulatory reform has been a long standing policy of the Government of Alberta, and endeavors to reduce regulatory burden where possible while ensuring that personal safety, public health and our environment remain protected.

The Regulatory Review Secretariat seems to be concentrated on the red tape burden of compliance requirements and regulation whereas the guiding principle behind Bill 1 is more about collaboration, yet both have very similar mandates and, ultimately, have the same end goal of allowing for productivity, competitiveness, and sustainable prosperity.

4:50

Now, I'm curious about who's on this Regulatory Review Secretariat. It's chaired by the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, and he is assisted by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead and the hon. Member for Red Deer-South. They're the latest group to be charged with this review. It'll be interesting to hear in the course of debate how they feel about this bill, whether this bill is going to make their efforts redundant, if there's going to be overlap, or what's going to happen. I'll be listening keenly, and if I'm not available, I will certainly read *Hansard*.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, I would like to please adjourn debate on Bill 1. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 3
Fatal Accidents Amendment Act, 2010
(continued)

[Adjourned debate February 16: Mr. Weadick]

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

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise and speak to Bill 3, the Fatal Accidents Amendment Act, 2010. This is a bill that I will be supporting. The Fatal Accidents Act awards a set amount of damages for bereavement to a surviving spouse, adult interdependent partner, parent, or child of a deceased person. The proposed amendments would make eligibility for bereavement damages less restrictive by removing reference to marital status and would remove the reference to a child as including illegitimate child.

In essence, Mr. Speaker, this bill is just updating the language. It's making damage awards easier for individuals to obtain and not have cumbersome impediments that really should have no bearing in law or, in fact, get in the way of someone being able to collect the damage award. With this bill, as mentioned by the hon. member earlier today, it'll just be easier for people to collect an award under our system. In fact, there are no restrictions now to collecting an award if someone is married or there's none of that unfortunate language of legitimate or illegitimate child. That has gone by the wayside in our measures of what we as a society deem important, and I think that's a good thing.

As a little bit of a background to this act, it was interesting or maybe not so interesting that in the past development of the law when a person was killed at an accident site, their spouses, their children could not receive any benefits. The only thing that was available after the death of a person, what that caused, was solely emotional and pure economic loss to the relatives. It was declared in a court that you couldn't do that, and the only way that a person could actually collect on this was if a person survived.

What this did was that it set up sort of a strange dichotomy in the law where if a person was killed at work, they couldn't get any damages for their families, but if they were injured, well, their family could collect damages. So that part of the law was rectified and sort of caught on foot here and advanced more in the development of the rights. It seems that this is just a continued advancement along a reasonably progressive path, a path that sort of allows both families and individuals to get recompensed at a reasonable rate, where they don't have to claim that damage in lawsuits and they can merely go ahead with their lives. Obviously, this bill will benefit vulnerable members of our communities, and we as a party are supporters of benefits to those families who are facing bereavement circumstances like many of those that exist in fatality incidents.

Without saying more, I appreciate the government advancing the language of this bill, making it compatible with other jurisdictions

and in the eyes of the law, and moving forward in a reasonable fashion in this regard.

At this point in time I would move that we adjourn debate on Bill 3, and we'll go from there.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 1
Alberta Competitiveness Act
(continued)

[Adjourned debate February 16: Mr. MacDonald]

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

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand today and speak to Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, and its impact on businesses and communities throughout Alberta. As His Honour the Lieutenant Government outlined in his Speech from the Throne, one of this government's top priorities is achieving Alberta's goal of becoming the most attractive business environment in the world. For decades this government has recognized the importance of being business friendly because when business is successful, Albertans reap the reward. That simple strategy has resulted in historically low unemployment rates and one of the highest standards of living in Canada.

But times are changing, Mr. Speaker. The global economy has evolved, and potential new markets are opening up around the world. Geography is no longer the limitation it used to be, and companies are taking a global perspective when it comes to finding the best possible location to do business. To adapt to this new reality, this government recognizes that we are now competing with the entire world for both new and existing revenue streams. To be competitive, we must look at every angle of the situation to ensure that we have the ability to meet the needs of companies that create jobs for Albertans and contribute to the economy that sustains us.

Mr. Speaker, the essential purpose of Bill 1 is to discover and eliminate any unnecessary hurdles that might keep new businesses from choosing Alberta or that might keep existing businesses from expanding here. In the Speech from the Throne His Honour used as an example the conventional oil and gas sectors, that have traditionally driven Alberta's economy. While I recognize the immense contributions these industries make to the economic well-being of the province, I would like to focus today on how Bill 1 might have an effect on a different level across Alberta.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, competition isn't just a global phenomenon between nations. It also exists between provinces and even between municipalities within a province. I am encouraged by the western Canadian partnership with British Columbia and Saskatchewan to create a boundary-free trade and investment market. But I would also like to see this government clear hurdles for smaller cities and towns within Alberta that don't have the advantage of being associated with the energy sectors.

My home town in Lethbridge is a perfect example. As an agriculturally driven city that is also a hub of postsecondary education and light industry, it has its own unique advantages and challenges in attracting business. Communities such as mine must compete with similar communities across Canada and around the world to attract business and new jobs. That's keeping with the Alberta government's priorities and ideals, and it's a good thing. But the playing field isn't always level. Communities often struggle with finding accurate, up-to-date information on where they stand in relation to their competition. For example, if two communities are competing for a new processing plant, neither knows what kind of tax situation their competitor may offer. Instead of being an open

and merit-based competition, this kind of situation has the potential to degenerate into a gamble where neither player can see the other's cards. To use a sports analogy, it's like facing off in a hockey game against a team whose roster, stats, and records are all sealed.

5:00

Comparable competitive data is essential to creating an environment where every community can compete based on its own merits. Such data would allow communities to have greater confidence in their own competitiveness and allow them to market themselves accurately and strategically on the provincial, national, and global stages.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 1 would establish a governing body to help implement the competitive strategy set forth in the Speech from the Throne. It is my hope that this body will also collect and distribute the data that communities such as mine need in order to increase their own competitiveness. I also hope this body can create a cohesive, strategic marketing message that all communities can use. We know that Alberta has the lowest taxes in Canada and is one of the world's most business-friendly places. But while we can all talk about the obvious advantages of doing business here, communities also need specific information on what resources we have to encourage productivity.

In short, Mr. Speaker, I believe our communities would benefit from one cohesive story for all Alberta. Such a story would outline the specific advantages of this province as a whole. It would also provide the information our communities need to strategically position themselves and showcase their unique strengths. This would help communities or regions define themselves within the overall Alberta community and allow them to compete openly and fairly based on what they have to offer. By creating a level playing field where each team is allowed to compete on their own merits while drawing on the strength of the province as a whole, we can help foster competitive environments throughout Alberta that follow the same principles set forth by this government.

Mr. Speaker, I hope the members of this House will keep my comments in mind as we move forward with Bill 1 and strive to improve Alberta's competitive edge at home and throughout the world. Let's make our communities, our businesses, and our province the most competitive place on earth.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone wishes to comment or question.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on the bill.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Just to sort of continue on from the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West's stance, Alberta, to its credit, has done some good things. One of those good things in terms of improving our competitiveness was the agreement reached with the B.C. government prior to TILMA, and that was the investment in the container port in Prince Rupert. That was a very worthwhile long-term investment because if we're going to be successful as a province, we have to go beyond the United States as our chief market source. Our relationships, of course, with the United States need to continue to be strong. We'll have to make sure that our regulations and theirs work together, or we'll be cross-purposing and working against each others' economies. We have to have other alternatives. With the container port at Prince Rupert what we should be considering are India and China as our future markets so that we don't put all of our apples in that one U.S. basket.

Now, the government has been proposing and paying for and supporting pipelines down to Illinois and down to Texas for bitumen

upgrading, but where I would like to see the pipelines growing and flowing is to the coast, to Prince Rupert. Obviously, we're going to have to have environmental regulations in terms of both the structure of the pipeline and making sure that the loadings and so on are of a safe nature. Once the ships are out to sea, we don't have that same control; it becomes a federal matter. But doing the best we can to get not only our raw materials but preferably our upgraded bitumen, our refined bitumen, to the potential of markets in China and India is extremely important.

In terms of the southern portion of the province, which the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West represents along with our hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, and in terms of improving our economic competitiveness, we need to be spending the same type of investments in the twinning of highway 3 so that we have an east to west highway of equivalent value to our north-south highway 2. The government is slowly getting its act together when it comes to the twinning of highway 63, but until that twinning is accomplished, economic opportunities will continue to elude us based on the narrowness of that highway and the frequent bottlenecks.

There is always a balance between cutting red tape and governance. Now, I'm very supportive of facilitating economic development both in this province and in our partnerships not only with other western provinces and with the U.S. but, as I mentioned earlier, with India and China, who are the two most rapidly growing markets. We also have to have a balance, which, unfortunately, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar stated, hasn't been achieved in terms of the detailing of the whys and wherefores of Bill 1. Bill 1 says that we'll start playing the game, and then at some point in the future, a year or so down the road, we'll give you the rules of the game.

Now, we've seen that kind of lack of rules in the numerous attempts at the royalty review. Business depends on consistency. Business requires not only consultation; business requires collaboration. Without the rules to go forward, it's an uncharted course. It's a game that is very difficult to play, to negotiate. So for Bill 1 to be successful, we're going to have to decide what the reduced regulations are, what the reduced red tape will be.

We've had examples leading up to this global meltdown, this recession, that is the worst since the 1930s, where there wasn't sufficient red tape or there wasn't sufficient regulation and process. This government and a number of institutions within Alberta were suckered because of a lack of regulation by the Alberta Securities Commission, a lack of red tape when it came to investment in asset-backed commercial paper. ATB took a tremendous hit. AIMCo took a hit. The University of Calgary took a hit. So when we're cutting through the red tape, let's make sure we're not cutting through the regulations and the governance and the oversight.

Another example, fortunately, because of stronger red tape regulation such as Bill 1 is purporting to propose is the subprime mortgages. In Canada we escaped some of that fallout although it overlapped into Alberta and Canada with, as I say, the asset-backed commercial paper. But because we had strong regulations, which Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, has yet to define, Canadians were saved some of the hardship that our American counterparts are going through.

5:10

The balance between governance, regulation, red tape is extremely important. We've seen examples in Alberta, for example, when there wasn't sufficient regulation. I don't say that regulation and red tape are synonymous, but red tape has to do with regulation. For example, when we had the mad cow crisis here in Alberta, we only had one inspector, and that inspector was so caught up with chronic

wasting disease that it took three months to actually confirm that we had a case of mad cow disease here in Alberta. We all know the fallout from that, especially in terms of our beef entry into the States, again our major trading partner.

The government realized the mistake, and instead of one regulator they hired more so that the processing could occur. While our economy suffered some tremendous damage, some good things came out of the regulation, and that was recognizing the age of an animal, the marking of an animal so that you could trace its origin. I know that because of the lack of regulation on the importing of cattle – I've mentioned the example of a cousin having his whole Angus herd that his dad had built up over years and years butchered, culled. That's an example where we have to balance our need for regulation and red tape with the moving forward.

Now, this government has frequently undermined outfits like the Canadian Wheat Board, and they have supported the nonregulated crossing of the Montana border by individuals wishing to sell their grain at whatever price they could get. They cheered when the individuals who sort of did their cross-border shopping were freed from jail for the illegal importation of grain. We have to in Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, match the need for governance with the need for regulation.

For example, in housing the city of Calgary has improved its processing of building permits, particularly when it comes to affordable housing, because they recognize this as a need. Now, if Bill 1, when we finally establish whatever the rules are for Bill 1, prioritizes affordable housing and getting approvals through in a more timely manner, then that's wonderful because we'll be able to take advantage of this basic 40 per cent discount that we currently have.

Again, with regulation and red tape and governance you've got to achieve the right balance. We want sustainable infrastructure projects, for example, to go ahead. Those long-term care projects that the government has issued bonds for: we want to see those be successful, particularly for the nonprofits and the publicly administered long-term care. We would want to see that go forward.

We also have to regulate the degree of profit-taking, for example, that long-term care or assisted living can charge because without some kind of governance then we'll see what happened with the market sort of being let loose on sky-high rents and the increase in property values only, in the case of property values, to start to, well, in the States take a nosedive; in our case be reduced. So, hopefully, Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act, will create that necessary balance.

The other concern I have is that the government has said – Ralph's mantra was: we're no longer in the business of being in business. But that doesn't mean that we simply wave the checkered flag without any kinds of expectations on the quality of a product.

Another Alberta historical circumstance due to lack of regulation was the pine shingles fiasco, where B.C. was dumping its rejected shingles into Alberta's market. We were rubber stamping, approving a whole variety of fly-by-night pine shingle outfits, and we have very expensive roof repairs as a result.

The other part of the regulation/red-tape balance is getting it right. This government has actually moved more toward regulation and away from legislation. Is Bill 1 signalling a different direction? For example, in postsecondary, Bill 40 changed from a debate on increases in tuition for postsecondary to a regulated circumstance where the minister of advanced education has the sole authority to permit tuition increases. Again, the balance is absolutely essential for us to get it right. We need, we want to say to Canada and to the world: we're a great place to not only visit, but we're a great place

to do business. In order for that to happen, we have to provide an elimination of risk for investment in Alberta.

Now, because of the changing royalties, for example, we've lost a lot of our competitiveness to our neighbours, B.C. and Saskatchewan, so striking that right balance is absolutely essential. Part of achieving that balance is our land-use framework. Where will we allow development to go forward? Where will we set aside parks and protected areas? Where will the no-go zones be? This is part of what Bill 1 has to achieve, and unfortunately what we've seen in terms of the regulatory process is that we've seen a whole bunch of bills – Bill 50, I think it was Bill 46, Bill 39, and I believe it was Bill 19 – that all had to do with land usage, but we still don't have the sustainable land-use policy.

Bill 1 is, again, kind of putting the cart before the horse because it hasn't, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar stated, set out the regulations. It's a great concept, but without the concrete rules and regulations to make the concept work . . . [Mr. Chase's speaking time expired]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East under 29(2)(a).

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity if he could perhaps expand on his vision of the pipeline to Prince Rupert, on who would own that pipeline and how it could get constructed.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I am rather big on provincial ownership. Having said that, we could certainly strike an agreement with CAPP or one of the subsidiary companies within CAPP to determine not only the most environmentally sound route but the degree of ownership. I am not suggesting – please, I would never want to be thought of as promoting a P3 project, but we can work with industry to create the most favourable circumstance.

We are already doing a lot of container trucking to the port of Prince Rupert. It only makes sense that we would have an environmentally sound pipeline route which would respect both people's property rights and the environment but would create an opportunity to send our refined petroleum, bitumen upgraded, in its finished state to China and India. We'd do the refining. We'd get the added value for propane, butane, methane, all of the things that we're losing to Illinois or down in the Texas area, where they're going to upgrade our bitumen and then get the added benefit from it.

I hope, hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, that I gave you a better sense of the routing, the approval process, and why it's so important.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing order 29(2)(a) is still available.

The next member to speak, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

5:20

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today and speak in support of Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act. The purpose of Bill 1 is to create a focus on competitiveness that brings together government and industry to co-ordinate current government initiatives and develop a strategy to improve Alberta's competitiveness. This collaboration will be led by partnerships under the direction of the Premier. Furthermore, it will be com-

prised of the relevant ministers and key stakeholders, who will assess all areas where Alberta can strengthen its competitive edge.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to point out that the government of Alberta has already taken action in a number of areas. In advanced education we have introduced Alberta Innovates, the Alberta Enterprise Corporation, and the trade, investment, and labour mobility act, just to name a few. All of these programs give Alberta an edge. We also have the most competitive tax regime in Canada.

Bill 1 will develop an overall strategic approach to competitiveness in Alberta. This will include an operational plan to enhance Alberta's competitiveness in the global marketplace. The Alberta advantage may no longer be our official provincial slogan; however, this should always be our goal. This landmark legislation will do just that. It will focus our efforts to ensure Alberta increases its competitive advantage in the face of a highly competitive global economy.

Mr. Speaker, our newest slogan says it best. In order for us to remain competitive in the world, Albertans require the freedom to create mixed with their spirit to achieve. Bill 1 ensures that Albertans have the freedom to create by providing a competitive economic environment. This will provide long-term benefits for Alberta families and for the entire province. The freedom that comes with the lowest taxes in Canada will create the conditions that will attract new businesses, innovators, and the next generation of entrepreneurs to our great province.

Thanks to the steps taken earlier through the Alberta immigrant nominee program and the trade, investment, and labour mobility act, Alberta has and will continue to attract the best people from across Canada and around the world to come and enjoy all Alberta has to offer. This in turn will help Alberta achieve a more prosperous province, which will benefit all Albertans and Canadians alike. A more competitive economy grows faster, adapts quicker, leads to lower prices, better wages, more jobs, and improved living standards for all Albertans. Bill 1 shows our commitment to make our province one of the most economically competitive places in the global market.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Bill 1 will always ensure that Alberta has the freedom to create with our spirit to achieve. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much. A quick question to this member. He's an active component of the mushroom industry. I wonder if he could talk about the competitiveness of the mushroom industry and how that bill relates to that.

The Acting Speaker: Does the hon. member wish to respond?

Mr. Benito: Well, I'm not sure if that's a question or something that I should be mentioning with regard to the goodness of this bill that we are proposing. I firmly believe that the Alberta Competitiveness Act will create an environment so that the business environment will be much better than what we have right now, so that the economy of this province will become the leading edge and a good example in North America. The bottom line of this, Mr. Speaker, is making this province the best place to live, work, and play in the whole of North America. I believe the Premier has the best intentions to make the Alberta government one of the best-managed administrations in the whole of North America.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Frequently as members of the opposition we somehow didn't receive the memo, or we didn't get the second part to a bill. I'd just ask the member: have you received anything spelling out the rules of this philosophical concept? Have you been given the plans or the operating manual for accomplishing what Bill 1 proposes to accomplish?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Benito: Thank you. Hon. member, what I know is the reality of this Alberta Competitiveness Act, which we are trying to name Bill 1. For example, in education we have introduced, you know, the Alberta Innovates program, the Alberta Enterprise Corporation. One of the best programs, that we have already introduced and from my own personal experience, is the Alberta nominee program, the AINP program. Out of that program we were able to bring the best skilled workers to this province and in turn meet all the labour needs to make our economic development. Without the introduction of this program I don't think that during the high season of being competitive in North America we can meet the labour needs of this province. I firmly believe that this is one of the reasons why we should strengthen more this kind of program that we are trying to do for Bill 1, which is the Alberta Competitiveness Act.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. It's wonderful to be able to be in total agreement with the value of the nominee program. What the nominee program does is that it fast-tracks immigration, which I'm sure the Minister of Employment and Immigration will agree with. It also provides workers with rights because they are fast-tracked to citizenship. Hopefully, this will be reflected as one of the rules and accomplishments that have yet to be outlined in Bill 1. If this is the direction Bill 1 is heading, then the direction is a good one. We just need the substantive rules, regulations to know where it's headed.

The Acting Speaker: Any other members wish to speak under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to address a few things regarding Bill 1, the Alberta Competitiveness Act. One of the things that I've been hearing is the business of reducing red tape, and certainly the Liberals have for many, many years been speaking of the necessity to reduce red tape, particularly for our small-business owners and entrepreneurs in this province. We can speak about competitiveness within our country and certainly within our international community, where clearly the global market has moved, but I'd like to talk about the competitiveness just within our province.

One of the things that I can see coming is that some of the smaller business owners – and I'm going to use the example of perhaps pharmaceutical salesmen who are working for large pharmaceutical companies. Because of the way that we will be buying pharmaceuticals in this province – we'll be buying by volume – many of these pharmaceutical salesmen won't be required in exactly the same way. Some of our smaller pharmacies also will be affected by large-volume buying, which in itself is good, but there always is a consequence to an action, and this is part of the consequence that may well happen to the smaller businesses that will be affected because of volume buying, not just in pharmaceuticals.

I attended an agricultural day in which they were speaking about value-added. One of the valued-added was the ability of larger

companies to buy bulk tomatoes from California to be able to make a pasta sauce, which totally bypasses some of our smaller farmers who are creating greenhouses to produce specific vegetables and using, actually, solar power to heat them.

5:30

There are amazing things that are going on in this province. We have a lot of advanced thinkers, particularly on the value-added side, in terms of our food that we're going to eat and the fact that we are moving into specialized farms that are smaller and are supplying specialty restaurants with, for instance, perhaps Cornish game hens or some of the vegetables which probably in the old days we would have considered exotic but now – I'm thinking of a bok choy – we consider just a regular part of our diet. There is a lot of red tape around this, and I think that one of the most important things that we can look at in this Competitiveness Act is that we get rid of the red tape that holds the hands of our entrepreneurs while they're trying to get ahead and create new and interesting things in our province.

One of the things that I can certainly speak about from my area – and I know that my colleague from Lethbridge-West has been working on this as well – is that we have the chance to produce poppies in southern Alberta. We have a great environment. The geography is good, and also the weather is good to be able to create these poppies. They are non narcotic-producing poppies. They create something called thebaine, and it will be produced and marketed mainly towards the pharmaceuticals. But this has been in the offing for almost three years.

One of the things that this bill is talking about – I believe I heard it from the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor – is to try to get the levels of government together so that many of the red-tape forms and regulations can be streamlined because there is a tremendous amount of redundancy when you move from one level of government to the other. One of the things that is holding up our poppy production is the fact that the feds, of course, have to okay the use of this. Now, I know that we have gone through huge risk managements that have been done by retired RCMP members and that it actually has passed this business, that it isn't a risk. It will be a very viable product that we can produce and grow in southern Alberta. But the feds are still sitting on it, and it's because of regulations that this is not moving forward nearly as fast as it possibly could have. So I think that this is a very important bill, as I've said, mainly from the red-tape side of it.

One of the things, though, that I've noticed is that the benchmarks and goals are going to be released in a year, and there is no indication after that year how long the action will take, which to me is a perfect example of what we're talking about, red tape. This has to move much, much quicker with very clear, defined lines on how this is going to work. I don't think that our small businesspeople who are looking forward to this want to sit around for another year.

British Columbia is a much-cited example of successful efforts to reduce its red tape. It met its goal as of January 2010, and they've eliminated 152,000 regulations since it first started in 2001. It's a red-tape reduction of 42 per cent. I realize that this is over a nine-year period, but I think that with this Competitiveness Act we should be able to move forward much, much more quickly.

Chad Ford of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, who is their policy person, has said that this bill doesn't mention small business and that it seems to be written only for gas and oil. I think that he has a point.

One of things that I would like to talk about is PDD. One of the ways that people are getting help for persons that require PDD funding is through self-managed care. What's happened is that it is a fairly successful program where people actually can get the money

from the government, and they hire their own workers. But what has happened in that is the huge red tape that is tied up with the people that have to fill out the paperwork. It's a terrible burden on some of these family members that have to do all the forms that they're filling out, which I call red tape.

I realize that a lot of the information that is being gathered is used for a data analysis, which is fine because we need to know where our dollars are going and how they're being spent. But I maintain that the information is in the government ministries in their computers, and they should be pulling that information that they need out from the government computers and not forcing some of the people – mainly, a lot of them are computer illiterate and are filling out all of these forms by hand.

To me that's an example of one of the ways that a competitiveness bill can look at not just the red tape for small business, where I think it should start – oil and gas, yes; oil and gas have many, many employees that are lawyers and accountants that can easily fill the bill about giving their input into this competitiveness bill – but I think we have to look at how what I call red tape affects every person in this province and that we can move much quicker. I'm hoping that some of this bill and the conversations around it will address the smaller issues and our smaller businesses in this province.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. On one of our numerous outreach trips to Lethbridge I recall visiting a small business that was a trailer outfitter. This organization did the folding beds. It did a lot of the furniture that you find in RVs and so on. One of the problems our local manufacturer pointed out was the difference in terms of import-export regulations. He pointed out that American trailers could come in built to considerably lower safety standards, but our export requirements were considerably higher. You've mentioned the need to co-ordinate with the federal government. I think you're familiar with this trailer outfitting company, that is doing very well despite the American competition.

I'm also wondering in terms of co-ordination with government if there have been any examples of problems with genetically modified seed in the Lethbridge area because I know that that's been a major problem with some of our exports to European countries. I don't know whether there are problems like that that have arisen in Lethbridge, but I'd be interested in hearing your take on that regulation or lack thereof.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure that I can really address the modified seed part of it. I'm not sure. I do know that some of our modified seeds are not accepted in Europe, so it then presents a problem for the farmers that are actually producing them.

I can talk about the RV industry in Canada. At one point – and I certainly was a part of the heyday of recreational vehicles being produced in this country. We are now down to one. Basically, the recreational vehicle manufacturing in this country is dead, and part of it is because we didn't insist that American-made RV vehicles coming into this country had to meet the same standards. There are a huge number of people over the years clearly that have lost jobs, and the whole industry has gone down.

As I've mentioned – and I wish I could remember; there's one, I believe, in Manitoba and one in B.C. – this was a huge, huge employer that brought in millions and millions and millions of

dollars to our economy and employed many. It's just one example of, as my colleague from Calgary-Varsity has mentioned, bad communication between the provinces and the federal government. Some of it was a province responsibility in terms of looking at what comes across the border, and the other part of it was the feds. They should have sat down and addressed this as it happened.

5:40

I think that this in a way is a small example of – I'm going to go off on a tangent here – how we do not have inspectors at the federal level inspecting the food that comes into our country. I read a label, and it doesn't say where it comes from. It says that it's a product of, but it doesn't say where it is. If it has been packaged in Canada, they can call it a product of, but I actually have no idea. I believe that we need more inspectors to look at the food that's coming into this country and, in fact, some of the items that are coming into this country. I think we just noticed that there was a huge recall on kids' toys because they were loaded with lead.

These are the kinds of things that we should be looking at coming across our border. I believe that had we had stronger regulations that were actually enforced, we still would have viable recreational vehicle manufacturing in this country.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available.

Mr. Kang: My question is to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East on how this act is going to help in, as you said, growing poppies. What kind of income is it going to bring? How many drug addicts are we going to have if we start growing poppies here? We've already got a problem. You know, they come in from Arizona. Are we trying to compete with Afghanistan by bringing in this bill to grow poppies? What are your thoughts on that?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Mr. Hancock: I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:43 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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