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The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 27th Legislature

Fourth Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, November 22, 2011

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Thank you hon. members. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Supplementary Supply Estimates 2011-12 General Revenue Fund

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the hon. Deputy Premier and President of Treasury Board and Enterprise.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Please let me be the first in this House to congratulate you on your new role as Deputy Chair of Committees. I know it was a very close election. [applause]

I'd like to move the 2011-2012 supplementary supply estimates for the general revenue fund on behalf of the President of Treasury Board and Enterprise. The estimates will provide additional spending authority to two offices of the Legislature and nine government departments. When passed, the estimates will authorize increases of about \$2.4 million in voted expense and capital investment of the Legislative Assembly, increases of about \$864.9 million in voted expense, \$82 million in voted capital investment, and \$0.3 million in voted nonbudgetary disbursements of the government.

Mr. Chair, the estimates will also authorize, when passed, transfers of approximately \$80.7 million of the previously approved spending authority between departments and a transfer of approximately \$58.4 million from expense to capital investment in the Department of Infrastructure. These estimates are consistent with the second-quarter fiscal updates, which updated the 2011-2012 fiscal plan for all government entities. The estimates will authorize increases for each of the following: the office of the Auditor General; the office of the Chief Electoral Officer; and the departments of Culture and Community Services, Education, Environment and Water, Human Services, Justice, Municipal Affairs, Sustainable Resource Development, Tourism, Parks and Recreation, and Transportation.

Finally, the estimates will also authorize transfers from the Department of Treasury Board and Enterprise to the departments as follows: Advanced Education and Technology, Agriculture and Rural Development, Infrastructure, Sustainable Resource Development, and Transportation as well as a transfer from expense to capital investment within the Department of Infrastructure.

Mr. Chair, the ministers that are responsible for these departments or the ministers who are here on their behalf will be happy to answer questions from any members from the House. Thank you, sir.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Just before we call on the first speaker, I want to just remind all members here that members may speak more than once at this stage; however, speaking time is limited to 10 minutes per occasion. I would only say that if a minister and member wish to, they can combine their total time for 20 minutes, but I would ask that you advise the chair at the beginning of your speech, hon. members, if you plan to combine your time with the minister's time. Both of you will then take and yield the floor over that combined period. I'll try and maintain a speakers list here.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, do you wish to lead off?

Sustainable Resource Development

Dr. Taft: Okay. Sure. I thought I might have opening comments from the minister.

The Deputy Chair: That's fine, too. Yes.

Dr. Taft: Then I'll respond to him.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Dr. Taft: We can take it back and forth if that's okay with the minister. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister for Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you. I'm pleased to appear before the House tonight to request and explain the supplementary estimate of \$280 million, which you'll note is bigger than the actual original budget estimate. As past ministers in this spot have done every time, I will explain that we budget for fires, and now for the mountain pine beetle, at a base level of known cost, which is start-up, man-up, equipment purchases. Those sorts of things establish our base budget. Beyond that, we go into emergency spending, which brings up very large supplementary estimates.

The explanation – and I'll ask the *Hansard* recorder to indulge me in this if they would use capitals and an exclamation mark – could be simply summed up in one word. It would be FIRE! As you well know, this year we had it, and I don't at all mean to make light of the horrific year that we had the fire, the huge cost to improvements to the entire town of Slave Lake and the communities everywhere and of course to our forest resources.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Well, I appreciate that it was an extraordinarily horrific year for fire. My struggle with this and my questions to the minister are around the recurring nature, whether it's the fires at Slave Lake or whether it's the Chisholm fire or wherever the fires are. Every year there are significant fires, and every year we come back after the fact to pay for them. I contrast that, for example, to the snow clearing budgeting process, say for the city of Edmonton, where they take an average, the best guess of what it's likely to cost to clear the snow, and they put that in the budget up front. Then sometimes they go over and there has to be a supplement, but sometimes they're under, and then they can carry that forward to the subsequent year.

It just strikes me as a peculiar way to handle the budget for fire. We'll get to the pine beetle later. It's just a genuine question of: why doesn't the government handle the budgeting process differently based on, say, the average of the previous five years or something like that because it would take some of the more dramatic swings out of this department's budget, which I'm sure is a hassle to handle. So that would my question. Any explanation from the minister? Any openness to changing that for next year? I'd welcome hearing it.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I welcome the hon. member's question. As I said, every year that I've sat in this House, the same concerns have been raised. The member, of course, understands that we're talking about orders of magnitude different from the snow removal budget of a city, and the completely unpredictable nature of it. I'll give you an example. The fact is that this year is actually a less-than-average fire year. We're 50 per cent below our annual average number of fires. All

of the damage was caused in very short order in a very few fires, and that was purely the timing of the fires, not the fact that they happened. They happened in the spring in very volatile burning conditions that we've never seen before.

I know that other jurisdictions struggle with this as well. This is the budgeting process that we've arrived at. This argument reminds me of how useful averages are in these natural resource situations. I know of three statisticians that were out hunting. They're walking down a trail, and there's a beautiful buck deer standing there. The first guy shoots and misses it two feet to the left. The second guy shoots and misses it two feet to the right. Whereupon the third guy starts jumping up and down and says: "We got it! We got it!" It's not always useful to use averages, and it certainly isn't in this case.

Dr. Taft: Well, we just have to agree to disagree on this one. I actually think it would be quite useful to use a different kind of budgeting process. Every year is different. Every year there are random events. There is a dry spring, or maybe there's a dry fall, or there are even winter fires. Whatever. We can be pretty sure that we're going to be spending \$100 million or \$200 million on fires every year. If we're really lucky and we don't, we can even carry that forward.

I will just once more put on the record that I think it's an odd way to handle this kind of budgeting. Although it wasn't a bad joke, I didn't hear from the minister a rationale that convinced me of why this is a sensible approach. This comes up every year, and we get the same exchange every year.

I'd like to move on, actually, to the pine beetle. I happen to have last year's sup supply estimates for Sustainable Resource Development, and it's word for word and number for number the same allocation. It says, "\$30,000,000 of emergency spending for continued ground survey and control operations to fight the mountain pine beetle infestation." I guess there are two or three questions to this. One is: again, if it's \$30 million last year, \$30 million this year, and it's probably going to be \$30 million next year, why do we keep bringing this back to sup supply as opposed to just putting it in the baseline budget?

That \$30 million is a nice round figure. I have no idea what the detailed basis of it is, but I assume it's built from the bottom up, and it probably covers research and culling and controlled fires and goodness knows what. So the first part of my question would be, perhaps: is there some reason not to put that \$30 million into next year's base budget?

7:40

The second question around the mountain pine beetle, frankly, is: how is the fight going? Let me put it that way. I was twice in the fall through the area west of Nordegg and up to Lake Louise and so on. Boy, it's a bit worrying there. In fact, probably just a week or 10 days ago I was at Chateau Lake Louise, and I looked across, and there are a number of red pine trees. I'm thinking: "Wow. Is that magnificent view from Chateau Lake Louise of the lake and the mountains and the glaciers and the trees going to look different if in three or four years the trees are all dead?"

Can you (a) tell us about the budgeting? This \$30 million: where is it going? Will we see it in next year's base budget given it has been exactly the same for the last couple of years? And (b) how is the fight going?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very pleased to respond to the member. First of all, he's right. That was the number that was presented in the budget last year. That would be indicative of

the fact that we're expecting a similar amount of work to happen this year. We do annual surveys. We have some understanding of, as he puts it, how the fight is going. I'm expecting to do a similar amount of work this year.

What I put in the budget for a proposal for next year is up to me, in consultation with my department, about the amount of work we need to do. How it goes into the budget is for the tall foreheads in the accounting group in the Treasury Board and Finance ministries. Even the Auditor General, who has reviewed our books and how we do budgeting, has made comments from time to time. So the accounting rules around it are not mine. I invite you to carry on a conversation at some point with the Finance minister and the Treasury Board President about that very thing. Our work, the \$30 million, is based on some projection of the work we need to do.

The situation in Alberta: I can inform this House that it's good and bad. We are just finishing the survey work. We are about to release a report. I believe the first of next week it'll be out. The southern part is encouraging. I have some issues in the north in the Grande Prairie region and then east to the town of Slave Lake.

My objectives for the coming year will be to do everything we can to stop the north-south movement of the beetles along the eastern slopes corridor and the east-west movement between Grande Prairie and Slave Lake. The north-south corridor along the eastern slopes is absolutely critical to us. That's a watershed for all of the prairies. The east-west movement gives them a vector into the eastern pine system of the boreal forest. There is probably no real stopping them once they get to that point, so I have some concern.

The hon. member mentioned the situation in the parks. There are indeed beetles in the parks. I am travelling to Ottawa, I hope before the end of the year, to discuss with the federal ministers of Natural Resources and Parks what their actions can be. Is there any role that Alberta can play in assisting them and in partnering with them since we have crews up and running already? I'm not completely sure what they intend there.

I do know and I need to make it very clear to the member that the federal government intends to act, but they're acting on a protected parkland basis versus the managed land basis that my department looks after, so they have different objectives and different tools. They are fully intending to use prescribed fire. I know that much.

I do intend to meet with the federal ministers to discuss what role we can play and how they can help us on our publicly managed land base as well. They have been helpful to this point. I also need to say that significant federal dollars have flowed to our province, the research resources of the Canadian Forest Service. They've done some work with industry in the utilization of mountain pine beetle killed wood, and those sorts of things. I don't in any way sling arrows at what the federal government is doing or how helpful they have been to us.

So I think that kind of covers the issue. As I said, we have a similar amount of work planned for this coming year, and that's based on surveys and survival counts and all that. I'll be releasing a full report on our work to date on the state of the mountain pine beetle I guess at the beginning of next week.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Is it possible for me to see if I could bring another minister in, the Minister of Finance, just specifically to SRD?

The Deputy Chair: Proceed.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Just picking up on our debate here, I was just saying, Mr. Minister, that last year, 2010-11, the supplementary supply estimate had \$30 million “of emergency spending for continued ground survey and control operations to fight the mountain pine beetle infestation.” This year it’s exactly the same thing: \$30 million of emergency spending for exactly the same purposes. So my question would be: given that it doesn’t look like the mountain pine beetle is going to go away, should we not be at least considering taking this \$30 million from emergency funding and putting it into the standard budget? Maybe you don’t even need to answer that. I’m just putting that as a question to you in terms of how we manage our budgeting.

I think the pine beetle has gone from being a one-off kind of emergency to, sadly, probably a chronic management issue. So I’d encourage the Minister of Finance and the Minister of SRD to consider, rather than bringing \$30 million next year in sup supply, just building it into the baseline budget. I don’t know if there are issues around that that the Minister of Finance wants to address or not. I just put that idea on the table.

Mr. Liepert: You know, I guess it’s a question as you begin the year: what is the appropriate amount that you put in? With all due respect, we’re spending a lot of time talking about \$30 million out of – what’s our supplementary estimates? – about \$800 million. You know, when it comes to these disasters, I just don’t know how you manage to get to that point, and at the end of the day I’m not sure that it really makes that much difference.

That’s why we’re here with supplementary estimates, because inevitably there are going to be some things that you’re not going to be prepared for. When we reconcile at the end of the year, it’s all there. So it’s a matter of whether you do it up front and, potentially, not need the money and then lapse it at the end of the year, or you spend it on something else because it’s already been accounted for, or you actually make sure that the expenditures take place and are warranted and then come back to the Assembly for the approval.

Dr. Taft: My last question just to the Minister of SRD would be: is there spending on mountain pine beetle fighting outside of this \$30 million, or is this \$30 million the full allocated amount for the continued ground survey and control operations to fight the mountain pine beetle?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Yes. Mr. Chair, I’m pleased to respond to that. There would be a base level of spending in there. It would not be the kind of base that would be in our fire budget, you know, the amount of equipment required in firefighting, but there are certainly staff costs, those things built into the department that we will be staffed up to address the mountain pine beetle. Beyond that, actual program spending is in the emergency.

The minister makes an excellent point. That money in my budget up front would allow the SRD ministry, if in fact it turned out to be a less-than-average year, to spend that money elsewhere. It is, in fact, better to come back to the Legislature as a supplementary estimate at the end of the year with the indication that that money was actually spent on the disaster that it was intended for.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

You have four minutes left if you wish.

If not, I’ll proceed in an alternating fashion after the lead critics have had their moment. I have Calgary-Nose Hill for a quick question and then Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

7:50

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Member for Edmonton-Riverview anticipated part of my question, but I would like to follow up with the minister with respect to the \$30 million, exactly what the program is with respect to spending that money. I can certainly appreciate additional money for the purposes of a survey, which would allow cutting in advance or in front of the advance of the mountain pine beetle epidemic and allow, also, some salvage operations. Could he explain what types of control are being utilized with respect to this additional money other than the survey money? Is it selective cutting and burning, of which, I understand, we’ve had a program for some years? Also, is there some measure of the efficacy of the way that that program is being utilized? Has it had success here in the past?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I’m quite pleased to address that. Of course, we need to do surveys to determine the progress, the success of the beetle from year to year, and that’s an expensive endeavour. We do aerial and ground-level surveys.

Most of the money goes to control actions, and a very significant part of that goes to single-tree action, where trees are removed, relocated to a different place, and burned on the site. Where cutting or salvage cutting is feasible, as in the beetles in a big enough concentration and we can get reasonable access to it, we do work with the forest industry to reschedule their cutting activities and take those pine beetle-infected trees. But lots of the action is on a single-tree basis: remove the tree and burn it at another location. That work happens often with helicopters and is very expensive.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I have Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Just indicate if you would like to proceed in rapid-fire, hon. member, or combine your time.

Mr. Mason: Sure, we can combine the time. That would be great.

The Deputy Chair: Okay.

Mr. Mason: This summer I travelled to a few communities in the wake of the Slave Lake fire where they had reception centres. Athabasca was one, and I visited other towns in the northern forest. Some of the conversations I had with local officials revolved around what we do to protect these communities from the kind of thing that happened at Slave Lake.

This may not be a supplementary estimate, but you do talk about forest protection here, so I’m going to use the opportunity to raise the question. Is there not more that we can do to protect these communities by way of building firebreaks or fire barriers around the town, anticipating that as the forest dries out a bit because of climate change, these kinds of fires are going to be more common? They’re going to be larger, they’re going to be hotter, and they’re going to be more dangerous. I’m wondering if the minister could talk a little bit about anything that has been discussed or is in the works, any plans that have been made to provide greater protection for this type of thing, which is becoming more inevitable every day. I would really hope that we would learn a lesson from what happened in Slave Lake and take steps to mitigate that kind of occurrence in the future.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The member is right. It's not a part of supplementary estimates.

We do run a FireSmart program, and we offer supports and grant funding to communities to deal with the urban forest interface, and we deal with country residential land practices to minimize the chance that a fire will spread into a residence or into a community. We do that work all the time. That's in our regular budget.

I want to caution the member to understand, and I will tell him that in my experience in fighting forest fires – that's how I began my career in forestry – I've never in my life seen burning conditions such as there were on that day in the Slave Lake fire. I expressed concern that morning to my son. We were watching the weather conditions in Edmonton here, the amount of wind that was blowing, and I said to him: you know, if we have a big forest fire today, somebody could get killed. I've never seen burning conditions like that. It warms my heart, at the same time, that I've also never seen a human response such as we saw that day in the fact that we safely evacuated that many people in that short a time, and we moved on.

There is no feasible fireguard system that would have stopped that fire advancing under those burning conditions on that day short of completely devegetating, including the grass, from a very large area. It was early in the spring, and any grass that was on the ground was dry. It wicked the fire just as well as the trees did.

There are some very interesting shots of that fire. One has an RCMP officer directing traffic on the road, with fireballs raining. Those were coming from the tops of trees, clumps of needles and cones being blown in from kilometres away. It's not something that you could have stopped. It was an absolutely unbelievable situation. Thank goodness we had the people in place either directly or very quickly to have a safe reaction to that and literally save lives. It really could have been horrendous. An absolutely astounding event. You know, it was just good disaster planning, good emergency planning. A lot of ministries came together, and some great people in the public service came together on that day.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I agree that there was an excellent effort following the fire. I'll actually give the government a little credit on this because I think that they did do a good job. I also think that municipalities did a great job, various organizations did a good job, and the people really came together. It was really a collective community effort the likes of which I've not seen before. I was so impressed and so proud to be an Albertan when I saw the work that had been done and the volunteers coming forward at the reception centres to help the people, even, you know, the SPCA setting up facilities to rescue animals, pets that had been left behind. It was very, very impressive and heartwarming.

I also recognize that there were special circumstances on that day. However, I didn't hear the minister say that any efforts were being made or any program put in place to protect communities. There are some communities – take, for example, Swan Hills – where the forest comes right into the community in a number of areas. It wouldn't take an extraordinary fire for that community to be put at serious risk from a forest fire. That's just one example. Again, is the ministry considering working with municipalities in order to provide at least a higher degree of protection from fires than currently exists?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you. First of all, I want to thank the hon. member very much for reminding me that it wasn't just our public service that responded on that day. Municipalities from across our province did, I agree, a fantastic job, and we couldn't have done it without their help. The number of fire trucks that rolled into Slave Lake, for example: those weren't ours; those were from municipalities across the province. An incredible response.

I did say that we run the FireSmart program and provide grants. We'll continue to do that. I've approved some grants for this year already. That is a program where we work with municipalities to identify risk and mitigation strategies. It could well be that we'll be informed by what happened in Slave Lake this year, and we'll relook at criteria. I can guarantee that. It's essential work. I didn't want to say that it's not possible to do that. It's just that on that particular day it would have been next to impossible to stop that particular fire. But that's not the average fire condition. I do agree with the member that it's very important to identify those strategies.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I have the hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Allred: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Pardon me if I've got this wrong. I was just getting organized when the minister was speaking earlier. I understood the minister to say that he doesn't budget for disasters, but he does budget for mountain pine beetle. Then I thought I heard the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview indicate that you could roll over your budget from one year to the next. Is that correct? That's not my understanding of the situation, but I'd appreciate the comment on it.

8:00

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you. First of all, I do budget for fires and mountain pine beetle in the regular budget. There is a base level of activity that I have to do from year to year, so that's budgeted. Then the activities as they occur come out of emergency budget, as the Member for Edmonton-Riverview correctly pointed out.

If in the event that I had that in my regular budget and I didn't spend it in a year, no, I definitely could not roll it over. That's not in keeping with our financial rules.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Yes. Just a supplemental. Certainly, I didn't believe you could roll over your budget, and I appreciate that.

I don't personally agree with budgeting for disasters. I agree with budgeting a certain amount for the mountain pine beetle, you know, because it's a regular occurrence as of late and certainly a certain number of fires, but I don't believe in budgeting for disasters.

My question is with regard to the mountain pine beetle and particularly the national parks. As I recall, about 30 years ago – and my memory is a little faded; I'm getting a little old – in Waterton park they had I think it was a mountain pine beetle or maybe it was a spruce beetle at that time, and the national parks' policy was, since it was a natural occurrence, to leave it alone and not do anything. Is that still the policy of the national parks as far as you're aware, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Oberle: No. To the best of my knowledge, it's not although each individual park has a somewhat localized management strategy. That situation occurred. It's not just the fault of the federal government. The B.C. government did it in Tweedsmuir provincial park, and the federal government had the same problem in Cape Breton Highlands national park. We've all learned a lot since, you know, those kinds of infestations have happened, and we all take a little different approach to them.

The federal government is still constrained by the fact that it is a national park, so they have certain land uses that they can allow within there, but they are actively managing it. You will have seen prescribed fire used in our national parks several times in the last few years, so they do have management strategies. We've all learned a lot since those infestations happened.

Mr. Allred: I have a question if I may, Mr. Chairman. I noticed in coming back from Slave Lake several months ago that a lot of the burned-out timber was just standing there. Is there no commercial use for that timber, and is it not logical to try and harvest it for some use? I expect that's probably a commercial operation, but perhaps you set policies on that.

Mr. Oberle: Well, we certainly try to do as much salvage logging as we possibly can. Much of the wood is damaged beyond repair immediately in that as soon as it dries out that much, it cracks, and then it's not useful for lumber. There's only so much sawmill capacity in the province to deal with all of that wood. We've done some work with pulping, but carbon, charcoal, in pulp is just about impossible to get rid of. You can't bleach it out. So it's difficult to deal with salvaged wood. We do as much as we can, recognizing that the wood has ecological benefits and that the sites will have to be reforested. We'll move forward on a sustainable basis. No, we simply cannot salvage it all.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I have the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere next if he wishes to speak. No?

Then we'll go to Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Just a brief question about biofuel or at least the opportunity for energy from some of this damaged wood. I assume some of it, even the pulped stuff, could be used for alternate energy. I was wondering if you had any sense of where that might be going and what the potential is in our energy mix.

Mr. Oberle: That is definitely a possibility, and, you know, we'll look to opportunities wherever we can. There are problems with that, though, in that you can't have a biofuel industry at full capacity sitting on the ground waiting for fires to happen, and it can't be set up fast enough to deal with an emergency after it happens, so you always have a limited capacity.

There is also an economic problem in that it's a more marginal endeavour to burn biofuels for cogeneration, for example, and there's a limited distance that you can truck those fuels beyond which it's no longer economic. So there are problems. We are certainly willing to talk to anybody that's willing to discuss bioenergy or other opportunities. That's part of our salvaging program as well because there are bioenergy facilities out there, and they will be utilizing burned wood wherever we can.

Dr. Swann: A supplementary. I was actually referring to the pine beetle damaged wood. Are there any current existing facilities using the damaged wood?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Yeah. It's the same situation, maybe magnified somewhat, though, because the damage from the pine beetle is typically more dispersed than the damage from a fire. At least that's all in one place, and you could economically harvest within that area. It's harder to do with pine beetle, and with the amount of access that's required, it's difficult. But, again, we are salvage cutting in pine beetle wood as well, and all the waste from that wood and whatever other amounts we can are going to bioenergy facilities wherever we can. We're always open to talking to more people. One thing about deadwood fibre is that it's useful for a number of years for a bioenergy facility. It doesn't deteriorate like it does for its use in sawn lumber. So there's some opportunity there.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other questions for the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development?

If not, we can proceed to the top of the list, then. Perhaps, Minister of Culture and Community Services, you may wish to address the Assembly with your request.

Culture and Community Services

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Chair. Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the 2011-2012 supplementary estimates for Culture and Community Services.

As you all will know as MLAs, representing Albertans across this province, cultural facilities play an important role in the building of welcoming and inclusive communities. These facilities provide the kind of socioeconomic benefits that help sustain not only local business but the communities themselves. Our investment in cultural facilities has resulted in stronger communities and improved quality of life for all Albertans.

This year's supplementary budget estimate of \$20,683,000 is requested to provide the following funding: first, \$6,245,000 to complete the Canada Sports Hall of Fame; second, \$518,000 toward the Citadel Theatre; and third, \$3,295,000 to complete the GO community centre. This funding is offset by a transfer from the government of Canada's infrastructure stimulus fund.

An additional \$4 million is required for the construction projects at Fort Calgary, including the Hunt and Deane houses, expansion of the interpretive centre and the stockade, barracks, and parkways. A transfer from the federal government's provincial-territorial base funding program will offset this funding.

Mr. Chair, \$3,125,000 will support the development of the Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum of Alberta, with the funding used in the conversion of the historic Lodge Hotel in Edmonton to house the museum, archives, and library. Again, this funding will be offset by a transfer by the federal-provincial-territorial base funding program.

Lastly, an allocation of \$3,500,000 is required to meet the first year of the province's \$25 million commitment toward the construction of the Cantos national music centre.

These investments will help establish our communities and our local economies while enhancing Alberta's reputation as a cultural leader in Canada and beyond.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Any comments? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you for this information on supplementary supply for Culture and Community

Services. I have to assume that each of these extra expenditures was not anticipated in the year, and that's why it wasn't budgeted for. I'd appreciate hearing a little bit about how each of these actually happened.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Chair. As I indicated earlier, many of these are federal flow-through capital grants. What typically follows is that the money is put in at the provincial level, and then the federal level follows with flow-through capital grants. That's why it's an additional supplementary estimate to the budget that was presented last year.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Chair. How does that apply, then, to the Cantos music centre?

The Deputy Chair: Madam Minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you. The Cantos music centre: to make it clear, that is an allocation from the province for the first year of the \$25 million commitment. That would be an allocation from the province from the current funds there for that. That would not be part of the federal flow-through, so my apology there.

8:10

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you. I'm curious to know more about what's happened to some of the Wild Rose Foundation funding and whether that is continuing through other means and how that's being disbursed. I know it's not part of the supplementary estimates, but many of us are curious about where that money has gone and how decisions are being made.

The Deputy Chair: Madam Minister, the Wild Rose Foundation is not part of this, but if you wish to answer the question, I'll allow it.

Mrs. Klimchuk: That's fine. Just a couple of brief comments. The Wild Rose Foundation still does exist as a foundation in this department, and of course all the grants that are funded towards international development are running through the community initiatives program. Those still will continue.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you. Perhaps the minister could make some comments about the Royal Alberta Museum and what you are anticipating there.

The Deputy Chair: Again, Madam Minister, the Royal Alberta Museum funding is not part of this request from what I read, but if you wish to make a brief comment, I'll allow it.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Chair. I'll make one brief comment. The provincial museum is a terrific example of levels of government working together to develop something that's going to be an incredible legacy for Alberta and for Canadians. That is moving forward. We know the design-build agreement has been met. As well, there's been some excellent work with respect to moving forward on the transfer of land. So it's going to be a very exciting project for Albertans.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. That was done nicely and briefly. Let's just remind ourselves that we should be focusing on what's really in the supplementary estimates.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just in looking at the supplementary estimates, in particular the Cantos national music centre, it's my understanding – and this could be incorrect; a little bit of knowledge can sometimes go in a wrong direction, so I appreciate the minister's contributions on this – that this project is supposed to start building by 2014. If I look at these payments, it looks like the provincial government is looking at making eight. Is that your strategy, to make eight payments of \$3.5 million over the course of the life of this project? Are you guys contributing? I believe the federal government has contributed \$25 million to this project, and they have put those funds into the Cantos national music centre. Isn't that granting formula contingent on you giving it relatively quickly, or am I mistaken on that?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Chair. I think it's really clear to note, just speaking specifically to what's before us tonight, that the initial allocation of \$3.5 million is required to start the process going. Then the allocation will be that every year there will be money put towards that from the provincial and from the federal levels, as you said.

Mr. Hehr: Well, no, that's not my understanding. My understanding is that the full money is already at the national music centre from the feds. In future years are we going to see this \$3.5 million contribution come forward in supplementary estimates, then, for the time foregoing, or is this going to become a budgeted amount in the budget, where people can actually see that the Cantos music centre is going to get this money over eight years? I guess I would like some clarification. It's my understanding that the federal government has given the full grant process to them. Now that the provincial funding mechanism is here, won't that impact the Cantos music centre in some fashion?

Mrs. Klimchuk: Well, certainly, it is my understanding that it'll be part of the budget moving forward, but I would prefer to get back to the member on those details so that I can make sure I have the correct information for you.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you. I might be mistaken as well, so I'd appreciate that.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Okay. No problem.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other questions for the Minister of Culture and Community Services? The hon. Member for Edmonton-*Decore*.

Mrs. Sarich: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I was wondering if I could ask a very simple question to help Albertans understand what is meant by the flow-through dollars from our federal counterparts. Also, from time to time constituents raise the issue of whether those flow-through dollars are time certain for the province of Alberta. I'm just wondering if the hon. member could shed a little bit of light on those two aspects.

The Deputy Chair: Madam Minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Chair. That's a very good point. The concept of flow-through dollars, as I mentioned previously:

oftentimes the province will initiate the funding, and then the federal government follows through. That's why the flow-through dollars are there. It does give you flexibility to plan. But, also, we want to make sure that when we plan our projects, they do go ahead and the money is there. Albertans can be assured that with respect to these items for the supplementary estimates there are no concerns there whatsoever.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Any other members wish to question the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit?

Seeing none, perhaps we could move on to Education. If the Minister of Education wishes to make a few opening comments, that would be appreciated.

Education

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, I'd be thrilled to do that. There are a number of reasons for supplementary estimates as requested in the documents before the House as follows. The supplementary amount of \$217,646,000 is requested to provide, and I list: \$106,683,000 for the reinstatement of operating support to public and separate school boards; \$13,100,000 for fuel costs, which, as you know, Mr. Chair, have risen significantly over a short period of time; \$3,200,000 for teachers' salaries as a result of an increase in the actual Alberta average weekly earnings, to which the salaries under the current agreement are tied, to 4.54 per cent from what was anticipated to be 4.4 per cent as included in the original budget estimate; and also \$94,346,000 for reprofiling of the Alberta school alternative procurement projects, the second phase of it, due to – and this is a good-news story – faster than anticipated construction progress, and \$70,296,000 for new school construction and modular classrooms; and, last but not least, \$317,000 for the reinstatement of operating supports to accredited private schools.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, in some cases, as well as we do with budgeting, some numbers, particularly those of average weekly earnings, are simply not predictable. They're very difficult to pinpoint a year in advance. So those differences will occur. As you also know, very much appreciated by the school boards was a recent additional injection of dollars to address some of the shall we call hot spots or pressure points within school boards throughout the province. I should note that shortly school boards will be reporting to us on how they spent these dollars. I can assure you that you will find that many of the pressures that would have been identified by students and/or parents have been addressed in a satisfactory way. The Alberta School Boards Association will tell you that the dollars were welcomed and were needed and have yielded the benefit that they were designed to address.

At this point, Mr. Chairman, I'm open to any and all questions from members of this House.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Just before I recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, I'm going to assume that it'll be 20 minutes shared unless speakers advise me otherwise. It just helps us run the clock.

Proceed, hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the hon. minister. I know he's had a long day with the speech I heard him do this morning in front of the boards. Most of it I was actually quite receptive of. I congratulate him on that speech and the reception he got from the ASBA.

I would like to go into a little bit of the conversation. As you know, I think I asked last spring, when we were going through the

then proposed cuts – I think I only asked one question last term. It wasn't because I couldn't ask other questions. The importance of it meant that I needed to ask it every day, and that was, in my estimation, the wrong-headed cuts of approximately \$107 million to the school budget, something that threw our school boards and parents and teachers' groups into disarray for quite a while. I'm glad to see that the Premier in this instance has followed through on her promise and reinstated that funding for the benefit of not only children but, in my view, for the benefit of the province. I would say that was kudos to the government for reinstating that money.

8:20

On that component of the \$106 million or \$107 million, just to be rough. In my conversation with some of the school organizations out there they indicate to me that because of the budgeting and the pulling the money in, pulling it out, and returning the money to them, additional costs and expenses and other things of that nature were incurred by the boards. Was there any consideration given to or any requests made of this government to augment some of these extra costs that occurred as a result of the giving of funds, taking of funds, and giving funds back again? Or has that discussion not happened and it's just – I know it's not seen here, so obviously it wasn't given, but was there a request made, and was there any consideration of that?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have to start by saying that the reason the member was not appreciative of all of my speech but only most of my speech is because he couldn't hear the remaining parts because the applause was so loud. But I will share my notes with him later so he can appreciate all of it.

Mr. Chairman, no, there were no discussions, really, with school boards relevant to any additional costs that may or may not have been incurred as a result of the in-year injection of the dollars, but I would like to remind the member that in the last year's budget we actually increased the amount of funding for Alberta Education. This was just programs, which in many cases were anticipated to lapse, so school boards knew that some of the programs within that \$107 million were lapsing.

That is not to say that they are not welcoming of these particular additional dollars to address some of the pressure points that they found within school boards. All school boards were given significant latitude in how they will spend these dollars. All school boards have identified meaningful and productive ways to allocate these dollars, and we will be hearing from them within a month or so, telling us exactly how each school board appropriated those dollars and what tangible benefit in the classroom was incurred.

To answer your question shortly: no. No discussions took place, and frankly no requests were made by school boards to offset any additional costs which may or may not have been incurred.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Another question I have is in regard to the expenditures for operating accredited private schools. I do note that I've asked some questions of the minister on the appropriateness of funding for accredited private schools. I think many Albertans are simply unaware of the fact that we fund private accredited schools to the tune of 70 cents on the dollar for all these schools that are operating that may or may not or, in my view, do not fit within an inclusive education system that expands equal opportunity to each and every child regardless of age, race, colour, creed, and all of that stuff – you know the drill – and then

that term “equity” that I heard in the speech earlier today. Nevertheless, just a question around this \$317,000 expenditure: is that based on the .7 formula, or 70 per cent formula, for private schools? If you could outline how that expenditure was made, that would just clarify things for me.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, the fact that we do have private accredited schools in this province speaks to equity, actually. Each child learns differently, and each child and family have different needs and different priorities. What makes Alberta education as great as it is and renowned throughout the world to a large degree, not only because of it but to a large degree, is the fact that parents and children in Alberta have choices. They can go to Protestant schools. They can go to Catholic schools. They can go to chartered schools. They can go to Christian schools. They can go to Islamic academies. They can go to art schools and drama schools, and they can go to academic schools. The list goes on and on. That’s what makes the system so good in this province, and that’s what engages children.

A monolithic approach to education would not engage all children and by all means would not be inclusive because as different as we are on the outside, our brains are different. Children learn differently, and they require a different environment and different approach. What is important, Mr. Chair, is that no matter what school it is and who administers the school and what their focus is and what the corporate structure of the school is, they all teach Alberta curriculum, and that is one of the best curricula in the world. We actually are proud of exporting our curriculum to other countries. These children learn Alberta curriculum, but their learning is enriched by other, additional programs that are offered by either charter, private, or you name it, whatever variety of school it may be.

In the case of private schools, yes, we fund the schools based on a portion, on a percentage of what funding we allocate to public schools to recognize the fact that we pay only for instruction of Alberta curriculum. Any other additional programs that the schools deliver: the parents are on the hook for that cost. There are also some infrastructure funding differences, and that is what the number is.

I know this hon. member has issues with having nonpublic schools, having schools that may be religious or privately operated, but I would suggest to him that it is the mosaic of schools that we have that makes, overall, Alberta education better. It actually improves public schools because it creates a constructive, child-focused competition between schools, and that is important. That drives the level of education within the publicly funded system.

Mr. Hehr: I thank the minister for his comments. I don’t want him to think I’m antichoice. I believe we should have lots of choice in Alberta, choice for lots of stuff. This can all be accommodated through a properly funded, properly administered, publicly funded education system. I beg to differ with him on the fact that private schools make the landscape better for all students because it increases competition. That simply doesn’t bear out in research done in other jurisdictions or in our own.

Nevertheless, I thank him for his comments and the explanation that it is that private schools are being funded on a per-school grant of 70 cents on the dollar compared to the public school system and that clarification that that’s what this expenditure is for. I thank him for his time. These are my only questions in that regard.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I have the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, and I’ll look to see who might wish to speak thereafter. Go ahead, hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. First off, I’d like to on behalf of the Wildrose and our caucus agree and congratulate the minister on his comments about the importance of diversity in the schools that are permitted and the schooling options that are permitted parents in this province. It is critically important that we continue that.

There is a fallacy out there that people that go to private schools or charter schools are somehow only just, you know, the very elite and the very rich. It’s just not the case. Clearly, there are some very high-level, I guess you could say, expensive private schools out there that people who are very wealthy put their children into, but those are relatively rare. The vast majority of private schools are nonprofit. They cater to a group of parents that just feel that their child, for whatever reason – maybe they have autism or a special need or, perhaps, they are looking for a more faith-based education or something like that. Their parents feel that that’s the need that their child has.

I have several private schools in Airdrie-Chestermere. One is Airdrie Koinonia Christian school, a fantastic school. The parents sacrifice so much to put their kids in that school. It’s a nonprofit school. They do fundraisers. They’re just such a strength to our community, and the quality of the graduates that they put out is second to none.

8:30

There is also another school called – boy, I’m going to butcher this, hon. member – the Khalsa school. It’s just a fantastic school in Conrich, fabulous students. It obviously very much caters to the East Indian culture. Specifically, there are mostly Sikh students going there, but there are others, too. It’s just a real credit to my community. Again, it’s nonprofit. They’re not all rich parents that are sending their kids to school there. That’s not the case at all. They are sacrificing. They raise money. They work hard to have their students have the kind of cultural education that is important to that community.

So I’m glad to see that although we have disagreements on many issues, certainly school choice is not one of them with this minister and with the PC Party.

I also want to say that I agree with and support the Premier and this minister’s decision to put the \$106 million back into the public education system. That is exceptionally important. My children attend public school. Well, I only have one that’s old enough so far to be in public school but another one next year. It is just so critical that we properly fund our public education system. This is one of those priority areas. When we talk about prioritizing our spending, our education system is one of those areas where we do need to put in as many resources as we can.

It’s not like the health system, which is so overly bureaucratic and is just a black hole. There’s so much money wasted in it, not going to the front lines. In health care it’s not a matter of spending more; it’s about changing the entire management structure of the system to spend more wisely and to make it more efficient. With education that’s not really the case. It’s just a matter of getting more resources to the front lines to build more schools and to hire more teachers. So I want to congratulate him for doing that.

Now with that, I do have some questions. The first thing is that even though it is important to restore that funding, it’s also important to realize that we have a \$3 billion deficit and a \$6 billion cash shortfall that is primarily coming out of our sustainability fund as well as direct borrowing. Between those

two, that's where the \$6 billion cash shortfall is being financed. If we're going to put back \$106 million, what I would like to know is that in the first conference after her election as PC leader, the Premier alluded to finding in-budget savings, in-year savings to cover this \$106 million reinvestment of the money into the education system. So my first question to the minister is: where is this money coming from? What savings have you found in order to pay for this needed \$106 million?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. minister, before you answer, could everybody please check and see if somebody has a cellphone on vibrate? It's coming through the system here. If you do, move it off your desk, please, or turn it off completely. Thank you.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chair, I thank the member for his kind remarks relative to the choices that exist in Alberta. I can assure the member that this government will be committed to making sure that parents and children continue to have choices relative to schools. I agree that predominantly private schools are not for the elite of our society. I happen to have a school in my riding, the Islamic Academy, which is attended by slightly fewer than 1,000 children. I have to tell you that I would guess – this is purely intuitive – that the average income of the families who send their children to that school would be below the average in Alberta.

The fact is that to that community maintaining language predominantly and learning religious studies are important. These children do extremely well. They do instruct Alberta curriculum. There are misconceptions relative to private schools, that they happen to be elitist schools for rich kids with uniforms who get dropped off in fine, fancy vehicles by rich parents every morning. That is just simply not the case.

Now, relative to where that \$107 million was found. The member comments that education should be well funded and that the \$107 million was the right thing to do, but at the same time he's asking: where did I find \$107 million in the Ministry of Education? Basically, if I was to find \$107 million in the Ministry of Education and then put it back into the Ministry of Education, I don't think the education system would be any better off at the end of the day. So requesting that the Minister of Education first cut \$107 million just to the next day reinject it and have a big announcement is not what the Premier intended. The Premier intended to put an additional \$107 million into the system, which, obviously, the Premier, myself, and all involved in the administration of education concluded was needed at this point in time.

The member should be reminded that approximately 80 per cent of the Education budget goes into salaries. It's a very labour-intensive ministry. Obviously, teaching takes place in classrooms by teachers, and our teachers need to be paid salaries. Right off the bat 80 per cent of our budget goes into salaries. The exercise was not to carve out \$107 million just to reinject it. This was additional dollars that were found in the operations of the government of Alberta.

Now, the member will have an opportunity to debate next year's budget in the House. If he has any suggestions for where I can find savings in the Ministry of Education, I would be more than interested to hear what they are and how they can be attained. But I have to tell you one thing. I will not consider any savings and/or cuts that will negatively impact children in the classrooms. So if the member is aware of any savings that can be found that will not compromise the quality of education, I will be very interested to find out from the member what they are, and I will get on it.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. Well, I'm just going to assume that that was a misunderstanding and a lack of clarity on what I was asking, Minister. Surely he doesn't honestly think I was saying that he should cut \$107 million from the Ministry of Education to pay for the \$107 million.

Anyway, what I would ask is: where is that \$107 million coming from out of the government? Obviously, he doesn't know where that's coming from. Obviously, it seems pretty clear that when the PC government needs more money, they don't look for savings in-house. They just grab it out of our savings account. I thought I was providing an opportunity for the minister to explain where they found that \$107 million in the total government, but apparently he thought I meant taking it out of the Department of Education, which was clearly not my question.

He did ask for ideas on where to find savings in the future. That is a good question, and here's my suggestion. The former Education minister – before he was the health minister, before he was the Energy minister, before he was the Finance minister – signed a very irresponsible contract with the teachers that tied teachers' salary increases and, frankly, reflected the irresponsible pay increases that we as MLAs received, to the cost of the weekly wage index. A very, very irresponsible way to index our salaries; irresponsible as well to index the teachers although it's not the teachers' fault. When they see the politicians, their leaders, going ahead and giving themselves that kind of salary increase, then naturally and, I think fairly, they say: well, shouldn't we be getting the same increase?

If we don't show an example in this House of how to be reasonable with our salaries, surely we can't expect the same out of public servants. That irresponsible contract was signed, and it has led to a huge increase in the cost of wages in this province, roughly 4 and a half per cent a year or thereabouts, so about 13 per cent over the last three years. It has caused, of course, our Education budget to balloon so that instead of controlling teachers' salaries and our salaries as well to the rate of the cost of living, for example, in which case we would have only had maybe a 5 or 6 per cent increase over the last three years, we have doubled or more than doubled that increase. Because of that, with the same amount of money we haven't been able to hire as many teachers as we would have been able to with the same amount of money had we kept those costs down.

So my question to the Minister of Education is whether he is actually going to negotiate a contract with the teachers this time that adequately protects taxpayers and will actually result in us being able to hire more teachers because we're not paying them through the nose because of some irresponsible vote-buying scheme that a minister previous to you put in place. That's what I would like to know. Are you going to actually negotiate a good deal for the people of Alberta, or are you going to cave in like a cheap tent again?

8:40

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chair. A few corrections. A very inflammatory rhetoric, but very thin on facts. Number one, I would strongly encourage the member tonight, once we recess at 1 o'clock in the morning, to dig out his last paycheque and to realize that his wages have not been indexed to average weekly earnings for years. So I hope he's not budgeting his family budget on anticipated pay increases because he hasn't been receiving any and won't be receiving any for a while to come. To say that we are getting average weekly earnings as politicians – it's difficult for

me to take financial advice from him when he actually hasn't even examined his own paycheque.

Now, Mr. Chair, relative to teachers' salaries. This is actually good timing on behalf of the member because I will be meeting with the majority of teachers over the next few months, and I'm sure they will be interested in finding out what position the Wildrose Alliance is taking relative to our teachers.

The fact is that an agreement was negotiated in good faith by the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association and the government of Alberta. At that point in time it was considered to be a fair pay settlement by all three parties. Our Alberta teachers are not paid exorbitant wages. They are paid more on average than teachers throughout the country, but I can tell you that the results that we're getting out of education are better than what the rest of the country gets.

I have to remind the member, because this is testimony that I am very proud of, that when the Prime Minister of the U.K. showed up over here, he highlighted Alberta education as the best education system in the entire English-speaking world, not Canadian education but Alberta education. Are we getting a return on our investment? I see spending money on education as an investment and not expenditure. Yes, we definitely are.

If that particular party wants to engage in divisive rhetoric and try to pit parents against teachers against students against school boards against ATA against government, they're free to do that. I choose to work with the school boards and the teachers and the parents in a collaborative spirit because at the end of the day there's only one thing that matters, the students in the classroom.

If you want to engage in inflammatory rhetoric where you end up pitting one against the other, only one party is going to lose, and it won't be the teachers. They have contracts. They will come to work tomorrow morning and get paid. It won't be us. It will be the children in the classroom who lose because what happens when you engage in that kind of rhetoric, as the Wildrose Alliance would have us do, is that you don't talk about education. You end up talking about politics, you end up talking about arguments, you end up talking about salaries, but you never engage in the most important conversation that we as adults, as educators should be having. That's pedagogy. That's curriculum. That's administration of education. That's making sure that we continuously remain one of the best education systems in the world.

Mr. Chair, I personally will not be drawn into that kind of inflammatory dialogue with teachers or with parents. I will stick to the request. If the member wants to know where the money comes from, well, I am here before the House, asking the House for the money. To answer the member's question, if he grants the money today to pay that \$107 million, he knows very well where the money comes from. It will be him voting either in favour of it or against it, and the money will come from the Alberta Treasury. Obviously, at the end of the day there is a finite amount of dollars that government can have, that Alberta Treasury will have, and something has to give. But we do budgeting together in the House, and that member should know where the money comes from.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, about three minutes and 18 seconds left.

Mr. Anderson: Well, that lack of budget and fiscal planning is the reason why we have a \$6 billion cash shortfall. The member is right; we haven't had a pay raise as MLAs for the last two years, three years, something like that. The reason is because we got a monstrous 30 per cent pay raise right after we were elected, and we all know on that side of the House and the people that used to be on that side of the House how that pay raise occurred, okay?

We know how it was decided; we know how it was told and how most of us were informed, including that member, who wasn't a minister at the time. [interjections]

I would just say, you know, that the most important thing here is that that type of stupidity, specifically by the Finance minister – his lack of proper planning, the lack of proper budgeting, selling out, constantly trying to buy votes – is the reason we are in the situation . . .

Chair's Ruling Decorum Relevance

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I wonder if we could just go back to the peace and decorum we had a few minutes ago so that the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere could continue speaking.

Airdrie-Chestermere, could I remind you that we're discussing the supplementary estimates of Education; okay? If we can stay relevant, that would be appreciated. Thank you. With that, please proceed.

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely.

Debate Continued

Mr. Anderson: It's ridiculous. I've said again and again that the reason we can't pay for teachers, the teachers that we need, is because of the absolutely irresponsible, liberal-minded, ridiculous contract that that Finance minister over there signed. That's the reason. Because of that irresponsibility, we're in a position here where we have a teacher shortage. He signed an irresponsible contract that the taxpayers of this province couldn't afford. That's the reason why we're here talking about giving money back. The reason we are in the position where we have to spend an extra \$107 million right now is because of that irresponsibility, and that's why we have a \$6 billion cash deficit and a \$3 billion deficit. That's why we're here in supplementary supply putting forward another money bill, because of that irresponsibility.

It's just amazing to me – and I don't blame this current minister because I have faith in him. I think he's going to do a better job this time, negotiating a deal that has some financial sanity, which is more than I can say for the Minister of Finance, who's now in charge of this entire province's finances. It should scare the living you-know-what out of every single Albertan.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. minister, you've got 15 seconds.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, 15 seconds is all I need. The choice is clear. You can have that party running this province, or you can have this party running this province. In the meantime I'm asking for the supplemental estimate.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, did you wish to speak?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Chairman, you know, when you bring up a point in regard to relevance, that comment certainly did have nothing to do with the budget whatsoever.

The Deputy Chair: Frankly, the chair was challenged to hear any comments for the last 30 seconds. If we could just preserve the decorum, that would be much appreciated.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Chairman, if I may, we have technology in this Legislature that works very well. Because of my hearing impairment I would encourage you to get one of these.

The Deputy Chair: I just asked for one, in fact. Thank you.

Are there any other members who wish to speak on the Education estimates? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

8:50

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'll get in on this increasingly interesting exchange that's been going on, and I will start with the \$106.7 million to reinstate operating support to school boards. I'll just remind some of the members opposite, including the current Minister of Education, that when the last budget was debated in the Legislature, we warned the government that this cut, not a cut exactly but this shortfall in terms of the requirements that the school boards put forward, was going to result in very serious impacts on our students, the same students that this minister is now standing up and purporting to champion. It was this minister as well as all the other members opposite that supported this budget for education at the time. They were warned and they were told by teachers, by school boards, by parents, certainly by Alberta's NDP in the Legislature that the cuts or the reduction or the shortfall of \$107 million was going to have a terrible impact, but they didn't listen. They did not listen. They passed that budget, and every Tory member stood up for it. That's all a matter of record.

The results, of course, were substantial reductions, a whole class of graduating education students that didn't get jobs. Existing people who were teachers and support staff and specialists that provided for the educational needs of special-needs children lost their jobs. Class sizes exploded, and kids were hurt. And the minister laughs when I say that kids were hurt, but I think that if he asks the parents of those children, they haven't forgotten the impact of that devastating decision on the part of the government.

People got angry. Parents were angry. Teachers were angry. Alberta's NDP organized a campaign to reinstate the funding, and this funding is exactly what I'm talking about, Mr. Chairman. I'm talking about the \$110 million. We organized a campaign to get that money back. Now, at the last minute in the Conservative leadership race, with the current Premier behind in the race, she pulled out a Hail Mary pass and threw the ball of \$110 million to reinstate the funding, a political move: shrewd, perhaps; opportunistic, definitely; coming from the heart, from a clear understanding of the needs of children, not a chance. It was a purely political move in order to accomplish what she achieved, which is her victory in that race.

Now we come down to the \$106.7 million, the roughly \$107 million. It has now been reinstated, but a lot of damage has been caused in the meantime. Just correcting it halfway through the school year does not undo the damage over the last number of months in our schools and to our children, so this government bears a heavy burden of responsibility with respect to that.

Now, I want to ask the minister because I was there for this announcement at Government House. I watched the minister and the Premier announce the reinstatement of this \$107 million. I want to get back to the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere's question because he asked where the money was coming from. We got a glib non-answer from the minister that, of course, it's coming out of the treasury, but I was there, and I remember what he said at that time and what the Premier said at that time, that this money would be found from savings in the budget. In other words, they were not going to increase the budget. They were going to

find reductions across the board, not limited to his department, because I don't want him to misrepresent my question. Across the board they were going to find the \$107 million and make other cuts in order to restore the funding that they never should have cut in the first place. My question to this minister is: where will this money come from?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, the Ministry of Education has a budget of \$6.2 billion – that's billion with a "b" – and \$106 million compared to \$6.2 billion was lapsed by way of programs that were not continued. This member would have this House believe that entire education classes of graduates did not get hired and that a bunch of teachers got fired and that a bunch of support staff got laid off and that classroom sizes exploded, and I imagine that he's going to tell us that we shut down schools and that we knocked down schools and that the education system was devastated, that it was just char and smoke, and that nothing was left of education because \$107 million was lapsed out of a \$6.2 billion budget. If that's the case, next year I'm going to run the education system on \$107 million. If you can hire all the teachers and run the whole system with \$107 million, who needs the \$6.2 billion?

Well, Mr. Chairman, that is not the reality. The reality is that, yes, that \$106 million was very important. It was addressing programs within classrooms that were impacting students, and it was deemed that it was needed to be reinstated. But when you look at the fraction of the budget that it actually is, it's a very insignificant number.

Mr. Chairman, the premise of that entire question is ridiculous, but I will go back to my initial response that I have given to the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. The fact is that the money, obviously, will come from the treasury. The member is asking: what are we going to cut? I will expand my question by saying that if the member is of the belief that there are programs that need to be cut to find those dollars, do say so. Not to misrepresent his question, I don't assume that he wants me to cut that money out of education, but if there are other ministries that the member thinks that we should be cutting those dollars from, please do say so because we will be interested.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

I would again ask, please, to keep the conversations down to a minimum. If you wish to be recognized, just wave your hand, and I'll be happy to recognize you in your order.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, please proceed.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, I'm going to persist because I think what we just heard from the minister was an attempt to completely misrepresent the question in the first place, not the first time he's done it tonight, then a refusal to take responsibility for the impacts of those budget decisions and an attempt to dismiss them and pretend that they are trivial and minor, which I don't think we can accept – I'm glad that he's on the record saying that – and ultimately a refusal to answer the question, an attempt to try and put it back in a very crude, ham-fisted way, quite frankly, as if I am proposing that we are going to find other cuts, that I have to propose what it is to cut.

Just to cut right through it all, at the time that this minister and the Premier announced that the \$107 million would be restored to the funding, they said that this money would be found in the budget from other places. My question to the minister is: where are those reductions that correspond to this increase, or has the minister changed the game without telling anyone? I heard the

Premier say it, and now the minister is blatantly avoiding the question, refusing to answer. We can be here all night until we get an answer on this question. I'm up for it.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, unlike the member would suggest, I don't play games with education, and this government doesn't play games with education. If to him education is a sport, he's welcome to it, but to me it is a serious business. Frankly, I would argue that it's probably one of the most important businesses that we can carry out in this House and as government in this province.

The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that this government department by department on an ongoing basis goes through our budgets, and we try to find savings in-year if there can be any realized without negatively affecting the valuable programs that we deliver to Albertans, and our departments will continue doing that. At the end of the day, when you get your final quarter numbers, you will find out whether there were any savings found within departments. If there were, that's fine. They are reallocated or returned to Treasury.

In the meantime, Mr. Chair, I know that he will get up and scream and shout that I'm misinterpreting his question, but I don't think that he's suggesting that we don't issue that \$106 million, which, *nota bene*, has already been released. School boards have been given the go-ahead to bring the programs into the classrooms as required. I don't think he is suggesting that I not do that and not release the dollars to the classrooms until this government in some ministry or perhaps even in my ministry finds the dollars.

If that member wants that to happen, if he wants us not to release those dollars into the classrooms and have the children benefit from it right now until we find \$106 million or \$107 million in current budget spending in some ministry, say so.

9:00

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, of course I didn't say so. The minister continually attempts to avoid answering questions by putting words in the mouths of other members. It's not what I think we expect from a responsible minister who's in charge of a multi-billion dollar budget, as he rightly says.

I think we're making a little progress, Mr. Chairman. He's now talked about reviewing his budget to find other savings, and that says that they do that on an ongoing basis. He's saying that we have to wait until the final reconciliation after this budget year is all over in order to find out where those reductions were made, and I don't think that's responsible either, Mr. Chairman.

I want to put it to the minister again. If you're going through your department looking for savings in order to contribute to this \$107 million figure, where are you making those reductions?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I don't know if I can be any more clear to this member. Let me say this again. You know what? I give him the benefit because maybe I should sit down with the member and walk him through what we do in each portfolio on an ongoing basis. Mr. Chair, you will appreciate that as you carry on through the year, you do try to find savings everywhere you can as responsible stewards of taxpayers' dollars also in charge of the living programs. If there are ways of delivering programs at a quality that is expected by Albertans and delivering them cheaper, you always will do that because you try to deliver programs as efficiently as you possibly can.

In the last-quarter reconciliation of the year you do notice how much you managed to save by finding efficiencies within departments. At the same time, when you make an in-year announcement that you're going to inject additional dollars into a program, you don't honestly believe that for a program as

important and as vital and as time sensitive as education you're going to wait to inject those dollars until you actually realize the dollars in savings in this or some other department.

What you do is that you continuously look for savings, and you do find savings. You do realize savings. But when the time comes to inject dollars, you inject dollars. We made a decision as government to inject this additional \$107 million, and I'm sure that as we continuously look for savings in other departments, that sum or even a greater sum may be found in in-year savings in a variety of ministries.

In-year savings happen through a variety of ways. Sometimes you just find a more efficient way of delivering a program. Sometimes you find that the subscription to a program was lower than you thought it was because of ineligibility or because the program simply wasn't tapped into. Sometimes you find that certain programs just were not needed in a year. But the opposite is also the case. We just had a minister talking about natural disasters. You may have a program that gets tapped out, and you have to put additional dollars into it. That is the nature of government. You put budgets in place, but at the end of the year you try to find efficiencies.

Let the member be patient. At the end of the year when we reconcile our budget, he will see what savings were found.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I will express my appreciation to the minister for his change in tone. Instead of inciting and insulting and putting words in the mouth of people asking questions, he is actually now just down to basically not answering the question. So that's progress.

I want to pursue this a little bit. He is talking now about in-year savings. That's the language I remember the Premier using when this announcement was made. We're going to call it in-year savings. Okay. So now we're back to sort of what the Premier and the minister actually said: in-year savings. Let me ask this question of the minister. Which year are you going to find \$107 million of in-year savings? Is it the current budget year, which is coming to an end next March, or is it in-year savings next year? How much of the in-year savings are going to be found in his department – does he think he can give me an estimate? – versus other departments in the government? So let's start there, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. minister, we have about three and a half minutes for this exchange.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, I never attempted to incite or insult the member in any way. If I did, I apologize.

You know, Albert Einstein, I think it was, had a definition of insanity: if you do something over and over again and you expect a different outcome, that is the definition of insanity. I would suggest to this member that if he continues asking me the same question over and over and over again, on the balance of probability he is likely to receive the same answer over and over and over again. There is a very good reason for that. It's because there is only one answer to his question.

This member seems to be more concerned with where we find the dollars in this year, in which ministry and which program will perhaps be underutilized or which program will be eliminated, which probably may not be the case, and he will have the opportunity to see that when this year's budget, not next year's but this year's, is reconciled. The actual topic that we should be discussing over here is the additional injection of the almost \$107

million into the system for programs that were deemed to be valuable and programs that needed to be topped up.

So if the member wants to ask me in a variety of ways the same question of where this money is going to be found, Mr. Chair, I have no option but to give him the same answer and speculate on what motivates him to ask the same question over and over again. What I'm wondering right now is that maybe he is not certain whether injecting that \$107 million into education was the right thing to do because he's worried that we may not find it in this year's spending. That is starting to become clear to me. If that is the case, if he thinks that we may have injected dollars that we may not be able to find later and we are being fiscally irresponsible, say so. But if he is supportive of the fact that injecting the dollars into the budget was the right thing to do, if he knows that at the end of the day the budget will be reconciled in just a couple of months and that he will have the opportunity to take the entire last-quarter report home and look through it and see what ministries realized what savings, we can sit down with him and walk him through it. I'm sure the Minister of Finance will enjoy doing that. We will do that.

Mr. Chairman, I don't see how my comments in any way are inciting the gentleman or being insulting. Ask the same question 55 times, and you are going to get the same answer. What is important is that we have to focus on the benefit of the \$107 million. This morning I met with the Alberta School Boards Association, and the member has already heard that apparently it delivered a speech that the Member for Calgary-Buffalo could not hear because it was so well received. Partly it was so well received because of that \$107 million, Mr. Chairman. The money was put in places where educators, not this government but educators, and school boards deemed appropriate. They will be reporting to this member, and he will have the benefit of seeing their report and how the money was spent in the classroom. He will see that the children have benefited from it. But if he wants to focus on which ministry in this government found that \$107 million, let him go to it.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Are there any other members? The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

9:10

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely. Well, let's keep going, then, because we're all just a little crazier tonight. Specifically, you're telling me, Mr. Minister, that at the first news conference after your new leader was elected, she comes out and says: we are going to return the \$107 million that we cut to education, and because we're such fiscally responsible Conservatives, we're going to find in-year savings to do that. The media asked: where are these in-year savings going to come from? She said: we're just going to find them; stay tuned.

So you bring in a supplementary estimate to get this \$107 million, and you don't even have the answer. You're so unprepared that you do not have the answer as to where that \$107 million comes from. Does it come from savings, from the sustainability fund? Did it come from the heritage fund? Did it come from your backyard? Where did it come from? Are you just taking more money, more savings, and just putting it in there without finding the in-year savings that your Premier in her first news conference, almost first words out of her mouth, said: we will find in-year savings in the current budget to pay for this \$107 million. I said: well, that's great; that's exactly what they should do.

So you ask: where? Well, how about the \$350 million we're spending on new MLA offices. Do you think that's a priority for

Albertans? Do you think \$2 billion for carbon capture and storage is a priority for Albertans? Do you really think that? Do you think that your 34 per cent cabinet salary increases were a priority for Albertans? Where does it end? I guess that if you're looking for \$107 million of in-year savings, there are plenty of places to look. You could also have gotten it from the sustainability fund. Maybe that's where you got it.

What I'm asking, Mr. Minister, I think is a very reasonable question since it was the first thing that came out of the new Premier's mouth. Or is this another flip-flop? Is she again flip-flopping, which she is doing literally once or twice a day now it seems? Did she make a promise again and not keep that promise? It sounds to me by your non-answer that she made a promise that she's not keeping. She said: yeah, I'm going to give this \$107 million back to the school boards, and I'm going to find in-year savings to do it. It sounds to me like she got half the promise right. It's kind of like with fixed elections; she kind of went halfway there, you know, but she didn't go the full length. So she's found the \$107 million, but she hasn't found it in in-year savings. Is that what you're saying, Minister? Is this just coming right out of our children's savings again? Is that what's going on?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. The only thing that went halfway is the half-baked idea of their platform and what they're presenting here to this House right now.

If, really, the opposition wants to engage in a debate right now on whether the government did a fiscally prudent thing by injecting \$106 million, game on. Let's talk about that because that's what they seem to be focusing on. The fact is very simple, and this is not unusual. Government MLAs' offices – by the way, I should let you know, Mr. Chairman, that perhaps there's yet another memo that he hasn't read. His office, his opposition office, which will be his opposition office for many, many years to come, or maybe not his but his party's, will also be in that building. So it's not government MLA offices. It'll be opposition MLA offices unless he chooses not to vacate the Annex building. It would be unfortunate, but worse things could happen.

The fact is that they have already pawned that building 55 times over because that building is going to pay for 55 other programs that they identified with savings that could be found. I would strongly encourage them to go to the mayor of Edmonton and tell him that we should not have refurbished that building and left it vacant and paid \$600,000 per year to keep an empty building standing.

The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that this tells you about the depth of the dialogue that you get from that side. Instead of focusing on what we should be focusing on, the well-being of children in the classroom and the fact that we need to maintain valuable educational programs, the fact that we have kids with special needs that need additional help from time to time, the fact that there are pressure points that arise from time to time, and the fact that this member in his own city has pressure points in the education system that he should be focusing on instead of playing politics with education – no, that is something that they will not discuss.

They want to discuss where that \$106 million is going to come from. Well, Mr. Chairman, it's going to come from the government of Alberta. He knows very well that every ministry is looking for in-year savings, and there will be in-year savings in a variety of ministries. At the end of the day the budget will be reconciled, and the odds are that \$106 million will come from dollars currently allocated to the operations of the government of

Alberta. If he honestly wants me not to release the dollars to school boards, not to put additional help into classrooms, not to get those TAs to stay on the job until I can actually pinpoint which ministry that \$106 million is going to come from, say so.

Mr. Anderson: You know, this minister talks a lot about how much he cares about the children. That's great. That's awesome. I love children, I love motherhood, and I love apple pie. But you know what? I'll tell you how much I love children. I love my own children, my four boys, and I know the minister has children or has a child and, I think, another on the way. I'm not sure. Anyway, I know he cares about children as well. The fact of the matter is that I care about my children, so not only do I worry about their education, I worry about their financial future. I worry that we're going to pile upon them billions and billions of dollars in debt, deficit, liabilities, all kinds of different entitlements, and things that they're going to have pay for our irresponsibility because we couldn't figure it out, because at a hundred dollar a barrel oil, we're running a \$6 billion cash shortfall.

When oil goes down to \$50 one day or \$40 because it's not worth as much and there are alternative fuels out there that kind of lessen the demand for it, and our kids come and look – you know, they're a little bit grown up, and everyone is moving out to different areas of the world because there are no jobs in Alberta, and we haven't saved a blinking nickel so we can't pay for all these great social programs that we've built up over the years and the infrastructure. When all that happens, and they look at us and say: "What the heck was the matter with you guys? You had \$10 billion in resources, and you couldn't put a few nickels away for us? Instead you spent it all? Really?" That's what it means to care about the kids, Minister.

I care about the kids just fine. I want to make sure they get an education, and I want to make sure that the bills are paid and that we don't leave them with a mountain of liabilities and debt. If we can't balance our budget at a hundred dollar a barrel oil, then on what planet are we ever going to balance it except for the possibility that oil may one day get to \$120 or \$130? That's the problem I have, so I look at this debate as more fulsome than that. Clearly, we want education for our kids. Clearly, we want schools for our kids. But, clearly, we don't want to leave them up you-know-what creek without a paddle when it comes to the finances of this province. That's the direction we're heading in.

When the Premier comes out and she talks about being all fiscally responsible and she says that we need to make sure we give that school money back to our kids to support their education, that's great. I'm completely in favour of that. But when she says in the next sentence that we're going to do that by not increasing the deficit and we're going to do that by finding in-year savings, I take her at her word. That's what she said she'd do.

What is clear, very clear here, Mr. Chair, is that this minister has, I think, told the Assembly by his nonanswer that there was never any intention to find that \$106 million. There was never any intention. It was another promise that this former PC candidate Premier made in order to get people to vote for her. She had no intention of finding the in-year savings at all. She just wanted the votes. She promised the money. She got it. She got the votes, and she got the premiership.

Mr. Boutilier: Crass politics.

Mr. Anderson: Crass politics is right.

Obviously, we've talked through this issue with the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and I think I've talked about it

two or three times in this session. We've asked very nicely. I complimented the minister earlier tonight. I've tried to ask reasonable questions of him. What is clear is: there was never any intention by this Premier to find in-year savings for this money.

Am I happy that we're giving the children this money? Absolutely. I am very happy about that. But why couldn't you find money in those new MLA offices? I'll say it right here. I don't think the Wildrose has been hiding the fact that they think \$350 million for new MLA offices is not a priority for the people of Alberta. Not just for the people of Airdrie – this is not just only Airdrie. People in Airdrie don't think this is a priority. No, no. I would say the vast majority of people in the city of Edmonton, frankly, don't think that new MLA offices are more important than new schools, this funding or balancing the budget or at least trying to get closer to a balanced budget. I think that that is very clear.

Mr. Hancock: I wonder if the hon. member would permit a question. Do the rules provide for that?

9:20

Mr. Anderson: Absolutely. I have to preface my question. I have to give a preamble so that there's context to the question, so I am getting to the question.

Mr. Mason: You don't have to ask questions.

Mr. Anderson: You don't have to ask questions?

Mr. Mason: Did you want to ask him a question?

Mr. Hancock: Oh, I'd love to ask him a question.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, we're still waiting for an answer, Dave, on this side.

Mr. Anderson: We are waiting for an answer. If we get an answer, then we can ask questions again.

That's the question I have for this minister. Does he have no intention over the next period of time to find this \$107 million out of in-year savings, or is he just going to take it out of our savings? Because what it sounds like to me, according to the second-quarter update that was just released yesterday, the increased deficit is being financed by the sustainability fund.

Am I right to say that this \$107 million – it's a simple question – came out of our children's sustainability fund? Is that correct or not correct? Or did it come out from, you know, the end of the rainbow? From leprechauns? Where did it come from?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chair, it was very difficult to focus on the member's question right after he told me that I have a child on the way, because I wasn't aware of that. As you may appreciate, receiving that news under circumstances like this is a little bit unnerving, but I will try to address some of the things that he may have said.

Mr. Chair, this debate really puzzles me because the question before the House is really simple. The government has made a decision, and these members across the floor will argue that they are supportive of this decision. They really want this \$107 million to go into the classroom. So the debate should be short and simple. The fact is that that was an allocation of dollars that was wisely spent to address issues that definitely needed to be addressed.

Also, a comment was made by the Premier and myself that we will find savings in-year in the operation of the government. The year is not over. There's an entire quarter ahead of us.

As I said earlier, Mr. Chair – this is probably the seventh time that I'm saying the same thing – the budget will be reconciled. They will get to see what savings were made. I'm sure certain departments will find more than \$107 million of savings within their operations. That will be the money. The dollars are not marked. The dollars are fluid, and that will be the case.

The question is not whether we find the dollars but whether we're spending the dollars wisely. I hear that these members are – at face value they'll tell you that they are supportive of spending and investing dollars in education but only at face value, theoretically speaking, because the moment you actually start spending money on education, this is the kind of rhetoric you get.

They will start telling you that spending money leads you to deficit spending, which leads you to debt, which means we're passing debt onto our next generation, and loving children actually doesn't mean spending on education right now but making sure that we don't pass debt on to them in the future. Well, Mr. Chair, you can't speak out of both sides of your mouth. If you really love children and if you profess to be supportive of education and spending on education, then you should be supportive of this expenditure.

If you profess to be proficient in understanding budgets – and this member clearly doesn't seem to be exhibiting such qualities – you should know that at the end of the next quarter the budget will be reconciled. He will be able to take a look at the reconciliation of the budget, and I'm sure that he will find more than \$106 million in year-end savings in some ministries, and then he will find that other ministries like this one and a few others have to come for supplemental spending because programs require such.

Mr. Chair, the question is simple. I think Albertans could conclude from this dialogue, rather bizarre dialogue, what the priorities of each party in this House really are. Some will actually tell you, like ours, that our priority is education and children, and we put our money where our mouth is. Some will just talk about the fact that education is their priority, but the moment you try to address issues within the education world and try to invest dollars into programs, all of a sudden that becomes an issue. That becomes deficit spending. That becomes passing debt on to our next generation, and all of a sudden that is not a wise expenditure. You can see the duplicity in what they're professing.

This is a government that will continue supporting education, that will be addressing issues and pressures from school to school. We will be addressing education in an equitable way, which means that sometimes you need to put different resources in different jurisdictions to make sure that kids throughout the entire province get an equally high level of education. And sometimes it means that you have to look at in-year savings from other ministries.

But these individuals choose to focus on something very narrow because that's all they can understand and not very well, because he hasn't even realized that he hasn't had a paycheque increase over the last years. He still thinks that he is getting his average weekly earnings increases. All they can comprehend is numbers, but you can't assess education simply by numbers, Mr. Chairman, because when you look at education, it is as much quantitative as it is qualitative.

If you want to judge by numbers and if you want to colour by numbers and if that's how you would administer education if you, God forbid, ever had a chance of getting anywhere near power, then God help us and the children that you profess that you love so much. Yes, maybe you would leave them with a massive surplus, but – you know what? – they wouldn't know what to do with it because they wouldn't have the education that they need right now to be able to deal with it later and manage this province, as they will. We are graduating some pretty darn good graduates out of

our schools that are ready for the world and will be the leaders not only in Alberta and not only in Canada but throughout the world. Why? Because education is our priority. We're putting our money where our mouth is and not engaging in dialogue that Albertans now had to be exposed to for the last half an hour, which makes no sense, no rhyme, and no reason.

By the way, if your prediction that I have a child on the way turns out to be true, I thank you for being the first one to let me know.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, you have two minutes and 50 seconds left in this exchange.

Mr. Anderson: Excellent. As we've exhausted, obviously, the intellectual capacity of this minister, I'm going to move on to somebody who I think is articulate enough to actually answer this question since she made the promise. The Premier is here. When she was first elected, the day after, she specifically stated that she would restore the \$107 million in funding for education, which was a promise that she made, indeed, during her leadership. She said that she would find in-year savings to the tune of \$107 million to fund that. So my question to the Premier is simply: where is that \$107 million going to come from? You said it was in your savings. Where is it going to come from? From the sustainability fund or from somewhere else, Madam Premier?

Chair's Ruling Committee of Supply Procedures

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I might remind you that supplementary estimates pursuant to Standing Order 59.02: the debate that's going on is between a member and the minister. A question such as you're wishing to ask might be better posed in question period or in some other format unless the Minister of Education wishes to deal with it.

We've got about a minute and 30 seconds.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. I will gladly deal with that question, Mr. Chairman. Let me reiterate what I said earlier, and I'll try to use a different approach. When the government of Alberta and this Legislature passes a budget for a whole year, this government, which actually is the only one, I believe, in Confederation to do so, provides all Albertans with quarterly reports. The final report is the final reconciliation of the entire budget. All members are privy to looking at it, and Albertans are privy to looking at it. As the member would know, from time to time certain ministries have additional pressures, in-year pressures, because of unforeseeable circumstances, just like changes to average weekly earnings, to which we are contractually bound, or natural disasters in other ministries that need to be addressed, and we find ourselves in a position where we have to come back before the Alberta Legislature. It's the privilege of the Alberta Legislature to grant us additional dollars.

Now, other ministries on the other hand will find, as did the past ministry I was fortunate to be charged with, certain programs that are undersubscribed for one reason or another. Economic conditions in the province are good, and certain programs are simply not tapped into. Those ministries find themselves on the opposite side of the ledger, and they will end up having in-year savings. At the end of the year, Mr. Chairman, the budget is reconciled, and if there are additional dollars, those dollars are used, and they're moved from ministry to ministry.

Hopefully, that helps this member in recognizing where the dollars will come from.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, and I see that Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood is up after that. Calgary-Buffalo, please proceed.

9:30

Mr. Hehr: Well, now I've spent an hour listening to this riveting debate. Nevertheless, I think the question is whether it will be in-year savings or some other thing like that. Do you think we can just get your best efforts to – I think you've sort of said that you're going to provide those throughout the year or at the next budget time. That answer is good enough for me, and I think it should satisfy the rest. Is that sort of what I'm hearing, that you're going to use your best efforts to let us know whether it's in-year savings or if some other event happens? Is that the gist of it, just to clarify for everyone here and sort of to proceed along? I will not get that last hour back in my life, by the way, but, you know, I hear you.

The Deputy Chair: Mr. Minister, you're reminded that section 23(c) deals with needless repetition, but if you wish to repeat once more for the record . . .

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I won't. Obviously, this member understands it, and he finds it perfectly clear. It's just unfortunate that the Wildrose Alliance members are not in a position to understand that.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, do you have any supplementals?

Mr. Hehr: No further questions. I just wanted to make sure I had the parameters clear.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Could we move on, then, to Calgary-Glenmore, please?

Mr. Hinman: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to go back because I'm going to restate in another way what it is. To my understanding, these are supplemental supply estimates. What that means: we go through some of the other ministerial offices, and the one most important that we look at is the hazard in Slave Lake, and we understand why we're applying for new money. But the question that's eluding all of this in education is the fact that it says expenses. The reason the supplemental amount of \$217 million is requested to be provided: the first major line item is \$106 million "for the reinstatement of operating support to public and separate school boards."

Now, the problem that seems to be eluding everyone I think is very simple. The Premier promised and said that that money would come from in-year savings. Therefore, it wouldn't be in here. It's supplemental supply. So what they're saying very plainly is that it's not going to come from in-year savings. What it says is that it's going to come from in-year and be transferred over. What they're saying is that they're going to pull it out because this is all new spending, money that they're taking out of our savings account to pay for these things. It sounds like the minister is cackling over there. I don't know. Maybe he's having an egg, then, if not a child. Why would you put it in here if, in fact, it was in-year savings? It wouldn't need to be in supplemental supply in a request for the \$106 million.

The Deputy Chair: The Minister of Education to comment, please.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chair, yes. Perhaps I need to really pull back and start at the beginning, and that actually will be a benefit to these three members there for the next budgetary process because we will soon be passing a budget. When you pass a budget, you pass it ministry by ministry by ministry. Each ministry is allotted a certain amount of dollars for their operation. Money doesn't freely flow from one ministry to another, where the Minister of Education all of a sudden needs 300 extra million dollars and I pick up the phone and call my friend in another ministry and say: spot me \$300 million. Well, that maybe is how these guys would run government if they ever had a chance to get near one. Thank God that it won't be the case.

What happens is that this Legislature decides how much each ministry gets to spend on operations of their department, and when certain ministries find themselves in a situation where they need additional operating dollars, despite the fact that other ministries actually may be not utilizing all of the dollars that have been allotted to them by this Legislature, you don't just borrow money from each other between ministries and hope that at the end it's a wash and that everything works out just fine. The fact is that each minister has to come before this Legislature so that our duly elected members get to either approve a supplementary supply or not. If this member suggests that this is money up and above the entire government of Alberta, it's ludicrous, and it shows, you know, what level of understanding of the budgetary process he has.

The fact is that these are dollars just for the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education needs additional dollars to enhance the programs that we apparently all agree need to be enhanced. I as a minister will not be receiving dollars from other ministries. There is no free flow of dollars between ministries. This Chamber is the ultimate decision-making Chamber and decides which minister gets how much money, and if money is to be transferred from one ministry to another, it has to happen with the approval of this particular Chamber. One would hope that this member would know that because this is his second term in this Chamber. He's gone through at least seven budgets up to now, and he still thinks that money is flowing free from ministry to ministry. Well, such is not the case.

[Mr. Cao in the chair]

That is why I am standing as a minister before this Chamber, which has the ultimate authority to give me additional dollars, to inject that \$107 million for what these members on one side claim is the right way to spend money, but on the other side they are very hesitant to release the dollars. Well, if you're supportive of it, release the dollars. If you're not, then that's fine. I won't be able to release the dollars. School boards will have to find it in their current, this year's, budgets, which obviously is not what they anticipate doing. Then I will come before you in March asking for a new budget.

There is no free flow of dollars. I hope that member takes time, looks at how the budget works not only in Alberta – it's a parliamentary procedure throughout the Commonwealth – and realizes that the process he was part of for seven years, I believe, now is not working the way he may have thought it did.

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

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Minister. You're such a teacher. You shouldn't have given up that profess-

sion because you're doing a poor job in here, and I think that should be crystal clear for you.

Fair enough on the technicalities of it, the budgetary. That's fine. What you're putting in there, though, and what you haven't explained to any of the opposition that have been asking you a question on whether or not it's going to be in-house findings or whether you're going to rob it from our children's savings, that we supposedly had in there for a heritage savings or a sustainability fund, which isn't sustainable the way you guys spend money – it's pathetic, and it's inexcusable. I don't know how you could possibly talk to your child as they're growing up and tell them that you're running a \$6 billion cash deficit when we have a \$10 billion revenue from our resource sector. Totally unbelievable for him. I don't know how you're going to ever explain that to him. It's just appalling and unacceptable.

Let's go on to some other questions here. Can you please explain how you've failed to estimate properly the \$13 million for the student transportation? Was there a change in the way you are doing the transportation? Did you open up other areas? Why is there an extra \$13 million needed?

Again, you know, it wasn't that long ago, Mr. Chairman, just a little over four years, that this government was needing, again, to buy an election. We've just gone through a process of buying the leadership, where they went to the teachers and said: "Oh, yes. We'll sign a five-year deal. We'll even give you average weekly earnings because that's what we ourselves get." Yet they failed to calculate what that was going to cost them. They said: "Oh, we're giving you an increase, but, well, we don't want to do it on the average weekly earnings. We'll even take you to arbitration or the courts if we need to." Therefore, we have a \$3.2 million shortfall there, which we all understand.

Again, this is just poor government negotiations and failing to even honour their own contract. They have had a long history of doing that for the past seven years that I've been following this. Very disappointing. They have no respect for the rule of law. They think that they make the laws because they have a majority and that they don't need to have precedents, that it's okay to send a bad message to investments around the world saying, "Sure, we said that you could put a bid on our land" – and they bid billions of dollars back then – "and you'll pay this much royalty," and then they shred those contracts.

The Premier is taking a look. She knows about it. She went and listened to the people in downtown Calgary on the disregard for the contracts, that this government has done damage, which is part of the reason why we're running a \$6 billion cash deficit. They set us up for failure there. Very disappointing.

Again, the \$317,000 reinstated for operating support for accredited private schools: why did you cut them? Why weren't they in the original budget, and why do we need to go to supplemental supply to go back and reinstate these things? Let's have stable government, predictable government. They finally have caught on, and they think it's going to save health care because they've got five-year predictable funding, but they don't have predictable funding for education.

9:40

It's just wrong the way that they chop programs, add programs, a hundred million here, cut a hundred million, sign a five-year contract. They don't calculate it out in their so-called intense budget debates, where they put things forward. They don't have the capability of even calculating their own dealings, arguing: "Oh, that isn't what we meant. We wrote out average weekly earnings, but we didn't mean it. We meant something else, so we're not going to pay that." It's just unbelievable the hundreds of

millions of dollars that we need in these different departments other than the fact of such things as in SRD, where we had a disastrous fire. We understand that need.

Year after year when I'm in here, Mr. Chairman, we have these supplemental supplies because of the failure of the government to be able to do their budgeting and to forecast out. I don't know. They seem to think: oh, we'll cut here so that we can give it back in six months, and they'll think it's a treat. It's amazing to me. I don't know what their thought process is on how they do that.

Again, the \$94 million to provide \$24 million for the reprofiling of the Alberta school alternative procurement project. I don't know. Maybe I missed it when I was in my office listening, but why do we need to do the reprofiling of those things? The anticipated construction progress: that's the one on the supplemental page that I can understand, that things progress a little bit quicker, so we need the money in this fiscal year. Understandable. If you could perhaps answer some of those in a more professional manner, it would be appreciated.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, I hope that you will point out to me if or when I'm being unprofessional, and I hope that I haven't been up to now.

When I came to this Chamber with my supplemental requests, I was hoping that we would actually engage in a high-level discussion about how money could be appropriated, how we can enhance our Alberta education system with these dollars, and perhaps on how we can start planning expenditures for next year, focusing on education and on children in the schools. What I'm finding myself doing is engaging in a very low-level discussion about MLA offices in one building with seven floors and language that sometimes is really unbecoming, particularly when you're talking about education.

Also, instead of actually assuming that all members of this House would have a thorough understanding of how the budgeting of this province is done and how it's disposed of by elected members of this Legislature, I'm finding myself as a teacher again, putting on grade 6 social studies, teaching members on how the operation . . . [interjections]

The Chair: Hon. members, we have 20 minutes of back and forth. Now it's the minister's turn.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, if that's what I have to do and if the member feels that I'm a better teacher than an MLA, then that's fine. Let me go back to grade 6 curriculum social studies and do government 101 because, obviously, that will be more appropriate at this point.

What happens, Mr. Chairman, for the benefit of the members over there, is that when the minister receives the budget – obviously, the budget is based on best estimates from last year's expenditures – there are certain projections that you make.

The member really wants to know why there is an additional \$13 million for transportation. Well, let me give him an example that he can understand. Those yellow buses that pull up in front of schools – you know, the kids get on them – every so often have to pull up in front of a gas station, and you have to put fuel into those buses. The fuel that you use is called diesel, Mr. Chairman. It's not leaded, and it's not unleaded. It's a different type of a fuel. It's called diesel. That's what buses use.

Mr. Chairman, because of world global commodity costs and because of increased consumption and decreased production, supply and demand, the cost of diesel went up. When the bus pulls up in front of the gas station and the bus driver fills up the tank,

the bill that he got this year was \$13 million higher than what we anticipated because no one could predict the fact that diesel would be more expensive this year by as much as it was last year. So to answer this member's question, when you now fill up all of those buses and add it up at the end of the year, the bill for diesel was \$13 million more than what we anticipated.

There are no people in Alberta, never mind in this Chamber, that could have predicted that because the price of fuel is based on consumption and supply. It's very difficult to predict with a great deal of accuracy what the consumption will be, what the supply will be, what the interaction of the refining processes of diesel will be, what global commodity prices of oil and bitumen will be, and that resulted in an additional fuel price.

Mr. Hancock: We reinstated the subsidy program.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's right. What also happened, Mr. Chairman – because when the bus driver shows up in front of the gas station to fuel up his bus and the bill is bigger, he can't tell the gas station owner: "Uh-oh. I don't have any money. I can't pay you for the gas." It wouldn't be good. So what we did as the government of Alberta is that we reinstated a program to subsidize the cost of fuel so that school boards can continue fuelling buses so that children can show up to school on time and get home after school. I'm not sure how I did as a grade 6 social studies teacher, but hopefully that answer went through and sunk in.

Mr. Hinman: Well, it's interesting. Thank heavens that the former Education minister is here because the answer, which he finally said after listening to your prolonged gibberish, was that they reinstated the fuel subsidy. A simple answer, yet you spewed out minutes . . . [interjections] Well, because I didn't know, but the past minister finally did, and he told him so that he'd sit down. Unbelievable what rhetoric comes out and how unprofessional it is.

I guess my question, when he wants to talk about diesel, is that I don't think this government even understands the importance of upgrading. It's interesting when you actually upgrade and produce more diesel. For decades diesel was cheaper in this province because we had a surplus. Supply and demand. Actually, one of the things, if we were to do more upgrading, is that it would drive down the price of gas and diesel here in the province because it's a commodity.

The reason we have upgraders in different locations is because once you have the diesel and the gas, it costs too much to pipe that around. That's one of the economic challenges of how much we can actually upgrade here and then have diesel and gas left over. It would drive the price down, which would be a benefit for industry here in the province. Obviously, the minister doesn't understand any of that area. Thanks to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, who gave us the answer in a few quick seconds.

The other question that the minister failed to answer was about the \$94 million to provide \$24 million for the reprofiling of Alberta schools alternative procurement 2 program. The reason I wanted to ask about this is that one of the reasons WestJet is so successful is because they went through a procurement program for their fuel. They knew a year in advance what it was. The government is big enough. They can look after those things. Why don't they look at buying long-term contracts and locking in those prices rather than having a \$13 million hit in the pocketbook at the end and saying, "Wow; we didn't project that," and going from those angles?

They talk all the time, and we commend them when they want to underforecast the price of oil so that we don't overspend. It's

the same on the other side when they're doing the budgeting for these areas, to realize that the price of fuel can go up.

Perhaps he would like to answer on the reprofiling of Alberta schools alternative procurement 2 and why that costs so much more. Hopefully, there's a quick, simple answer. That's all we're really looking for is an expansion on the line item.

9:50

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, there's nothing quick and simple in education. Maybe that is the reason the member has difficulty understanding some of the concepts.

One of the attributes of Alberta Education, Mr. Chairman, is the fact that we have 62 boards administering education in a manner that is conducive to that local area. Yes, I would agree with this member that if you had centralized procurement and if you had the wisdom and the foresight that this member professes to have – if we actually hedged diesel prices, for example, years in advance, knowing that they would go up, then we would be the only ones to have the privilege of understanding what commodity prices would do – then, yes, as a result, we would end up saving dollars. But the fact is that we have 62 school boards that run fairly distinct operations. I think this member would be the first one to say that local autonomy, local decision-making is the best thing in the world since sliced bread. We do have local autonomy and local decision-making at school boards.

They have their own procurement, that this government backstops, obviously, in our annual budget as well. They buy supplies and materials that are responsive to their local needs and local jurisdictions. We as the government of Alberta also provide a variety of services to the 62 school boards. That is why the mathematics is not as simple as this man would like them to be.

The Chair: The 20 minutes have just been completed.

Next is the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Do you want to combine the 20 minutes?

Mr. Mason: No.

The Chair: All right. So you go for 10, and then back and forth, right?

Mr. Mason: I've got a few things to say about how this has gone so far. You know, the minister talked about how this has been bizarre dialogue. It has been to a degree, and I think the minister has made a significant contribution to that.

It is a question of \$107 million that we're asking about, Mr. Chair, and I think that opposition members are entitled in this process to ask legitimate questions about that \$107 million, including where it is to come from, particularly when the Premier and the minister have previously said that it would be found by in-year savings. It is a legitimate question to ask where the money is coming from before we are asked to vote on it, without suggestion that by asking that question, we are asserting that we do not want to spend the \$107 million and restore it to Education. That is completely false, and that allegation or suggestion has been made repeatedly. We deserve an answer to the question of where the \$107 million is going to come from.

Now, I am going to assume, based on what we've gone through, which has wasted quite a bit of time, that the minister doesn't know. I wish he had just said so. I don't think it's appropriate to accuse people who ask a legitimate question of taking a position

that they have not taken or of trivializing the impact of the reductions that took place as a result of the original decision.

So let's move on. I want to ask a question about the P3s and the schools. There's a supplementary amount of \$94.3 million for school facilities infrastructure. Of that, \$24 million is for the reprofiling of the Alberta schools alternative procurement, ASAP 2, projects due to a faster than anticipated construction progress. That involves the construction of 10 new P3 schools in Edmonton and Calgary which are expected to open next September. The government claims that the P3 approach will save \$105 million. The government also claims that the savings on ASAP 1 will save \$97 million over 32 years.

Now, I would like the minister, if he could briefly, to outline where those savings are going to be found, why they're going to be found, and what, in fact, the reprofiling actually amounts to.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Going back to the member's initial comments, I think I have done the best I can to advise the members of this House where that \$107 million will be found. At this point if the members are asking me to pinpoint exactly where that money is going to come from – and I know this member knows very well and that, obviously, we don't need to approach this member the way we had previous speakers. The money will be found in in-year savings when the budget is reconciled. It will be found in the in-year savings of the operations of the government of Alberta.

But where will the money come from? I would have to now predict how the last quarter of the expenditures will go. I may hope that it will come from Sustainable Resource Development, but who knows? There may be a fire, and it won't. I may think that it will come from Human Services, but who knows? All of a sudden they may have a big uptake in a certain program, and it won't. I can't tell you exactly where it's going to come from, but I've said this a million times already tonight: it'll come from the reconciled budget of this year's expenditures. Period. I'm not sure how much more detailed they'll be. I know that this member will agree with that statement. The others: we'll leave them oblivious. Perhaps that's a good place for them to be.

Now to the question on infrastructure construction. You know, that is one that I'm actually personally struggling with right now, and I'm looking forward to discussing that matter with some members of the opposition. The fact is that with the current accounting structures we have in the government of Alberta, it is very difficult to build as many schools as we would like because the need for schools is outpacing our ability to build new schools. Frankly, when I met with the school boards a couple of days ago, I told them that in total we probably have too many schools in Alberta. If you could actually put them on dollies and move them around, we would probably have excess space of maybe 20 to 25 per cent. But, obviously, that can't be done.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is: are we going to continue, as WRA members would want us to do, to find the money for the building of new schools in year 1 of the budget, so that if I announce a school today in your riding, hon. member, I have to find the dollars in my budget this year? Or are we going to do what businesses do and what all Albertans do when they buy homes, where we amortize the cost of the school over the duration that we anticipate the building will serve us?

Currently our system is such that not only in Alberta but in accepted accounting standards, we have to find all the money in this year's budget. I don't care how rich this government may or may not be and I don't care how much of a surplus we may have

or how much money we have stashed away in accounts, we simply will never have enough money to build enough schools if we always have to find the dollars in this year's budget. So alternative ways of financing schools have been found, P3s. I know that the member was opposing that process. Is it ideal? Perhaps not. But it is a process that allows us to build more schools at the same time because of the fact that it allows us to amortize the cost of schools over a longer period of time.

That in itself is an asset to Albertans because we get to announce and build more schools at the same time and have more children attending schools, where they have an environment that's conducive to learning and where communities have schools where the children actually live. If there was a method – and I'm challenging the Treasury Board of our government to find a method – where we could ourselves actually finance the buildings over a period of time, that would be great. That's something that we are focusing on because at the end of the day I don't believe there is anyone in this House who doesn't want to build schools for children. We know kids need schools. The question is: how do we finance them, and how do we make it happen?

Now, the reprofiling is that when we're using third parties and they're constructing the schools on behalf of the government of Alberta, just like with building a house, the contractors want to be paid every time they reach a certain stage of construction. But when they're actually moving ahead of time, which is good because that means they'll complete the building ahead of time and kids will move into classrooms ahead of time, they want to be paid faster. So if I'm anticipating that a school will be built over a period of three years, and all of a sudden the contractor manages to build it in two years, he needs to be paid faster. I need to find the three years' worth of money that I anticipated to pay him over three years in two years. So that is the additional cost.

It's actually a good-news story because that means those projects are moving ahead of schedule, and that means they will be used by Albertans, by children, faster. But it requires the reprofiling because we need to issue the dollars to pay the contractors for their work as they are completing their work faster.

10:00

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much to the minister for that answer. I want to just take issue with one point that the minister has made, and that is that it is necessary, in his view, to have a P3 in order to amortize the cost of the capital construction of a school. Now, we know that most governments, municipal governments as well as provincial and the federal government, do borrow for their capital costs. In fact, it's the normal way of building infrastructure projects. Utilities do that, and governments do that in order to build roads and schools and other infrastructure. You do not have to have a P3 to amortize the cost of a capital project. In fact, it is the case that government can borrow money at a lower interest rate than the private sector. So savings can be found by eliminating the P3 participant, the partner, and having government finance, including self-finance, its own infrastructure projects.

I agree because, you know, I remember when I was first elected to Edmonton city council, and there was a policy in place called pay-as-you-go for capital projects. It meant that we had to pay cash for every major project we wanted to build. It was interesting that it was under Mayor Decore, who was a Liberal but actually had a very conservative approach to financing. At the same time Ralph Klein was the mayor of Calgary, and he was borrowing like crazy to build all the stuff that Calgary has, and Calgary moved ahead. Sometimes if you're prepared to borrow for infrastructure in a responsible way, including planning ahead for the retirement of the debt, the principal and the interest, then it is actually a good

way to go. But I reject the concept that you need to have a private partner in order to do that. What you need is a bank.

The question I have is how these P3s actually operate. We have had some P3 schools open in Edmonton, and there have been some maintenance issues that have arisen as a result of the structure of the P3. The maintenance is required by the private partner, which is in this case Honeywell. Technicians that are working for Honeywell are responsible for fixing mechanical equipment like boilers, and they have to report back to a private partner in Calgary for every maintenance procedure they do. They have to get their replacement parts from Calgary, all of which slows down the process. We've received a report about a public school board school where the heat was out for three weeks because of the time it took for the private partner to fix the heating system.

Now, my question relative to this is: what are the costs of doing things this way? You already have a department in the school board responsible for the maintenance of schools, but certain schools have to be maintained by a private company, and that adds lots of duplication. Particularly if the private partner is located in another city, it creates inefficiencies and higher costs and so on. I'd like to ask the minister: is he aware of this situation, and does he really think that this is the best way to build and maintain our schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, going back to the member's initial comments, in principle I would agree with the member. Unfortunately, adopted accounting standards would not agree with what the member says. It is true that it would perhaps be cheaper even though our P3 partners do benefit from our government's backstopping and ability to borrow at a lower cost – they also get to do that – but the fact is that in Alberta there are really two types of accounting for infrastructure.

The infrastructure that the government of Alberta builds and actually owns and operates – let's say like this building. We can actually amortize the cost of this building if we were to be building it today over the next 30, 40, 50 years and show one-fiftieth on every year's subsequent budget because this building shows on our ledger as a provincial asset. We own this building, so on one side it's an expenditure, and on the other side of the ledger it's an asset. It's basically transferring liquid asset dollars into a solid asset, being a piece of infrastructure. That's what happens in business accounting.

Schools are a different animal, Mr. Chairman, because the moment we construct the school, we almost symbolically, literally hand over the keys to that school to a school board, and the school board runs and operates that particular building. So it shows as an expenditure on one side of our ledger, but it doesn't show as an asset on the other, and that is why we need to find the dollars in this year's budget. Whether we borrow those dollars or not, we need to show them in this year's budget because that building ceases to be an asset that shows on a statement from the Ministry of Education. In a reconciled statement of the entire province it does.

You will find that other provinces that haven't adopted the accounting standards – but they will because all of them will be falling in line – that don't have truly reconciled budgets, their citizens actually never get to see the true picture of the budget of the province because all of the Crown corporations and utility companies and others have their own separate budgets. You never really get to see a reconciled budget of the province. In Alberta you do, but because of the fact that you do, we have that particular barrier to building schools.

That is something that we will overcome. We're working on it with the Treasury Board. Hopefully, we'll find a more innovative way of building schools that will allow us to amortize the cost over a number of years, which I would suggest to you – and I think you would agree with me – would be a sensible thing to do.

Relevant to maintenance of buildings, the P3 contracts are signed in such a manner – and they're subject to public disclosure if the member ever wanted to look at them – that maintenance of the building is built into the price of the building. Honeywell in this case is responsible for operation and maintenance of the building. At the lapsing of the particular contract, they are turning over the building in the condition of a new building, so they have to actually have an elevated level of maintenance of their buildings.

Those buildings actually are built to a somewhat higher standard than a building that we would be building because they know that after 30 years or so, whatever the amortization of that contract is, they will be returning that building to the province, and it has to be in mint shape. It is in their best interests to build it to a good standard and to maintain it as well as possible because if they don't, it will be costing them money because (a) they have to maintain it contractually and (b) they have to turn it over to us in mint condition.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to just indicate that I don't agree with the minister on a number of points, but I think we've spent plenty of time on his ministry. Given that we've got some real answers lately, I'm prepared to move on.

The Chair: So we conclude that session.

Any other hon. member wish to join the debate on Education?

Seeing none, then the next item would be the Minister of Environment and Water.

Environment and Water

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The supplementary estimates amount of \$13 million relates exclusively to the EcoTrust funds. The \$13 million represents the deferral of spending authority not used last fiscal year. In 2008-2009 Alberta received \$155.9 million under the federal government's EcoTrust for clean air and climate change program. When received, the EcoTrust funds were set up as a dedicated funding item in the government of Alberta budget process. Through the annual budget exercise, the department receives spending authority, which includes the dedicated EcoTrust funding. The EcoTrust budget is included under the climate change program. Since this funding is dedicated, any unused spending authority in any year can be deferred to a subsequent fiscal year.

10:10

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to rise and raise some questions regarding the supplementary supply. It appears that the \$13 million was simply deferred, then, from a previous year. I would be interested to hear more about what the Canada EcoTrust is about, how it relates to our climate change commitment, where Climate Change Central fits into that, if that's part of this budget. I'll follow up with another question after this particular one.

Thanks.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, and thank you to the member for the question. So the climate change fund with the federal dollars is a flow-through fund that comes into ours. If the funding isn't spent in a year, it is deferred into the next year's budget. A certain amount of our dollars has gone to Climate Change Central funding.

A couple of items with regard to some of the great programming that's happened with regard to climate change. I'll give you two examples of two projects, one being the Helmholtz Institute. In December 2009 \$25 million was dedicated to a unique international partnership between the University of Alberta and the Helmholtz Association of German research centres to drive innovation towards clean energy production with particular focus on the province's oil sands.

In September 2009 the University of Alberta signed a memorandum of understanding with the Helmholtz Association to establish the Alberta initiative with Helmholtz. The five-year research venture will address key challenges encountered when advancing the sustainable development of Alberta oil sands, including cleaner alternatives to tailings management, more efficient methods of reclamation, and developing renewable energy sources.

Another fine example of dollars that have gone out of this fund is to the city of Edmonton and county of Strathcona initiative. On October 1, 2009, the government of Alberta announced it would provide \$7.5 million in EcoTrust funds to support a renewable energy project that will transfer residual energy from a city of Edmonton biofuels facility to heat a neighbourhood in Strathcona county. The project will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by about 700,000 tonnes per year. An agreement has been worked on with them as well.

So that's just giving you an idea, a flavour of two of the initiatives that have gone forward with regard to some of this federal funding.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the minister. Could the minister speak further to the budgets for Climate Change Central, what they are doing with the money and what the future holds for supplementary support for Climate Change Central?

Mrs. McQueen: Some of the funding that has gone in the past to Climate Change Central really is dealing with some of the energy efficiency programs that we have. We've funded over the last three years a number of millions of dollars of projects with Climate Change Central. We're working with them right now within their current budget year to look at providing additional funds to them for the work that they've done with energy efficiency and the reductions of GHGs with regard to that.

We've worked well with them, Climate Change Central, as well as looking at other ways to become self-sustaining, and they're working with regard to that. Certainly, we've provided from the department many millions of dollars – I think about \$35 million – with regard to the last three years for Climate Change Central on energy efficiency programs.

Dr. Swann: Thank you. I understand they have done some remarkable things working with industry and with individuals: workplaces, individual behaviours, incentives for those things, and obviously appliances and retrofits in homes, that are getting supplemented. The rumour is that some of this will be removed in the future. I guess I was surprised to hear that there were concerns

about the effectiveness of the program when everything that I've heard from the consumer's side of it is that it's been positive. Are there plans to cut out that program or to significantly reduce its support of GHG reductions in Alberta?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the question. With regard to Climate Change Central's future funding, three years ago when they were given funding, they were given that under the condition that they look, as all programs eventually need to look, at becoming self-sustainable, at this. When I spent some time with them on that board as one of the co-chairs, that was certainly an initiative that they were looking at. How do they broaden their horizons? How do they become more sustainable?

As I said earlier in comments about Climate Change Central, we're working through a budget process right now, looking at: when we design new energy efficiency programs, would we run those through Climate Change Central for the coming year? That's what we're looking at with regard to that. We are currently designing what some of those climate change programs may look like with energy efficiency and are certainly looking towards Climate Change for that. We've met with them recently, and certainly they've done good work in that area. I know they're excited about the way that they're branching out as well. So that's where we are currently in the budget process.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you. Shifting to another area of funding. I guess I'm surprised that we didn't hear about supplementary requests for things like water monitoring. It suggests that, you know, in this past year, when there has been so much international attention on our oil sands and the lack of consistent evidence-based, comprehensive monitoring of our water system, especially in the north, we're not moving very quickly on setting up that independent monitoring system that has been so needed for several years in the province. What is the plan there, and how are we going to get things moving more quickly?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you. I do believe that kind of question is a question more aligned for question period. The supplementary request right here is with regard to the excess dollars to transfer. If the hon. member would like to have a question at another time, at question period or sit down and chat about it, I would be more than happy to talk about the monitoring program. I think that piece is really out of scope for what we're talking about here this evening.

Dr. Swann: Well, I do think it's highly relevant since this department cut millions of dollars from its monitoring program in the last couple of years. How do you justify cutting funding and then asking for supplementary funding for some of these greenhouse gas reductions when monitoring is the issue of the day? When the international community is saying that they don't respect our oil and we cut back on funding for monitoring, how does that jibe with good governance?

Mrs. McQueen: Certainly, the request for tonight really is about a transfer of funds that wasn't expended in the last year and is transferred here. What I've said before in question period with regard to the monitoring system: we're working very hard with

regard to a federal-provincial monitoring system to move to a world-class monitoring system. As I've said in question period with regard to that is that I've had a couple of conversations with the federal minister. That conversation is moving along very nicely, and we hope to be able to stand together to have a response to Albertans and Canadians on how we're going to move that forward. We've put a lot of effort with regard to that.

We are taking forward, as well, the recommendations from the Alberta report that was put before us. I'm taking that through the government process. I'm not going to speak about the past; all I can speak about is the present. We are working very hard to make sure that in a very timely manner we are moving the monitoring system forward and that it'll be a system that will be world class and one that Albertans, Canadians will be very respectful of and will be very excited to see.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, you still have 11 minutes left.

Dr. Swann: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Well, I've been very impressed with the vision of Alberta environment to establish cumulative impact assessments. While the words are there, it's pretty hard to believe that anything is happening with technical and expert decisions and monitoring systems that will actually allow us to make cumulative impact assessments, whether it be in the Fort McMurray area or in some of the other systems that were involved. I guess I'm encouraging the minister to show us the money.

10:20

If we're serious about doing this rather sophisticated and vital next phase of environmental monitoring that is based on the cumulative airshed and watershed and soil impacts of the activities in an area, we have to see more than talk for the credibility of this province and especially for our industry to actually be able to make inroads in the international markets and restore some kind of reputation. We're in serious trouble, obviously. The Keystone was to me a symptom of the failure of this government to actually embody some of the principles of good environmental stewardship, set in place standards, get the technical people that you need, and spend the money on monitoring and enforcing those standards. We are going to continue to be in a serious disadvantage with the rest of the world.

On the basis of what I am reading and hearing, there's no connection between what this government has said it's doing on environment and what it actually appears to be spending money on. I think we're at a serious phase in our development in Alberta, especially with respect to the credibility around monitoring cumulative effects, and we're losing not only the international support for what we're doing but the citizens' support in this province. You can only counter the evidence with public relations so long before people start to say: the emperor has no clothes. When I see year after year cuts to Alberta environment, the credibility is gone.

I think not only you as a minister but this whole government needs to take a serious look at what priority our independent monitoring, our standard setting, and our enforcement of those standards takes in this administration.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Chair. Well, I would respectfully disagree with the hon. member. I think Alberta has been very, very proactive in a lot of the work that they've done and in

particular in the areas of the oil sands. When we look at areas of cumulative effects and land-use planning and when we look at the areas of a carbon tax, I think Alberta has been very leading edge in that. But it is time – I will agree with you on this, that there are areas where we need to have continuous improvement.

What I've said and what I'm saying this evening is that we are looking at a monitoring system that will be world class, that will not only be a system that we'll do in conjunction with the federal government so that we have one system in Alberta for the oil sands area. In addition to that, the province of Alberta is looking at having a system that is province-wide. All I can say to you is stay tuned because it's going to happen, and I look forward to having other conversations with you. I think what's really important about this one is that both the federal government and the provincial government share jurisdiction in this area rather than having two different systems that may or may not contradict each other or are vying to see which system is better.

We have good systems of monitoring here in Alberta, and I think we need to be proud of that. I think we need to start talking about the positive things that are happening in this province. Other people are talking about that although you may not see it in the headlines all the time. When people come to visit Alberta, when we go to visit them, when they hear the full facts about all of the good work that happens in the Wood Buffalo region, it's really quite amazing what they have to say.

You know, I had a group out from the European delegation a couple of years ago that I took on a tour, and we made sure that they got to talk to everybody. They got to talk to the NGOs. They got to talk to the First Nations. They got to talk to the different departments. Quite frankly, then we took them up to the Wood Buffalo region and let them see first-hand the excellent work that is happening up there. Their comments to the media were very, very positive. They were actually very surprised at what they saw on the ground and what they heard from Albertans from various opinions compared to what they may have read in their media.

I, for one, am very proud of the work that we in the oil sands and the different industries that we have here in this province. Does that mean we cannot do better? Absolutely, we can do better. We can always work to strive to do better, but I think it's time that we stand up as Albertans and be proud of the work that we're doing, the leading-edge work that we're taking, and start talking about some of that as well and being proud of this province and the resources that are plentiful in this province and making sure that we have those discussions.

So, absolutely, we're going to create a monitoring system that will enhance what we're already doing. But let's not forget that we have good monitoring. We look at the Wood Buffalo area with their monitoring. We look at the biodiversity monitoring. Even with the RAMP monitoring, that's had some criticism, the Royal Society has brought up some good points.

In saying that, though, I think it is time that we have one good monitoring system between the federal government and the provincial government here. Stop duplication. Make sure that we have a system that works across the province in addition to just in the oil sands region. I think there are lots of areas in this province that we can be very, very proud of.

I, for one, like to talk about the cup that's half full and speak about those in addition to saying: let's fix the issues that arise, but let's all as members in this Assembly also start promoting Alberta for the good things that happen in this province rather than just focusing on what may be the negative. We've got many, many good stories here to talk about in Alberta; in particular, the economic region and economic engine of the province, the oil sands. We need to be having some good-news stories about that.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo talks about that quite often and is pretty proud when he speaks of his region. I'm pretty proud when we talk about that as a province.

Hon. member, we are going to be moving forward with this monitoring system across the province. We can do better. As we ramp up industry and development in the oil sands, we can do better. We'll have a system that people can look at.

The other part. If you look at a week or so ago, when we announced the information portal, it was very, very progressive, the work that the department did over the last two or three years. I give them a great deal of credit, and I give the past minister a great deal of credit for bringing that forward. We were happy to announce that a couple of weeks ago. That shows to Albertans the piece that our Premier has talked about, the transparency piece. All of that information was publicly available. What we've done is made sure that it's there and that it's easier for people to access. We had very, very good comments from many sectors with regard to the information portal. I say that that's one thing. In the first month on the job that's the first thing we've looked at.

We were looking at making sure that we have a good agreement with the federal government as we move forward for a federal-provincial monitoring program. I'll say one thing. We're going to do it in a very timely manner, but we're going to get it right when we do it. To me it's more important that if it takes us a little bit more time, and I do mean a little bit more time, that we do it in a fashion that is proper and that is science based and that we have all of the issues we need to do with that. The group that we had with regard to doing the provincial report, I think, has come up with excellent recommendations. We'll take that through the process, and I think that even you, hon. member, will be quite happy with the results of the monitoring program.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You want to join the 20 minutes or 10 minutes?

Mr. Boutilier: I welcome the dialogue.

The Chair: Twenty minutes then.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As a former minister of environment I appreciate the comments that have been made by the existing minister of environment when she talks about my home. I hear so often the dialogue that goes on in this place, and as I look around, there's not one single person other than me that calls Fort McMurray home. I'm very proud.

Relative to the finances here today I have a question to the minister of environment. I'm very proud of being one of the architects behind the formation of Climate Change Central. In doing so, from what I observed in talking to a variety of mayors and councillors and people at the local level – and it's no different than the minister of environment, who also served, I know, with distinction as a mayor in Drayton Valley – one of the issues at the most recent AUMA was the issue of finances. We certainly want to avoid any duplication. There has been a very positive initiative that has been structured with the AUMA on finances relative to Climate Change Central, but it's at the local autonomy level. Specifically, Bob Hawkesworth, a former alderman in Calgary, is chairing that initiative. It's really local initiatives that have played a significant role.

I've been very impressed. I saw their project in terms of what they're doing, engaging local communities. I understand that the

minister has, I think, contributed a couple of million dollars to that project in partnership, and I actually think it was a good investment, connecting Climate Change Central even further down to the grassroots of our communities, where I see local autonomy of groups actually putting it to good work. Especially on the issue of energy efficiency they continue to look for more. I'm wondering if . . .

10:30

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt you, but I just wish to announce that the minimum three hours have expired pursuant to Standing Order 61(1)(b). If you want to continue, go ahead.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Chair, I'll continue on relative to the Ministry of Environment with my nice, positive comments that I'm making to this particular minister. I would like to say that my four-year-old son breathes the air in Fort McMurray every day. I think the investment that is being made in connecting with local communities such as through partners of the AUMA is important. It's been a wise investment of dollars. Consequently, I am saying that with the supplemental estimates I do believe this is a good investment of money. Albertans will be proud of the value they're getting, especially when you're relaying that dollar back to local communities and elected officials at the local level, something that the Wildrose believes in at the local level. We don't believe in the sky down; we believe in the roots up. So I compliment the minister on that.

Now, what I would like to do is to also ask a question on Climate Change Central. In fact, rather than have a duplication, where we can continue to use that outreach within municipalities – we have over 365 municipalities – why wouldn't we tap into their energy? There is an incredible willingness in energy efficiency with them wanting to help. I think there's \$2 million or \$3 million there on energy efficiency. I see some incredibly good, positive things happening, and I compliment the minister on that. It's not often that I compliment this government on things that are going right, but to this particular minister I say: good job, and keep it going.

For my son and for anyone who talks about the oil sands and the economic engine, I just want to say that it's one thing to talk about the economic engine, as I've heard other ministers and the previous Premier talk about, but what's more important is that words are cheap, and it really comes down to the investment. The investments that are being made in my community, that I've called home for over 34 years, we commend. But I will invite and offer this. I find it interesting that there are so many ministers on the other side. They come into my home, but they never extend the courtesy. Having been the minister of environment and the mayor and a member of council for 12 years, I find that actually quite annoying. I never go into a community without talking to a member that has been elected there. But it's seems that this government doesn't do that at all.

I hear the Premier. I want to say that when I taught at the University of Alberta, as a professor at the University of Alberta I would always ask Dr. Taft if I could come into the classroom each and every day. Indeed, what a pleasure it is that he gave me the green light on all occasions to be able to do that.

I want to say this to the minister. Economic engine: let's make it more than just words. This Premier and some ministers over time use the term, but the reality of it is that they bring in people from Europe. You know what? Oh, gee, they bring somebody from Europe to tell them about something that I believe ministers still do not know. I'm not saying this minister, but there are many

ministers on that side who really do not know what my home is all about and what goes on in the oil sands capital of the world, that I'm very proud to have called home for 34 years.

The Chair: Hon. minister, do you want to respond?

Mrs. McQueen: I will respond quickly and thank the hon. member for some of his positive comments. What I would say is that I do agree with you that connecting local communities is a great initiative. As we all know, Mayor Melissa Blake and her council in Wood Buffalo do outstanding work. We know that they do outstanding work there. I'm very proud of the work that they do and the work that not only the hon. member does but all of our cabinet and colleagues do. I will say that it's been an interesting initiative with the local communities. Being a past mayor and councillor, we know that, certainly, a lot of these initiatives with regard to energy efficiency can happen very effectively at the local council.

I will leave it at that.

Mr. Chairman, now that the three hours have expired, I would ask to call the question.

Vote on Supplementary Supply Estimates 2011-12 General Revenue Fund

The Chair: The hon. minister has proposed calling the question. Is any hon. member opposed? Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question.

Those members in favour of each of the resolutions relating to the 2011-2012 supplementary supply estimates for the general revenue fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012, please say aye.

Some Hon. Members: Aye.

The Chair: Opposed, please say no.

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Chair: The motion is carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee now rise and report the supplementary estimates.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Quest: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again. The following resolutions relating to the 2011-2012 supplementary supply estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012, have been approved.

Office of the Auditor General: expense and capital investment, \$975,000.

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer: expense and capital investment, \$1,400,000.

Culture and Community Services: expense, \$20,683,000.

Education: expense, \$217,646,000.

Environment and Water: expense, \$13,000,000.

Human Services: expense, \$18,250,000; capital investment, \$1,132,000.

Justice: capital investment, \$2,940,000.

Municipal Affairs: expense, \$309,890,000; capital investment, \$65,100,000.

Sustainable Resource Development: expense, \$280,000,000.

Tourism, Parks and Recreation: expense, \$5,450,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$250,000.

Transportation: capital investment, \$12,800,000.

The Committee of Supply has also approved the following amounts to be transferred.

Infrastructure: from expense to capital investment, \$58,420,000.

Treasury Board and Enterprise: from capital investment to expense of Advanced Education and Technology, \$13,000,000; to expense of Agriculture and Rural Development, \$25,000,000; to capital investment of Infrastructure, \$21,700,000; to capital investment of Sustainable Resource Development, \$610,000; to expense of Transportation, \$14,000,000, and to capital investment, \$6,400,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Having heard the report, does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

10:40 Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 24

Health Quality Council of Alberta Act

[Debate adjourned November 22: Mr. Kang speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 24, the Health Quality Council of Alberta Act. During the recent PC leadership race the Premier made a very specific promise in order to get selected as leader of the Progressive Conservative Party. This promise set her apart from the crowd. It even got the former Premier so upset as to scold her publicly. He called her a Liberal, in fact, which got her instant attention in the media and support.

Last June in the wake of Dr. Duckett's allegations of rampant queue-jumping by those with connections to the PC Party, she said without equivocation that if elected, she would call a full, independent public inquiry. She said that those claims and others alleging intimidation of health care whistle-blowers demanded an inquiry. She said, quote: it's about what has happened in the system to ensure that we get to the bottom of this and, if there has been any of this, meaning intimidation and so forth, that we all are completely open about it. Unquote. And she added this, quote: I know that it's not something that Albertans are going to accept, and nor should they. That's why we need to have this inquiry. Unquote.

This wasn't just a media stunt either, Mr. Speaker. In September she was still talking about how absolutely urgent it was to have this public judicial inquiry because, quote, in Alberta we've had so much political interference in health care that I don't think Albertans have confidence that the system has been allowed to work. Unquote. She said at that time what the Wildrose and other opposition parties had been saying all along, and she was right at that time.

But as with so many other issues what the Premier said before she was elected as PC leader sounded great, but what she is actually doing as Premier is just as disappointing. Whether it's fixed election dates or balancing the budget or, as we heard earlier today, finding \$107 million of in-year savings or fixing the Human Rights Act to protect free speech, the list is growing every single day. This Premier is constantly – constantly – flip-flopping

on the promises that she made to Albertans and, indeed, to her own party members.

This flip-flop is maybe the most blatant, however, and has the most serious consequences. We need a truly independent and powerful body to look into the dozens of allegations of government intimidation of health care workers and political queue-jumping as well as interference with the health care system. And now we don't know if we're going to get it. We also don't know if we're going to get it before the next election, another promise that she made. She made a promise during the campaign that this public inquiry would be well under way before the next election so that voters would have all that information in front of them, openly and transparently, before they went into the ballot box and selected a member to represent them in the Legislature. She's flip-flopped on that promise by implementing this needless bill, thereby delaying the process so that we will not have this public inquiry before the next election, another broken promise.

As the Premier made perfectly clear when she was running for the PC leadership, the repeated allegations of bullying by politicians and AHS executives could not be handled by anybody but a judge. She was right about that, absolutely right about that. This needed to be done publicly so Albertans could be assured of the truth. It needed to be open so that the media could be there and could report to Albertans on what was happening so they could have their confidence restored in the health care system and those overseeing it. She emphasized that partisan considerations didn't matter. All that mattered was that Albertans' faith in the system was restored. As I said, she even said that it was so very urgent to proceed quickly so that the inquiry would be well under way by the time the next provincial election was called.

But now, Mr. Speaker, she's waffling. She's flip-flopping. I don't even know if waffling or flip-flopping are the right words because there are other words that are unparliamentary to use for what she has done. Clearly, she's breaking a promise. We'll use the parliamentary words. This is a flip-flop of the highest order. To quote today's Premier and then candidate, "It's not something that Albertans are going to accept, nor should they," meaning that this would go on without a public inquiry.

This has to stop. This Premier needs to start keeping the commitment she has made to Albertans, and it starts by keeping her promise to call an independent public judicial inquiry into the allegations of health system intimidation and interference. Earlier this month the Wildrose along with the New Democratic and the Liberal caucuses penned a joint letter to the Premier asking that she keep this promise to Albertans and laid out five criteria that the inquiry must include in order to be legitimate, effective, and in line with the Premier's aforementioned commitment to Albertans on the matter.

These five criteria are as follows. First, the inquiry must be entirely public and open to the media. We don't try extortionists or fraudsters behind closed doors. We do so publicly so that the entire legal process is open and transparent. The point of this inquiry is to restore confidence in our health system and to give health workers the confidence they need to openly advocate for their patients without fear of reprisal.

It is also about who, if anyone, was involved in the intimidation of health professionals, whether any person used their political influence to interfere with the administration of the health system, such as queue-jumping for example, and whether any such intimidation or interference adversely affected the health of patients, the health of Albertans. The inquiry will be considered an absolute sham if it is conducted behind closed doors.

The second criteria. The inquiry must be judicial, meaning that it must be presided over by a qualified judge with the power to

subpoena witnesses and evidence. It is not enough to simply appoint a panel with a judge included on it. A qualified judge should have complete authority over the entire process. He or she must have full powers of subpoena and the experience to properly weigh evidence and assess the credibility, or lack thereof, of the witnesses that come before him or her.

This is not a job for doctors. Not only are they unqualified to weigh evidence and assess witness credibility compared to a judge; they are also conflicted in that they are being asked to judge their fellow health colleagues and current political bosses, who pay them, indirectly, their salaries. The judge must also be a federally, not provincially, appointed judge with absolutely no known ties to the PC Party or the provincial government. This must be a federally appointed judge, just so that there is no appearance of influence even if there isn't.

The third criteria. The inquiry must be focused on alleged wrongdoing, intimidation, or interference by government members, officials, or surrogates with health professionals or the administration of the health system that has resulted in harm to patients, health workers leaving Alberta, unnecessary costs incurred by the health system, or health professionals being forced to stay silent as it pertains to advocating for patient care.

This inquiry is not about health quality issues such as why our ERs are overcrowded and what we can do about it. That would be a question for the Health Quality Council. That is what they are qualified to look into, health quality issues, not allegations of wrongdoing and breaches of ethics, as is being alleged in this case. The promised public inquiry is about the alleged intimidation and government interference with health care, and those are the clear criteria or the clear parameters that a judge-led inquiry or a judge-presided-over inquiry should look into.

10:50

Fourth, the inquiry must be well under way or complete prior to the next election so that voters have the information they need before making a decision at the ballot box. The Premier must not delay the process in order to avoid having uncomfortable findings come out prior to her spring election call. This would be exceptionally cynical and disrespectful to Albertans, who have the right to have all relevant information in front of them before they mark their X in the ballot booth.

This is critical, this point, and it is clear to me above all things. From everything that I've gathered here in the last couple of days, through question period and so forth, the number one reason for this legislation has become quite clear. By using this legislation and this process, by extending it out, by making sure that this goes well into the spring before we have the legislation, before the Health Quality Council makes their first report, and so forth, what it does is that it allows the Premier to extend the process and not get started, in any significant way anyway, until the next election is over with.

Her plan is very simple. Her plan is to make sure that there are no uncomfortable truths that are made public prior to the next election. What an absolutely, frankly, shameful motivation that is. For someone who ran on transparency, who ran on accountability, she's starting to sound like the Member for Calgary-West.

Finally, the inquiry should be called using the Public Inquiries Act. There is no need to pass new legislation as it relates to calling the inquiry. If the Premier wants to pass additional legislation to strengthen the Health Quality Council so that it can better conduct investigations related to health quality issues, that is a good thing, and I think all opposition parties would support that. However, strengthening the Health Quality Council has nothing to do with the public inquiry we are referring to. The public inquiry deals

with alleged wrongdoing, ethical breaches, waste of tax dollars, and the buying-off of health professionals to stay silent. As mentioned, the Health Quality Council deals only with health quality/ care issues, like the reasons behind long ER wait times or dirty surgical instruments in the hospitals and how to solve such issues in the future or keep them from happening.

Delaying the inquiry in order to pass new legislation is unacceptable. It's needless. The Member for Calgary-Mountain View spoke very eloquently earlier about the fact that we have a perfectly legitimate and well-proven, well-used Public Inquiries Act. It's there. We know it works. There is no reason that the week after the new Premier got elected, she couldn't have used that legislation to call this public inquiry. Absolutely no reason. Instead, we sit here. We're now – what? – approaching two months of her being in office, and she has managed to delay, delay, delay. It is absolutely shameful. She is passing this legislation simply in order to delay the process that she could call at any time if she had any true intention of getting to the bottom of the alleged outrageous acts by government officials and AHS officials.

There is only one reason why the government would go to all these lengths to create something that meets some of the Premier's promises out of the Health Quality Council instead of just using the existing Public Inquiries Act. They have something to hide. They are not telling us something. They know that there is something there that is going to be very, very damaging to their political re-election chances, so they will hide it. It may come out a little bit right after the next election, but they're banking that if they can just hold on to that information a little longer, till after the next election, then they can spend a couple of years after that trying to repair the damage and separating themselves from their wrongdoing.

Clearly, people within her party, like the former health minister, who publicly said that he would fight her on this inquiry, have gotten to her and have explained to her how many of their careers could be ruined by a public inquiry. For someone who campaigned as an outsider who would do things differently, it sure didn't take her long to let Albertans down. I hope this Premier flip-flops again on this bill and just calls the public inquiry she promised and knew was needed before her election. She can prove to Albertans that she really is bringing renewal to this government and isn't just the newly crowned queen of the same old boys' club, but, Mr. Speaker, I won't be holding my breath.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments, questions, clarifications.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, I find it interesting. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere had made some very important points and clearly indicated that, you know, this Premier and the word "promise" obviously must have a new meaning to what has gone on over there.

My question to the member, though, is this. You made reference to a former minister of health, that's been often referred to as Mr. Gibberish, but I thought it was important that there were also some very inappropriate actions being taken by the now minister of health, and as that was going on, the question is: do you perceive that potentially the perception is that there was something trying to be hidden by the actual minister of health that stands in here today, that represents under her leadership?

Mr. Anderson: Yes, I would. You know, one of the real issues here is the many conflicts of interest that are present. We have, for example, the former minister of health, now the current Minister

of Finance, who essentially seemed to know what the Health Quality Council was going to find even before they announced their interim report. He said: "Ah, they don't have anything. They've got nothing. There's nothing worth pursuing there." This is before the Health Quality Council even came up with their interim report. That's a questionable thing, isn't it? It's almost like the government has a pre-notion of what's going to happen.

Of course, that calls in the whole question of the independence of the Health Quality Council itself. That's the problem here. I don't blame the members of the Health Quality Council for it. I blame the government members for allowing the perception of bias or the perception of nonindependence that their comments, particularly that minister's comments, have allowed.

The other problem, of course, as you alluded to, is that the current minister of health is allegedly involved in this scandal, as we saw. One of the clearest displays in the last year and a half of this problem was, of course, when the now Leader of the Official Opposition was sitting as an independent after being kicked out of the Tory caucus. He was emotionally talking about his experiences in coming to this country and his family coming to this country and his grandfather, all these incredible stories. He was trying to relate that to why we shouldn't allow intimidation like this to occur in our country, et cetera, et cetera. He was getting slightly quivery in his voice. Apparently, the now minister of health decided that he would phone the head of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dr. P.J. White, and have a conversation with him about the potential mental state of the Official Opposition leader.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under Standing Order 23 I would ask that you call the hon. member to order. He is imputing motives to a member, making allegations against another member. He's specifically referring to the current minister of health, and he's mischaracterizing a statement that was very clearly put on the record by the now minister of health with respect to exactly what happened in the events of that evening. It's inappropriate for this hon. member to mischaracterize those statements, to make up stories, in essence, about what happened that night. What he's talking about is not the truth. The truth was put on the record at the time, and he should be called to order for making allegations against another member.

Mr. Anderson: I get to respond, obviously, to the point of order?

The Deputy Speaker: Yes.

11:00

Mr. Anderson: On the point of order. Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important that the House leader opposite actually describe what part of the story I just said – give me the quote – that was untrue? Let me repeat what I said. I said that the now minister of health, when the now Official Opposition leader was an independent speaking about his experiences and was getting emotional, called Dr. P.J. White, the head of physicians and surgeons, on the phone to say that he had a problem with the mental state of the Official Opposition leader. What was untrue about that statement? I actually heard the phone message, and I think most of the media has, too. What part of that was untrue?

Mr. Hancock: The whole of it, Mr. Speaker. The whole of it is untrue, and he can go back to the statement that was made on the record by the now minister of health at the time, which clearly explained all of the actions at that moment. All of what that member has said is a mischaracterization of what happened at the time and inappropriate to put. [interjections] It is absolutely. It is a total mischaracterization of the events of the day.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak to the purported point of order, which is brought under Standing Order 23(h), which is making allegations against another member, and (i), imputing false or unavowed motives to another member. The events of that time are well known to all of us in this House. We know that the present minister of health, who was not the minister of health at that time, during a very prolonged debate that was taking place in this Chamber, called the president of the Alberta Medical Association and expressed concern about the mental state of the now Leader of the Official Opposition, who was at the time someone who had been suspended from the Progressive Conservative caucus because he had spoken out against government health care policy.

We know that as a result of that, the president of the Medical Association called three doctors who were colleagues of the now Leader of the Official Opposition. We also know that the next day a psychiatrist from the College of Physicians & Surgeons showed up at the constituency office of the Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, now the Leader of the Official Opposition, in order to subject him to a psychiatric evaluation to see if he was able to continue to practise medicine.

Mr. Speaker, the result of that would have been a very serious point of privilege, which we prepared and introduced. Unfortunately, it was withdrawn at the advice of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark's lawyer. I know that the hon. member, now the minister of health . . .

Mr. Boutilier: He was the junior minister then.

Mr. Mason: No, he wasn't.

. . . had made a statement with regard to that incident in which he set out his purported motivations.

I want to just indicate that there is still a great deal of controversy about his actions at that time, which in my view should be part of the subject of any inquiry into intimidation of health care professionals. I won't judge that question, but I will say that on the face of it it is my strongly held belief that that conduct of the minister of health at that time must be part of the investigation of any public inquiry if one is ever actually called.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, in bringing this up and referring to it, does not, in my opinion, offend Standing Order 23(h) and (i) but is, in fact, a legitimate part of the debate around this question as it's obvious that the government is attempting to avoid just the instance that I'm setting forward.

So I would ask you with respect, Mr. Speaker, to rule against the Government House Leader's point of order because I believe it has no merit.

The Deputy Speaker: I heard the point of order, and I heard the defence on that, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood expounded it further. According to my opinion, Standing Order 23(c) says, "persists in needless repetition or raises matters that have been decided during the current session." The matter you talked about has been repeated, and then it has been raised and resolved in the last session. To me that is the point of order. Don't repeat what has been raised before. Resolve it, and go on with the debate on the bill.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order?

The Deputy Speaker: I already ruled on the point of order.

Mr. Mason: This is a new point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: A new point of order?

Mr. Mason: A new point of order. Absolutely.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Point of Order

Explanation of Speaker's Ruling

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, under chapter 2 of the Standing Orders, section 13(2) states that "the Speaker shall explain the reasons for any decision on the request of a Member." My request to you is to explain how you ruled that something was out of order on a point that was not raised in the original point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, I used the standing order here, and I heard on that point of order the debate about it. It clearly says in here, "persists in needless repetition or raises matters that have been decided." Okay? That is the point I want to make on that. That is a point of order that we should pay attention to and not violate. I do not recognize a point of order on a point of order.

Carry on the debate on Bill 24.

Debate Continued

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I feel intimidated into silence. I have nothing else to say.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. member want to join the debate on Bill 24? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak briefly to Bill 24, the Health Quality Council of Alberta Act. This bill does some things. It continues the Health Quality Council. It gives it the regular powers that it has had. It clarifies things. It allows it to make bylaws. It gives the responsibilities of the directors for indemnification, borrowing, access for information, and so on. It says that the council may advise the minister and will look into things requested by the minister and at the request of the minister prepare and submit reports to the minister and so on. Those are its normal activities, and the normal reporting relationship relative to those activities is to the minister of health, whom we've just had a little conversation about during the point of order relative to his history with the broader issue.

11:10

But it also gives new powers to the Health Quality Council, powers that are similar to but not exactly the same as a judicial inquiry, and that's very interesting because until the Premier had promised a judicial inquiry under the inquiries act into allegations of physician intimidation, there was no thought of giving these additional powers here. So it's interesting that when the government has before it the inquiries act, that allows a clear public inquiry headed by a judge, a very clean process, she and the government did not choose to avail themselves of that act. That question has never been properly answered by this government, why they didn't just want to use the Public Inquiries Act to investigate the allegations that had come forward and to meet the

commitment made by the Premier during her run for the PC leadership.

So why, then, do we have a government that goes to all the trouble of amending a piece of legislation for the Health Quality Council to give it these similar powers when it already had those powers under another act? That's a very interesting question, Mr. Speaker, and one that this government has never been able to adequately answer.

I would submit that this creates a problem for the Health Quality Council. The Health Quality Council is closely connected to the health community. It's comprised of individuals who have history, who participate in various professions and various roles in the health system, and that's appropriate for its traditional role of trying to examine the health care system in order to make it safer and more efficient, to make it more effective, to improve it generally, and to look into serious problems in terms of the administration of the health system.

But now it's got these extra powers, and it can set up a quasi-judicial inquiry, so that brings it into conflict with its traditional role. I think it's not a good idea for several reasons but mostly because it goes from being part of the health system and integrated with it, to a degree, to being put in a position where those attributes are no longer an asset to its work and not appropriate to its mandate. The government is creating kind of a Jekyll-and-Hyde situation for the Health Quality Council. Again, it brings us back to the question of why they're doing it.

My view is, Mr. Speaker, that there are two reasons. One is delay. By initiating this legislation we hold up the process of appointing the inquiry and we ensure that the inquiry is not under way in a public way during the next election. Nobody expected a judicial inquiry appointed by this Premier to have completed its work before the next election, but its work might have been under way, and people might be testifying, and it might be embarrassing, and it might have created some negative reaction for this government. So it was better from the government's point of view to simply pass some new legislation and start later. That's one of the things.

The other thing is, Mr. Speaker, that it's not quite going to be the same, and it's certainly going to involve a group of individuals making selections, perhaps of a panel that may include a judge – the Premier said a judge-led inquiry – and a bunch of other people who have some involvement in the health system. Then it brings to bear a whole number of additional biases, filters, and opinions that prevent a clean examination. I think that it is not going to result in getting to the bottom of it. I think that's why the government is doing it here.

I'll make no apology, Mr. Speaker, for being concerned that we are going through a process of legislation by this government, a Health Quality Council that reports to the minister of health when the minister of health himself may be one of the primary witnesses of the inquiry, and he should be, in my view. How is the Health Quality Council going to structure an inquiry that would have that result without seriously compromising itself? That will in my view seriously compromise the legitimacy of the inquiry, that it may or may not call and which may or may not contain people including a judge or other individuals. The government has decided that they're going to go down this route. In my view, the only answer for this seemingly contradictory and duplicative piece of legislation is so that the government can manage the outcome of this inquiry.

Now, the present Minister of Finance, who was a notorious minister of health, has come out publicly against the inquiry, saying that it's just going to show that the allegations that have been made are just figments of Edmonton-Meadowlark's imagin-

ation. He's already prejudged it, Mr. Speaker. He's already determined that an inquiry is not needed. But that minister should also be called as a witness for this inquiry because under his watch as minister of health there were a number of senior health officials, doctors, public health officials whose positions were terminated apparently over a dispute about a public awareness campaign for a syphilis outbreak. They have signed nondisclosure agreements, which seems to be part of the standard pattern when the government runs off people that they don't agree with in the health system, people that cause them problems.

Now, I think the minister's sensibilities were offended by the fact that this campaign talked publicly about the outbreak of syphilis, but the result of cancelling that campaign, Mr. Speaker, was that the syphilis outbreak continued unchecked and we had Third World rates of syphilis in this province and babies with congenital syphilis who died. That, in my view, is the result of political interference by the former minister and should be the subject of this inquiry. But I don't think with this legislation that's ever going to happen. I know perfectly well why that minister does not want this inquiry to go ahead, because he is one of the people that should be testifying, and there would be a lot of people testifying about his actions as well.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation is a contrived way of the government attempting to control its message, to prevent damage to its reputation, to prevent the facts from coming out. This piece of legislation is part of the ongoing cover-up of this government, of their culpability in the interference in the health care system that has caused so many people to suffer so much. So I'm opposed to this particular piece of legislation and very strongly so.

I think that the Health Quality Council does very good work. It does really good work in examining procedures that take place in the health care system and in hospitals, but it is not appropriate that it should be conducting a public inquiry. It is not the body that should be handling this. It is a way for the Premier to avoid the promise that she made to Albertans when she was running for leader of the Progressive Conservative Party.

I will oppose this legislation. I think all Albertans need to ask the basic question: if there's going to be a public inquiry, then why don't we use the Public Inquiries Act, which is already there for exactly that purpose? Until the government can answer that question for Albertans, I don't think this is going to wash.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

11:20

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows five minutes for comments and questions. The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. I would like to ask the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood about a point he raised. It's interesting that under moving away from the Public Inquiries Act, this government indicated that the actual decision would be made by cabinet. I have to ask through the Speaker to the hon. member, you know, about the comment that has been made that the fox is in the henhouse. One has to ask the question about the role cabinet plays in this because it truly is not independent, in fact, because of the fact that someone that is brought into the controversy of the whole episode of what's going on in this review is directly involved as minister of health. Relative to the perception that it's creating for Albertans, what does he think of that?

Mr. Mason: As I indicated in my comments, hon. member, I think that is part of the problem. This is a body that for its routine activities responds to the minister of health, and the minister of

health, in my view, needs to be examined on his role in the intimidation of one of the members of this House. I think that it creates a conflict of interest with respect to the Health Quality Council conducting the inquiry.

The Deputy Speaker: Seeing no others on Standing Order 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the bill.

Dr. Taft: On the bill, Mr. Speaker. Much has been said, so I will keep my comments brief and to the point. I particularly commend readers to the comments made by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View as well as other members.

But this is what I would like to say. Bill 24 is unnecessary, and it's an expensive delaying tactic. It's intended to avoid accountability instead of to embrace accountability. It's a broken promise, no more, no less, on a matter that potentially involves life and death, truth and lies, insiders and outsiders, and courage and cowardice. It's a sorry and cynical mark for a new Premier to make, and it should be withdrawn.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other speakers wish to join the debate?

Seeing none, the chair shall now call the question on the bill.

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

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 11:24 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Allred	Hancock	Mitzel
Benito	Johnson	Quest
Berger	Johnston	Renner
Bhullar	Leskiw	Sandhu
Brown	Liepert	Sarich
Campbell	Lukaszuk	Snelgrove
Denis	Marz	Tarchuk
Fawcett	McQueen	Weadick
Groeneveld		

Against the motion:

Anderson	Hinman	Swann
Boutilier	Mason	Taft
Totals:	For – 25	Against – 6

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a second time]

Bill 25 Child and Youth Advocate Act

[Adjourned debate November 22: Mr. Hancock]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to rise and speak to Bill 25, the Child and Youth Advocate Act, something that this caucus has been pressing for for a long time now. I'm very pleased to see a very progressive minister embrace this and move it forward into legislation. The Child and Youth Advocate is a critical role to ensure the monitoring and standards in the child and youth care system, dealing with problem issues,

injury, deaths in care, probably the most vulnerable population of all that government deals with, and now we're seeing a serious commitment, I think, to ensuring that the children, particularly those where there are some unfortunate adverse events that happen, are going to be addressed more vigorously.

The kind of ongoing monitoring and changes to the system are going to go into independent reporting to the Legislature, and there won't be the concerns that I think have been raised on a number of occasions, that it's politically difficult for a minister to be dealing with some of these reports and not be seen as having some kind of conflict of interest.

The Child and Youth Advocate has also got at his or her disposal a council for quality assurance, providing access to the advocate for incidents and referral outside that quality assurance council to even a second investigative department.

11:40

Admittedly, the Child and Youth Advocate is chosen by the cabinet, but there is now a degree of separation between the reporting requirements on these sensitive and critical issues to the Legislature, where there can be seen to be a more objective and impartial review of some of the most serious problems, injuries, and risks, a learning process for us all, in fact. We all become much better able to do the oversight and make recommendations for improvements that have to be ongoing in such a complex and challenging area as children and families at a disadvantage and in this case separated from, in some cases, parents and kin.

This process has been strengthened as a result of the changes. Indeed, there's some clarification around confidentiality and what aspects of some of these cases can be protected in privacy when they will not necessarily serve the public interest. But those that can and will serve the public interest will be made public so that there can be the learning and the changes that are needed in how we identify, how we counsel, how we work with families, and ultimately achieve greater success in terms of the health, safety, and the achievement of their human potential under very difficult circumstances.

In looking at some of these issues, it's something that I certainly will be interested in hearing more debate on and seeing more of the details relating to this bill, but at the current time I think there is a lot to be said for the changes that are being made. With that, I'll take my seat.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo on the bill.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you. On the bill, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a privilege to stand in this House to discuss the proposed adoption of a Child and Youth Advocate as an independent officer of this Legislature and accountable to this Legislature. I am very encouraged by this proposed bill as I, myself, like many people in here, many members, have young children. I, like everyone else, support the intention of this bill to help young people at risk in our province.

The disturbing number of deaths and injuries that have happened to children in government care is a real cause for concern for my constituents and all Albertans. With that in mind, I find it helpful that we finally have some legislation in front of us that will help the government of the day in an area where Albertans are wondering why it hasn't happened sooner. But that being the case, better late than never.

I particularly want to congratulate the government since the Wildrose were the first to indicate that we supported the advocate as an independent officer of this Legislature.

Mr. Mason: Point of order.

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, it is sometimes necessary to rise in this place to end absurdity and to set the record straight, so I'm rising on Standing Order 23, "abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." Given that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has single-handedly championed this issue for years and fought to make it a provincial issue and the government has finally caved in and adopted her proposal, it is abusive and insulting to her efforts for this hon. member to claim that they had anything whatsoever to do with it.

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

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to clarify that the Wildrose is the first conservative party to in fact come forward.

The Deputy Speaker: A point of clarification has been made, so no point of order.

Go ahead, hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, on the bill.

Debate Continued

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. After that important point of order was raised, I would like to continue on with my thoughts relative to this important initiative that we are very proud to share with other members and other parties in this House.

Mr. Speaker, clearly, we believe that my colleagues here in the Wildrose have been asking the government to do something like this for some time, and it is better late than never. We have been very consistent. I might add that being consistent is something that means you're not flip-flopping, that you're being consistent. We believe the initiative relative to this important piece of legislation on the Child and Youth Advocate being independent of the government is important, and I commend the government. As much as I will raise comments when I don't like things that the government is doing, I will commend them occasionally.

You might remember that we have also long called for a variety of situations similar to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona had initiated as well. In terms of calling for something and the better sharing of information between public bodies, a clarification of confidentiality in regard to these cases is also very important. This is something that I believe the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek had been pushing for for a variety of reasons; for instance, for a safer communities taskforce. As you recall, the previous Justice minister wasn't quite able to get that job done, but I'm glad that the government finally decided to follow an important initiative by the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, which I commend, to include this in the legislation as well.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, there is obviously, I think, some real promise here, where we see one of the government's biggest shortcomings being addressed. For too long it has been entirely up to the minister to decide if something gets looked into, and often the same minister has something to lose by the investigation. This is the problem with our health care system. We'll see over the next few weeks if those problems are adequately addressed, which we don't believe under Bill 24 because it's falling short of the promise that was made.

Again, I remind members that we believe in commitments, not making false promises. I will say that I know that I have my

doubts, but I will give the benefit of hearing the debate in the days and hours and weeks ahead.

One of the things that we need assurance of in debating this bill is whether it is adequately addressed in this bill. Now, on the one hand we can feel confident about this because there is an independent advocate, but then it gets muddled because there is also a child and family services council for quality assurance. So it looks like there might be a muddying of mandates here, and we want to ensure that that is rectified. Maybe this council appointed by the minister will somehow reduce the powers of the advocate, and we certainly do not want to see that happen. We'll see how the government presents its case, and we'll be watching very vigilantly and closely as this case is a work-in-progress.

It seems that it is a positive step, though, that this council will not only be activated when summoned by the minister but that, instead, the functions and powers of the council will be embedded in the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. Again, we'll have to see how the government envisions this council working with the advocate's office.

Still, Mr. Speaker, I feel that this bill is clearly, I think, missing a few things that I will give friendly suggestions on at the appropriate time. Maybe the government can explain how this council and the advocate are up to the job. For instance, the Premier made a promise in light of a situation that took place not that long ago, as you know, with a youngster, a tragedy, that we know the Premier had spoken to as well. It was a tragic situation.

11:50

The Premier said in the summertime during her leadership campaign that we need a children's serious incident review team. Now, this would be modelled on the Alberta Serious Incident Response Team, that has the tools to look into police shootings and other delicate things that require independence. But that is not here explicitly, and I look forward to the government explaining how this bill is even better.

You know, this provides a great opportunity to get some of the right legislation in place, and I compliment the initiative that's in front of us. I wish I could stand more often to say that I like what is coming from across the way when it comes to legislation. But I'm pleased to say that they are listening to the conservative party that brought this up. As mentioned earlier, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has been a real advocate of that as well.

I might add that we're very proud that the Wildrose has a former minister of children's services, who has shown a stellar record relative to helping children and protecting children, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Let me say, Mr. Speaker, that while I do think the bill is a good first step, I look forward to other comments and questions as we go forward. I want to say that we believe that Alberta used to be a leader on a lot of things, and it's time for us to catch up. It's like how we were the first province with balanced budgets, but lately we have fallen behind. Now it's other provinces like B.C. and Saskatchewan that are leading in things like accountability. [interjection] I am hearing what the member behind has mentioned to me, certainly accountability and fiscal responsibility. It's sad, I will say, in the fact of what has taken place.

We are one of the last provinces to make the advocate independent. With that in mind, Mr. Speaker, I would like to say to the government: welcome to the 21st century. We're still a bit concerned about how we can be assured that the Child and Youth Advocate won't become a political appointment who deliberately will not hold the government accountable. Sometimes it seems like every henhouse in the province has a PC fox guarding it. We know that apart from the advocate council members will be

appointed by the minister, and this perhaps could be a problem. But we are assured that the advocate will be an officer of this Legislature, that all members proudly serve in, and that means the opposition members at least get to be part of the vetting committee. Even if we're outnumbered, that's still important.

Now, without saying anything disparaging about the current advocate, this Legislature has a clause saying that the current advocate, chosen in the past by this government, will stay in the post. This seems unusual and goes against the definition of being an officer of the Legislature. We'll have to review this in the debate. I think all the opposition parties will likely question whether it wouldn't be better to let the current individual reapply for the post so Albertans are reassured the very best person is in the job.

We have seen in the past month or so, with the appointment of our new trade representative to Asia and with the new executive director of the Progressive Conservative Party, that this Premier is a very big fan of political appointments and not holding open competitions. That concerns us, and I think it concerns Albertans.

I, quite frankly, worry that our new Child and Youth Advocate could be another Gary Mar or a Kelley Charlebois, who will not stand up to this Premier when needed. We want the next person that is appointed by this Legislature to stand up for children. Again, I'm not in any way referring to the individual currently in the post. In fact, I know little about him, but that's the point. The opposition should know a lot about officers of the Legislature because they are vetted by them. The advocate must be independent, so we'll be looking for a bit more reassurance that the post won't be filled by yet another insider from the good old boys' club.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will say that another thing that boggles my mind is that there is not any explicit mention of co-operation with aboriginal affairs and aboriginal relations. The word "aboriginal" doesn't appear anywhere in the whole document. I will say as a former minister of aboriginal relations that I think it's unfortunate because if you look at the data, it's very clear that our aboriginal children are disproportionately at risk, and we want to continue to care for all Alberta children. Why would the advocate not have the clear mandate to co-operate with aboriginal affairs, to directly help those most affected? Like a lot of things with this government, it truly does boggle the mind.

That is something that I could see helping aboriginals in and around my community of Fort McMurray and across Alberta, and

it bothers me that it's not included in this legislation. I hope that at the appropriate time some alterations could be made there in amendments.

On a final concern, I want to be assured of this, that the advocate will have the power to access cabinet documents. Whatever rules there are about going public with the information, we want to be assured that this advocate, like in British Columbia, has the ability to see how the cabinet is responding to issues that affect children, not a behind-closed-doors approach but, rather, that it is open and transparent so that all Albertans can see.

This government is notorious for its contempt for transparency, so if the British Columbia government found it inconvenient for their advocate to be snooping around for the truth inside the dome, I'm guessing that this government isn't even letting it get on the table. That is very unfortunate as well.

I look forward to the minister setting me straight down the road because I believe the minister is to be commended, in his new gigantic ministry of quite a lot of things, to not lose sight of the importance of the children. I say that as the dad of a four-year-old son.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of comments, questions, clarification. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo would, in order to afford the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona the chance to speak to this bill at second reading, move to adjourn the debate.

Mr. Boutilier: Sure. It would be my honour, Mr. Speaker, to move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this is the first full day of session since we returned to deal with government business and since we've made such good progress, I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:59 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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