



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, February 13, 2012

Issue 4

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

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Progressive Conservative: 67 Alberta Liberal: 8 Wildrose: 4 New Democrat: 2 Alberta: 1 Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, February 13, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask for renewed strength in the awareness of our duty and privilege as members of the Legislature. We ask for the protection of this Assembly and also the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, we will now deal with the singing of our national anthem. I'm going to call on Mr. Paul Lorieau, who is in the Speaker's gallery, to lead us, and I would ask that all participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Water.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you a group of outstanding, hard-working, and dedicated staff members from our Department of Environment and Water. Today we have over 20 public service employees from Alberta Environment and Water offices across our province. I'm sure that my colleagues feel the same when I thank you all for joining us and for the outstanding work you do each and every day for Albertans. They're in the members' gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the acknowledgement of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a huge honour for me to introduce to you and through you to all members today a large group of people from the Terrace Ridge school in Lacombe. There are 47 visitors, 37 bright young students in grade 6 and a number of teachers and parent helpers that have come along with them. The teachers are Mrs. Pat Jenkins, Mrs. Billie Lafleche, Mr. Brent Buchanan, and Mrs. Letha Maddox, and the parent helpers are Mr. Randy Hofer, Mr. Geoffrey Thomson, Mr. Brent Bailey, Mrs. Lisa Mydonick, Mrs. Sandy Toepfer, and Mrs. Maureen Cruickshank. These bright young students have been in the Legislature this morning and this afternoon and have toured around. I hope that they've enjoyed their visit, of course. I want to thank the large number of parents and helpers for taking this time to show interest in their students' education and also in our democracy at work here. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. I believe they're in the public gallery.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great deal of pleasure for me today to introduce to you and through you a young man that's very special to me. He's my oldest grandson, Ethan Marz, from the Terrace Ridge school in Lacombe. He's been chosen today to represent his class in the mock parliament as the Premier. My advice to him today: I don't know what policies he's going to be introducing later on, but hopefully they're good, sound, Conservative policies. If he would rise in the public gallery and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to rise on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Rutherford to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of students and their teacher and accompanying parent from St. Stanislaus school in the constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford. They are attending the School at the Legislature this week, and they're seated in the members' gallery. Accompanying the 18 students is their teacher Jennifer Steedsman and parent volunteer Angela Armstrong. I'd ask that the students, teacher, and parent from St. Stanislaus school please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you several political science students from King's University College in Edmonton. They are led by their professor Dr. Michael DeMoor and are part of a bright, enthusiastic class of aspiring politicians. The students visiting today are Josh Culling, Simon Meijers, Terri McCausland, Elvis Moturi, and Lenn Wheatley. These students are here to tour the Legislature Building and observe the members in the House as they learn more about our political traditions and processes in our province. The guests are seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a very successful and talented young Albertan, Amanda Hughes from Calmar. Amanda was chosen from 123 of the province's top 4-H members to receive the Alberta 4-H program's most prestigious award, the Premier's award. Amanda is currently in her 12th year as a member of the Calmar Heart of the Country 4-H Club and has held executive positions such as president, secretary, treasurer, and club reporter. She is currently a third-year education student at the University of Alberta and is still very active in her 4-H career, earning top honours at the provincial 4-H Horse Classic in 2010, and has attended international events as a representative of Alberta 4-H. Her exceptional talents have earned her this great honour. During this year she will represent youth and 4-H at various events around the province. Amanda is visiting us today and meeting with the Premier and her local MLA, the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Mr. Speaker, Amanda is seated in the members' gallery with her parents, Michael and Tracy, and her sisters, Holly and Lauren. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today in the House to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mr. Cliff Chapman, who is seated in your gallery. I met Cliff in Lougheed at Oktoberfest. He's one of the most remarkable Albertans I've encountered in my life. He worked as a roughneck in the oil and gas fields in Viking and Sundre and all over western Alberta. He was employed as a locomotive fireman, shovelling coal on steam locomotives in Hanna in the early 1950s. He continued to work on the railway and worked at virtually every terminal west of Hanna all the way to Vancouver before finally, after being qualified as a locomotive engineer, he changed to a career with the Edmonton Police Service in 1960. He had 29 years of service as a sworn member of the Edmonton Police Service, then retired and rejoined as a civilian member. He has over 50 years of dedicated service with the Edmonton Police Service, which is a record I think we would be hard-pressed to find duplicated in pretty much any police service in this country.

He also is no stranger to this House as he worked as a security member in the Legislative Assembly for nine years during the 1990s. Lastly, the only thing he really wanted me to point out was that he is married to the best Peruvian cook in the world. Mr. Speaker, I'd ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am extremely honoured to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a number of members of the Alberta Funeral Service Association. They are seated today in the public gallery, and they have come to hear the response from the government to a series of questions that I'm going to put forward on their behalf. Joining us today are Mitch Thomson, the president of the Alberta Funeral Service Association; Sheila Van Alstyne, the vice-president of AFSA; Gary Lynn, a funeral director and board member from Edmonton; Gerry Connelly, a funeral business owner and member of AFSA from Edmonton; Jerry Smolyk, a funeral business owner and member of AFSA from Edmonton; and Deanna Schroeder, the executive administrator of the Alberta Funeral Service Association. Please join me in welcoming these wonderful members who contribute so much to our province. Thank you for coming.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members Len Skowronski, leader of the Alberta Social Credit Party. Len and the Sacred picketers outside are here today because they are very concerned about the billions of dollars Albertans are losing in added value from our oil sands by exporting bitumen instead of synthetic crude oil. They hope to encourage the government to legislate a policy that would require all bitumen produced from our oil sands to be upgraded to synthetic crude oil in Alberta. Please stand, Len, and receive the greetings of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly my

guests from the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees and their Committee on Political Action. AUPE is Alberta's largest union and represents nearly 80,000 hard-working Albertans. The Alberta NDP is proud to stand with AUPE members in protecting and improving public services that benefit all Albertans. I would now like to ask my guests to rise as I call their names and to remain standing and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly: Glen Scott, Kendra Ness, Christina Sefton, Bill Piggott, Gerald Forbes, Rod Auramenko, Henry Wakoluk, Heather Stocking, and Andrew Hanon.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly eight guests here in recognition of the silver jubilee of Glengarry elementary school's Arabic bilingual program. I've visited with the administration, teachers, staff, and students at this school on numerous occasions, and the learning environment is filled with tremendous commitment and strong, unwavering support for student success.

My guests from the school are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to please rise as I mention their names: Randy Billey, principal of Glengarry elementary school; Hassan Seifeddine, assistant principal, Glengarry elementary school; Taher Shayeb, teacher for grades 5 and 6; Houda Trabelsi, school council chair; Mazina Chamseddine, school council member; and two grade 6 students from the school who will be the next generation of leaders, for sure. They include Rana Habbab and Ibrahim Keshta. I also have with us this afternoon Yazan Haymour, president of the Canadian Arab Friendship Association.

Mr. Speaker, these representatives joining us today demonstrate the foundational support and collaboration that is central to the successful longevity of Glengarry school's Arabic bilingual program. I would now ask that they receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of the Legislative Assembly a gentleman who is a resident of northeast Edmonton, Wayne Sorenson. Wayne worked for the transportation and utilities department for 29 and a half years with the provincial government. During that time he was employed as a structural draftsman, chief draftsman, and also an occupational health and safety officer. His duties included drafting the design of bridges, overpasses, and highways as well as contract preparation for the tendering process. As an occupational health and safety officer he was involved in the development and delivery of training programs and conducted accident investigations, safety audits, and safety inspections, which contributed to the overall accident reduction for the department.

I will be tabling a document on behalf of Mr. Sorenson later on in the Routine. He is very concerned about the Alberta public service pension plans. He's now in the public gallery. I would ask him – he has already risen – to please receive the warm, traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Minister of Energy.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce Mr. Brian Heidecker, who's joining us today. Brian has a distinguished career as a rancher with Drylander Ranch. More recently he has

served as the chairman of the board of governors at the University of Alberta. He's had numerous other public service commitments, and most recently he's been the chairman of the critical transmission infrastructure review committee, that will be delivering its report later this afternoon. Will everyone please welcome Brian.

Members' Statements

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

Glengarry Elementary School Arabic Bilingual Program Silver Jubilee

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour and privilege to rise today in recognition of the silver jubilee of Glengarry elementary school's Arabic bilingual program in Edmonton public schools. Over 25 years ago Glengarry elementary school responded to the needs of their students and community and implemented an innovative Arabic bilingual program. In doing so, Glengarry school became the first to offer Arabic bilingual programming in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, Glengarry school embraces and emulates the Edmonton public school's mission statement by providing students with alternative paths to achieve academic and personal success. The Glengarry school Arabic bilingual program opened with an enrolment of 32 kindergarten and grade 1 students. Today it has grown into a partial immersion program serving 587 Glengarry kindergarten to grade 6 students.

Students receive 35 per cent of their programming in Arabic, including Arabic language arts, health, physical education, art, and music. The remaining 65 per cent of instruction is in English and covers the following subjects: English language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and computer studies.

Mr. Speaker, no previous knowledge of Arabic is required for children entering the Arabic bilingual program in kindergarten or grade 1. This provides a unique opportunity for children from diverse backgrounds to learn Arabic.

Glengarry school's Arabic bilingual program is strongly supported by a community of children, educators, parents, community, businesses, and organizations. Through the long-standing efforts of a supportive school council, a dynamic relationship with the Canadian Arab Friendship Association, and the continued and expanding support of Edmonton public schools Glengarry school strives for best practices in its interactive approach to teaching and student learning.

Without question, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to commend and congratulate Glengarry elementary school and school community for all their partners and their longevity of success. They have a vision and have established the Arabic bilingual program, and I wish them continued success.

Assalamu Alaikum. Peace be with you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Oral Question Period

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's fudge-it budget inflates future revenues and blatantly ignores threats to Alberta's economy: the European debt crisis, continuing global economic uncertainty, the rising Canadian dollar, the slowdown in

countries like India and China. Given that the Premier warned about these threats last fall and repeated them in the government's recent fiscal plan, will the Premier tell us why the government is now inflating estimates of real growth in Alberta's GDP, personal income, and corporate profits instead of using the average of private forecasts?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is an exciting time for Alberta. You know what? It's not just the government of Alberta that thinks that. It's the Toronto-Dominion Bank. It's the Royal Bank of Canada. It's people that look at these issues every day and decide what the future of our country and the future of our province will be. They are as optimistic about the future of Alberta as we are, and it's unfortunate the opposition doesn't feel the same way.

1:50

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, we're all optimistic about Alberta for the future. Absolutely. We're just responsible about it. Given that the elephant in the room is a structural deficit that this Premier is afraid to talk about before an election, why not say yes to closing the spending gap with a fair tax that allows us to balance the budget and start saving some of our resource revenue for our kids?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I will always say yes to exactly what we have now, but I will say no to the hon. member's proposals for tax increases. I will say that today, and I will say it tomorrow.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a Premier and a party that has been saying no to the people and continues to say no.

Given that the natural resource revenues are volatile at the best of times and especially volatile in times of international economic instability, can the Premier tell Albertans if it's fundamentally right to blow 100 per cent of our resource heritage fund and stability fund revenue just to pay for the daily bills? Is it right, Premier?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what's been wonderful in the past 40 years in this province is that we've had a government that's understood the ups and downs of economic change. We actually have a sustainability fund that's in place to deal with exactly the circumstances that we're facing right now. I'm pretty excited, as are Albertans, that we've been able to forecast that this is the last year we'll need to deal with that. We'll still have a balance in the sustainability fund, and that's good fiscal management on behalf of Albertans.

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

Electricity Prices

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What's wonderful is that hard-working Albertans work hard each and every day despite what this government does to them. On Thursday the Minister of Energy's far-from-truthful defence of electricity deregulation cited debt held by publicly owned power companies such as Hydro-Québec. The fact is that Hydro-Québec has assets \$27 billion greater than its debt, and it pays the Quebec government nearly \$2 billion in dividends. That's some debt. How does the Premier plan to discipline the minister for his highly creative response in this House?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I think anybody who can do simple math can take the population of Quebec, divide \$32 billion by their population, and figure out how much their beautiful electricity prices are helping them. I'll give you one other example. In Ontario today the government is paying 80 cents a kilowatt hour and selling it for 7 cents. Who makes up the difference? Oh, I think that would be the consumer.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, there's no doubt why we have a deficit with oil at a hundred bucks a barrel. This government can't do math.

Given that the facts simply do not support this government's headlong dive into electricity deregulation, does the Premier have an honest answer – an honest answer – as to why this government ignores the fact that deregulation has cost Albertans billions and gives them the highest utility rates in the nation?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, this is into the second week now of these folks on the other side trying to make short-term political hay at the expense of Alberta consumers. I'm here to tell you today that you can pick up the phone, call 11 different providers, and if you're on the regulated rate option, decrease your costs by 42 per cent. Today. Pick up the phone and do it. We have set options out there to help consumers. They're out here just trying to stir up trouble.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Talk about short-term political hay. That's exactly what they're trying to do before an election.

Given that there is no correlation between the low cost of generating electricity in Alberta and the sky-high prices that deregulation has forced upon us, will the Premier just admit that the pricing system for electricity is stacked heavily in favour of producers at the expense of the vulnerable, our seniors, hard-working families, and businesses? Come on, Premier.

Dr. Morton: I will say this very, very slowly for the benefit of the Leader of the Opposition. There are 11 different providers, all of them having a contract at 8 to 9 cents which can be cancelled in a 30- to 45-day period if you don't like it. You pick up the phone today, and you reduce your rates by 42 per cent.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Provincially Contracted Funeral Services

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The funeral directors' association of Alberta has notified the government of their intention to end their contract for funeral services until dignity and respect can be restored for indigent persons, AISH recipients, and children who die in government care. My question is to the Minister of Human Services. How does the minister respond to grieving family members whose child has died while in government care and must be buried in an adult casket because the government will not pay for a child-sized casket? How is that for putting children first?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, if that situation happens, people can certainly let me know. I'm not aware of that happening, and I would want every Albertan who's in that circumstance to be treated with dignity. We are in discussions with the Funeral Service Association with respect to a new

contract. We received a notice on January 30 that the existing contract would be terminated. There are normal negotiating processes that are going on. I've instructed the people in my department who are dealing with it that Albertans deserve dignity both in life and in death.

Ms Blakeman: I've clearly hit a nerve, seeing as the government has known about this for years and has done nothing in reacting to them.

To the same minister: why does the government force Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and others to be embalmed, which is against the tenets of their faith, unless a family member with legal authority can be found fast enough to sign documentation for a cremation? Why would you do this in this diverse Alberta?

Mr. Hancock: Why indeed, Mr. Speaker? Indeed, we shouldn't be doing that. We should be able to offer people the opportunity to bury their loved ones in the manner, style, and custom in which they practise. That would be my and this government's vision going forward.

Ms Blakeman: This is the same government that has refused to speak to these people for years.

Back to the same minister: why does the government squeeze out the last, final humiliation by refusing a small honorarium for religious leaders to say a few words over the grave?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, what we're seeing here is the hon. member trying to negotiate a contract on the floor of the Legislature. We're not going to be negotiating the contract on the floor of the Legislature. What we are going to be doing is talking with funeral service providers through their association and directly to try and negotiate a new contract which helps families in their time of loss deal with their bereavement in dignity. We will be doing that, and I will ensure we'll be doing that.

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, a *National Post* editorial said it best about this Premier's new budget. It read: Alberta introduces its first NDP budget. That's unfair to the NDP. This is the fifth straight budget deficit despite near-record resource revenues. It relies on record revenue increases just to balance the budget, and it mentions a review of taxation levels after the next election so that we can pay for all of this new spending. Premier, yes or no? Will you commit that you will not raise taxes should you be re-elected unless you first tell Albertans what those increases will be before they go to the polls?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this is now, I think, day five or six of the fearmongering with respect to taxes. I'm proud of the budget that we presented on Thursday. I'm looking forward to debating it in the House. What I've said all along and what my colleagues have said all along is that this is a budget that represents the values, the hopes, and the aspirations of Albertans. As we move ahead, I am fully confident that once we pass this budget, knowing full well that there is a projected surplus, it will be very clear to Albertans what our fiscal plan is for the next two years.

Mr. Anderson: You know what? Albertans are pretty tired of your fulsome discussions, which include closed-door budget consultations and endless meetings with lobbyists and special interest groups. Quit cowering in the corner and answer the question, Premier. Tell us how much you're going to raise taxes to cover your addiction to spending. If you're not going to do it, say

it here and now: in the next four years you're not going to raise taxes no matter what. Say it right now. Put it on the record.

Ms Redford: There have been a lot of things that I've been accused of in my life, but I'll tell you that one of them is never going to be cowering to that party. Mr. Speaker, this is a budget that I know has the confidence of Albertans. It's reflecting what Albertans want for the future. I know what Albertans expect in terms of what government needs to present. We've presented it, Albertans will decide, and I'm looking forward to that discussion.

Mr. Anderson: Still no answer, Mr. Speaker. It's incredible. I've got to give it to the Liberals and NDP: at least they're honest about the fact they're going to raise taxes. But perhaps you know that being honest will lose you the election.

Last question. The Wildrose is willing to sign a no new tax pledge to Albertans that says that we will not support any new tax increases during the next term. Will you also sign this pledge, Premier, or will you waffle and will you avoid and will you deflect talking about your postelection plans to raise taxes on Albertans? Just say you're not going to raise taxes. It's so easy. Just say it.

2:00

Ms Redford: The fact about this budget is that it sets out a fiscal framework with a surplus. I don't know about how they do math, Mr. Speaker, but I don't see why, when you have a surplus, anyone would be contemplating new taxes. I would say that it's quite interesting to look at some of the things that this hon. member is suggesting we do in the next year, which is slow down the construction of the south Calgary hospital, not build 14 new schools, and not build the Fort Saskatchewan community hospital.

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

Electricity Prices (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Recently Hydro-Québec released its annual report comparing electricity rates in North American cities. Based on prices in March 2011, it appears that the highest electricity rates for residential customers in Canada and amongst the highest rates in North America, comparable only to New York City, are in Edmonton and Calgary. I would like to ask the Premier: why are Albertans being asked to pay the highest electricity prices in the entire country and, in fact, higher than most American cities as well?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm sure it would shock the leader of the fourth party to learn that people in Quebec calculate average electricity prices in a way that suits the Quebec government. There are two other studies out there, one from outside of Canada, from London, and another one from Manitoba, that show that Alberta is very much in the middle of the pack when you look at electricity prices for nonhydro jurisdictions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the dissembling of this Energy minister continues unabated. Quebec counts everything, including all the middlemen charges, transmission charges, and so on that the Alberta government has imposed. Given that power rates were only 7 cents a kilowatt hour at that time and they're now 15 – the power rates have increased even far, far beyond what they were 10 months ago – what is the Energy minister or the Premier going to do about it?

Dr. Morton: I'm happy to repeat because, obviously, they're having some hearing problems over there. The MLAs on this side of the House have gone out and spoken to their constituents and pointed out that all you have to do is pick up the phone, call one of 11 different providers that have fixed contracts, and you can reduce your electricity costs starting tomorrow by 42 per cent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. This minister is going to give Albertans the runaround. We've set up a phone number so that people can fax their power bills. Given that we've already received power bills from a number of people who faxed them to 780.415.0701 or e-mailed them to NDP@assembly.ab.ca and we're expecting many more, what does this minister have to say to the angry customers who are paying way too much for their power rates?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I didn't exactly hear the question, but that sounded more like a campaign speech. For Albertans who are listening I would say that there is a good place to go for information, and that's the Utilities Consumer Advocate website. It lists all of the different companies and all of the different programs where you can reduce your electricity price by 42 per cent by picking up the phone tomorrow.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Provincial Budget

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think you would find some irony in the fact that I'm asking a question on the same day as the question on funeral directors.

Mr. Speaker, the government has come up with a new idea; Lord, aren't we all good for new ideas? They've got a new way to do a budget. They're going to be very careful, and they're going to spend money very carefully, wisely, and ensure that Albertans receive value for the money. I think the question that Albertans want to ask the President of the Treasury Board is: what were you doing for the last eight years in government if it wasn't spending Alberta's money wisely?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's obvious that the hon. member has taken some lessons from the hon. members from last week's questions in terms of suggesting that we have not been doing value reviews. In fact, as part of Treasury Board, previously under the hon. member's tutelage, the value reviews that we have been undergoing over the last several years have created over a billion dollars' worth of efficiencies and savings within the government. If the hon. members would actually read the budgets, they would see that.

Mr. Snelgrove: As a matter of fact, the president is exactly correct. Over the last three years it's closer to a billion point five. So my question is: is this business as usual, or have you established some new, magical way to cut money out of the civil service, after you've given them a 7 per cent operational increase, that's going to be more efficient?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's not as short sighted as that. It's essentially taking the value reviews that we've been doing over the past several years – and I stand corrected by the previous President of the Treasury Board: over a billion and a half dollars' worth of value reviews. But what we weren't doing was actually talking to Albertans about what it is they wanted us to deliver and

whether or not we're doing that in an efficient way and then pulling it entirely back and building it from the ground up. I happen to know that the hon. member would have liked to have done that in his tenure.

Mr. Snelgrove: I do apologize, Mr. Speaker; I wasn't able to hear most of the answer. The simple fact is that we think we determined what priority changes there have been in the government, and it's directly related to membership sales. I want to know how they're going to sustain 7 per cent operational spending increases in the current economic environment.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, what has happened in this province in the past six months is that we have a new cabinet and a new government that is going to manage government differently. While there may have been savings in the past years of \$1.5 billion, we are committed to changing the budgeting process to go to a results-based system that truly reflects the value of services that Alberta is delivering. That is what Albertans have told us they want to have. We are going to signal that change, and we are going to deliver on that change.

Education Funding

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, since the beginning of this school year this province has 450 fewer teaching positions despite increases to our population. Seemingly in denial, this government produced a budget or, more aptly, a fudge-it budget based on pie-in-the-sky numbers and unrealistic targets; case in point, the proposed numbers the Alberta teachers are supposed to agree on in salaries. To the Minister of Education: was this minister checked into the Fantasyland Hotel when he budgeted that teachers will accept a 1 per cent salary increase?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this member is presuming the outcome of a tripartite negotiation that is ongoing and will be going on, I imagine, for a while to come. The fact of the matter is that the Education budget has been increased from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion over the next three years. The Education budget has been increasing an average of 7 per cent per year for the last 10 years. Teachers and the school boards and this government will be negotiating a salary that is reflective of the work that happens in the classroom.

Mr. Hehr: So given that the government has only budgeted a 1 per cent instructional grant for the upcoming school year, again not meeting the 2.5 per cent increase in inflation being projected, my question for the minister is: does he agree that the only thing predictable and sustainable about his budget is cuts to our education program?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I would say that the only thing that's predictable is this member's fearmongering.

As a matter of fact, teachers and students and parents have been asking for a predictable and sustainable budget. They have received one. For the first time in the history of this province teachers and parents know what their budget will be for the next three years. There was an opportunity to negotiate a contract before this budget was drafted; unfortunately, parties did not come to an agreement. The budget had to be tabled, and there are very reasonable numbers based on predictions and trends from throughout . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Hehr: By ignoring the facts, basic economics, and inflation

rates, will this minister admit that this budget will produce a shortfall of teachers, a shortfall of student support, and workplace instability?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I will not say that, but what I will tell you is that this government will continue to be committed to one of the top three education systems in the world, as we are known for. I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that we will make sure that students in every classroom receive that world-class education. I can tell you further that we will not be negotiating contracts with teachers on the floor of this Legislature because we know that we have partners in education and school boards and teachers and parents and this government that will negotiate a contract. [interjections]

The Speaker: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday there still is a need for civility.

2:10 Student Aid Program

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, the cost of postsecondary education and training in Alberta is causing students to incur huge debt loads that may deter a lot of them from pursuing further education. Meanwhile, students that are long past the age of majority have been denied financial assistance because of their parents' income. All of my questions are for the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. When will the minister bring relief to those students who are hindered by their finances from achieving their educational goals?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member for asking that question and also the Member for Calgary-Mackay for actually bringing it up last year in the House. We have been looking at student finances as an issue and an impediment to some students. In fact, the Premier asked us to review this and promised to review this. I'm happy to tell you that today we announced significant changes around student finances that will make access to student loans easier. This is a promise made, a promise kept.

Dr. Brown: What is the minister doing to ensure that potential students who may not be able to rely on their parents or family for assistance have recourse to the student aid program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate that. The old student loan system was extremely difficult to navigate. It was complex, so we've simplified it. We are now having a flat rate of \$1,500 assumed earnings by a student so that they don't have to try to calculate their part-time earnings, their parents' incomes are not taken into consideration when they apply for student loans, and their RRSP savings are not considered when we're considering student loans. So all students in Alberta should have access to student loans if they're needed.

Dr. Brown: Well, I thank the minister for that. It's very good news. Instead of searching for essential workers from abroad to work in Alberta, what's the minister doing to train and retrain our essential workers who may live and work here in Alberta and want to continue doing so?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my mandate

letter from the Premier she's asked me to work very closely with rural, remote, and aboriginal students to try to increase the numbers of students that are attending postsecondary. So we're going to work very closely with all of those groups. We're going to utilize smoother financial application rules to try to entice more students to get involved in postsecondary, and we're going to work closely with Education to streamline that process as students move from high school into the postsecondary system.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Physician Services Agreement

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Physicians in the province have been without a contract since March 31, 2011. In her January letter to members of the Medical Association President Dr. Linda Slocombe explained the importance of the eight-year master agreement in establishing a relationship between Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, and the physicians as one step "to rebuild trust." To the minister: why did last week's budget leave no room for a renegotiated contract?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Budget 2012 includes provision for physician services and development. It does not include provision for a new agreement for the specific reason that we have not yet reached an agreement.

Dr. Swann: Or is it punishment for not signing a contract yet, Mr. Speaker?

With no commitment to secure funding for primary care networks, only new family care clinics, whatever those are, what is it supposed to mean for the much-needed development of primary care networks? Is this supposed to rebuild trust?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, fortunately, I am in regular communication with Dr. Slocombe, the president of the Alberta Medical Association, and I can tell you that what neither she nor I would want to happen is to have a negotiation of this agreement on the floor of this House. What we are doing is discussing ways that we can build on the success of primary care networks and many other initiatives that flow out of the previous eight-year agreement. The discussions are productive, they're ongoing, and I'm very optimistic that we'll have an agreement.

Dr. Swann: Well, it's very disappointing, Mr. Speaker, for those on the front lines of primary care networks that this government has made no commitment to primary care network increases.

The new internal hotline for doctors to report intimidation or abuse shows that this government is desperately trying to improve patient care a baby step at a time. Why does the government continue to treat front-line health workers with so little respect?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. The physician hotline that was reported on today in the media is, I think, a very clear demonstration of the commitment of not only this government but Alberta Health Services to supporting physicians and indeed to supporting all health professionals in advocating on behalf of their patients. To suggest that we would entertain a discussion about the detailed negotiations with the AMA on the floor of this House simply speaks to, if I may say, the naïveté of the questioner.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Expanded Role for Pharmacists

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today the Minister of Health and Wellness made three announcements that will change the way that pharmacy is done in Alberta. Starting July 1 this year, Alberta pharmacists will be reimbursed for renewing prescriptions, government will pay less for generic drugs, and a grant will be offered to pharmacies in small communities to help them adjust to lower generic prices. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. I thought pharmacists could already renew prescriptions in Alberta. What's different about this plan?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, one of the differences is that pharmacists will now be paid in order to renew prescriptions. As the hon. member may know, previously pharmacists relied solely on dispensing fees. This new initiative recognizes the role of the pharmacist as a full partner in the delivery of primary health care. It compensates pharmacists for the exercise of their professional expertise and their clinical judgment in serving patients with prescription renewals.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Also to the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that pharmacists in my constituency have expressed concerns that reducing generic drug prices will adversely affect their businesses, why is government meddling in the way Alberta pharmacies operate?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government isn't meddling in the business practices of pharmacists. In fact, I'm pleased to report to the House that since 2009 this government has provided over \$75 million in transition support for pharmacists as we developed a new professional compensation model for pharmacists across Alberta.

Today's announcement will open up to a thousand new locations across the province for Albertans to have their prescriptions renewed. I think most pharmacists view this as very good news, Mr. Speaker. We're continuing to work with them on the implementation.

Mrs. Jablonski: Again to the same minister: if lower generic drug prices are nothing to worry about, why set up a safety net for rural pharmacies in the form of the remote pharmacy access grant?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, as many hon. members will know from their constituencies, many of our rural and remote pharmacies who are operating independently rely very heavily on the traditional income stream through the sale of generic drugs in their particular business. This transition support, which falls, as I said, on the heels of over \$75 million in support over the last three years, will assist pharmacists in the transition to the new compensation model, which focuses on the professional fee for professional health care delivered to Alberta patients.

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

Twinning of Highway 63

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was extremely saddened to

hear about the tragic bus crash involving over 30 people travelling from Edmonton to Fort McMurray last Friday. The crash that occurred on highway 28, which like highway 63 is not twinned, made me think even more about why this government is cutting funding for highways at a time when our population and economy are growing. A large increase in oil and gas mining means more trucks on the road. To the Minister of Transportation: can the minister tell this House why his department is slashing spending on highways by 38 per cent by 2015 when the province is growing and needs more and better highways, not fewer highways?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This government has supported transportation and highways with unprecedented investment, in fact a small 38 per cent higher than the average spending of provinces throughout Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to say to you that we are spending money in the right places. In fact, the hon. member needs to know, if he read the budget and looked at it carefully, that we are spending 150-plus million dollars on highway 63.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We don't build better highways by cutting spending.

To the minister again: given that last Thursday I asked the minister for leadership in fast-tracking the twinning of highway 63 and he refused by saying that it sounded like I would say yes to, quote, any necessary highway in Alberta, unquote, can the minister tell this House why this government will not say yes to funding highways even though they are, by their own admission, necessary?

2:20

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure how much more clear I can make it: \$150 million being spent on highway 63. Our commitment has been there to support highway 63, and we are continuing to be committed to highway 63. We have just completed the Athabasca bridge, which is the biggest bridge in Alberta. We have just committed to an interchange that has been completed. We are committed to the twinning that we have done.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm talking about twinning highway 63 – we are not talking about underpasses, overpasses, and bridges – and we want to get it done by 2015.

Again to the minister. Let's cut to the chase for the passengers on that bus. Exactly when will the Ministry of Transportation finish twinning highway 63? Give us the exact date.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, from Grassland to Wandering River \$450 million is going to be spent and is continuing to be spent to twin that highway. We have committed to twinning highway 63, and we will continue to commit to twinning that highway. We have finished twinning the highway from Fort McMurray to highway 881, and this is what the municipality of Wood Buffalo is asking for.

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

Aboriginal Education

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In December 2010 the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples released the report

Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope, and it says that reserve schools operate in isolation without the necessary support and called for a complete overhaul of Canada's First Nations education system. In January the federal government, British Columbia, and First Nations reached an historic education deal to provide First Nations students with access to quality education. One of the key issues is addressing the 20 per cent funding gap. My questions are to the Minister of Education. With the current funding challenges that face students on-reserve . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this member highlights a very important subject matter, and the Senate committee is perfectly right. The condition of education for our aboriginal community, particularly on-reserve, is frankly deplorable, and it needs to be addressed. Whatever we have done for the last 150 years has simply not worked. So the province of Alberta is willing to take leadership, and we have already indicated to our colleagues in the federal government that we are willing to lend our expertise in providing world-class education. As a matter of fact, we're willing to come to the table with money to help offset the differential between the federal level of funding and the provincial level of funding.

Ms Woo-Paw: When the federal aboriginal affairs minister signed the agreement in B.C., he said that other reform partnerships are likely. Would the minister inform the House whether such a partnership exists for Alberta, and if yes, what is the status of the partnership?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the province of British Columbia needs to be congratulated for acknowledging the problem and being willing to do something about it. I understand it took some 15 years to bring this agreement about, and it's still not being executed. We know we have the expertise in providing education. We have the means to do so. The federal government has the ability to leverage their relationship with aboriginal communities who are willing to step in and assist the federal government in making sure that all children – they're Alberta children; they're Canadian children – receive the top-notch education that they deserve.

Ms Woo-Paw: What is your ministry's response to the Senate's report, which calls for a First Nations education act to establish legal power for educational authorities that would be accountable to parents and communities?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I respect that recommendation from the point of view that aboriginal communities should have a high degree of determination relative to the curriculum and the means by which the education system is run, just like we do in all communities by way of school boards. But one thing I would like to point out is that we don't need duplication. We have the expertise to deliver world-class education. There is the will on behalf of this government and school boards to contribute. We're willing to offer that instead of actually focusing our time on replicating a system that already exists.

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

Accommodation and Health Care for Seniors

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are directed to the Minister of Seniors. Over 1,800 seniors continue to

be stuck in hospitals waiting for long-term care. Under the current continuing care model seniors are paying up to \$4,000 a month just to be in accommodations and extra if they want medications given to them. Will the Seniors minister then make it crystal clear to Albertans who will be paying for services under the newly proposed continuing care model? Will it be the government, or will it be seniors?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you for that question. The Premier and your government have made it very clear that vulnerable Albertans will be taken care of and will continue to be taken care of. I can tell you that the health services in our continuing care models will be completely paid for by the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that for seniors to get more than one shower a week at these continuing care homes they have to pay an extra \$20 and for a bath they have to pay \$50, the seniors would like to challenge the minister to see if he could survive on just one shower a week and would like to know if the minister thinks it's fair for seniors to be nickelled and dimed to pay for more than one shower a week.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is getting pretty personal, and I wouldn't be satisfied with one shower a week. The citizens and the Albertans that I have visited – and I've visited thousands of them over the last number of months in our seniors' homes – are very proud of the services they receive. We have invested millions of dollars, \$600 million over the last 12 years, to create 10,000 spaces. We're proud of it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you. Given that just last Wednesday the Premier said in the Assembly, "We in this government have guaranteed that publicly funded health care will be available for all Albertans, including seniors," could the minister then clarify to seniors in this province whether they will be the ones who will be paying for the services, or will it be the government? If they are paying for the services, where do they send their bills to get reimbursed?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, I will not argue with the Premier. She's absolutely correct, and I stated it earlier. Health services in our seniors' facilities will be paid for by the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Support for Tourism

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tourism in Alberta is a \$6 billion a year industry. For every dollar invested in tourism, there is an estimated \$10 return. Last spring this government boasted of its efforts to promote our tourism industry despite economic hardships. This Premier's budget, which fails to promote Alberta as a tourism destination, directly impacts not only our economy; it also undermines our global status. To the minister of tourism: how can this minister justify the \$5 billion in cuts to tourism and the escalatingly negative impact it will have on Alberta as a tourism destination?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have no idea what the hon. member is talking about: \$5 billion in cuts to tourism. In fact, the promotion of tourism in this province is done through Travel Alberta, and that's done through a fee that's collected through the hotel industry. There's a sustainability fund with that organization. In the case of reduced revenues they will top it up with the sustainability fund. We're aggressively promoting Alberta all over the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If there was confusion, it was on my part: \$5 million. I may have said billion by mistake.

To the same minister: does the minister understand the terrible impacts these cuts will have on jobs here in Alberta? It is a cut.

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, there are no cuts to the Tourism, Parks and Recreation budget. It has actually been increased somewhat.

We are aggressively going out to bring more tourists to this province. We are working very hard on the international markets as 7 per cent of our tourists are international tourists, but they're 25 per cent of our revenues. Mr. Speaker, I'm hoping to increase by close to 20 per cent the amount of tourism dollars that are spent in this province over the next three years.

Mr. Chase: Tourism requires investment. It's not happening.

To the same minister: given that a majority of Albertans want greater protection for our parks, why is this government again acting against Alberta's will and cutting more than a million dollars in funding to parks support?

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, we are expanding our parks system. We're adding new group camping areas. We have 480 provincial parks in this province, more parks than any other province in the country. There is a park within a maximum of an hour's drive of all Albertans. We're very proud of them, and we continue to invest in them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:30

Teachers' Salary Negotiations

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Education. The minister has said that he is working to secure a long-term labour deal with teachers. As a former teacher I know the important role that teachers play in this province and the recognition they do deserve. Seeing as the minister wanted a labour deal for the budget and the budget was last week and there is no deal, will the school boards be surprised with the new collective agreement?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, a school board could not possibly be surprised because they are at the negotiating table. I hope that they will negotiate in good faith, just like the ATA and the government of Alberta will, to the benefit of the students. We have some of the best outcomes in the world in our classrooms. Our teachers are handsomely compensated, better than anywhere else in Canada, and so they should be because the product, obviously, warrants that. We are still way off from expiry of this particular agreement, so I know that they will all be negotiating in good faith and will find the solution that. . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mrs. Leskiw: My final question is to the same minister. If you already proposed a salary settlement without negotiation, what is the point of the negotiating committee continuing to meet?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, there was plenty of opportunity to negotiate an agreement before this budget. I was very clear that I would have preferred to know what the agreement was before this budget was put together, but I don't think the ministers of health and seniors and others would want to wait for me with their budgets until teachers negotiate an agreement with school boards and the government. The budget has to go on, life has to go on, and they will have to negotiate within the parameters of this budget.

The Speaker: The hon. member? Fine?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Postsecondary Education Funding

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Every year Alberta postsecondary institutions fall farther behind financially. Instead of seizing the moment and building a great future, this government seems to be choking it off. With budget squeezes the past three years and effective cuts to operating grants in the next three years, Alberta's postsecondary institutions will yet again fail to keep up with growing enrolment, aging infrastructure, and inflation. To the minister of advanced education: will the minister admit that this government's policies are forcing program cuts upon Alberta's universities for years to come?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud to stand up and talk about this budget and the impact that it's going to have on our postsecondaries. This is a very good-news story, and my presidents, my board chairs, and even my students have come forward and said: this is exactly what we needed. This is about helping to provide stability, long-term funding, and they tell me that this is enough to make sure that they are sustainable into the future and that they can continue to provide the quality of programming that our students want and need.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: given the constant needs for upgrading, maintaining, and expanding our universities, colleges, and technical institutes, how can this government justify the \$192 million in cuts to postsecondary infrastructure funding?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past six years we've invested \$3 billion in infrastructure on our postsecondaries and \$770 million in repair and maintenance budgets. We're the envy of any province in this country, and our postsecondaries are truly well maintained.

Mr. Speaker, we did have a bump over the past two or three years in maintenance budgets to help with the KIP program, that the feds had put in, to match that. This year we've gone back to the types of infrastructure budgets that we've had in the past, and it will help us to maintain . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Dr. Taft: Again to the same minister: given that in the leadership race the Premier promised greater funding for research and development, why was \$4 million cut in research capacity programs in this budget?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, this is another promise made and a promise kept by our Premier. Within my budget we have increases to all four of the Alberta Innovates corporations. On top of that, we have 9 million new dollars invested in prion research and water research, for which we are the envy of Canada and North America.

Mr. Speaker, this is a good-news budget for research. We are going to continue to move forward with the research agenda that we need to make sure Alberta businesses and Alberta people have what they need.

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

Logging in the Bragg Creek Area

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents enjoy using the trails in the forest reserve west of Bragg Creek. They all know about the tragedy of the Slave Lake fire, so they do understand that logging needs to take place in the area to protect Bragg Creek village. Now, their concerns relate to the details of the extent of the logging. If my constituents were unable to attend a consultation in Bragg Creek on January 26, would the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development tell us how they can provide feedback to optimize their future trail experience while still protecting Bragg Creek from forest fires?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's regrettable, I guess, that some people were unable to attend the public consultation meeting. This is a multiple-use area, and occasionally there are conflicts in land use. If anybody has a use or a value that they see in that landscape and they would like the company to harvest in a different manner or consider that value on the landscape, if they couldn't attend the public meeting, they could contact the company directly, or they could attend one of our offices to express their concern.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: now, if there are trails in the area that need to be rebuilt because of the logging, who will take on this responsibility?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's precisely why the ministry makes sure that the company does public consultations, to identify conflicts like that and to deal with them up front. It's always better if we can deal with them up front, mitigate the impacts of one user on another user, and then we don't have to get into questions like that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. I also have constituents who wish to change the whole approach to logging on the eastern slopes. What opportunities are available for them to influence those decisions?

Mr. Oberle: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd have to have a clearer definition of what you mean by the whole approach to logging. If people are interested in different logging methods and different management practices on the eastern slopes, then there are a myriad of opportunities for them to be involved in the management planning process or the operations planning process, to visit with the company when they do their open houses, to

express their concerns or desires to forest management personnel, to SRD personnel. There's a lot of opportunity to do that. If they're in fact concerned that we should not be logging on the eastern slopes, that's a different conversation, and they should attend the South Saskatchewan regional planning process to express that desire.

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

Revenue from Problem Gambling

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The government anticipates revenue from Alberta gaming, or the Alberta gaming and liquor control board, of roughly \$1.3 billion this year. Now, in 2011 gross profit from VLTs was \$492 million. To the President of the Treasury Board: what percentage of this VLT revenue comes from the pockets and purses of problem gamblers?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd have to take that question under advisement for the minister responsible. However, I'm quite confident that those numbers are available and that the minister is working on a number of projects and programs to help those individuals who may have an issue with a gambling-related habit.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm surprised the hon. minister is not up to speed on this given that he's the one that counts the cash.

Given that in 2011 gross profits to the government from slot machines were over \$800 million, what percentage of this slot machine revenue comes from the pockets and purses of people in this province with problem gambling habits?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm equally surprised that the hon. member is not aware of the division of the different departments. The Minister of Finance has the AGLC under that purview. Again, I will take the question under advisement and ensure that the hon. member gets an adequate response.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister's response. However, I'm not satisfied with it, so I'm going to go to the Minister of Justice. Why is it necessary to exempt the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission from the Lobbyists Act, which is clearly under your observation? I can say that.

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, we have just finished a consultation regarding the Lobbyists Act, and I don't recall there being any comment about that at all as a concern.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the question-and-answer period for today. Eighteen members were recognized, with 106 questions and responses.

Statement by the Speaker

Questions about the Budget

The Speaker: A fair number of the questions today had to do with the budget, and of course, as all members know, the budget process begins later today, as I recall, and will continue probably to the third week of March. Now, some very specific questions occurred in the question period today. Members should be aware

that estimates will be provided, that time frames will be provided, two or three hours for each of these estimates. I can understand the need for generalized questions with respect to the budget, but if this is going to degenerate into a specific question-and-answer response, then why have the time allocated for a review of the budget at a later date?

As an example, I noticed the schedule that's coming up. I can see that the estimates for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General are tomorrow evening, so all members might want to attend. Ample hours will be provided for that.

2:40

On February 21 the Minister of Finance will be here in the Assembly for probably three hours. I'm sure there'll be ample time for specific questions with respect to that at that time.

Questions were raised as well with the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation. He will be available in this Assembly on the evening of March 5 to basically deal with the specifics of those particular budgets. And I can go on.

Yes, absolutely, questions on the budget I'll accept as totally appropriate in the question period, but if they're going to be online questions and addressed to ministers whose departments have not come up yet, I think there's a better opportunity for us to take a look at that at a later time. So just a little bit of advice with respect to that.

We're now going to return to Member's Statements. I still have six members who wish to give a member's statement. It's now 18 minutes to 3.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: We will continue and hear first from the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Integration of Community Services with Health Care

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to talk about delivering and improving mental health services, but it doesn't deliver. A substantial number of individuals and families are reporting a lack of responsiveness, unsafe wait times for help, and inappropriate placement of family members and friends with mental illness, especially coming from the Edmonton region. The Health Facilities Review Committee in Calgary reported as much in December of last year, commenting on the Peter Lougheed's long-standing shortage of beds for psychiatric crisis, with no surge capacity when a crisis happens. This increases risk for patients as well as staff and families, including preventable deaths.

It's time for action. Shortage of community and in-patient services predictably results in emergency room overcrowding and mental health patients in hallways on the ward, sometimes unsafely placed with other types of medical problems throughout the hospital. Wait times most recently reported in Calgary include active treatment wait of six months, a six-month wait for psychiatric assessment, and so on. Young adults and those with chronic conditions or sudden worsening of their illness are increasingly being pushed out of institutional care prematurely and placing themselves at risk as well as risking others. This means harm to themselves, to family and community, and inappropriate incarceration in jails at times, where roughly a third of inmates are known to have mental illness.

Community services must be integrated better with the institution to ensure a safe transition from one to the other and

more successful maintenance of in-patients in the community. As the report Poverty Costs last week indicated, we will pay and our fellow citizens will pay one way or the other by failing to provide sufficient community resources for people with addictions, homelessness, and mental illness. Our hotline has received calls from family members being injured and suffering major mental distress in attempting to get attention from a system that is supposed to relieve them.

Albertans and their long-suffering families continue to seek basic care. Albertans deserve better, Mr. Speaker.

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

Primco Dene Rewarding Partnerships Award

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today to speak about an incredible company in my constituency of Bonnyville-Cold Lake, Primco Dene. Based in Cold Lake and owned by the Cold Lake First Nations, Primco Dene is a model for First Nations business development in Alberta. On February 10 Primco Dene was presented with a rewarding partnerships award by the hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. The aboriginal rewarding partnerships award, which is presented annually at the Alberta Chamber of Resources awards banquet, recognizes companies and aboriginal partners that demonstrate excellence in innovation, best practices, sustainability, and capacity building.

Mr. Speaker, this government is very proud of its efforts to enhance aboriginal participation in Alberta's diverse economy. One of the ways we do this is by promoting and facilitating economic partnerships among aboriginal businesses, industry, and government. Companies like Primco Dene exemplify how strong business partnerships can yield long-term benefits for aboriginal communities and industry alike. This government is proud to support the Alberta Chamber of Resources in recognizing aboriginal-owned companies like Primco Dene, and we look forward to continuing this valuable partnership in years to come.

I would like to congratulate Primco Dene on this tremendous accomplishment and thank them for the amazing work that they do in my constituency.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Brain Health Symposium 2012

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through the Seniors' ministry the office of the public guardian is offering the first annual Brain Health Symposium next week both in Calgary and in Edmonton. In Calgary this symposium is already fully subscribed, which is a good-news story, but in Edmonton we still have placements.

Mr. Speaker, we've learned that people who have a brain injury often have mental health and other health-associated difficulties. The most thrilling thing we're learning through Dr. Norman Doidge's book, *The Brain That Changes Itself*, is that the neuroplasticity of the brain allows us to have a brain that can change in function as we age. It lends new hope that people who have a brain injury might yet recover.

There are others that are local people that are going to be part of this symposium: Suzette Brémault-Phillips, Dr. Catherine Phillips, and Dr. Peter Wass. Many of you will know him from FASD fame. He's done much in terms of research of brain-injured people. They will be speaking as part of it. It's affiliated with the

Alzheimer Society and Alberta Health Services. We expect guests from the Northwest Territories and other places.

Mr. Speaker, the most exciting thing, I think, that will materially happen with this symposium is that people for the first time will get together and talk about what can be done with brain injuries. We've backed away from that as a society at times, but it's time and it's very topical to look after those that have brain injuries. The office of the public guardian, who usually does that job, is now championing the advocacy and education for people that need it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This year is the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, which marks her 60 years as monarch and head of state of the United Kingdom and Canada and several other Commonwealth nations. Upon her coronation at the age of 27 our young Queen promised to follow the example of her parents in dedicating her life, whether it be short or long, to serve the people of her realms, including Canada. We are indeed thankful that her life and her service have been long and fruitful. She has made some 30 visits to our country, strengthening the bonds of loyalty and affection which Canadians feel for her.

At her coronation Her Majesty stated:

Parliamentary institutions, with their free speech and respect for the rights of minorities, and the inspiration of a broad tolerance in thought and expression – all this we conceive to be a precious part of our way of life and outlook.

As a constitutional monarchy Canada's system of governance has evolved peacefully, without violence or revolution, to become a shining example of a free and democratic state to the rest of the world. Indeed, our parliamentary government and Constitution, inherited from the United Kingdom, with the Queen as head of state have served us well as a nation bound together by respect for human rights, including the right to freely choose those who govern us and make our laws. As Albertans we are proud of this form of government here in our provincial Legislature with the Queen as head of state as embodied in her representative, our Lieutenant Governor. On her Diamond Jubilee I know I speak for all hon. members when I say that we are thankful for Her Majesty's 60 years of service to Canada and Canadians. God save our noble and gracious Queen.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

2012 Alberta Winter Games

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend we welcomed more than 2,800 young Albertans, their parents, and supporters in my constituency of Stony Plain and Parkland county and in our neighbouring community of Spruce Grove. We were thrilled to host 20 great events during the 2012 Alberta Winter Games. The results are in, and Calgary won the Alberta Cup with the most overall points. The Sunny South won the Minister's Cup for the most improved performance, and the Parkland zone, stretching from Rocky Mountain House to Coronation, won the spirit of sport award.

2:50

The young athletes who participated in these games are the future of sport in our province. With continued perseverance many

of them will move on to become national competitors or even to the next Olympics. They are an inspiration. They inspire us to do our best, to put the team first, to respect our competition, and to have fun. These young people also inspire Albertans of all ages to get more active. As a government we are proud to support these games through the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank the volunteers and organizers for their hard work and dedication to amateur sports and competition. They created a memorable experience for anyone and everyone involved. With the approach of summer we now look forward to the start of the 2012 Alberta Summer Games in Lethbridge this July.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Central Alberta Ronald McDonald House

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, when a child is very ill, the only thing they want is to be near their mom and dad. It has been said that the greatest gift that you can give a sick child is their family. After three years of hard work and fundraising, Red Deer and central Alberta were recently invited to an open house to come and see the newest Ronald McDonald House in Canada.

Thanks to the efforts of a group of very dedicated people in Red Deer and central Alberta \$12 million was raised to build Alberta's third Ronald McDonald House, the 13th in Canada. This is a remarkable community accomplishment that involved large corporations, small businesses, many organizations, and many individuals. Donations ranged from the million dollars given by Mary Bea Quinn, donated on behalf of her late husband, Bernard, to the \$18,000 raised through hot dog sales by Jenaya Moore and Caitlyn Richardson, two young students of Poplar Ridge school.

The members of the dedicated Capital Campaign committee include four generations of the Radford family – Lyn and Reg Radford, Marg Imeson, Erin and Chris Buckland, Jamie and Geordin Flett, Ashley and David Brant, and Andrew Radford – as well as Kathy Bontje, Mike Chorlton, Dale Devereaux, Marty Vellner, Tracy Graf, Melanie Warren, Cathy Fowler, Greg Shannon, Tera Lee Flaman, Andy Cuthbertson, Tom and Margaret Towers, and Connie Sutter.

The families of the very sick children who will be very grateful for their home away from home may not ever get the chance to meet the members of this dedicated committee or those who worked so hard to give them this gift of love, but every time a child's face lights up because they see their family or because they enter the Magic Room at Ronald McDonald House, it will be because so many people worked so hard to make sure they could receive the gift of their families.

The central Alberta Ronald McDonald House is a magnificent gift of love. I can't think of a better gift or a better legacy for those who made this home possible. Thank you to all the volunteers, donors, and sponsors who gave the greatest gift possible to the sick children of central Alberta and their families.

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to present a petition signed by over 3,700 Albertans predominantly from around the Little Bow, Highwood, and Livingstone-Macleod constituencies urging the government "to Not Approve" – and I repeat to not approve – "any application from BFI Canada/Prairie

Sky Resource Centre to Alberta Environment or the Municipal District of Foothills No. 31 for the proposed Prairie Sky Resource Centre." Clearly, all Albertans do not want to see prime agricultural land used for garbage waste landfills.

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 201

Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 201, the Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012.

Property rights are essential to guarantee every citizen the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness without the interference of government. It is paramount whenever we talk about good government that preserving and protecting property rights is one of the cornerstones of a prosperous society and a fully functioning democracy. Bill 201, Alberta Bill of Rights (Property Rights Protection) Amendment Act, 2012, seeks to preserve the original spirit in which the Bill of Rights was written and to guarantee landowners the right to a timely and fair compensation through the courts.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a first time]

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

Bill 203

Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 203, the Tobacco Reduction (Protection of Children in Vehicles) Amendment Act, 2012.

Mr. Speaker, it is our moral duty as a society to protect our vulnerable and our weak, especially our children. This act would amend the Tobacco Reduction Act by prohibiting smoking in cars when children are present. As an ER physician I can tell you that over the last 19, 20 years that I've been practising, many times I've seen young children six months, 12 months, 18 months old suffocating, and their parents smoke. They drive them to the hospital with severe asthma attacks, and they've been smoking on the way to the hospital.

The health risks of second-hand smoke for young children: there's extensive evidence that it damages their lung lining and it hurts their immunity. With respect to role modelling – I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, that if you want to save on health care, let's make sure we have healthy children and make sure that they don't start smoking. When parents are smoking in front of their children, especially in cars, our children are smoking from day 1, at birth, and that's got to stop.

This measure would make smoking in cars with anyone under the age of 18 punishable by a maximum fine of \$1,000. It's an important preventative health step, the wisdom of which certain municipalities in this province and certain provinces in this country have already implemented.

I feel it's time Albertans take leadership in this issue to protect our children and the most vulnerable in our society.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Okay. Can we go pretty quickly now? I don't want to run up against the 3 o'clock thing.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise pursuant to section 15(2) of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act with the appropriate number of copies of the interim financial report for the fund for the nine months ended December 31, 2011. Copies have already been distributed to the members.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have more, but I'll just give you one today, and that is the letter from the Alberta Funeral Service Association president, Mitch Thompson. The letter he directed to me outlines the problems that the association has with the current contract for provision of services under children's services, Seniors, AISH, and Human Services. So that's a copy of the letter to me.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of several electricity bills Albertans have sent to the NDP opposition showing significantly increased and growing electricity costs.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling e-mails and three letters from the following individuals who are concerned about the proposed logging in the West Bragg Creek area, all of whom believe clear-cutting will damage an essential watershed and recreation area that thousands of Calgarians use to promote health and fitness and be detrimental to wildlife and natural species: Jerrel Wilkens, Masten Brolsma, Diane Schon, Jason Curtis, John Wong, Lorraine Lau, Corine and Stefan Frick, Elena Rhodes, Ferdl and Heather Taxbock, Donna Fallon, Lynn Whittingham, Maurice Gaucher, David Neame, Theo and Carol van Besouw, Marie-Andrée Ménard, Jennifer Wright, and Ryan Chambers.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 7(7) says that "at 3 p.m. the items in the ordinary daily routine will be deemed to be concluded and the Speaker shall notify the Assembly."

Mr. Chase: May I please ask you to ask all members to extend the time period to complete the business at hand?

The Speaker: I can certainly do that, and it will require unanimous consent.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition under Tabling Returns and Reports.

3:00

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to all the hon. members. I have four tablings. One is from Campaign for a Smoke-Free Alberta, Protecting Youth from Exposure to Tobacco Smoke in Vehicles, and I have five copies.

The second tabling is a graph of youth smoking rates among Albertans aged 12 to 19 that shows that our smoking rates had

initially decreased from 12 per cent to 11 per cent and are up to 14 per cent.

I have two other tablings pertaining to our utility bills. One is an excellent article written by Catherine Griwkowsky from the *Edmonton Sun*. It's labelled Power Bills... Canada's Energy Powerhouse Has Highest Electricity [Bills] in the Country.

Finally, I also have five copies of an annual report from 2010 from Hydro-Québec showing how Quebec has gotten no power or utility bills and has returned billions to the government of Quebec so they can provide essential services to the people.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there additional tablings?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I have two tablings today. The first is a letter dated November 30, 2011, from Wayne Sorenson, board member, Alberta Society for Pension Reform. This letter is addressed to the hon. Premier of Alberta. Certainly, this letter gives significant detail on the problems with the public service pension as indicated from a deal that goes back quite some time.

My second tabling is a response that Mr. Wayne Sorenson received not from the hon. Premier but from the Minister of Finance. This is dated February 1, 2012. I would encourage all hon. members of the Assembly to read both letters and familiarize themselves with this issue if they have not already done so.

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Horne, Minister of Health and Wellness, responses to written questions 3, 4, and 5, asked for by Dr. Swann on April 11, 2011; responses to written questions 16, 17, and 18, asked for by Dr. Swann on May 9, 2011.

On behalf of the hon. Mrs. McQueen, Minister of Environment and Water, pursuant to the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act the Ministry of Environment and Water environmental protection security fund annual report, April 1, 2010, to March 31, 2011.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Lukaszuk, Minister of Education, report dated January 27, 2012, entitled Alberta Education, Our Children, Our Future: Getting it Right, Final Report on Public Engagement, prepared by KPMG.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere on a purported point of order, please.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Anderson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'm looking at Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). The Premier imputed false and unavowed motives to another member, among other things, when she said, referring to the Wildrose alternative budget, that we would cut the money in the budget for the building of new schools, 14 new schools as she referred to it, in the budget. If we look at the budget, what is said specifically is that the Wildrose caucus would invest [\$4.1] billion in new infrastructure (a per capita amount significantly higher than BC, Ontario, and Saskatchewan). These capital dollars would be focused primarily on the building of high priority road projects such as the Calgary and Edmonton ring roads, twinning Highway 63, long-term care facilities for seniors, and urgently needed schools

in our province and so forth. And it goes on and on and on.

Further on in our alternative budget it specifically notes that we would spend a portion of the increase of \$854 million in operational spending that we propose on hiring roughly 1,425 new teachers, teaching assistants, and support staff for students with special needs, for a total of \$114 million. Not only do we have in our budget that we would build those schools, every school that has been announced, but we would indeed have the money to staff those schools. Obviously, we did ask to cut the \$2 billion carbon capture and storage and other wasteful spending, but clearly the Premier was incorrect in that statement, and I ask her to be more informed next time.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, obviously, 23(h), (i), and (j) doesn't apply because that refers to a member, and the party is not a member. The defence that the hon. member has put up, indicating that he was referring to a party document, is clearly an entirely different thing.

However, that being said, it is a very simplistic document that he refers to, trying to balance a budget by cutting spending that is not being made. For example, the \$2 billion carbon capture and storage is not budgeted in one year but budgeted over a number of years, as the hon. member ought to know. It's the same with many of the other capital projects that are budgeted over a series of years, some of which could be I suppose delayed over a longer period of time if they wanted to, which they're advocating. That would not be a cost saving but would be an additional cost to Albertans to do it in that way, but they've ignored that in their simplistic analysis of the budget.

It's interesting because the hon. member, you know, last year and this year is talking about balancing the budget by failing to complete the essential infrastructure that Albertans need as we move forward but has no compulsion at all about then calling, as I recall last year at least, ministers responsible and asking when the infrastructure in his constituency will be completed on a timely basis.

Mr. Speaker, there's no point of order. It's simply the hon. member trying to play politics with the numbers and not appreciating the fact when people point that out.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I think the most pertinent information that's really required here has to do with the book *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, page 634, which basically points out that points of order should not be used to continue debate on an issue.

Again, it's the continuation, basically, of the little suggestion that I made earlier that we're going to be into debate on the budget now for probably five weeks, and if the question period becomes part of that debate other than policy questions and if there are specific questions, then we're going to probably have these points of order every day. There's really not much need for that when you can have the points of order in the committee if you wish. You'll have three hours to play with it. But if the purpose of question period is to basically keep the government accountable and to basically seek information, then there should be questions of that particular nature.

Orders of the Day

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We find ourselves in the unusual situation where we do not have private members' bills on

the table available for discussion at the moment, so I would ask for the consent of the House to proceed immediately to private members' motions, which would normally be considered at 5 o'clock.

Mr. Anderson: A point of clarification on the motion. Is there any way that under 77 of the standing orders I can request unanimous consent to proceed directly to private members' bills, starting with Bill 201?

The Speaker: Certainly, if I had caught your eye first, that probably would have happened, but the Government House Leader seemed to rise first, basically with respect to that motion. The request that we have here is because of what happened the other day, with the two bills not being introduced. I suspect that the request the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere would want to make is for the House to give unanimous consent to allow second reading on private member's Bill 201. We have another motion that says that Motions Other than Government Motions, scheduled for 5 o'clock this afternoon, be advanced to 3 o'clock, which is now the time, and we deal with this now, not knowing what the outcome will be.

This is a kind of conundrum. This has not happened in a long time with respect to this matter. I do believe, though, that having caught my eye first, I must basically go with what it appeared to be, recognizing fully what request would come from the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. Now, in the event that the request being made by the Government House Leader is defeated, then we could go to the second one.

3:10

Hon. Government House Leader, if I understand, your request is that we move now to Motions Other than Government Motions. In other words, I would recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to proceed with her motion. We would go for one hour, and I take it that that means we would then adjourn until 7:30 tonight. I'm not leading anybody here. I'm just trying to make sure we have this.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: I'll recognize the request coming from the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has requested that, in fact, the Assembly go to second reading of private member's Bill 201. This requires unanimous consent. Hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, proceed with your request, please.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I rise under rule 77 of the standing orders, asking that the House give unanimous consent to proceed to private members' business, starting with Bill 201.

[Unanimous consent denied]

[The Assembly adjourned from 3:12 p.m. to 5 p.m.]

Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre

Income Tax Rate

501. Ms Blakeman moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation that will replace the flat-rate income tax in favour of a progressive income tax whereby tax rates increase according to income.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise to a trumpet fanfare from somebody's computer coming on and speak to the motion that I have proposed. This is a motion other than a government motion. For those of you following along, that's done by any member of the House except for cabinet. We put these in a long time ago.

What I really wanted to do with this motion was start a conversation in this House. I've been interested in this issue for quite some time, and I think I was actually even raising it back when I was still on the Public Accounts Committee to those many years ago. I really think that this conversation has three parts to it. One is the current mix of revenue, how and where the government gets money and sort of what that ratio is. The second part is our nonrenewable resource revenue which we are blessed to have in this province, the questions about how we use it, whether we spend it now, spend it today, or we spend it in the future, save it for something in the future. Finally, I think the third piece of this puzzle is the taxation rate itself.

I note that last year the then Provincial Treasurer was very frank in admitting that we had \$11 billion of tax room that we could have been collecting from people before we matched the B.C. rate. Eleven billion dollars is a lot of income tax room. A lot. When we look at the deficits that the government is currently carrying – and I'm not going to be bothered with whether this is a technical deficit or a real deficit or an imaginary deficit – clearly, the amount that was brought in compared to the amount that was budgeted, there's a difference. I think that we really need to consider that.

We certainly have people that are asking for additional services. Frankly, nobody wants to pay more money if they don't have to, but when you really get into the conversation with Albertans as I do on a regular basis with my constituents, they're quite open about saying that, yeah, they'd rather have the service, thank you very much.

The most recent one I had was that for a \$60 increase in people's property tax, the city could be running one of those little snowplows down every single residential street, so you would never have to shovel the front of your street again. People were ecstatic. They wanted to know where they could pay that 60 bucks to get the snow cleared from the front of their house. People were clearly willing to pay additional taxes to get services that they viewed as valuable. Now you get into the discussion of: what do people think is valuable? There are a lot of those different discussions, particularly right now in my constituency where we have a long discussion about whether the arena is valuable and whether there should be tax money, provincial money, civic money, going into that. That's another whole discussion that I'm just not going to get into in my 10 minutes.

What I am seeing more and more of is the experts saying that this province really needs to think about this. When I look at different groups like the Shaping Alberta's Future, which was a government-requested report, that comes forward saying that, "You guys have got to look at this stuff," and we've got the likes of Jack Mintz and Peter Lougheed saying this and then we've got the Parkland Institute saying it and in North America we have very wealthy people like Warren Buffett saying it, I go, "Well, this might be time for something." So that whole discussion of where government gets revenue from: how much do they charge individual taxpayers versus corporations versus how much we take out of nonrenewable resource revenue?

Currently, just if anybody needs a little refresher, the budget that was brought forward in 2011 was expecting \$7.5 billion in personal income tax, \$3.4 billion in corporate, and the education property tax was expected to bring in \$1.6 billion. So we've got a

subtotal there of \$12.5 billion. You add in the sin taxes – gambling, tobacco, alcohol – and you've got another \$2 billion. Licences and fees for various things from hunting licences to campground fees and that sort of thing: \$4.4 billion. Interest – thank you, AIMCo – at \$1.9 billion. Now you're up to \$20.8 billion. Where's the rest of the money? Well, the rest of the money, \$8 billion of it, came from royalties that came out of the ground yesterday, and the federal government contributed \$5.2 billion by way of transfer payments for various agreements that they have with the provincial government.

I had a chart here, but I'm sure you've all seen the numbers. Twenty-three per cent of the revenue that this province spends comes from nonrenewable resource revenue. I think that's an issue that we need to look at because I don't think it's sustainable. I think that mixed in with all of this is a conversation about intergenerational debt, or spending our children's inheritance is another way of talking about that.

So this is all part of a larger mix, but in order to get that conversation going, I thought I'd be a little provocative and put it out there, specifically talking about an increase in the flat rate of income tax that we pay. I personally would like to push this far enough that we went back to a completely progressive form of taxation, but I recognize at this point that you can't do that overnight any more than we hope the federal government will not, you know, impose their changes to the old age security overnight. There has to be a phase-in period.

Indeed, the Alberta Liberal Party has brought forward as part of its platform a proposal in which the tax rate for those with a taxable income over \$100,000 would be an increased rate of 13 per cent, those with more than \$150,000 of taxable income would go to 15 per cent, and those over \$200,000 of taxable income would go to 17 per cent – so that's towards a progressive taxation system – but everybody else would still be at that 10 per cent flat tax. As we ran the numbers on that, we went: you know what? That still means that 90 per cent of the people in the province would be paying a 10 per cent rate, and just those high-income earners would be paying higher.

I'm going to try to bring this whole ball of wax back together for you. We've got a situation where increasingly people are telling us that we should not be spending our nonrenewable resource revenue as part of our daily operating money. One of those examples was a farmer who sells off, acre by acre, the family farm to buy groceries and to go to Blockbuster and for various other parts of their lives. You're right. That's not what you would do as a prudent person. We are expected to be the prudent people in Alberta in this House. So I encourage you to think of those possibilities that we could be discussing and moving forward on if we contemplated a progressive income tax.

I think we should go further there and look at what we're doing with our corporate taxes as well, which would allow us to not have 23 per cent of our budget being paid for by nonrenewable resource revenue. I think that revenue should be saved. It's not ours. It's everybody's, including future generations.

I think that's the Norway question. Clearly, we don't compare very well when we look at what Norway has done. They just took every single penny, and they put it into their fund, and then they passed a law that they could not dip into that and use the money for any investments inside of Norway. They can invest in things outside of Norway. Thus, you can expect them investing in Alberta – I think they already do – but not in their own country. So they couldn't manipulate what was going on in their own country. That fund, as we know, is just so far beyond ours, it's embarrassing to compare it at this point, while the heritage trust savings fund has diminished.

So to give ourselves time, let's look at taxes in the whole mix of things. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity and any other members who want to attract my attention.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on Motion 501. I thank the Member for Edmonton-Centre for bringing this up. I just want to preface my comments that I'm not really feeling well today, so I'll have to spare the rest of you from my usual rapid-fire speech.

5:10

The member started a conversation; we're going to continue this conversation. The purpose of this motion she talked about is to replace the current single rate of income tax in favour of what she calls progressive income tax, which would see taxes rise along with income. This is an important debate.

One thing I do want to correct, Mr. Speaker, is that the current taxation structure is, in fact, a progressive system. It is with one rate as she points out – that is correct – but at the same time the manner in which this rate is applied is in a progressive manner because of the rather generous exemptions at the lower end.

I'll give you an example. Based on last year's exemptions someone who earns just under \$19,000 ends up paying 1.1 per cent, someone who earns \$47,000 pays 6.4 per cent, and someone who earns \$117,000 pays 8.5 per cent. Thank you to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation for those figures.

Of the nearly 2.7 million Albertans who file income taxes I was astonished, Mr. Speaker, that only 63 per cent actually pay any provincial income tax at all. That means 37 per cent of tax filers pay zero per cent income tax. That's right. One in 3 individuals don't have to pay income tax on their earnings. The system protects the families and individuals with lower incomes and provides citizens of this province with a simple tax system and also doesn't provide a disincentive for those who decide to put more time into their work.

Interestingly enough, if you look at the dollar take as well, Mr. Speaker, the bottom 50 per cent of income earners in this province only pay 3 per cent of the total take of the single rate of tax, the middle 40 per cent pay 40 per cent, and the top 10 per cent pay 57 per cent of the total take on this tax. I would respectfully submit to all members of this Assembly that those who earn more already pay more.

This has also created a very business-friendly environment. I would submit that Albertans benefit from one of the most competitive taxation systems in North America. This is something we can be proud of. This is due to low personal income, corporate, and fuel taxes coupled with no capital payroll and sales taxes. In fact, if our province had a system comparable to the next lowest province, as the member pointed out, Albertans and Alberta businesses would pay at least \$11 billion – that's billion with a "b", Mr. Speaker – more in taxes each year. I think that this room is a good thing. It's not a reason that we should be able to tax more. It provides this province with a clear and distinct competitive advantage.

Our ability to keep taxes low for all Albertans while maintaining first-class services and programs has been one of our biggest competitive edges. It is a primary reason, Mr. Speaker, why so many people have chosen to flock to Alberta in search of better economic prospects, and I have to say that I'm one of those individuals. In fact, the population of Alberta grew by 10 per cent over the past five to six years. That's almost half a million people

that have moved here since then. Obviously, something is going right when it comes to our economic policies.

This government respects the trust Albertans have that their government will spend their hard-earned money wisely and prudently. We also must ask ourselves: what's the primary engine of our economy? Is it the government, or is it the private sector? I respectfully submit that it is the latter. We are firmly committed to examining our entire fiscal framework with the goal of guaranteeing that tax dollars are spent in the most efficient way possible, providing the most amount of benefit to every Albertan.

This motion concerns implementing a different progressive tax system, and it's prudent that we all understand what that system entails. Most economists define a progressive tax system as one where the lower incomes pay a smaller share and those who earn more end up paying more. I've indicated that that is what this one already offers.

The income tax rate previously was tied to the portion of taxes collected by the federal government. Prior to 1999 it was set at 44 per cent of federal tax collection from an individual. Although the rate itself happened to be a single rate for all, due to the fact that the federal government has a progressive tax system with many different rates, we were tied to the feds, and we had very little control over this. So the fact that we actually delinked our taxation system was a positive move back then. I know other provinces, including Saskatchewan, have also done that.

In 1999 the provincial government announced that it would be moving to the single rate of tax. I think the economic success story that is Alberta speaks to the benefits of this policy. I would submit that changing the current system might affect the number of individuals who choose to migrate from other jurisdictions to Alberta, making it difficult for businesses to attract and retain employees.

Mr. Speaker, if you don't believe me, look no further than to Enterprise Saskatchewan, who in 2009 proposed going to a similar single rate of tax because of – what? – competition from Alberta. In other words, this could possibly impact the Alberta advantage.

One must also keep in mind that the tax system that this motion proposes would affect those earners that already provide the most tax revenue for the province. Additionally, the vast majority of Albertans are supportive of keeping taxes as low as possible without affecting services.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this government does not support additionally taxing middle-class families. We are providing excellent services with our current revenue. It is difficult to know what the opposition, I have to say with respect, is getting at. One minute they talk about how we're spending too much money, and now they talk about how they want to increase taxes. I would ask the question, Mr. Speaker, but first of all, I want to assume a fact that's not in evidence. Let's presume that this would result in a higher aggregate take of taxes. I'm not willing to give him that point because any second-year economics student who has taken Laffer economics knows that if you raise the tax too much, you drive out capital, you drive out investment, you drive out people, and you end up having a lower take. We don't know where exactly that point is, but let's just say that that's where it is.

Where would they spend this extra money? Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Official Opposition has talked about raising taxes as much as 70 per cent. It is only the opposition in this House that is talking about raising taxes. What would they want to do? Would they want to give more free tuition to everyone? I think it's far better to target our resources to those who are in need like the minister of advanced education has announced today as opposed to going and affecting everyone and basically taxing everyone out of this province.

I do not believe that this is the right decision for our province to take. I think, in fact, that instead of questioning this, we should be thanking our former Treasurer, Stockwell Day, for his incredible success on this file. I will be voting against this motion, and I encourage all others to do the same.

I also want to mention to all members of this Assembly that if anybody here feels that we are undertaxed, if they do, the government accepts donations. Every government accepts donations. They can donate some of their own money in and of themselves. They can go and lead by example.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the last thing I wanted to mention was that the Member for Edmonton-Centre talked about Norway, and that is a topic worth discussion because that is an oil-producing state as well. One thing to remember about Norway is that it's a country; it's not a province. We send billions of our tax dollars to other provinces, which we're happy to do, but we have to recognize that Alberta is a province, not a nation. The second thing. I didn't have the time to look up Norway's tax rates, but I do know that Norway has a significantly higher value-added tax and a significantly higher income tax. Is that the type of society that we want to live in? I'd rather focus upon equality of opportunity than outcome.

People keep coming here. This system works, Mr. Speaker. I think that we should be very proud of the taxation structure that we have.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You and hon. members of this House might question what reception you would get when you ring the doorbell and say: "Hi, my name is . . . Vote for me, and I'll raise your taxes." You might think that the welcome mat would be drawn very quickly into the residence, or there might be a trap door that dropped you down into a dungeonlike circumstance.

What we are suggesting with Motion 501 on the Liberal Party tax policy is being transparent and being accountable, living on today's wages and bounty as opposed to a buy now, pay later scheme. Now, this proposal affects approximately 10 per cent of Albertans, and they're the 10 per cent of Albertans who are fortunate enough to on an individual basis be earning more than \$100,000 a year. We're all in that particular category of being in the 100,000-plus dollars circumstance as Members of this Legislative Assembly. Whether John Major decides to reduce that amount or raise it remains to be seen, Mr. Speaker, but you and I will not be participants in that discussion.

What we have proposed is a raising of the flat-tax rate for those earning over \$100,000 by 3 per cent. For those who earn in the category of \$150,000 to \$200,000, we're talking about a raise, an increase in tax of 5 per cent. For those earning over \$200,000, who are doing very well in Alberta, we've proposed to increase their rate by 7 per cent. As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre noted, even with these proposed increases to approximately 10 per cent of the better-off members of Alberta society, our taxes would be considerably lower than any other provincial jurisdiction.

5:20

Now, the hon. Solicitor General talked about the motivation that brings people to Alberta. For that motivation to be sustainable and for us to be able to keep the people that move here, we have to get past the gold rush mentality. We have to get off the roller coaster of nonrenewable energy prices set by a world market or set rather

exclusively by our southern partner. We are affected by a lower price for our product based on a glut of that product down in Chicago and down in Texas, where the proposal is to ship more of our raw bitumen rather than our refined product.

If we want to be able to control our own destinies not only now but into the future, in that future when we have drawn out every single sellable drop of oil and when we have decided that the speed at which we're extracting gas needs to be slowed down because we have such a surplus of it that the value of that product is tremendously diminished from what it was eight years ago, only at that point possibly, if the government continues in the direction it's headed, will we come to realize that we've blown the best opportunity that anyplace in the world had by not saving.

Now, what is part of Motion 501 is the notion that we should be setting aside a significantly larger portion of our nonrenewable resource revenue for the future. The hon. Solicitor General suggested that you can't compare the province of Alberta to the country of Norway, and he also indicated how much higher the taxes were in Norway. What he didn't mention – I don't think it was by neglect; he just simply didn't mention it – is the higher standard of living in Norway and that higher standard of living projected into years and years of guaranteed support for not only the grandchildren of today but successive grandchildren of the future.

We are basically individuals that are at the smorgasbord table stuffing down our meals as though there were no end in sight. This is a kind of nonconservative approach of getting those resources out of the ground as quickly as you can. Don't worry about refining them. Don't worry about value-added. Just sell them off as quickly as you can, and while you're selling them off, don't worry about the methodology you've chosen to get those resources to other areas. Simply, whether it's federal government or provincial government, ramrod your desires regardless of what the effects are. Take those resources out. Don't worry about the possibility of expanded tailings ponds. Don't worry about the fact that your resources will have greater value in the future when there is scarcity. Full speed ahead and, you know, as the expression goes, damn the torpedoes.

This living for the moment is very much like the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Our Conservative government is fiddling. It has got no preparation for the winter. It has got no preparation for the time when science and technology comes up with alternatives to fuel-based energy. It's going to be a very dark time in Alberta. That time in terms of when we run out of not only conventional oil but synthetic alternatives is not as far off as some of the people in this parliament see. It's possible that the Solicitor General may still be alive to see those dark days when we have absolutely exploited every last bit of natural resource and there is no backup.

Contrast Peter Lougheed with every successive Premier of Alberta that we've seen since. His advice was taken at the time. He was innovative. He developed the notion of the investment worthiness of our oil sands. Peter Lougheed has been saying: "What have you done to my heritage trust fund? I put forward a good idea. I put forward a savings account. Why do you keep drawing from it?"

Another idea that was less, I guess, mercurial or less debatable that the Liberals put forward that this government actually accepted was the idea of a stability fund or a sustainability fund. We go back two years ago, and we had \$17 billion in that sustainability fund. Check your balance now, Conservative members. We're somewhere around \$3 billion. What happens if that rosy projection that we received in the name of a budget speech on Thursday doesn't come true? What if the prices of our nonrenewable resources are affected by a global market? What if

European circumstances draw down the debt to such an extent that there is a further collapse of our economic market? The U.S. is very slowly coming out of a very deep depression, but it's got a long way to go.

Something else that has a long way to go: it may seem like only 1,700 kilometres to the coast, to Kitimat, but the reality is that no matter how fast Stephen Harper tries to speed up the proposed Gateway discussions, there is a great deal of opposition. Unless we call out the troops and run roughshod, we've got a problem.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and then the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member has certainly raised an interesting proposition in that motion, one option that might be considered were the government to find it necessary to raise money to provide for its essential services. However, in the present situation that's certainly not the case. It's not even within the foreseeable future since we do have a sustainability fund and we've saved for the eventuality of low resource revenues and we're even projecting very significant surpluses in the very near future. The hon. member is implying that the current tax structure is not working for Albertans and that this so-called progressive tax rate would be a better way to go and a better way of taxing Albertans.

The hon. member's proposition, however, I think has some holes in it. Like my honourable friend the Solicitor General has said, there's a large amount of proportionality already built into our system, and that is because of the fact that we have these things called personal exemptions. Before you ever get taxed, you're allowed to deduct a certain amount of your income, and that recognizes the fact that people have certain living requirements, that they need a certain amount of income to live by.

Alberta is really already on a blended proportional tax regime in that respect because of the fact that we have a 10 per cent tax only on that taxable portion of income. In 1999, when the Treasurer at that time announced the provincial government was going to be converting to a flat-tax rate of 11 per cent, we were already tied to a de facto progressive rate before that time because we tied it to the percentage of the federal tax structure. In 2001 our flat tax was reduced even further to 10 per cent, which it now stands at.

5:30

It brings up the idea and the concept and the issue of: what's a fair share for people of different earning levels to pay? I would suggest that if you look at the performance of our economy here in Alberta, according to the latest statistical data we have grown by nearly 100,000 people in a single year. From 2010 up to December of 2011 almost 100,000 people have come into Alberta. They came here seeking better opportunities, and they're also benefiting from the Alberta advantage. They voted with their feet, and they voted for our economic system. They voted for our tax system, which has now the lowest overall taxes in the country.

We have average weekly earnings that are growing at a rate of almost 5 per cent every year. In other places they are remaining stagnant. We have the highest wages in the country, which are around 20 per cent above the national average. Mr. Speaker, because a flat tax rate is a percentage of taxable income, the proportion of income tax paid on that taxable income is the same for each and every Albertan even if they have more than the personal exemption. As the hon. Solicitor General stated and as I

started off with, the practical result is a degree of progressiveness already infused into the system.

Mr. Speaker, almost 2.7 million Albertans file a personal income tax return. Of those, 1.9 million pay federal income tax while only about 1.7 million, or about 63 per cent, pay provincial income tax. That means about 37 per cent of Albertans don't pay a single dime of provincial income tax, and I would submit that, in fact, the personal exemption, which is presently indexed and which goes up every year, is a far more important factor to those individuals in Alberta who are in the low-income category. It's a far more important factor to them than it is converting to some sort of a progressive tax system, and I believe that's an illustration of the fact that the flat tax is serving us very, very well. We have already provided for those Albertans which are in the low-income categories. We have something that is already very progressive.

One other final comment, Mr. Speaker, I would add. If you look at the way taxes are paid in Alberta, of those who do pay – as I said, approximately 63 per cent are paying income tax – the top 10 per cent of earners are contributing about 57 per cent of the income revenue generated in the province, so they're already paying more. They pay more for every dollar that they earn.

Mr. Speaker, in concluding, I think that the flat tax as it is now structured, with a basic personal exemption, is at the very core of Albertans' values. We're pioneers. We're entrepreneurs. We're self-starters. We value entrepreneurship, we value hard work, and we want people to be rewarded for that hard work. I believe that the tax structure that we have presently in place, with the 10 per cent flat tax, is fair, equitable, and consistent with what this government proposes. It's conservative values at its core.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, then the hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to be able to rise to speak in favour of this motion. I am a proud member of what I believe was really the only caucus at the time this government embarked upon this unfortunate path a decade ago towards the introduction of a flat tax, the NDP, to completely reject any form of flattening of our tax structure. I was looking back through history, and at the time we were, in fact, the only caucus to do that because we believe that progressive taxation is the way you ensure fair contribution to the political and the collective benefit of our province and our community.

As anyone, to use the words of the Solicitor General, who's taken a most basic economics course will tell you, a flat tax is, in fact, a regressive tax. It's a regressive tax because what you do is that you're looking at disposable income, and by looking at disposable income, you see that with the introduction of a flat tax low-income and medium-income Albertans pay more.

What happened when the flat tax was introduced here in Alberta in January of 2001? Well, basically, it is true that a fairly generous exemption was put in place, so low-low-income Albertans did not pay tax, and that was fine, but middle-income Albertans received no benefit from the introduction of the flat tax. No benefit. They continued to have to pay exactly what they'd been paying before, and that was the case for people earning up to \$60,000 a year, which in 2000 encapsulated the majority of middle-income Albertans at the time. Those who earned between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a year – and this again was in the year 2000 – saw a 1.14 per cent drop in their taxes. Those who earned over \$100,000 a year saw a 2.76 per cent drop in their taxes. Clearly, the more you

made, the more this government delivered for you. The wealthier you were, the more this government did for you.

Well, let's just ask ourselves. Maybe that was a fair comment. Maybe we need to give more to the rich because they're just going to be so much wiser with their money than the government would be. So let's give more to the rich, and everything will work out better for everyone even though the vast majority of middle-income earners paid the same or more than they did before.

Well, what did that bring about for us? It brought about for us this ongoing roller coaster of provincial financial management that attaches us to the revenue stream that comes from the oil and gas industry, which is very unpredictable. It involves a tremendous amount of political gamesmanship on the part of the members of this government, and over the long haul it also involves some incredibly irresponsible planning and policy decisions.

What kinds of things does that middle-income family, that family that in the year 2000 was earning between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year, gain from it? Well, they gained increased school fees. They gained the delisting of a number of health care services. They gained huge cuts to our environmental regime and, thus, to the overall value of our collective environmental enjoyment. They saw cuts to special-needs funding for special-needs kids. They saw a gargantuan, unprecedented increase in university tuition. They saw a growing and unaddressed crisis with respect to how we care for our seniors. We have in long-term care a shortage of probably about 1,500 to 2,000 beds, and when we look at seniors' care overall, we're probably looking at about a 30,000-bed shortage. That's what we saw. We see a growing infrastructure deficit. We see schools which are falling apart around us, with the government trying to close community schools as a result of that.

Perhaps even more importantly than all of this, Mr. Speaker, we see an absence of savings. We see the failure to plan for when we have to make that economic transition in this province. The fact that we have, you know, whatever it is right now, a few billion in the sustainability fund and \$12 billion, \$13 billion, \$14 billion, \$15 billion in the heritage trust fund: that is shameful when you compare the amount of resource generation in this province to what happens in other jurisdictions. It is absolutely shameful. We are without question the richest jurisdiction in the world, yet we have nothing, almost nothing to show for it.

We cannot plan. We cannot say to our kids or our grandkids: we're leaving you with the best. Almost definitely we are going to be saying to our kids and our grandkids, "We're leaving you with a leaky roof and a bunch of poisoned ponds and poor air quality," and "Oh, by the way, we're coming to live in your basement because we have no long-term care spots." That's what we're doing for our kids and for our grandkids, and we're doing that so we can have a flat tax and ensure that the rich get more money than they would otherwise.

Economists know that when you're looking at disposable income, when you get to the very wealthy, there is a law of diminishing returns. When you get past a certain level, the very wealthy don't invest in their community. They don't invest in their local economy. They buy shares in international corporations. They buy things outside of their local economy. The fact of the matter is that the wealthier people get, the less likely that money stays in their local economy. Yet that's what this government has decided they want to do. It's not wise. It's not a long-term solution.

5:40

The other thing, of course, that the NDP is very keen on is ensuring that we actually look at the corporate tax structure in this province. Ironically in some ways, the Member for Edmonton-

Riverview has compiled a very intelligent argument around why we need to reconsider the structure of our corporate tax regime in this province. I say ironic because, unfortunately, his caucus voted to reduce that corporate tax on three separate occasions over the course of this decade. It's good that at this point there seems to be an understanding that over the long haul this is not the way we can run our province.

We need to ensure that we collect enough revenue to be able to invest fairly in the kinds of things that matter to regular Albertans and their families. We cannot be constantly saying to them: "Oh, well, you know, the goose that laid the golden egg" – I think that is one person's phrase – "is not laying this week. You guys need to stuff those other 20 kids into that classroom because we've decided not to hire any more teachers." You know, you'd think I'm exaggerating, but we've seen that kind of chaos in the education system over just the last two years with the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't political funding regime that this government has adopted with respect to our education system.

I've seen my kids' class sizes go from 18 to 31, back down to 18. I've seen teachers come and teachers go because from year to year these guys can't get it together to tell school boards how much money they're going to give them. If they do tell them, they tell them way too late, and they've created more chaos. That kind of funding might be acceptable for an economy that is in crisis, for a regime that is in crisis, that is brand new, that has no idea how to run the government, but for a group of people that have been here for 40 years, who are sitting on the most resources of any jurisdiction in the world, it's shameful. It's shameful.

What we need to do is develop a structure, a tax regime, that will ensure that everybody pays their fair share.

The other thing that the NDP would do, in addition to considering the concept of progressive taxation, would be to ensure that we actually review the issue of the royalty regime. This government got really nervous and scared when the oil industry found themselves a new political party that threatened these guys, and they backed down on what most experts will agree was the right direction, but Albertans are still waiting for them to act on what most experts agree is the right direction.

If we do that and if we have a realistic tax structure, one that ensures that regular Albertans still pay a reasonable amount but that those who are the most wealthy start paying their fair share, then I think we can move forward in a way that is responsible and ultimately visionary, which is what Albertans deserve, because we have enough here that we should be able to be visionary. It's time, I believe, that we start acting in that way.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Ms DeLong: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I did want to rise, mainly to talk about taxes. The only reason we are talking about taxes today is because the opposition wants to raise taxes, which is so very strange, so very, very strange.

You know, there were some very, very intelligent moves made by the Conservative Party many, many years ago, and these moves are now resulting in the future growth of our income. The first one was that the government of the day decided that for this useless stuff up north called oil sands, this totally useless stuff up there that was leaking into the river, we would try to figure out how to make this profitable, and that's what we did. We went out and we invested in research and got the oil companies involved, and we actually came up with ways of turning this useless goo that was polluting the environment into something that could fuel people's

cars and send planes all around the world and could power our industry and could bring income into the government of Alberta that could be used by all the people of Alberta. Well, this has been paying off, and it has been giving jobs to people, and we've been able to bring jobs to people from all over Canada into Alberta because of this move that was made way back then.

Then the next thing that they did was that they decided: "Okay. We want this thing to get going. We want people to be able to get going on these big, expensive projects." So we said: "Okay. Well, we'll only charge a 1 per cent royalty until it gets paid off. Then we're going to ramp that royalty right up." That's what we did. What's happening is that all of these investments are now starting to produce energy and produce money for us. Not only that, but a lot of these projects are now starting to get paid off. As soon as they start getting paid off, our royalties skyrocket.

These were decisions that were made long ago, and that is why we are projecting a surplus in the near future. It's not because of our estimates of what the price of oil is. I mean, the estimates that we're coming up with for the price of oil are extremely conservative. What is ramping up our income is that projects are actually starting to produce oil, and they are starting to pay out, so our income goes way, way up. Why would anybody want to start increasing taxes? Why? It just makes no sense to us. If you really understand how this industry is set up, you would understand that there is absolutely no reason to be able to talk about increasing taxes. I just wanted to make that point.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to rise today in this Assembly to speak to Motion 501, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. The motion urges the government to do away with our flat-rate income tax and to introduce a progressive income tax that would increase with one's income.

As we all know, Albertans enjoyed our flat-rate tax and hence a low-tax system for roughly a decade now. Over 10 years ago our province took a bold step forward in favour of a lower tax rate for all Albertans. This government believes in offering a competitive and stimulating economic environment, and our own income tax policy is directly related to that principle.

Mr. Speaker, I talk to many people in my constituency on a daily basis, and I just want to say that I have not talked to one single solitary person in four years that has asked us to change our tax rate. The government is fiscally responsible and will continue to provide a sophisticated level of services and programs for Albertans at our current rate of taxation and, I dare say, a level of services and programs that are the envy of anyone in not only Canada but in North America and most of the English-speaking world. Albertans expect and receive first-class services and programs. The truth of the matter is that they do not wish to pay more income tax, nor do they need to.

The economic success of Alberta has been firmly rooted in prudent policies that benefit all Albertans. As I said before, in 2012 employment growth is set to increase by another 3.8 per cent. Alberta's single tax rate system helps the province to attract and retain highly skilled individuals that are necessary to grow the province's economy and thus provide a higher standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, I am an immigrant and one of those people who came to Alberta 11 short years ago. I am one of the 30,000 to 100,000 people that we need to attract to our province in the next few years for the shortage of workers that we have to continue to

grow this economy, that is second to none in North America. We need to have the ability to be able to attract people.

I was one of those people who had a choice. I moved from Ontario. I moved to Quebec. Then I moved to Seattle. Moving from Quebec to Seattle, I saw my income tax rate drop by half. I took home 50 per cent more money after two weeks in Seattle than I did in Quebec, living in Montreal. When I decided to look for a place to locate and to raise my family, I chose Alberta. It was not just some willy-nilly idea. I did my research.

My father, who was a former senior auditor with Revenue Canada, said: "Do your homework. Look at the numbers. They never lie." I looked at the different jurisdictions and compared the statistics. When I moved to Seattle, it was rated number 2 in North America back in 1995. Calgary was rated, I think, number 8, and Edmonton was rated number 15, the best places to live in North America bar none.

5:50

There were reasons. The price of gas was less, what you paid for groceries, your property taxes, what you pay for housing, all those other things. But the other thing that jumped out at me was the tax rate. Because Alberta was moving to a flat tax, it meant that it was going to be the lowest taxed jurisdiction in Canada. That meant that people wanted to go there because, Mr. Speaker, no matter what the opposition believes, we do not enjoy paying more taxes. Albertans do not enjoy paying taxes more than anybody else in Canada does.

In moving to Alberta, like many others I have a chance to put more money in our pockets, to reinvest it in our community, to give more money to charities, to spend more money to help with our education system, to put our kids through school, to give our kids and their families the opportunities that others would only hope for. But we do that because we have that ability because of the foresight of the governments that led before us. They were able to look at a system that was competitive, one that was attractive, and one that was the envy of everybody else, not only in Canada but in North America.

I hear the hon. members from across the way. One is saying that it was a gold-rush mentality, a glut of product in a world-wide situation. Well, the fact of the matter is that in terms of resources, when you're speaking about gas, we are in a global economy. As the hon. Solicitor General had mentioned, we are a province in a country in a global economy, and we have to realize that. We are not the ones who determine what the price of gas is, and they don't determine the price in Texas, but we are part of that. To those who say that it's better to be in Norway, I'd beg to differ. I'd beg you to find somewhere else that's better to live in the world today than Alberta.

It's not an unfortunate path we've gone down; it's one that has been thoughtful. There are 37 per cent of Albertans who don't have to pay tax, as was mentioned before, and those are the lowest socioeconomic strata. That's what a caring and just society does. We're also in a society where we're able to have one of the best educational systems in the English-speaking world. We have one of the best health care systems in Canada.

When I looked at paying a tax rate of 18 per cent in Washington state versus paying a 10 per cent flat tax here plus a federal tax, one of the things that I forgot about the difference between living here and there was that you had publicly funded health care, and you had an education system that was second to none. You couple that with everything else that we have here – the ability to keep a job, to be able to get a job, to be able to go to work, be able to support your family in the fashion that we'd all like to do – and I

believe we have to continue on the course that has so rightly been directed for the last 40 years and the last 10 years.

I do not support this motion.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 8(3) provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close the debate. I'd now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close debate on Motion 501.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I was hoping to be engaged by the members opposite, but I'm afraid they rather met my low expectations, and I'm sorry about that.

A number of you made the same mistake and started talking immediately about how the current flat tax has a number of exemptions on the bottom end that would take care of working low-income, low-income, or truly poverty-stricken people, and that's not what I was talking about. I think the point is that in any tax structure the society is going to look for ways to look after those that have very few resources. I take that as a given, and I would expect to see that in any tax structure that was in place. So I don't find it a very compelling argument against having, for example, those with over \$100,000 of taxable income pay a 3 per cent higher rate. The two things do not go together, and I don't find it a compelling reason.

I think there's a larger issue here. If you all want to step back to the 10,000-foot level and look at the fact that that nonrenewable energy is being spent as part of our operating budget every single day in this province, it is already problematic for us. We can't save it. We are using those resources, and they will begin to diminish in our lifetime. We, the people responsible for this, are not taking any steps to try and save that money for the future.

How do we replace the money out of the budget? You're going to have to look at increasing taxes. How difficult is that? Well, my point would be that you look at a fair tax structure, which is going to be taxing those that are making significantly more money, and they pay more taxes.

For all the arguments about people flocking here and migrating here because of our low tax structure, you know what? They come here for jobs. When you are living somewhere else and you don't have a job and you know that you could come to this province and get a job, you come here for a job. I appreciate the research that the Member for Calgary-North West did in choosing a place based

solely on an income tax rate. Okay. That's what was important to him, but everybody else, I think, really comes here for the jobs, not for the tax rate.

The idea that somehow Alberta was built by lone, gun-slinging mavericks is completely wrong. We were built and able to achieve the success that we did in this province through a co-operative movement, through large families, through neighbours helping neighbours, through communities that built together, came together, and pooled resources so that everyone was able to take advantage of that.

That, indeed, is the same reason why we pool taxes, so that we can offer services to those that need them. Not everybody necessarily needs it. They don't need it every day. Maybe they never need it in their life. Nonetheless, the government is expected to provide those services, even things like disaster relief. I'm sure there were some very wealthy people in Medicine Hat that got flooded, and they would expect to be able to come to the government and get some relief as a result of what they had suffered.

I will continue to advocate for a fair tax system. I will continue to advocate that we move the money from the nonrenewable resource revenue into a savings plan. I think that is prudent, and I also think it's responsible for the generations that come after me.

You know what? I don't have kids. I don't have to worry about them. I worry about your kids and your children's children and even beyond that because I feel there is a collective responsibility to the health and the long-term success of everything in this province, and sticking to a regressive tax system in which the middle-income people pay a significantly higher portion of their resources does not seem like a fair structure to me.

I'd hoped for some more interesting ideas to come out of the discussion today, but what I mostly heard was a reiteration of government rhetoric, so that was a bit disappointing. Nonetheless, I'm glad I was able to get it out there for discussion. I still would like to see a larger discussion take place amongst all Albertans along the lines of a citizens' assembly, in which you bring together representatives and let them talk about it.

Thank you very much.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 501 lost]

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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