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The 28th Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, November 25, 2013

Issue 72

The Honourable Gene Zwozdesky, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 28th Legislature

First Session

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Woo-Paw, Hon. Teresa, Calgary-Northern Hills (PC)
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Young, Steve, Edmonton-Riverview (PC),
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Progressive Conservative: 59 Wildrose: 17 Alberta Liberal: 5 New Democrat: 4 Independent: 2

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, November 25, 2013

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Hon. members, let us pray. First, let us be reminded of the adage that we make a living by what we earn, but we make a life by what we give. We are privileged to have so much to give in our lives. Let us be generous in how we share that with others. Amen.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're joined today by Ms Hana Marinkovic, who is going to lead us in the singing of *O Canada*. We want to welcome her. She is involved with the Edmonton Singing Christmas Tree in support of our local drive for Santas Anonymous and Edmonton's Food Bank. These organizations are very close to her heart. She's been in Canada since she was age six. We invite you now, Ms Marinkovic, to lead us in the singing of our national anthem.

Hon. Members:

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

The Speaker: Thank you very much, Hana.

Please remain standing for a moment, hon. members. The chair has just been informed that a former member of this Assembly, the hon. Lou Hyndman, passed away. We will be doing a tribute and a memorial in his honour, with the traditional minute or two of silence, either tomorrow or Wednesday pending confirmation with the family of their wishes. Please know that your chair is aware of that, and we will take the necessary steps in accordance with our tradition very shortly.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very, very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you today a number of guests seated in your gallery who are representatives of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Alberta. They are here to mark a Canadian first, the signing of a partnership agreement between a provincial chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada and the provincial government as well.

Mr. Speaker, seated in your gallery, most familiar will be, of course, Mrs. Judy Gordon, former president, I believe, of the MS Society and, most importantly, a former member of this Assembly. Seated with her this afternoon: Mr. Neil Pierce from MS Alberta as well; Julie Kelndorfer, who is staff with the MS Society; I believe at least two other board members of the MS Society, Mr. Garry Wheeler and Mr. Kevin O'Neil; as well as Julia Nimilowich from the MS Society staff. I'd like to invite these guests to please rise and receive the warm welcome and thanks from this House

for their tremendous work to support Albertans with multiple sclerosis.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, you have some guests?

Ms Redford: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. I'm rising today to introduce to you and through you a very good friend of mine, Steve Kwasny. Steve Kwasny started at the Legislature as part of our ministerial internship program in the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, and this led Steve this summer to being involved with Minister Rick Fraser in flood recovery efforts in High River. Steve truly is a community leader from Red Deer, and prior to joining us at the Legislature, Steve was tremendously active in postsecondary student government as president of the Students' Association of Red Deer College and chair of the Alberta Students' Executive Council. As I said, he is originally from Red Deer, currently working part-time to finish his political science degree at the University of Alberta, and this weekend he was elected president of the PC Youth of Alberta.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have a number of guests here with us today to be introduced. Let's start with some school groups.

The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a wonderful group of 29 grade 6 students from Monsignor William Irwin school although I have to admit that I always have trouble saying that name because most of us knew him as Father Bill, the founder of Catholic Social Services in Edmonton. Monsignor William Irwin is located in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. Accompanying the students are their teachers Michael Leskow and Jaelyn Bedard along with parent helpers Dan Reid and Ken Saunders.

Mr. Speaker, I had a wonderful opportunity to spend some time with them this past Friday, and I want to let you and all members know they were impressive, they were motivated, and they were direct. They asked outstanding questions about the Chamber, the processes within the Chamber, the role of MLAs within the Chamber, the processes for building more schools, and what Campus Alberta is about. This is the class to watch. There are some up-and-coming politicians and successful business leaders in this class. They're seated in the members' gallery and in the public gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly a group of future leaders from the beautiful constituency of Edmonton-Manning, 59 grade 6 students from the Edmonton Christian school. These students are among the brightest in Alberta. It was definitely my honour to meet them very early today. I also had the honour of meeting their teachers Ms Elaine Junk and Mr. Greg Gurnett as well as their parent helpers Lee-Ann Chin, Tracy Schiile, Jeff Stolte, Teresa Gammel, Val Verveda, Luz Maria Groot, Janice Zenari, and Stacey Bell. They are all seated in the public gallery. I'm so pleased to ask them to stand and receive the warmest welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: We have one last school group. Edmonton-Mill Woods, please.

Mr. Quadri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf I would like to introduce to you and through you the most passionate, most enthusiastic, and most well-dressed students, 33 students from the Bisset elementary school, located in your wonderful consistency of Edmonton-Mill Creek. They are participating in School at the Legislature this week, and they are accompanied by their teacher, Mike Lastiwka. They are seated in the members' gallery. I would request them to please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two staff from the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. They are seated in your gallery. They are Rob Sutherland, the director of *Hansard* in B.C., and Christine Fedoruk, the manager of reporting services. They are in Edmonton this week to attend a conference called Navigating the Digital Divide, and while they are here, they are visiting our Legislature to get a first-hand look at *Alberta Hansard's* transcript production processes. Plus, they're enjoying a bit of un-Victoria-like weather. I would ask Rob and Christine to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great honour and high distinction today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly retiring Deputy Commissioner Dale McGowan, commanding officer, RCMP K Division. Deputy Commissioner McGowan has been serving communities across our country for the last 35 years. He was born in Edmonton and returned to serve his home province in 2011. He brought his in-depth experience to the position of deputy commissioner, including work with northern aboriginal policing, serious major crime units, and homicide units. He has also served as the criminal operations officer and accredited emergency response team incident commander.

Deputy Commissioner McGowan has been recognized with many awards, including a commanding officer's commendation for investigative excellence, the RCMP long-service medals, and he is also a member of the Order of Merit of Police Forces.

Beyond policing, Deputy Commissioner McGowan has dedicated countless hours over the past 30 years to coaching many youth sports teams. His passion, Mr. Speaker, for the RCMP has been passed on to all three of his children, all of whom are members of the RCMP.

On behalf of all Albertans I want to thank you, Deputy Commissioner McGowan, for your commitment and your dedication to keeping our communities safe every day. I wish you the best in retirement. I'd ask that all members give Deputy Commissioner McGowan the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly. [Standing ovation]

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Human Services, followed by Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly

three special guests with the Edmonton Singing Christmas Tree, and they are seated in your gallery.

Carrie Doll is a board member of the Singing Christmas Tree Foundation, and Hana Marinkovic, who led us in *O Canada*, is my chief of staff and a member of the Singing Christmas Tree choir. I can assure the House that although we often sing from the same song sheet, listen to her singing, not mine.

I'll do the final introduction in a moment. Mr. Speaker, the Edmonton Singing Christmas Tree has an incredible legacy in this city. Many of us remember that it started as a local church production. It's now grown into a spectacular Broadway-style family show at the Jubilee, with five performances over four days, boasting collaborations with incredible local artists as well as international artists such as Mark Masri, the Canadian Tenors, and Ruben Studdard, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, the Edmonton Singing Christmas Tree is not only an incredible Christmas show for the family, but through these shows the foundation has raised more than half a million dollars over the last four years for Edmonton's Santas Anonymous and Food Bank.

My final introduction, Mr. Speaker, is Mike Fersovitch, and he's also seated in your gallery. He is here in honour of his wife, Kristen Fersovitch. Kristen was a special performer with the tree for the last two years and is a major source of hope and inspiration for the Singing Christmas Tree and every Edmontonian who was touched by her powerful spirit. Kristen passed away this October, but her light will remain the brightest star in the tree for many years to come.

Mr. Speaker, for their dedication and commitment to supporting our local community and helping to make the holidays that much brighter for families, I'd like to ask Carrie, Hana, and Mike to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome and thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the Associate Minister of Regional Recovery and Reconstruction for Southwest Alberta.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of fabulous men and women from the 50s group from the Candora Society. The Candora Society of Edmonton is a not-for-profit organization with a community development mandate to work with the residents of northeast Edmonton to create a positive environment for families to live and to grow and to collectively address issues of concern in our communities.

The 50s group started four years ago to keep their seniors together. This group meets every Thursday morning at 10 o'clock to play cards, make crafts, and take workshops, enjoying lots of laughs. Mr. Speaker, I've had the incredible privilege of visiting with this group on a couple of occasions in the last few years. Their goal this year is to fund raise to go on field trips, which brings them to our Assembly today.

I invite them to rise as I call their names and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly: Lorette Spilchen, the director; Eveline Warren; Leona Lindberg; Maria Locker; Mary Yadowski; Andry Gurba; Wilhelmina Lund; Kathy Wowchuk; Todd Schnerch; Colleen Campbell, and Maureen Stokell. I'll invite my colleagues to join me in giving them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The Associate Minister of Regional Recovery and Reconstruction for Southwest Alberta, followed by the Minister of Culture.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to everyone in this Assembly nine hard-working members of our Alberta public services' flood recovery task force team. Since the flooding began in June, members of the Alberta public service have been at the forefront of the recovery in impacted communities and offices across the province. Their efforts have helped thousands of Albertans move towards rebuilding their homes and bringing some sense of normalcy to their lives. They will continue to work compassionately and tirelessly behind the scenes to help flood victims move through the recovery and healing process in the years ahead.

These professionals are taking a short break from their day-to-day flood recovery efforts to tour the Legislature and see firsthand how their work is making a difference. I'm not sure if they're in the gallery yet, but I'd like to introduce them. I'd ask them to stand if they're here. They are Jacob Modayil, Teresa Ullyott, Shannon Cavalieri, Ramola Goguen, Rebecca Wade, Dana Gray, Cameron Gertzen, Sonya Witzman, and Carlyne Murphy. Please join me in giving these people a warm welcome.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. I've just received a note that your guests will be here shortly. They've been held up.

Let's move on to the Minister of Culture, followed by St. Albert.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very honoured to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly members of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose and their executive, an outstanding group of individuals who are part of the imperial court system of queens and kings across North America. If you would kindly rise in the members' gallery as I say your names: Michelle Pederson, treasurer; Kari Sorensen, president; Imperial Grand Duke XXXVIII Randy Quiver; Imperial Grand Duchess XXXVIII Myra Maines; Imperial Crown Princess XXXVIII Kelsey Breeze; His Most Imperial Sovereign Majesty Emperor XXVI, XXVIII, XXXVI, and XXXVIII and a half Rob BigOnion; His Most Imperial and Sovereign Majesty the 38th Elected Emperor of Edmonton and all of Northern Alberta the Triple-X Elizabethan Emperor of Classic Tunes, Show Tunes, and Looney Tunes Jeffylube XXXPress.

The mission of their court is to raise funds for charities and other organizations which either provide direct services to the GLBT community of Edmonton or those which work to promote an accepting attitude of gays and lesbians in the community as a whole. In their 38th year they've chosen to focus their fabulous fundraising on the John M. Kerr memorial scholarship for GLBT youth attending postsecondary schools, the Pride Centre of Edmonton, Camp fYrefly, the Canadian Cancer Society, the Alzheimer Society of Canada, and the GLBT community. On November 29, this weekend, Crowns for Kids will take place in Edmonton, where proceeds and toys collected are donated to Kids Kottage and Ronald McDonald House in time for Christmas. I would ask that my colleagues show you the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Khan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you a very special family living in my constituency of St. Albert. Terry and Roma Kurtz and their sons Ben and Grant have proven to be inspirational to everyone they meet. Ben and Grant are young men living with autism, yet both live amazing lives pursuing their passion as artists. Ben is a talented photographer, and Grant is an amazing painter. With the

love and encouragement of their parents these young men have flourished pursuing their respective interests and are gaining a following and a reputation as talented artists. It is, in fact, through their Autism Artistry gallery showing last spring that I first met this family and enjoyed their wonderful work, and their mother, Roma, has asked me to pass on a sample of their work in the form of gift cards to the Premier, which I will be honoured to do. Joining the family today are Ben and Grant's two caregivers, Ashley Bailer and Stacia McKinley. Also with them are Danielle Galloway and Shane Henton, two very dear friends. I'll ask Team Kurtz to now rise, and would you all join me in the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by Edmonton-South West if we hurry.

Mr. Dorward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons received the Nobel peace prize earlier this year. I am so pleased to report to you that the King's University College in my area of Gold Bar had a significant role in the receiving of that prize. Today we have Dr. Melanie Humphreys, the president of King's University College, and two of the students, Joseph Zondervan and Miriam Mahaffy. Miriam's father, Peter Mahaffy, is unable to be with us. He is the other individual who worked closely on this project along with Brian Martin, also a professor, who is unable to be here. I would like Joseph, Miriam, and Dr. Melanie Humphreys to please stand up and receive a warm welcome from the Assembly.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West very briefly.

Mr. Jeneroux: All right. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise to introduce to you 13 dynamic individuals who have come to our Chamber today. This group is from Alberta School of Business, executive education. As many of the members know, executive education is one of the four pillars of Alberta School of Business. As the school's professional development provider they serve all clients across all industries and in the public sector. Executive education works to build the province of Alberta in western Canada through the leadership of learning. This incredible group has taken the initiative and accepted my invite to come to today's proceedings. They are Associate Dean Carolyn Campbell, my dear friend Jenny Adams, Heather Christensen, Rhonda May, Courtney Schubert, Amy Fisher, Kate Wylie, Sabrina Loo, Heather Thomson, Krista Aune, Liezel Candava, Melissa Creech, Sarah Kowalevsky, and Tyler Waye. We can now refer to them as Tyler and the ladies, I guess, but I do ask them to rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. First main set of questions.

Children in Care

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, today we've learned that the government has failed to accurately report the number of deaths of children in care since 1999. The tragedy of these children's deaths is heart-breaking. To learn in media reports that the number of deaths of children in care is actually three times higher than the government's previously reported figures is unacceptable. Will the minister commit today to a full public inquiry into their children in care

policies to ensure that mistakes of this nature will not happen again?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, the death of any child in Alberta is a tragedy, either in care or not in care. That's one of the reasons, when we formed government in 2013, that we took steps to ensure that the child welfare system is even stronger. You will know that we passed legislation in this House in 2012 to ensure that the child advocate was independent, an independent officer of this House, that the death of any child in care had to be reported, mandatory reporting to the child advocate, and it's why we passed the Children First legislation, so that caregivers of children in care and out of care could share information to keep kids safe.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I'll ask questions about the advocate in a minute, but the media reports also raised concerns regarding the quality of care Alberta children receive when they are in the care of government. We know that the vast majority of Alberta's foster parents are caring, compassionate individuals who make substantial personal sacrifices. Will the minister commit to a public inquiry to ensure that foster parents are provided with the support that they need in order to effectively help Alberta's children in care?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is fast to call for public inquiries. What she should recognize in this case is that it's not another inquiry we need. We've actually had the inquiries, and now we're implementing the results of those inquiries. The previous minister put in place a quality assurance council to review every incident of serious injury and death. The Child and Youth Advocate Act, passed in December of 2012, requires every death of a child in care or under the programs of our department to be referred to the Child and Youth Advocate. The medical examiner's office reviews the death of any child in care. There are a lot of things that have been put in place.

Ms Smith: If that were true, Mr. Speaker, we wouldn't just be finding out today that only one-third of the deaths had actually been reported.

Following the tragic deaths of children in care, subsequent fatality reviews have provided hundreds of recommendations on how these tragic deaths can be prevented. Instead of fighting requests for information from the opposition, from the media, from other groups, will the minister commit to a public inquiry to track the extent to which the recommendations of these fatality inquiries and special case reviews have actually been implemented?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member would know that since 2012 we've actually publicly reported the death of any child in care. So every child since 2012 who has died in care, whether of natural causes, accidental, or otherwise, is fully reported. That's in place already. The quality assurance council has just sent me two recommendations, and one of them is to put in place a tracking system so that we can publicly track all of the recommendations that have come forward from fatality reviews and reports, and we are going to be doing that immediately.

Ms Smith: Here's a problem, Mr. Speaker. The government's independent Child and Youth Advocate has also expressed frustration at the government's failure to provide timely and accurate information. In his most recent report the advocate himself said that "our access to information is less timely than we hoped." Why is the government failing to provide full and timely information not only to Alberta's media but also to their own independent Child and Youth Advocate?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the Child and Youth Advocate has full access to all information. He has some concerns sometimes about timeliness, but that has been worked out. There's been a process since the office was established. We've been setting up a process to ensure that he has access to the information he needs when he needs it and when he wants it, and that is actually happening as we speak. We've dealt with that concern that he's had, and we're making sure that all of that information is available to him. There are two values here that are really important. One is the privacy of the family and siblings and others, and the other is the value of reporting. We've covered this by having a quality assurance council, the Child and Youth Advocate, the medical examiner's office, and other methods.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, that's not what the advocate said in his report two weeks ago.

In addition to recommendations coming from the fatality inquiries, the government's independent Child and Youth Advocate has also put forward a number of important recommendations regarding the quality of care for children in care. However, the advocate himself is also concerned that these recommendations aren't being fully implemented by the government, saying that "the response to these recommendations has been limited." Why is the government failing to implement all of the recommendations of their own Child and Youth Advocate?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, the first thing I want to be perfectly clear on, because the opposition doesn't seem to be able to get this straight, is that the Child and Youth Advocate is not our own officer. The Child and Youth Advocate is an officer of this Legislature and reports to the Legislature. We are mandated and legally obliged to co-operate fully with him and report all serious injuries and deaths and to co-operate to provide the information that he needs to make a full and complete inquiry. The quality assurance council is also mandated to do that, and between the two of them they can hold us to account with respect to anything that they feel might not be adequately reported. We've published all the numbers of every death of any child in care, and we have done so since 2012. What we need to do is to get on with continuing to improve the system.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, that answer is not acceptable. The minister is not living up to the expectations for this advocate office. Albertans may be rightly asking why the government even bothers to have an independent Child and Youth Advocate if they're going to keep him in the dark and fail to follow through on his recommendations. However, given the reports today the need for this officer has never been more clear. To the minister: going forward, will he actually empower the Child and Youth Advocate by providing him all of the relevant information and by implementing all of the recommendations he gives to this government?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, we do provide to the Child and Youth Advocate and I will pledge to this Legislature that we will continue to provide to the Child and Youth Advocate all of the information that he needs to do his job. The Child and Youth Advocate has now tabled I think it's two reports or maybe three reports, and we are thoroughly reviewing those reports. We are very, very interested in those recommendations, and we are very, very interested in implementing those recommendations.

The Speaker: The hon. leader. Third main set of questions.

Michener Centre Closure

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, keeping with the issue of persons in care, last Thursday the Member for Red Deer-North finally let caring and compassion trump partisanship and quite rightly joined the fight to keep Michener Centre open. The Member for Red Deer-North knows the great work of the staff at Michener, what they do for these residents. She knows there is no effective plan to relocate these residents. She knows that closing Michener is wrong. Will the Premier listen to her Member for Red Deer-North and cancel the closing of Michener Centre?

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, Michener Centre has been a very important part of the health care system in Alberta for many years, but that's the point. When the Michener Centre was opened many years ago, we as a community had an understanding, that was quite different than today, as to what community-based care looked like for people that were living with disabilities. Although there are some people that are certainly still requiring information and getting their transition plans in place, I have every confidence that the staff and the minister responsible for PDD are working with families to ensure that we provide better community-based support for people because that is how we actually work with people in 2013.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the Premier should know that Michener Centre hasn't been institutional care for more than 40 years. Jody Kvern is just one long-term resident who has tried community living and found that it was a disaster for her. Jody's family is passionate about keeping Michener Centre open. To the Premier: why won't she visit Michener Centre to see for herself that this model of care that they provide is the very best care for these residents?

2:00

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, I have visited the Michener Centre, and successive Premiers have visited the Michener Centre. Nobody is criticizing the care and compassion that's been exercised at the Michener Centre, nor would we ever. That's not the point. We know that we can do better. We know there are models of care that provide better outcomes. We're moving forward to implement them.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, many of the residents at Michener Centre are also under the guardianship of the government. In many cases their families surrendered guardianship to the government to secure their loved ones' care at this facility. These families were promised that their loved ones would be cared for at Michener Centre in Red Deer. They wouldn't have signed the guardianship documents otherwise. To the Premier: why is this government breaking their promises to these Alberta families?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, the promise that we've made to the families of those individuals either under the care of the public guardian or other guardians – the promises we make are to the individuals, and that is to provide for the very best care we can, to strive to achieve the very best outcomes that we can, and that's what we're going to do.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the Alberta Liberal opposition.

Deaths and Injuries of Children in Care

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The moral test of a government is how it treats its weak and vulnerable, especially children in care. Today we learned heartbreaking stories about the

shocking number of children who died while in government care. Annual government reports give the misleading indication that 56 children died in care between '99 and the present. After a four-year court battle waged by the *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Herald*, we now know the true number, 145. To the Premier: why is your government trying to cover up the deaths of 145 children?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, that is the furthest from the truth. The fact of the matter is that this government, under this Premier's leadership, immediately moved to set up the Human Services department, immediately moved to make the Child and Youth Advocate independent, and immediately moved to publish the numbers of all the children who died while in care. Now, the other number is also misleading. The reason it wasn't published before that was that the numbers that weren't published were of those children who died tragically of natural causes. So the numbers that were published were those that were not the children who died of natural causes. There was no attempt to hide, but this Premier has moved to make this completely open and transparent.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, with all due respect to that minister the fact of the matter is that there are mothers, grandmothers, and families waiting for answers about the deaths of their children in your care.

Mr. Speaker, if the number of deaths of children in care is this grossly underreported, then the number of children seriously injured while in government care is very likely underreported as well: sexually, physically, and emotionally injured. To the Minister of Human Services: since 1999 while in the care of your government how many children have been severely injured? Can you please answer that question?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, since I became Minister of Human Services – actually, prior to that the previous minister set up the quality assurance council. All incidents of serious injury or death are reported to the quality assurance council for investigation. Then we set up the Child and Youth Advocate as an independent officer of the Legislature, brought that legislation here. This Legislature agreed that the child and youth officer should be independent. All deaths and serious injuries are reported to the Child and Youth Advocate for investigation. As of the annual reports of 2012 we're reporting publicly the deaths of all children in care. There is nothing being hidden here. What's really unfortunate is if we make political hay out of . . .

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, it's quite clear the minister didn't hear the question. The question is: how many were severely injured?

It's also quite clear that this Conservative government has failed in its most basic duty to protect the weakest and most vulnerable amongst us, our children at risk. Only a fraction of these 145 deaths were deemed worthy of an investigation. In cases where reviews were completed, recommendations weren't even followed. We owe it to these children and their families, Minister. To the Premier. Your government's credibility is at risk. Can you please stand up and answer my question: will you call an independent judicial public inquiry into these deaths?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, this member also is one who wants to use public money for public inquiries. This is an area that's very serious. This is an area that's very important, and that's the very reason why this Premier has made children a priority of this government. This Premier moved immediately to have a Child and Youth Advocate's office as an independent officer of the Legis-

lature, who instructed that we publish the number of children's deaths. We are very open and transparent on it, while still maintaining the necessary privacy for the rest of the family. Don't forget that there are other children who are often involved.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to being accountable to Albertans about the safety of our most vulnerable children, this government has moved the goalpost so often that it took a four-year legal battle to start to get the picture. The long and the short of it is this. By playing around with reporting criteria, this PC government is hiding almost two-thirds of the deaths suffered by vulnerable children receiving protective services in Alberta. To the Premier. Even today you only report child deaths in care and not child deaths in protective services. How can Albertans possibly trust you?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, this Progressive Conservative government, which started in October 2012, took as one of its first steps making a child advocate an independent officer of this Legislature, and we did that because I worked in the family justice system and I worked in child welfare and I am a concerned Albertan just as every other citizen is. We must protect our children, and by ensuring that we have an independent child advocate and that we have reporting requirements in place and that we take a look at every tragic situation, that is how we get the outcomes that we need, which are . . .

The Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, given that the 10 deaths of children in care last year generated not one investigation by the government's internal quality assurance council and so far only two by the children's advocate and given that this government appears to be combining a policy of underreporting child fatalities with the growing practice of underinvestigating them, does the Premier really believe that increasing secrecy and decreasing accountability can result in anything other than less safety and less security for Alberta's most vulnerable children?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, what the hon. member has just said is fundamentally inaccurate. Every serious injury and death of a child is reported to the quality assurance council, which was set up by my predecessor, the Member for Calgary-Cross. Every one. Every death and serious injury is reported to the Child and Youth Advocate. Those two bodies work to determine what is the most appropriate investigation that should be undertaken to determine whether or not there is something that needs to be learned from it or some corrective action is to be taken. That fundamentally happens. The medical examiner's office also has the death of every child in care reported to that office to determine whether an investigation should happen. So it's not one investigation; it's three.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, having a death reported to you is not the same as doing an investigation about how that death happened and how it can be stopped. The fact of the matter is that the children's advocate has done two reports so far. It's just not good enough. Will the Premier commit today to legislation that requires the children's advocate to prepare a public review of every death of every child receiving protective services in this province?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the reason why you have independent officers of the Legislature, the reason why we have a quality assurance council is to determine whether a review, an in-depth

analysis and inquiry, is necessary. The same with the medical examiner's office: not every death in the province goes to a fatality review. The medical examiner's office reviews it, determines whether a recommendation should go to the board, and determines whether there is something that they do not know about that death. That's the way these circumstances are handled in this province. They look to see whether a further investigation is needed or warranted, and when it is needed or warranted, then they perform that review.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. members.

From here on in let's curtail our preambles or eliminate them totally, starting with Calgary-Shaw, followed by Calgary-Hawkwood.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The deaths of children in care is a heartbreaking and sensitive topic. While we accept that some deaths were neither nefarious nor preventable, it is extremely disturbing to learn that the number of deaths reported by this government would appear to be only one-third of the actual number of children who died while in care, and the final number may end up being well above that. To the Minister of Accountability, Transparency and Transformation: what steps will your ministry take to ensure that a reporting mistake of this nature will not be repeated by any ministry in the future?

2:10

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, as I've said at least three times already, we've reported annually since 2012 the death of any child in care, and we will continue to do that.

Mr. Wilson: Mr. Speaker, this PC government would have Albertans believe that they are not accountable for anything that happened prior to 2012. Like every other problem that this government has on its hands, it is a problem this government created. Why should Albertans trust this government to fix mistakes that they and they alone created?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I would think that this hon. member would know and understand that while we should all aspire to be perfect, no one should claim to be perfect. Therefore, we should always be open to learn, and we are. The reporting that happened before that seems to be the subject of this controversy was not nefarious. It was just that they did not report deaths by natural causes. There were concerns raised about that, and people wanted more openness about all the deaths in care, so now we report all the deaths in care. It doesn't change the fact that a significant number of the deaths in care were deaths from natural causes.

Mr. Wilson: Well, given that according to media reports the government spent significant resources fighting the release of this information in the courts for the past four years and given that these are resources that could have been used to provide more support to foster parents and other groups who work with children in need, to the minister: why did your government fight tooth and nail to prevent the release of this information?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I'd tell the hon. member that if he wants to know and understand this better, I'd be happy to sit down with him and talk to him about it. But let me tell you this. With a very modest amount of research he could have determined that what was being a concern in that process with the court was what type of information should be released. What we do not release publicly are the names of the children involved, the identifying information, and those sorts of pieces. That is a very significant

challenge in this process. We want to make sure that the public has all the information they need to know but that we do not invade the privacy of other children in the family and the family.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Hawkwood, followed by Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Calgary Road Construction

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Rapid population growth in Calgary has created traffic congestion, which is all too familiar to many Calgarians. I know the Minister of Transportation opened the southeast Stoney Trail in Calgary last Friday. My question to the same minister: aside from generating headline news and photo ops, do you actually observe any real improvement in traffic congestion for Calgary commuters, especially during rush hour?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the hon. member for being such a strong advocate for Calgarians' mobility, but I will say that he's a little bit of a hard case because we just opened the road. I will tell him that early indications are that it is making a difference. I've had lots of tweets. I've seen media reports where people have said that it's saved them five, 10, 20, up to 30 minutes. That will be 30 minutes a day for a lot of people for the rest of their lives, so that's pretty major. I will say to the hon. member that he should stay in touch with me because as time goes on, we hope for even better results.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that we're still hearing Calgarians complaining about the traffic congestion, particularly on Deerfoot Trail, does the minister have any other plans to make things better there?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, the hon. member, I'll refer him to the website to look at our three-year plan, which is where we have what is approved. The fact is that we do hope to do more improvements to the Deerfoot Trail, and as we bring those forward, we hope to do that and at the same time talk to the city of Calgary about returning the Deerfoot Trail to the city. That was the original arrangement when the province took it away, to get the ring road open so that we have an alternative to the Deerfoot and then give it back to the city. As that goes on, we hope to get some improvements done and then complete what we started and put it back in the care and feeding of the city of Calgary.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this same minister said himself that a ring road is better than the horseshoe that we currently have in Calgary, my question to the minister is: when is the southwest ring road going to be completed?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Up until last week it was a boomerang road, not even a horseshoe road. But we're up to the boomerang, and we're hoping to have a ring road when we're finished. In fact, I intend to be in Calgary on Wednesday with the Premier, the Tsuu T'ina chief and council and sign an agreement

for the southwest portion of the ring road. That will actually set in place a process where the federal government has to approve that. If all of that goes well, we'll be able to complete the ring road, just part of what this Premier and this government does: building Alberta.

Athabasca River Containment Pond Spill

Mr. Anglin: Mr. Speaker, the largest toxic waste spill of its kind in Canadian history is happening as we speak. I'm referring to the Obed coal mine disaster, that has leaked a billion litres of toxic slurry containing mercury and other heavy metals into the Athabasca River. Last week this government was quoted as saying that the contaminated water will be diluted and safe once it reaches the Northwest Territories. Now, I'm not a chemist, so can the minister who said that we will rely on science please explain how a deadly toxic metal such as mercury is diluted in a river?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll repeat again: first and foremost, what we've said all along is that we made sure that communities had notification so they were not drawing the drinking water. They were making sure that the water was safe because their water facilities knew about that. We are making sure that every day we are taking samples. We're working with Health; we're working with experts to make sure. The health and safety of people and of the wildlife are very important for us, and we're doing that every day.

Mr. Anglin: Given that two federal agencies have now confirmed the toxic slurry from the mine contains harmful levels of arsenic, cadmium, lead, mercury, and other cancer-causing agents and given that we know that these toxins are settling on the riverbed and in river gravel – and we know that gravel doesn't renew itself – what's the plan for cleanup?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you. What we're doing is making sure that as we're taking the samples, we're being aware. This will continue into the springtime as well with regard to the cleanup. What I'll guarantee you, Mr. Speaker, is that whatever costs are associated with the cleanup, those will be the responsibility of the companies and not the Alberta taxpayers.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister initially refused to release the information on the contents of the spill and claimed that the spill posed no threat to human health and given that the minister said last week, "We had only seen one dead fish," would the minister like to correct herself and admit that this toxic waste is a threat to human health? Or can she tell us: did that dead fish have one head or two?

Mrs. McQueen: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to tell you that I did not say that we would not release the information. We said that we would release the information, but we would make sure that we use the information as well for the investigation. All of that information we put out last week. We put out an environmental protection order. We have been doing everything since day one to make sure that the information is public, that that data is public. We will continue to do what's right for Albertans, for the health and safety of Albertans, and for the wildlife as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by Calgary-Mountain View.

Energy Company Licensee Liability Rating Program

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Changes to the licensee liability rating program took place this year and are having a serious impact on the junior oil and gas companies that contribute so much to Alberta's economic success. These companies are concerned that the new requirements are unfair to them and are having a negative impact on their cash flow. To the Minister of Energy: what is the purpose of this program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hughes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The licensee liability rating program, otherwise known in the industry as the LLR program, is one that is implemented by the Alberta Energy Regulator and ensures that companies have the assets necessary to deal with abandonment, remediation, and reclamation of their well sites. We'd all agree, I'm sure, that that is an important objective in terms of public policy: protecting Albertans, ensuring that those reclamation and abandonment costs are borne by the appropriate parties, those being the oil and gas companies. We want to make sure that Albertans are never on the hook for that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the impact of these changes are happening at a time of very low natural gas prices, can you explain why these changes are being made?

Mr. Hughes: Well, Mr. Speaker, there have been changes in the cost to industry of undertaking these commitments to reclaim orphan wells, abandoned facilities, and pipelines of defunct companies. As a result, those changes were made in order to update, to ensure that companies had the appropriate amount of assets to meet their obligations. As somebody who has worked in the private sector with small companies and started small companies, this is an important obligation that people understand when they go into business.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you. To the same minister: do you and the Department of Energy truly understand the impact of these changes?

An Hon. Member: No.

Mr. Hughes: Well, Mr. Speaker, others may try to speak for me, but let me speak for me.

Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that as an entrepreneur in my private life, as somebody who worked in the oil and gas service sector for many years, I have a very strong sense of this. I have as of last week asked the chair and the CEO of the Alberta Energy Regulator to readdress this issue, see if there are ways that companies could meet these obligations through other means, and explore all possible options, working with the Explorers and Producers Association of Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Emergency Medical Services

Dr. Swann: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Emergency medical services continue to be overtaxed and unacceptable, especially outside Calgary and Edmonton, since Alberta Health took over our emergency system, with increased injury rates as well as delayed response times. To the minister: why did you break a system that was working, especially in rural Alberta?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member asked this question last week and was concerned about increased injury rates for EMT workers. I offered last week and I'll offer again: if he actually wants to sit down and review the statistics, I'd be more than happy to do so because our statistics don't line up with his.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since it showed a 50 per cent increase in Calgary's emergency medical services injury rates over last year, it's troubling that the minister doesn't know anything about those.

EMS workers have a much higher injury rate and absentee rate since this government took over emergency services. Why?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Speaker, I don't know a lot about some of the reports that hon. member comes up with, but I do know what the actual statistics are, and I'd be more than happy to sit down and review them with him.

Dr. Swann: Well, I tabled those in the House, as you know, Mr. Speaker. It's unfortunate that the minister hasn't had a chance to look at those.

Poor communications, delays, misdirection from 911 are especially common in rural Alberta. Will you reconsider this one-size-fits-all in rural Alberta and reconsider 911 and EMS?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I said in answer to a question the other day, I've spent hours meeting with municipalities from across the province, including rural Alberta. I'll be tabling an article from a newspaper later today that quotes officials in Brooks and in other communities, saying that EMS services have improved since Alberta Health Services took over the leadership for EMS in their communities. Today a full 95 per cent of EMS calls are handled by our three provincial dispatch centres. It's working well. There's certainly room for improvement in many areas, and we're very focused on that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Health Care Premiums

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for many years the NDP fought long and hard to remove the regressive and hurtful health care premiums forced on Alberta families. We were happy that our continued pressure paid off when in 2009 the premiums were cancelled. Yet at the Tory convention over the weekend a number of questionable decisions were made, including a motion to reimplement these taxes. This tax will undoubtedly cause further hardship for middle-class families who can't afford them. To the Finance minister: will you confirm today that you will not be forcing this regressive and unfair tax on Albertans once again?

Mr. Horner: We will not be introducing health care premiums, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Mason: Good. My job here is done, Mr. Speaker.

Continuing and Long-term Care Placements

Mrs. Towle: In June of this year the Minister of Health stated that the hundred-kilometre policy separating seniors in care from their communities was withdrawn immediately. Well, Mr. Speaker, not everyone got that memo. In July Faye Hallet, a Red Deer resident and the sole caregiver of her 90-year-old aunt, had to sign a document at Red Deer hospital stating that she'd be willing to travel a hundred kilometres for continuing care placement. This is forcing her aunt out of the community that she has known for the last 70 years. Minister, why are AHS staff telling Faye and many other Albertans that the divorce-by-nursing-home policy has not been rescinded and defying your directive?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hundred-kilometre policy that Alberta Health Services had in effect was clearly rescinded. I can't be expected to know the circumstances of the hon. member's constituent. If she'd care to forward those to my office, I'd be happy to look into it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe she's met with the minister from Red Deer-South and given him direction. I'm sure he's met with you about it.

Given that just last week an Innisfail resident was told that her 85-year-old mother with dementia, who's been on the wait-list for placement since March 25, would have to pack up and leave her community, friends, and family within 24 hours because of the first available bed policy – and that's what they told her – and given that everyone but the Minister of Health and the Associate Minister of Seniors can see that this policy is cruel, when will either minister live up to their word and end this policy immediately?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll say again: there is no policy in effect in Alberta today that requires anyone to accept a continuing care placement within a hundred-kilometre radius of his or her community. We've seen these sorts of generalizations before. I don't doubt the goodwill of the hon. member in raising the concerns of her constituents. Again, if she'd be happy to provide me with the specifics, I'd be happy to provide her with a response.

Mrs. Towle: I did that just last week. I sent it over to the Associate Minister of Seniors.

Given that this government's own membership does not believe you, given that this government's own membership passed a resolution this weekend at the PC AGM that said to end the cruel divorce-by-nursing-home policy, will this minister send out a directive today to all Alberta Health Services staff to tell them that there is no longer a hundred-kilometre rule in Alberta Health Services?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is an absolutely absurd line of questioning. The hon. member herself was one of the members in this House who raised the issue of the hundred-kilometre policy in the first place. The issue was dealt with some time ago. We have processes in place for constituents and for MLAs on their behalf to raise concerns and have questions answered. I'd suggest she avail herself of those and do her constituents a better service.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Let's also be reminded about questions in question period not dealing with internal party matters. Now, the questions – I listened carefully – were crafted to sort of dodge around it, but the preambles certainly were not.

Let us carry on. St. Albert, followed by Cypress-Medicine Hat.

PDD Program Funding

Mr. Khan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past spring the government announced changes to the persons with disabilities program, also known as PDD. Albertans from across the province, including those in my riding, were worried, scared, and uncertain, so much so that many of my constituents brought their concerns to the very steps of the Legislature just this past summer. Many in the PDD community remain concerned and uncertain about how future PDD programming may impact their quality of life. My question is to the hon. Associate Minister of Services for Persons with Disabilities. Given the evolution of the PDD program will self-directed funding for PDD individuals be affected?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can inform the hon. member. He's asking about self-directed funding. I believe he's talking about family-managed supports, family-managed services, and that is an option that many families choose. It allows them greater flexibility and more control over the delivery of care. This hon. member should be informed that each of the individuals in that system will be assessed and will go through the individualized process, but we've held their funding constant this year. There will be no changes to their funding.

Mr. Khan: Thank you, Minister. I've heard the minister speak to the need for eliminating artificial barriers to funding for the PDD community. To the same minister: given that PDD funding to young individuals can appear to decrease once they turn 18, what exactly is the government doing to address this situation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Oberle: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a couple of pieces to that, and I'd be pleased to speak to the hon. member offline about them. There are two pieces. One is that we have to remove the transition, the difficult transition, between children and adult services when a person turns 18. It's inefficient and unfair. We've also, through our results-based budgeting process, talked about the need for a lifespan approach to the delivery of care, and we're talking about that as well. We'll proceed, and I'm sure that the Edmonton Autism Society, for example, and others will be very pleased with the outcome.

Mr. Khan: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Again to the same minister: given that funding for community access supports is critical funding that encourages community involvement and fosters the ability of the PDD families to pursue their passions and interests, Mr. Speaker, can the government assure us that community access supports will remain sufficient in light of the PDD funding transformations currently under way?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can inform the hon. member that we made no cuts at all in community access supports this year, and that is certainly our intention through the remainder of this year. We wanted to take an emphasis away from supports

that are designed to protect and to shelter people towards supports that are designed to engage and empower people. As we make that transition, there will be a shift in funding, but I can tell this House, as I said before, that community access supports are an important part of the support feature, and if you need those supports, you will get them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by Red Deer-North.

2:30 Construction Contracts

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wildrose believes that we need more value from our infrastructure process. The drama that has plagued the Trans-Canada bridge repairs in Medicine Hat has tainted the recent announcement that it will be completed by next week. The provincial government failed to do its due diligence for the original contract, which resulted in two and a half years of delay for all Medicine Hatters. After a new contract was signed to complete this work, this government now isn't paying the bill, and a small contractor is owed a million dollars and has had to walk off the job. Why is this government not paying their bills?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, the hon. member should know that we do pay our bills. If a contractor, typically, who is a subcontractor of somebody that has gotten paid doesn't, there is a process, actually, through the infrastructure legislation. I think that in this particular case of this contractor, if it is this contractor, if I'm correct in my assumption – and I'm sorry for assuming – I think they've been given that direction.

The fact is that I would recommend that the hon. member talk to those people in Medicine Hat. He's talking about a mess. I heard from a whole bunch of them this weekend. They're very happy with the way that project has gone.

Mr. Barnes: Mr. Speaker, given that the government has difficulty finding qualified contractors to complete infrastructure, doesn't this government see that not ensuring timely payments of the bills like the money owed to asphalt haulers on the two-month-delayed ring road will only make it harder for all Albertans to receive full value for their hard-earned tax dollars?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, sometimes I struggle with things to agree on with this hon. member, but I think we agree on one thing. When somebody does work, they should get paid for it. I believe he believes that, and I certainly do. That's why we have a process in place that when we pay a contractor and the money doesn't get to one of their subcontractors, they can go through the legislation and get that done. So we help them where we can. These are actually the problems that you have when you're building Alberta, and the hon. member might want to consider that. On the other hand, if he's not building Alberta, he won't have these problems.

Mr. Barnes: We just want to build it right, Mr. Speaker.

Given that this government regularly mismanages a selection of these contractors and that this results in the awarding of contracts to companies that don't have the capacity to complete the job or to pay their bills, when will this government increase the transparency and accountability in the infrastructure payment process and start to care that hard-working Albertans get full value for their taxes?

Mr. McIver: You know, Mr. Speaker, I tried to throw the hon. member a bone; it just doesn't work. In his first question he said that the project is going to be finished next week, and in the third question he said that the project is not going to get finished. The member doesn't seem to know whether he's coming or going.

I'll tell you what is going on, Mr. Speaker. That project will get opened soon; the government will pay their bills. We're building Alberta. People in Medicine Hat and across Alberta will enjoy the infrastructure that they need and deserve because under this Premier and this government we're building Alberta, and we're providing the infrastructure that is so desperately required. [interjections]

The Speaker: Thank you.

Airdrie and minister of environment, are you finished your conversation? Perhaps we can carry on.

Red Deer-North, followed by Livingstone-Macleod.

Red Deer Health Facilities

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Minister of Health announced the grand opening of the Central Alberta cancer centre in Red Deer, for which we are truly grateful. The Red Deer regional hospital, however, was built decades ago to handle 1,500 births per year, but with the growing population in central Alberta, over 400,000 people, there are now 2,700 births per year, almost double what the hospital was built to handle. There is a critical plan that calls for the development of two new operating rooms on the obstetrics floor. When can we expect the two new operating rooms on the obstetrics floor that were promised in Budget 2013?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question. The obstetrical operating rooms for the Red Deer hospital were not, in fact, part of Budget 2013. She is certainly right that the growth in Red Deer is unprecedented elsewhere in the province, particularly in the area of additional births. Last week the Minister of Infrastructure and I were pleased to approve \$9.6 million in funding for the project to go ahead. We expect it to be complete in 2016.

Mrs. Jablonski: That's great news, Minister. So that I don't sound too ungrateful, though, I'm going to ask: because of the growth that we're experiencing in central Alberta like other places in Alberta, when can we expect further expansion of the entire hospital?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member says, Red Deer is one of the fastest growing areas of the province, and the demand for health services is increasing proportionately. We have taken a number of steps. The member herself referred to the opening of the Central Alberta cancer centre in Red Deer last week. This is designed to avoid situations where people have to travel long distances to access radiation treatment. Another recent example of expansion was the addition of ICU beds to the hospital in late 2012, and as I've just said, the expansion of obstetrical services, a \$9.6 million project, will be complete in two years.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope I don't sound too ungrateful when I say to you that other areas in the country that have populations that are smaller than the population of Red Deer, St. Catharines, Ontario, for example,

have two hospitals. I'm wondering when central Alberta can expect a second hospital.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's very interesting is all I would say.

Population growth, of course, is not the only factor that determines whether additional hospitals are needed. We have put great emphasis in this government on primary health care, on ensuring that we're delivering services in the community as close to people as possible through primary care networks, through other initiatives. All of these factors as well as others are taken into account in long-term planning. The goal is to provide the person with the right service at the right time and by the right provider.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, followed by Calgary-Varsity.

Flood Hazard Caveats on Land Titles

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The deadline for disaster recovery applications is in five days, and Albertans want more critical information before making such life-altering decisions. Ever since this government decided it would attach caveats to the properties of Albertans who accept DRP funding, flood-impacted Albertans have lived in fear of reduced property values if they accept the DRP payment. To the associate minister for regional recovery. Please clarify: after accepting DRP assistance, how can someone with a property in a deemed floodway have the caveat placed on his or her title removed?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's right – and I appreciate the member giving me an opportunity to get the message out – that those that have not applied for the disaster recovery program should do so by the end of this month. Because they apply, it doesn't necessarily mean that they have to take the money. It's not until they take the money from the program, if they live in a floodway, that they then would have a caveat on their property. Until they take the money, they do not get that caveat. The deadline is just to signal their intent or the possibility that they would be eligible for that particular program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That wasn't quite the question.

Given that DRP assistance is intended to help, not hurt, can the minister explain how his government will protect Albertans from adverse treatment by banks and insurance companies and the like after they've had a caveat placed on their title?

Mr. Fawcett: Mr. Speaker, this government made a decision, a clear decision after the floods to try to get people that live in floodways, those that want to develop in floodways – we made a clear decision to not allow that moving forward. We want to provide people with the fair option of having that decision to move out of the floodway. As I've mentioned in this Assembly before, there are some very serious consequences both when it comes to future financial liability to taxpayers and public safety consequences for allowing development to continue in floodways, and that's the policy that this government decided to make.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Considering this deadline and that this government hasn't updated its flood maps and that it plans to implement flood mitigation measures as well, which will further alter the floodways, does the minister recognize that forcing Albertans to make this decision before updating the flood maps is wrong?

2:40

Mr. Fawcett: Mr. Speaker, it's very clear that this member completely does not understand the use of flood maps and this particular policy. The flood maps are put in place. They're a planning tool that allows us to make these decisions as well as to do the mitigation that's required. Just because you have mitigation in place doesn't mean that you're no longer in the floodway. Sometimes those mitigation measures fail, and that puts those people in harm's way and leaves the government and the taxpayers with future financial liabilities. That's what we're trying to get away from.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by Edmonton-South West.

School Class Sizes

Ms Kennedy-Glans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week my Calgary-Varsity constituency office hosted a forum on K to 12 education for parent councils and principals from the 27 schools in our constituency. It was an invigorating session, with many good ideas explored, and there are a few in particular that I promised to pose to our Minister of Education. Some grade 12 students I spoke to were concerned about their class sizes, even anticipating classes of 50 students in their next term's calculus class. To the minister: when you say that research supports the view that class size doesn't matter, but students are genuinely concerned, what's your response to those concerns?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I'd like to commend the member for her engagement with her community and putting on this open house. We were happy to provide some staff there to help her. As I've said before in this House, class size does matter. That's why we track it, and that's one of the places in the budget where we actually increased funding last year to \$248 million. It's not the only thing that we track, not the only important thing, and it's not the most important thing. Outside of the involvement of the parent the most important thing is the quality of the teacher, and we see a number of results, including the recent PIAAC results. Internationally we see countries like Japan or Korea with very high class sizes. Some of the largest bring in some of the best results.

Ms Kennedy-Glans: To the same minister: what changes in approaches to teaching do you envision to be able to make sure that learning can happen for every student in a classroom of 40 to 50 students?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, another very good question by the member. One of the things that is guiding what we're doing in Education right now is kind of the blueprint that we have, which is the Inspiring Education report. There are a number of changes. Modernization is happening with regard to the system, but one of the main things we're doing right now is that we've got a task force out talking to Albertans about excellence in teaching. I think they're just completing their public consultation, and I'm very excited and very interested to see what that group is going to come back with. They're going to talk about the things that teachers

need to be excellent, how class size contributes, and the diversity in the classroom, the time they need to prepare, and others.

Ms Kennedy-Glans: Finally, is there a ceiling on class size for academic classes in elementary, junior high, and high school, a threshold after which the emotional ties to the educator are just no longer probable?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, we do have guidelines for class sizes, that we track every year, and school boards report on that. It's an average across the jurisdiction. It's very difficult and virtually impossible to give hard caps on what class sizes should be because every class is different. The diversity in that classroom and the inclusion that we have now plays into that in terms of a number of things. So we leave those decisions up to the local school boards, the local administrators, and the local teachers to balance that mix of the class, the diversity, the excellence and the experience of the teacher. Thus, you just can't put a cap on any particular class in the province.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. members.

The time for question period has elapsed, and as you will note and already have observed – I've received notes from some of you – we today recognized 17 different members asking questions. Now, that is a very good number and a good target. If you do the math, where we allow by our rules 35 seconds for a question and 35 seconds for supplementals and the same for answers, you can't mathematically get to 17 very easily; that's for sure. But we did today, and I want to thank a few people for helping us do that because there are not many ways we can get that done but for short questions, short answers, not using your supplementary if the question has already been answered, and not breaking any rules, thus precluding the Speaker from having to rise and interject. [interjections] Such as the interjections that are going on right now. [interjections] Government members, please.

Calgary-Hawkwood did a very good job with a brief supplementary. Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre was also brief; the second one was a bit long but a good attempt on the first one. St. Albert was mercifully brief as well. Livingstone-Macleod's first supplemental was short; the second one was not too bad. Calgary-Varsity also. The champion today had to be Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, who forwent his second question and his third question. As a result, about 100 questions and answers were provided and given today. I think it was exactly 100.

In 30 seconds from now we will continue our Routine with the speeches by members under private Members' Statements.

Just before we go on with the private Members' Statements, Government House Leader, you have a request?

Mr. Hancock: While we await that commencing, given that we were so early in the Routine before we started question period, I'd ask for unanimous consent of the House to continue past 3 o'clock if that's required to complete Routine.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Government House Leader has requested your unanimous consent to proceed beyond 3 o'clock in order to complete Routine should it become necessary.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Let us continue now with St. Albert, followed by the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Kurtz Family

Mr. Khan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the Kurtz family and their team of supporters for joining us earlier this afternoon. As I mentioned in my introductions, brothers Ben and Grant Kurtz are young men living with severe autism, yet despite many challenges both of them lead extraordinary lives. Ben's passion is photography, while Grant is an enthusiastic and talented painter. With the help of their parents and mentors both young men have been able to flourish and enjoy countless successes, including the completion of a fulfilling educational journey through the school system in St. Albert.

According to his family Ben has always loved switches and pressing buttons and was naturally drawn to the camera, thus igniting his love of photography. Ben's younger brother Grant had an affinity for crayons, scissors, and paint from an early age. With the aid of an assistant Grant paints on canvasses, using acrylic paint.

These talented young men have developed into passionate artists. In 2011 and just this last spring Ben and Grant displayed and sold their artwork at a public gallery and auction showing in St. Albert. Mr. Speaker, their Autism Artistry gallery shows are gaining a remarkable reputation in our community.

These two young men are shining examples of how individuals with disabilities can flourish if they, their families, and those around them receive the proper support from their caregivers, community, and the government. Through a self-directed funding model of PDD support Terry and Roma Kurtz have been able to provide for their children what we all want as parents, a fulfilling and engaging childhood within a part of a vibrant community and a successful transition for their children from childhood to young adulthood, engaged in a vocation in which their children have a passion.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to personally thank Ben and Grant, their loving parents, Terry and Roma, and all those in our community who have supported the Kurtz family on their inspirational journey. I wish them continued success in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, followed by Calgary-Varsity.

Deaths of Children in Care

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today we learned of a very disturbing and heartbreaking trend in our child care system. According to official reports a total of 56 children have died while being cared for by the province between 1999 and present. However, a thorough media investigation published today confirms that the real number is almost triple that and likely more. That means that those deaths occurred shrouded in secrecy, their circumstances along with the lessons they should have taught us swept under the rug.

Let me be clear. This is not a partisan issue. We know that the vast majority of department staff and foster parents are caring, compassionate individuals who want the best for these children. The system that cares for these children is tasked with perhaps the greatest degree of public trust we have in our democracy. It is tasked with caring for children who, through no fault of their own, have been thrust into a life of pain, of anguish, and of personal struggle. Nonetheless, something has very clearly gone wrong in the system.

That's why we believe a public inquiry is in order. We must clear the air and answer the pressing questions this investigation

poses to us. How many deaths have there actually been since 1999? What is the implementation status of recommendations from all fatality inquiries and special case reviews in that time? When and how should the death of a child in care be publicly reported? How should the government track and report deaths of children who have been removed from government care and returned to their parents? Why did the government spend four years blocking the release of this information, and was that in the public interest? What steps can be taken to immediately improve the quality of care for children in the child welfare system and foster care?

If we're going to reform the system, Mr. Speaker, we must dispense with the notion that the details of these incidents should be buried. In fact, the opposite is true. We must shine the light on these tragedies so we can learn from them, so the mistakes aren't repeated, and so our system stops failing the innocent lives that it's in place to protect.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by Grande Prairie-Smoky.

2:50 **Eliminating Violence Against Women**

Ms Kennedy-Glans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to encourage my colleagues and all Albertans to wear a white ribbon in recognition of the importance of eliminating violence against women. I was in law school when Canada enshrined gender equality in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I still recall the feeling of great joy, yet it has not been easy to achieve that aim.

Over the decades we have seen momentum for equality build and then wane here in Canada and around the world. During the Arab Spring I was excited to support citizen leaders, including Tawakkol Karman in Yemen, to help move gender equality forward, yet the turbulence of the Arab Spring appears to have slowed or even reversed this progress.

Here in Alberta we have stronger laws and institutions, yet even here we are not free of discrimination and violence against women. Aboriginal women are a particularly vulnerable population. The spousal homicide rate is eight times higher than that of non-aboriginal women, and an estimated 75 per cent of aboriginal girls are sexually abused. These statistics are numbing, but let them not be debilitating.

In this government I'm honoured to be working with Métis and First Nations women to create economic security councils. One way to improve the safety of women is to increase their control over their economic security. YWCA and many other agencies are reframing their role. Their role is not just to protect women in shelters but to help women thrive in the community.

There is a role for every one of us in eliminating violence against women. I invite you to wear the white ribbon, and I encourage you to get to know these women and girls, not as statistics but as people.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Retail Market Review Committee

Mr. McDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As many of us know, electricity prices can fluctuate from season to season depending on the severity of weather. For many Albertans on a tight budget this unpredictability can greatly affect one's quality of life. In order to

respond to market volatility and protect Albertans, our government established the Retail Market Review Committee.

Recently the committee conducted an independent analysis of the electricity default rate with the intent to provide viable options to keep costs down. In January of this year the committee released its 391-page, in-depth report, entitled *Power for the People*, which detailed the concerns of industry experts and outlined several key recommendations.

In response to these recommendations an MLA implementation team, which I am privileged to chair, was created, with the hon. members for Banff-Cochrane, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock, Calgary-Foothills, Edmonton-South West, and Sherwood Park. Our team works in collaboration with consumers, industry officials, regulators, and stakeholders to ensure that we consult with Albertans in order to develop a plan to implement the committee's recommendations.

Our government recognizes the need to ensure Albertans are paying fair electricity prices by introducing regulations to promote greater transparency of energy prices. I'm privileged to be part of an initiative to better the lives of Albertans, and I'm grateful to be able to help foster more effective consumer oversight in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by Calgary-Mountain View.

King's University College Nobel Peace Prize Contribution

Mr. Dorward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have great post-secondary institutions in this province. Today I would like to highlight King's University College.

I rise today to speak about a team of outstanding individuals from King's University College, whose work contributed to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, OPCW, which was awarded the Nobel peace prize earlier this year. Mr. Speaker, faculty members professors Peter Mahaffy and Brian Martin along with student researchers from King's Centre for Visualization in Science have made contributions to the OPCW over the last eight years. Professor Mahaffy began working with the OPCW in 2005 and at that time headed a chemistry education committee for a group that sets global standards for chemistry and works internationally to improve students' and the public's understanding of chemistry.

This committee and the OPCW partnered in a new effort to educate the public, helping people to understand the devastating effects of chemical weapons. Students Joseph Zondervan, Miriam Mahaffy, and others have been working on the Multiple Uses of Chemicals website. OPCW was in the process of publicizing this site when chemical weapons were used in Syria on August 21, 2013, Mr. Speaker, killing more than a thousand people outside of Damascus. Syria signed on to the chemicals weapons convention and opened up their stores to international disarmament experts. Awareness helped that happen, and King's was on the forefront of that.

These King's college colleagues are an excellent example of the impact that Alberta's postsecondary institutions have made worldwide. King's University College is not only helping to build Alberta but helping to build the world.

Thank you so much.

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

Reporting of Deaths of Children in Care

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Children first, not politics. Shocking revelations today from diligent journalists of concealed child deaths in government care are most profoundly about public trust, and in this regard this government has profoundly failed.

What we see, unfortunately, is a government that says, “children first” but purposely misleads the media, the public, and the vulnerable families of children who trusted in their government to tell the truth and learn from them. As bad as the failure to learn from these critical lessons and pass it along to all staff in the department is, Albertans in care must surely be anxious, especially with the ongoing major reorganization and disruption among thousands of staff already coping with heavy workloads and high levels of stress and burnout.

Why was this government silent on causes and lessons from the deaths of 145 children in care? This is all the more egregious since most of these children under foster care are from First Nations communities. Not only does this raise questions about inadequate foster care and selection; it also questions the monitoring in these situations. It raises troubling questions about what this government does not want the public to know about its own internal functioning. Parental negligence is one thing; political and criminal negligence is another. Finally, it raises questions about a government that refuses to invest in prevention in the midst of growing numbers of poor families – 91,000 poor children in the last census – and of those with mental illness without adequate support.

To be true, there are thousands of daily successes and personal sacrifices among dedicated staff working under incredible difficulties in this department. We need to hear these stories also. But today, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the families, including foster parents of these dead and missing children: how can anyone trust a government that talks openness but hides the truth from both the staff and Albertans?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we continue with Routine, could we have your unanimous consent to revert briefly to Introduction of Guests? Does anyone object to giving that unanimous consent?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Culture, briefly.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just need to add another name, that I missed when I gave an introduction of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose. I did miss the current empress, Dayzi Chayne, and I wanted to put that on the *Hansard* record.

Thank you.

Notices of Motions

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

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to propose the following motion:

Pursuant to Standing Order 30 be it resolved that the ordinary business of the Legislative Assembly be adjourned to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the need to immediately identify the actual number of deaths of children in

care that have occurred since 1999, the implementation status of recommendations that have been made to prevent deaths in that time, the reasons for the secrecy surrounding this issue, and the steps that can be taken immediately to improve the protection of children currently in the care of the government.

Thank you.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Associate Minister of Services for Persons with Disabilities.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Thursday the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona referred to a document received through FOIP that supposedly provided some justification for the closure of Michener after the fact. I rise today to table that document, which the hon. member did not table. It's quite clear that it says nothing about the closure of the Michener Centre, the decision to close the Michener Centre, but refers, in fact, to the very careful planning that must go into transitioning residents of Michener to other living arrangements, and it speaks volumes about the care and compassion that goes into that decision.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by Edmonton-Calder.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table five copies of documents with 117 signatures that are requesting the preservation and enhancement of the pheasant release program, that has been part of Alberta's hunting tradition, heritage, and culture for over 65 years. These documents were originally part of a petition with over 3,500 signatures; however, they did not meet the strict rules for submitting a petition, so I'm tabling them instead.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the Minister of Health.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'd like to table a hundred more of the handwritten letters my office has received expressing concerns about the deep cuts to postsecondary education happening here in the province of Alberta. These letters call on the PC government to reverse their harmful cuts to post-secondary education.

As well, I have the appropriate number of copies of FOIP documents regarding negotiations between the PR firm Calder Bateman and the Assistant Deputy Minister of Human Services, Brenda Lee Doyle, on the development of principles.

I also have the appropriate number of copies of a letter written by a mother whose son is living in the Michener Centre. Jeannine Goodrich tried to find a group home for her son Dean, but after she got ill, no one except Michener would take him because he was too hard to handle. The Premier should do the right thing and reconsider the closing of Michener Centre.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a copy of the document entitled *The Way Forward, Alberta's Multiple Sclerosis Partnership*. This is the partnership between the government of Alberta, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, and other stakeholders designed to improve the experience and access to care for Albertans suffering with multiple sclerosis.

The second item, Mr. Speaker, is a news clipping from the *Brooks & County Chronicle*. Contrary to other claims that have been presented, this presents positive feedback from various municipal officials in southern Alberta regarding improvements in ground ambulance service delivery.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to provide five copies of a tabling of the *Red Deer Advocate* dated July 11, 2013, in which Faye Hallett tells her story about being the sole caregiver for her 95-year-old aunt and also says that the reason she's going to the media is because she's being forced to move her aunt over a hundred kilometres away by Alberta Health Services.

The second article that I'm tabling is again a *Red Deer Advocate* article, this one from October 2 of this year. This article is called *Where are the Beds for Seniors?* Again Faye Hallett advises that she has gone to her MLA, advises that she went to the Associate Minister of Seniors, and again is being deployed by Alberta Health Services under the first available bed policy to over a hundred kilometres away.

Thank you.

Statement by the Speaker

20th Anniversary of Elected Members

The Speaker: Hon. members, just as we wind up our Routine, I want to take a moment to first of all recognize a very important milestone in the lives of four of our colleagues. This past summer that special milestone was reached by four members of this Assembly, all of whom are still sitting. June 15, 2013, marked the 20th anniversary of the election of these members. In alphabetical order they are the Member for Calgary-East, the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, the Member for Calgary-Cross, and the Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, which would happen to be yours truly.

Eight hundred and twenty-nine members have been elected since 1905, and only 37 of those men and women to date have reached or surpassed the milestone of serving in six Legislatures, meaning they have won six elections each. That is 4.4 per cent of all those who have been elected MLAs in Alberta's history.

I am going to invite these members to come up and receive a special pin in honour of this recognition. In alphabetical order let me begin by calling forward the hon. Member for Calgary-East. Congratulations to you, sir.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek. Congratulations.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross just stepped out for a moment. I know we're not supposed to refer to absences, but in this case I will, and I'm going to ask her colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie to please come forward and accept this on her behalf. You weren't here in 1993 but your spirit may have been. Please congratulate her on our behalf.

Mine has been received in my office. Thank you very, very much.

Hon. members, in addition to the points I mentioned about speeding up question period, let me commend you that there were no points of order raised today. That also helped speed things up. Not that they shouldn't be raised – if they're due, go ahead and raise them – but it helps speed things up when they're not. You know what prompts them, so let's avoid prompting them.

Request for Emergency Debate

The Speaker: Let us move on, then. I think we do have a Standing Order 30 that has to be heard, so I'm going to hear that in just a moment. Before we do, I want to remind everybody now, so that I don't have to remind you during your comments, that I would appreciate, if necessary, hearing from one member from each caucus on behalf of their caucus so that we can get to the matter of the day just in case the ruling goes in favour of the debate proceeding today. I won't know until I hear all the arguments. I'm prepared on both sides of this, depending on what gets said and how it gets said today.

My point here isn't so much about that as it is about ensuring that you talk about the urgency of the matter, why this debate needs to be proceeded with now, not why the issue is important. Every issue that comes up under an SO 30 is important. Very important. This one happens to be in that category as well. We're talking about the matter of urgency as it's defined for this Assembly.

That having been said, let us hear the point from the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Deaths of Children in Care

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to propose the motion under Standing Order 30. As required by 30(1), written notice was provided to the Speaker this morning well in advance of the sitting of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, today we learned of a heartbreaking trend in our children's services system impacting some of our most vulnerable. Media reports show that the number of children who have died while under the province's care has been dramatically under-reported for the last 15 years. In fact, it took four years in the courts for Albertans to find out that the number of children who have died in government care is three times what had been previously reported.

Mr. Speaker, the motion is as follows:

Be it resolved that the ordinary business of the Legislative Assembly be adjourned to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the need to immediately identify the actual number of deaths of children in care that have occurred since 1999, the implementation status of recommendations that have been made to prevent deaths in that time, the reasons for the secrecy surrounding this issue, and the steps that can be taken immediately to improve the protection of children currently in the care of the government.

This issue meets the conditions laid out in Standing Order 30(7); namely, this is the first such motion proposed for today; this motion refers to a single matter, in this case the secrecy and uncertainty surrounding the deaths of children in the care of the provincial government; this motion does not revive any discussion held during this session; there is no bill or motion related to this concern, nor is there one likely to be tabled.

Now, while it did come up in question period today, it was clear that this is not the right forum for an adequate debate of a complex and passionate issue like this one. This motion is not based on a question of privilege, and the discussion does not raise a question that according to the standing orders can only be debated on a motion on notice.

As you have reminded us, Mr. Speaker, as the mover of a request for an emergency debate the purpose of this initial speech is to address the question of whether this is a genuine emergency requiring immediate and urgent consideration. As allowed in the standing orders, I will provide a brief summary of the facts.

The *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Herald* both ran multiple stories today detailing the results of a four-year investigation attempting to determine simple but important facts like how many children have died in care since 1999, how they died, and whether any recommendations that came out of their deaths were followed. What they found was disturbing on multiple levels. For one, after four years of battling the department, they still don't have all the facts, and only when the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner ruled this summer that they must produce some files did the true picture start to emerge; namely, that the government only investigates some of the deaths, only makes public about one-third of them, doesn't track implementation of the recommendations, and is stubbornly secret about letting the public know about any of this.

3:10

This summary is not intended to overlook the need to address the urgency of this debate, and I'll be happy to speak in much more detail about the facts of this matter in the event this motion passes. The reason the brief summary is needed, though, is to make clear why shock waves are reverberating today not only through the children's services community across Alberta and those closely connected to the deaths of these children but also among everyday Albertans, who rightfully believe that one of government's most important tasks is to ensure the adequate care of those children whose families cannot care for them. Simply put, it is our moral obligation as legislators, as elected officials to ensure that deaths of children entrusted to our care are not swept under the rug. If we allow these deaths to mean nothing, if we allow this House to pretend or insist that the system is working despite mounting evidence to the contrary, it will be a heavy weight and a burden for us to carry, Mr. Speaker.

We need to understand why this government decided to hide this critical information from the public. According to reports the government spent four years fighting the release of this information in the courts. These are resources that could have, in fact, and should have been used to provide more support to our staff, to the foster parents, and other groups who work with children in need. Sadly, this government kept that door slammed shut. It is critical, given the amount of secrecy exposed today, for all Albertans to get a crystal clear picture about what motivated the decision to hide this information. Questions remain whether or not this government was simply papering over cracks in a broken system or if it was made in an effort to hide potentially harmful and politically damaging truths or incompetence.

Further, Albertans expect a certain degree of accountability when it comes to who made the decision not to make these deaths public. Were these decisions made by those politically accountable, or was information ever withheld from ministers by staff? If information was withheld from ministers, who did the withholding, why, and are they still in a position to continue to withhold important information?

We need to understand why this government is allowing recommendations that come out of fatality inquiries and reports and the Child and Youth Advocate's office to go unmonitored or at times completely ignored. We're talking about hundreds of recommendations, Mr. Speaker, where advocates and parents are left sitting idly by, wondering why the government has failed to take action. In fact, I'm sure it would shock most Albertans to know that much of this data is going untracked and that we have no system for studying trends among children who die in provincial care.

Given these circumstances it is clear that this matter is, according to *Beauchesne's* 389, "so pressing that the public interest will

suffer if it is not given immediate attention." The matter of urgency should be unquestionable, Mr. Speaker. Surely all members of this House will agree that the almost 9,000 children in care today are impacted by what we do in here. There have been 89 children in this province's care that have died without public knowledge but, more importantly, without anybody asking the question why. We must work towards tearing down this culture of secrecy and ensure that this government takes immediate action to put forward reforms and improve the protection of children under our care.

We owe the children and the families impacted by these deaths this debate. We owe the social workers and enforcement officers on the job today this debate. We owe the foster families, the families who do great work every day and are intimately aware of the system's shortcomings, this debate. We owe the staff and officials in children's services this debate. We owe every single mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, aunt, uncle, brother, and sister of the 9,000 children that are in this province's care this debate. If we allow one more death to occur that could have been prevented, Mr. Speaker, shame on us. We owe all Albertans this debate. Make no mistake: Albertans deserve it.

It is our foremost responsibility and duty to ensure that these deaths, each one a tragedy unto its own, do not occur in vain. It is our duty as legislators and in the interest of Albertans for this Legislature to permit this debate immediately. Mr. Speaker, I respectfully ask you to rule in favour of this motion so that all members can raise their concerns on these tragic and heart-wrenching circumstances and ensure that this government either clears the air or starts doing a much better job at caring for the most vulnerable children in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Alberta Liberals I stand in the Assembly to support the hon. member's call for an emergency debate on this issue. Looking at the standing orders, the question is: is it an issue of public urgency? Under Standing Order 30(7) I believe it is an issue of public urgency premised on two facts. One, it's a breach of trust, a breach of trust of a government. The integrity of a government institution has been brought into question, and the credibility of our sitting government is at stake right now as we speak.

Number two, it's an issue of public safety. The safety of our children is at risk. I know as a front-line physician for more than 22 years, Mr. Speaker, that when the front-line heroes of health care, whether they're doctors or nurses or firefighters or police officers, see a child's life in danger, when a child has been injured, we always have to ask the question: is there child abuse involved? These children are being apprehended today when they meet the doctors and the front-line health professionals, and decisions are made to apprehend these children.

There has been enough evidence brought forward based upon the investigations done by the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* that the government has not been forthright in protecting their children. Mr. Speaker, the government's job, the most basic, fundamental job of our government, is to protect its citizens, and the most vulnerable citizens are our children. Essentially, here we have a government that apprehends these children, and then many of these children end up dead and the government has not been forthright in providing information. In fact, they have fought – they have fought – to get the truth to the public. If they were forthright years ago, we would actually have saved the lives of countless children and implemented solutions.

Mr. Speaker, it took the office of the Privacy Commissioner, an officer of this Legislature, to order this government to release the

death records because the office of the Privacy Commissioner felt it was an issue of public safety, that the public must know of this. Yet the government fought this tooth and nail until the last day.

I'm glad that we have a Child and Youth Advocate, that the Liberals fought for for years, an independent Child and Youth Advocate. The Child and Youth Advocate today says that the government is slow in sharing information. They still are not getting information as quickly as they'd like to and the amount of information they'd like from this government.

Mr. Speaker, there have been deaths of children in care, but we also don't know how many of these children that government was contacted to protect died at home. That number still isn't available. When we have front-line health providers identify a child at risk and we contact the government agency, we don't know how many of these children actually died when they were returned to their home.

You know, as an elected member it's heartbreaking to me to see this kind of thing. It is heartbreaking. If we can't protect children and if we can't be honest, why are we all even here today? The moral test of a government is how we protect those who are in the dawn of their life; those who walk in the shadows of their life, the weak and the vulnerable; and those who are in the twilight of their lives, the seniors. Mr. Speaker, can't we have an honest conversation on this to say, "Look, these are mistakes made in the past"? Some members are still currently here from that government making those decisions when these mistakes were made. Many of us knew. If we cannot have an honest conversation, how are we going to make sure that going forward the children today, right now, are being protected?

3:20

Mr. Speaker, it's for these two reasons that it is a matter of immediate public urgency. It's a public safety issue today. If our staff are not resourced enough in the ministry of children and youth services – I know these social workers. I know they're burnt out, I know their caseloads are too big, and I know that needs are too great because my colleagues and I are the ones who send many of these poor children into their care. If it's an issue of resourcing, then we need to get them the resources today.

Mr. Speaker, I know that many of the staff are barred from speaking publicly. They'll lose their jobs, and they fear breaking the law. I know that many of these parents are barred from speaking publicly about the children's deaths. If we're going to do one thing, let's send a message to Alberta that we're all prepared to work together. Let's not lay blame. Let's not lay blame. It's a complex issue, but let's get to the root of this matter. Let's make sure that there's no child that dies in care, and if a child dies in care, let's make sure that that never happens to any other child again.

On behalf of the Alberta Liberals I support this matter of public urgency because I feel that it's a matter of immediate public safety and a breach of trust of government. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise in support of this motion to proceed with this emergency debate. Briefly, the authorities that judge or assess the issue of urgency look to whether or not the need for the debate is urgent. They look at whether it's the first and only opportunity to debate, and I believe that this issue has been covered already by the Member for Calgary-Shaw, that there is no other opportunity in the near future for us to debate this issue.

As well, it is an issue of whether it constitutes a genuine emergency. In *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* on page 695 it states, "Events which [had] taken place in the past . . . might precipitate a course of conduct which, if allowed to continue unchecked, would certainly classify itself as an emergency and a matter of urgent consideration." I would argue, Mr. Speaker, that that particular issue applies today.

Finally, *Beauchesne's* 390 states that the Speaker must also look at whether "the public interest demands that discussion take place immediately." I'm going to start with that, Mr. Speaker, because, as you know, many Albertans woke up this morning to open a newspaper to read headlines that said that three times as many children had died in care in the last little over a decade than we had been told by the government. I think that that in and of itself is the kind of issue that is going to create a huge level of public interest and public concern, that needs to be addressed on an immediate basis because it is a matter which, I do believe, is fundamentally important to all sides of the House. I believe all Albertans care very sincerely and deeply about the best interests of the most vulnerable children in our society. I think that the fact that we have this issue out there, that three times as many children died than was reported, is important.

Now, I understand, Mr. Speaker, to some extent how this happened. I mean, we do understand it was not entirely intentional, obviously, on the part of the government. Up until last year the government only reported on accidents and injuries requiring hospitalization or that caused death. That was all they reported on. Children receiving protective services, I believe, was actually the criteria. This year the criteria changed again so that we were just hearing about children who died of any cause. Great; we've expanded the group of kids that we're reporting on but only if they were in care, so we've reduced the pool of children that would be subject to that more expansive definition.

So we continue to be in a situation where we are not reporting all fatalities of children receiving protective services from this government, and that is fundamentally important. If you look at the statistics around what children have been dying of, you will see that the majority of them are not accidents or injuries, but rather they are diseases, they are illnesses, they are things like pneumonia, they are asphyxiation, they are malnutrition, and things like sleep arrangement. I identify those ones in particular, Mr. Speaker, because those issues can and often do arise not only from the natural medical condition of the child but also from the issue of neglect. This is what is fundamentally important.

We have a piece of legislation that all Albertans think is being enforced right now that prohibits children from being the victims of neglect in our province and imposes on this government, and through them everybody in this Assembly, really, the obligation to save children from neglect. But, Mr. Speaker, we can't do that if we don't know about how many children may have died or may be at risk of dying as a result of neglect. Up until last year that information was not being shared with Albertans. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be. We weren't reporting it. We weren't typically investigating it because we're not typically investigating most deaths as things stand now, so we weren't talking about the issue of neglect.

Now we're in a situation where we might well talk about the issue of neglect amongst children who are in care, but we're not talking about the issue of neglect or serious injury amongst children who receive protective services but remain in the custody of their family while receiving family enhancement services. That, too, Mr. Speaker, is a huge crack that far too many children in this province are falling through.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I've been the critic for this area for four or five years, and I've known about the gaps in our reporting for that whole time. It was only today, though – this is where I come back to urgency – that I became aware of how significantly that gap results in profound underreporting of the danger that our most vulnerable children in this province are being subjected to. I had no idea that for every one that was reported, there were two more that weren't. I had no idea that the cracks in the system, the gaps in the reporting, had that many kids falling through. I honestly didn't realize that. But we do now, and we know it today. That is why this is a matter of urgency.

Mr. Speaker, ensuring that Alberta's children are safe is a three-part process. The first part of that process is in relation to knowing when children have died. It's a three-part process. The first is to know that a fatality occurred. The second is to investigate how that fatality occurred and to identify how to ensure that it does not occur again. The third thing is to follow up to see if those recommendations are actually being put in place. That's the three-part process.

What we've learned today is that as a result of the reporting processes used by this government, the people of Alberta and the members of this Assembly and many, many other advocates in the community are prohibited from even accessing that first step of that very, very important three-part process, which will keep our children safe. That is why this matter is so important, Mr. Speaker. We need to know how many children have been put at risk fatally so that we can begin the process of ensuring it doesn't happen again. If we don't know that, we can't do our job properly.

Now, the minister in question period also talked about the fact that there are other ways and other processes out there for how investigations can occur, but, Mr. Speaker, what I can glean from the situation is that while there may be reporting to the medical examiner's office and there may be reporting to the quality assurance council and there may be reporting to the children's advocate, the number of actual investigations around how these fatalities occurred is going down. It is actually decreasing.

The only ones we can know about, of course, are the ones that the children's advocate conducts. And that's great. The children's advocate has released two investigations. They've both been thorough, and they've included some good recommendations. But two investigations when 10 children last year died in care and another countless number died while receiving protective services even though not in care – two reports out of that many simply are not enough. When you consider the relationship that neglect may play and the role that neglect may play in otherwise seemingly innocuous fatalities, then we know we need to engage in a much more robust form of evaluation and analysis.

3:30

We know we need to do that if we really care about these issues and we really want to ensure that we reduce the number of fatalities, we reduce the number of injuries, we reduce the number of illnesses, we reduce the number of cases of pneumonia, we reduce the number of overdoses, we reduce the number of hypothermic deaths, all of those other things. If we want to reduce them, we have to know about them first, Mr. Speaker, and right now we don't. It is urgent because until we start hearing about those immediately, we can't start fixing the problem.

What we think we've heard is that the government itself is not even tracking this information. This is not necessarily a thing about intentional cover-ups on all these different levels. This is about the fact that in many, many cases when, for instance, a child receiving protective services has died from pneumonia, we're not looking into whether that child was ultimately the victim of

neglect, and we are not looking into whether that child could have been saved by a different approach to supporting his or her family or that child. By not doing that, that child's brother or sister could be at risk today. Today, Mr. Speaker. That is why this is urgent.

That is why the people of Alberta expect this Assembly to take this issue this seriously, because this is fundamental to what we do in this Assembly. We care for those who are least able to care for themselves; you know, fire, police, taking care of those who cannot care for themselves. It is fundamental to what we do in this Assembly. So if we don't take this matter seriously and we don't treat the gaps which have been revealed basically this morning to most of us, if we don't take those matters seriously, then, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that we are not taking the role of this Assembly seriously either.

It is important that we have an opportunity to discuss the gaps that exist throughout the system, to ensure that we can start taking care of the other children who are currently at risk right now, whom otherwise no one knows anything about because we don't have a systematic process in place to ensure that we are tracking their safety and their security going forward.

So that's why I rise in favour of this motion, and I hope that you will rule in favour of it. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't think there is any individual in this House who would not say that the issue of children in care and, in particular, the death of a child in care or of a child who is part of a family who is receiving services is not tragic. In fact, I would hope that each and every one of us as individuals here would think that the death of any child is tragic. The question of whether this should be an urgent debate is not a question about whether or not the issue is one of tragedy. These are tragic issues. When children are in care, it means that there has been neglect or abuse. It means that there has not been appropriate family care of that child. That in itself is tragic.

The question for today is whether we should adjourn the ordinary course of business of the House to debate this on an urgent and pressing necessity. I would say to you, Mr. Speaker, on the number of things that have been said about what will happen to children if we don't have the debate: none of those are actually accurate. What is very clear over the course of the last few years is how very seriously our Premier, this government, and this minister take the issue of children and, particularly, the issue of children in care.

The most salient reference from the standing orders and the precedent of the House that was referenced was that it is appropriate sometimes to have an urgent debate on matters in the past if they are allowed to continue unchecked. Well, let me say, Mr. Speaker, a number of things.

First of all, what has spurred this debate is an article in a newspaper. Now, I have the deepest respect for the work that the particular reporters are doing, and I think it happens to be very important work. The headline was very unfortunate. What is clear, though, even on the face of the article is that when they talked about 145 children dying in care over the last 14 years and that only a certain portion of them had been reported, the reason that the others were not reported was because they were considered to be natural deaths or deaths by accidents, which were not intentional. It was not self-harm, not done by a third party. In other words, somebody of authority who had the obligation to look at them looked at them and said: we understand how this death happened, and we need not take it any further. Tragedy has

many elements, Mr. Speaker, and drawing those tragedies back doesn't make them any easier.

One of the challenges that I have as minister – actually, this relates to another piece about the release of information. A number of the speakers have spoken about how the reporters had to go to court for four years to get information out. Well, yes, they did, Mr. Speaker, because we do not necessarily release easily the private information of individuals who are in the child care system. First and foremost, the impact of the child welfare system is to make families stronger. We do not go out telling people: oh, your neighbour's child has been apprehended. When a child dies, there may be other people involved, not just the parents. Often the parents do want information released, but there may be other family members, including other siblings. So you can't just go out and release the information, saying that the public wants to know about this death. You have to look at all of those surrounding pieces.

However, going forward, Mr. Speaker, we have made some changes to the system that I think are very, very fundamental. They started when the Member for Calgary-Cross was the minister. There were two reports, actually, that were done, a report in 2010 – that one was the child intervention system review – then in 2011 the Calgary expert panel. Out of those reports a number of very significant changes have happened. One of those very significant changes was the establishment of an AVIRT team. That's the Alberta Vulnerable Infant Response Team. That is responding to the fact that a number of the deaths in care are of infants. The hon. leader of the Liberal Party was indicating that the first responders and emergency rooms play a role, and yes, they do. When that role happens, the AVIRT teams in Edmonton and Calgary actually come into play very immediately. Change has been made there.

Change has been made by establishing an officer of this Legislature, the Child and Youth Advocate. In the act that established the Child and Youth Advocate's office, which was passed in December of 2011 – and the Child and Youth Advocate came into play on April 1, 2012 – section 12 requires a duty to report when a child is seriously injured or dies while receiving a designated service. So with not just a child that's been apprehended but a child that receives a designated service, the public body responsible for the provision of the service shall report the incident to the advocate as soon as practicable.

Under section 13(1) of the act there's a right to information.

- 13(1) The Advocate is entitled to any information, including personal information and health information, that
- (a) is in the custody or under the control of a public body . . . and
 - (b) is necessary to enable the Advocate to exercise the Advocate's [duty].

And it goes on.

Section 14 of that act provides the Child and Youth Advocate, who is an officer of this Legislature, the powers of a commissioner under the Public Inquiries Act. So there are very strong authorities purposefully set up to allow the Child and Youth Advocate independence, both real and seeming to be independent status, with authority and with the ability to compel information in a number of different ways.

The matters that were raised in the newspaper report that have given rise to these concerns today from the members of the opposition with respect to the failure to report and not knowing and nothing being done: in fact, the reality is that the incidents of death that they're referring to actually were not reported – and it was actually well known that they were not being reported – because we did not report deaths by natural causes. Mr. Speaker,

that has changed, too. Because of the issues that were raised way back then, as of April 2012 the death of any child in care is now being reported.

3:40

Now, the question about whether, if we don't have a debate, nothing will be done and children will reach a tragic end: let me be clear, Mr. Speaker, that first and foremost, any serious injury or death of any child under any protective program of this government must be reported to the Child and Youth Advocate.

Under the council on quality assurance, which was also, actually, legislatively established under that same bill, deaths are reported to the quality assurance council. Now, why both? Well, we can get into that at a later date, Mr. Speaker, but the point is that there are two independent – the council on quality assurance is made up of experts in their fields in this area to review and determine whether or not a further investigation needs to happen and what needs to be done from a systemic basis in the system. The Child and Youth Advocate has the powers of a commissioner and all of the authority he needs and all access to all of the expertise that he needs to determine whether a further investigation needs to happen.

The medical examiner also gets the information about the death of a child in care. Every death of a child in care is reported to the medical examiner, and he has an obligation to look at it from a medical basis and to then recommend to the Fatality Review Board whether or not there needs to be a further investigation. The fact that some of these deaths of children in care have not been further reviewed is not an indictment of the system. It, in fact, means that they have been looked at, and it's been determined by the experts in each of those areas that no further review is necessary.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona says that the number of investigations is going down. That, Member, is a good thing. It means that with all of these expert reviews fewer of the deaths in care are seen to be arising in such a nature of circumstance that needs further review. They're satisfied, upon the review that they've done, that they know how and why a child died.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, children do die in care, and that's tragic. Children die outside of care, and that's tragic. They die of natural causes, and that's horrible. We should be looking for ways, and we are looking always – I don't say "we" as a government. I mean everybody is looking for ways to reduce the issues of medical incidents that cause death. Sudden infant death syndrome is one of those things that still, I believe, people don't really understand very well.

There are lots of causes, and I don't disagree with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, who made some very eloquent statements about what needs to be looked at and what needs to be part of those. I actually think that she's added some very eloquent voice to the child protection discussion over the years that I've been around, and I think that there are an awful lot of things that she says that are really quite relevant to the discussion in terms of what we need to look at and what we need to go forward. One of the things is that you can't just take an incident and say: well, that was pneumonia, so we know that that doesn't need to be looked at. She's right, but we have the experts in the field who look at these things to determine: is something happening here that needs further investigation? They do that investigation

The issue here before us today is not whether these are tragic circumstances – they are tragic circumstances – and it's not a question of whether every single person, not just in this Legislature but in this province, should take the care and the time to

know and understand what is happening with some of the children in our society and how we could do a better job to reduce the abuse and the neglect of children in our society. Every one of us should be taking that on as a special project, absolutely. Family violence, drugs and alcohol, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, just families struggling to make ends meet: all of those are issues that we need to take care of in our society. Have we been talking about those? Yes, Mr. Speaker. This isn't the first time that this has been an issue that somebody could talk about.

We had the discussion last year over the social policy framework, identifying specifically this, and in that discussion people identified the care and protection of children as the number one priority of Albertans. Our Premier has made it the number one priority of our government in terms of the early childhood development, in terms of child protection, in establishing a ministry responsible for family and community safety. That's all about child abuse.

Should we all be engaged in this? Yes. Have we been engaged in this as a society and community? Well, 31,000 Albertans have participated in the social policy framework discussion. This year they're participating specifically in discussions around early childhood development, around a children's charter, around poverty reduction. So those are opportunities for not just people in this Legislature but all Albertans to be engaged in precisely the things that underlie the question of what needs to be done to strengthen a family. How do we assist families so that their children can have the opportunity for success? That has been one of the most significant discussions that we've actually been having right through. We brought in a Children First Act, which did, among a number of things, put forward a provision that said that we need to review every policy of government which relates to children to make sure that we're doing the right thing in the right way.

To suggest that we've never had a chance to discuss this is absurd. We have had those chances. Mr. Speaker, I believe that as long as I'm in this portfolio, those discussions will keep coming to the floor of this Legislature. We will have the children's charter coming back in the spring. We will have the poverty reduction strategy coming back. We will be talking about initiatives with respect to early childhood development. We are doing so many of the things that have been recommended in many of the reports they're talking about.

Now, there's an element that we need to discuss about not tracking. Well, Mr. Speaker, I can say this. The quality assurance council has made a recommendation that there should be a formal method of tracking. But I would not want to besmirch the very good people – and I'm really pleased that most of the speakers today have talked about the people who work in the department and the front end of the system to care for kids. We have excellent people. We have so many wonderful things that happen on a day-to-day basis, arising out of tragedy, no doubt, but wonderful things that are happening when people are there to help families and to help children. Yes, we also have some tragedies. We need to learn from those tragedies. We need to care about what happens to those children. We need to know and understand that the children who come into care are among the most vulnerable. They come into care for a reason. They are the highest risk. They are the most vulnerable. Therefore, we need to take extra precautions and take extra care.

But none of that speaks to the question of urgency of debate today in the House. All of it speaks to the importance of the issue and the importance that all of us as members of this House and all of us as members of society and the community put the highest priority possible on the care of our children, on ensuring that our

children get the best possible start, and on ensuring that when children are in unsafe conditions, we do something about it, we do something early, and, Mr. Speaker, that when things do go wrong – and they do – we learn from it. If we don't, that only compounds the tragedy.

We have in place a history of things that came through that report. Essentially, the nub of the report that was in the *Journal* today was about unreported deaths. Well, I think I can assure you that if you read the report that was in the *Journal*, you could see that the discrepancy in numbers between reported and unreported was the number of kids who died of natural causes. That's very clear.

Also, the rules about urgency deal with the question of looking at the past if there's been no change. Well, there's been a substantive change. There has been the Child and Youth Advocate, the quality review council, the AVIRT team, the reporting of all the numbers, the Children First Act, and it goes on. So there's not a good reason to abrogate the day's business today to debate the *Edmonton Journal* story, Mr. Speaker. There is a very good reason for all of us to take this issue seriously and look into the facts and apprise ourselves of what is actually happening and take every opportunity in the normal course of our business to make it our business on each and every day to put children first, make sure that children in this province are safe.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, Standing Order 30(2), in particular, provides that members “may briefly state the arguments in favour of the request for leave and the Speaker may allow such debate as he . . . considers relevant to the question of urgency.” It is then the role of the chair to “rule on whether or not the request for leave is in order.”

I want to begin with, again, just a little reminder of what urgency is, and I fully realize that I allowed a lot of leeway today with respect to that issue. But I will just remind you for future purposes, please. In my copy of *Beauchesne*, which is the sixth edition, page 113, citation 390 defines urgency this way as it pertains to whether or not the House should adjourn its normal business to deal with a matter of urgent and public importance.

“Urgency” within this rule does not apply to the matter itself, but means “urgency of debate”, when the ordinary opportunities provided by the rules of the House do not permit the subject to be brought on early enough and the public interest demands that discussion take place immediately.

That is the definition of urgency insofar as proceedings in this House are concerned regarding a matter such as the one at hand and the SO 30 under which it was raised.

3:50

That having been said, hon. members, I want to note that the Member for Calgary-Shaw did make the application at the proper time, and he did provide at least two hours' notice to the Speaker's office. In fact, his letter and a copy of the motion, in whatever order they were, arrived this morning at 9:50 in my office. His motion reads as follows:

Pursuant to Standing Order 30 be it resolved that the ordinary business of the Legislative Assembly be adjourned to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the need to immediately identify the actual number of deaths of children in care that have occurred since 1999, the implementation status of recommendations that have been made to prevent deaths in that time, the reasons for the secrecy surrounding this issue, and the steps that can be taken immediately to improve the protection of children currently in the care of the government.

Now, the relevant parliamentary authorities on this subject can be found at pages 689 and 696 of the *House of Commons Procedure*

and Practice, second edition, and also in *Beauchesne's*, paragraphs 387 and 390.

Now, I'm going to make a ruling in a moment. But while the chair will certainly address the urgency question and whether or not Standing Order 30 has been properly implemented here if a decision goes this way or that way, I want to just raise one other point for your future edification, so to speak, and that is: if you're bringing forward an issue under a Standing Order 30, please try your best to contain it and restrict it to one issue. I'm not chastising the member who raised this particular SO 30, so please don't misunderstand me. But there are at least three or four or five different issues contained in this one motion as phrased. Perhaps they would be better stated in written questions or a motion for a return or during question period or during some other form of debate. But in and of itself when you look at SO 30, you would see that there is a section in here that deals with the fact that an SO 30 should apply to one issue, hon. members. You can look it up for yourselves under SO 30. So please be reminded.

Secondly, also with respect to SO 30s it's not all that typical, in my recollection, that the language and the wording that sometimes gets used in SO 30s should be provocative in nature. That's another thing to please sort of keep in mind.

That having been said, hon. members, I did listen very attentively to all four speakers, one of whom represented each of their respective caucuses, as they spoke this afternoon to this matter. Obviously, it is an extremely serious matter when we're talking about children in care, and it's even more serious when we're talking about children who have perished, who have died. The gravity of the situation is certainly not lost on any of the speakers or on any of us in this House, including your Speaker, because the death of any child is without question a tragedy, and certainly the death of any child in care is no less tragic. Hon. members, I note the gravity of the matter.

I'm also noting that during question period today, believe it or not, 42 questions and answers were directed to this issue, 42 questions and answers, including nine questions in a row from the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition with nine answers, six more questions and answers during the exchange with the leader of the Liberal caucus, six more questions and answers directed from the NDP caucus by the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and six more questions and answers developed by the Member for Calgary-Shaw, the author of this particular motion. I listened very carefully to the Premier answer questions, to the Minister of Human Services answer questions, to the Associate Minister of Services for Persons with Disabilities answer all of these questions, and a lot of information was given out in the process because every death of every child in care is important.

I noted that these deaths are reported. I also noted that in some cases there might be privacy concerns, there might be infringements that the government doesn't want to violate. But I also noted the passion with which both the questions and the answers were delivered, a passion that underlines the gravity of the circumstance. We heard about deaths by natural causes. We heard allegations about reports being purposely held up or held back. We even heard the term "cover-up," which on this occasion I let go. I may not let it go on another occasion. But I understand how emotional this matter can be.

I also listened very carefully when the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition did her member's statement and through her delivery throughout probably the better part of 10 or 12 questions which require some form of answer from the government. Hopefully, they could be sought through a written question or a motion for a return.

I also then listened to the speeches that were just given. I heard seven or eight minutes from Calgary-Shaw, outlining his points and his allegations about some stubborn secrecy, about 89 deaths, about questions as to why these deaths occurred and what's being done to prevent them, and on he went.

I then listened to seven or eight minutes from the leader of the Liberal opposition, who talked about similar issues about public safety, the protection of our most vulnerable, references in the media, how many children in care died, when and where, and the questions went on.

I then listened carefully, again, to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, who recapped some rules that would govern here pertaining to *Beauchesne's* and *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* and motions to adjourn the normal business, and I listened to her points about criteria and the need to change some criteria and questions about what's causing the deaths and any gaps that exist in the system.

I also listened to the Government House Leader when he commented that nothing adverse would ever happen to a child in care if an urgent debate does not occur today.

On that point I want to bring you back to SO 30, which states at 30(6) that "an emergency debate does not entail any decision of the Assembly." In other words, an emergency debate, if it were to proceed here, does not culminate in a decision or a specific action that is required by anyone arising out of that particular decision. I think you know that because a number of you have been here before when issues like this have arisen.

I also heard the Government House Leader talk about what might happen if circumstances were allowed to continue unchecked and what it is that he, in his opinion, has seen the government do to try to prevent any of these tragic deaths. We talked about and heard about elements of tragedy, the protection of privacy, the purpose of the act, the role of the advocate. You should know that the Child and Youth Advocate is indeed new to the position and has presented at least one investigative report already, if memory serves me, and I think I tabled that not long ago.

Finally, we heard about extra precautions and other steps that have already been taken, and the hon. Government House Leader went on for about 15 or 16 minutes. So suffice it to say that we've heard quite a lot about what the grievances are and what the support would be for the motion to go forward, and we've also heard some counterarguments regarding why it should not.

Now, one last thing I want to mention here is that there are a number of vehicles that can be used in this House to raise issues such as the one raised today. Question period is one, and you saw illustration of that today. Forty-two questions and answers were given. The subject is a serious one, and that's not lost on any of us, as I said earlier. You have Motions for Returns. You have other opportunities such as that which the Leader of the Opposition took today, and that was to use a private member's statement to make your points. You also have another opportunity likely coming up very shortly under Bill 30, the Building Families and Communities Act, which is coming up for third reading. So you have opportunities there to continue on with the debate, and I could go on. I could go on at some length.

Suffice it to say that at the end of the day I don't find that there is a reason for us to stop all of the debate on other important matters in this House, and that is not to say that the issue at hand is not important because it most certainly is. It most certainly is. I wouldn't be surprised if this issue comes up again and again and again over the next several days. However, in the Speaker's ruling, which will now stand, I do not find it necessary to compel the House into the decision to stop all other business from proceeding

in spite of the fact that this is an extremely serious matter. We see a lot of action that is occurring, and I think we should all take some comfort in that.

**4:00 Orders of the Day
Written Questions**

[The Clerk read the following written question, which had been accepted]

Alberta Film Classification Revenue

Q44. Mr. Pedersen:

What is the amount of revenue collected by Alberta Film Classification for the fiscal years April 1, 2010, to March 31, 2011; April 1, 2011, to March 31, 2012; and April 1, 2012, to March 31, 2013?

**Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

**Bill 206
Tobacco Reduction (Flavoured Tobacco Products)
Amendment Act, 2012**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by Banff-Cochrane.

Ms Cusanelli: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise today and move third reading of Bill 206, the Tobacco Reduction (Flavoured Tobacco Products) Amendment Act, 2012.

I would like to thank all the hon. members who rose to speak during second reading and Committee of the Whole on what is an extremely important bill for Alberta's youth. My hon. colleagues have expressed some passionate views during these debates, and indeed I am moved by their unwavering commitment to improving Alberta's tobacco legislation. Our children's voice, Mr. Speaker, has been heard in this House.

Bill 206 is about the protection of youth from tobacco products that are marketed and crafted to attract youth to beginning a habit that we know has fatal consequences. We want our kids to have the greatest protection so they can enjoy prosperous, healthy lives. As studies have shown, leading healthy and fit lives can significantly reduce an individual's chances of developing disease. The goal behind Bill 206 is to help Alberta achieve the lowest underage smoking figures in the country by eliminating the attractiveness of smoking; namely, flavoured tobacco products, including flavoured cigarettes and flavoured cigarillos.

Many of our constituents have shared their stories either first-hand or through the story of a loved one. They've shared the damaging effects that have occurred from smoking; these include devastating diseases like lung, mouth, or pancreatic cancer. It is with sadness and much regret that we watch our loved ones when they suffer in pain only to lose them to a habit that they fell victim to, most of them, as young people. Members of this House know the devastating toll that this disease has had on the lives of smokers and their loved ones.

We all know that smoking is extremely addictive, and that is why we are here today discussing this bill. Bill 206 closes the gateway by which our young people have been able to enter after being enticed by the delicious and attractive tactics of flavoured tobacco. Groups such as the Canadian Cancer Society estimate that 30 per cent of all cancer deaths are related to smoking and over 85 per cent of lung cancer cases.

However, all is not lost. When we know better, we can do better. Yes, we know that menthol reduces irritation caused by tobacco smoke, making it easier for new users to smoke. Menthol also enhances nicotine absorption, increasing the risk of addiction. Yes, we know that the popularity of water pipe tobacco is rising with our youth. Of those users 74 per cent are using flavoured products. The addition of flavouring creates the false belief that water pipe use is less dangerous. In one session, however, a user can inhale the equivalent of one hundred cigarettes. Yes, we know that up to 69 per cent of Alberta youth using cigarillos and cigars are using flavoured varieties, more than any other province in Canada. And, yes, we know that 72 per cent of youth use chewing tobacco, and they are choosing flavoured varieties.

So I challenge us all to achieve something greater today. Why not try to eradicate the problem before it begins? This is what urged me to sponsor Bill 206, that something so preventable like smoking-related cancers could be targeted and eradicated by offering our children first-class protection. It has been a breath of fresh air to learn that youth are actually ahead of us on this. They want this legislation. They want protection from tobacco companies, and I am so proud to live in a province with youth, medical students, and many other young advocates of a future where youth tobacco use will not be encouraged by flavoured products.

It goes without saying that health-related costs associated with treatment of tobacco-related illness could benefit other programs in other areas. Alberta Health Services estimates that \$4.4 billion is spent each year on health care for smoking-related illnesses in Canada. The societal and individual costs of the smoker far outweigh the money that is generated from tobacco sales.

Mr. Speaker, over 47,000 Canadians die annually from smoking. Of this total an estimated 3,400 have been our Albertans: our fathers, our mothers, brothers, sisters, our children. These deaths were all preventable, and they serve as a tragic and constant reminder of the negative effects of smoking.

If that isn't enough to sway everyone, AHS also highlights the power that nicotine addiction has on smokers as well as the difficulties those individuals have when trying to quit smoking. Surprisingly, 40 per cent of cancer patients who have had their voice box removed continue to smoke, knowing full well the toll that smoking takes on their bodies. Seventy-five per cent of smokers who quit will, unfortunately, begin six months later. This figure is shockingly high, and this government is addressing this with Bill 206 and Bill 33.

This government is doing the right thing in proposing Bill 206. If we can reduce or eradicate youth smoking, we can correct generations of smoking- and second-hand-smoke-related consequences. In terms of second-hand smoke Alberta Health Services notes that individuals are exposed to 4,000 chemicals, with approximately 50 of those being known to cause cancer. What is even more distressing is the fact that children who are exposed to second-hand smoke are likely to have middle-ear disease, coughing, asthma, bronchitis, and even pneumonia. An estimated 3,470 nonsmokers die each year from heart disease related to second-hand smoke, and about 347 die each year from lung cancer caused by second-hand smoke. Mr. Speaker, Albertans know this, and they know it's unacceptable. They believe that Bill 206 will close the door on these statistics and finally make them a thing of the past.

Mr. Speaker, the idea has been floated comparing this bill to liquor regulations. Well, that's simply irresponsible messaging to our kids. After all, tobacco is the only legal product that kills half of its long-term users when used as directed by manufacturers. To even try to turn the intent of this bill into a rights issue by comparing it to banning flavoured alcohol – and I've even heard,

“What’s next? Banning flavoured condoms?” from supporters of another party – is weak at best.

It may be a simple life choice for adult nonsmokers who never fell prey to tobacco use to just quit, but as we know, the nicotine in tobacco products is highly addictive, making it extremely difficult for smokers to quit. We also have heard the various statistics regarding youth underage smoking. The younger a person begins smoking, the harder it is to quit. By reducing the temptation posed by flavoured tobacco products, we will reduce these figures. We can also help alleviate the socioeconomic costs associated with smoking-related illness and death, thereby reducing the country’s astonishingly high use of health resources and costs associated with smoking.

Mr. Speaker, we are the stewards of this amazing province, and if there is anything we as legislators can do to help all Albertans lead healthier, smoke-free lives, we must do so for the sake of our children and future generations. I believe Bill 206 will allow us to better prevent smoking addiction and, most importantly, protect our kids from the creative marketing techniques of the tobacco industry, and that is why I urge all hon. members to follow this debate and support this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:10

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, followed by Banff-Cochrane. We have to interject here with others, please.

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and speak on Bill 206, the Tobacco Reduction (Flavoured Tobacco Products) Amendment Act, 2012. As many in the House are aware, I’ve spoken with concern about Bill 206. Bill 206 is not aimed at reducing youth access to tobacco. To say that the primary purpose of Bill 206 is the reduction of youth access to flavoured tobacco is simply not true. Bill 206 is a ban.

I do not consume tobacco. My spouse does not consume it either. We all know people close to us who have been tragically lost due to tobacco use and the effects of it. I personally think that the use of tobacco products is a poor decision because of the inherent health risks associated with its use. However, as an MLA it is not my job to allow my personal views on this issue to cloud my judgment and impair my ability to rationally think and reasonably examine proposed laws. Bill 206 clearly needs more work before it can be rationalized as a law that actually targets youth access to tobacco. I’m in favour of any law that actually is specifically targeted at youth access to tobacco such as Bill 33, but there are still gaping holes in Bill 206 that, if left unfilled, will have broad implications for responsible adult consumers of tobacco products.

Sometimes in politics we hear about the law of unintended consequences. I considered discussing Bill 206 in this light because of how I see the future unfolding for responsible adult consumers of tobacco products due to this legislation. But the law of unintended consequences does not apply, Mr. Speaker. It doesn’t apply because it is clear and self-evident that Bill 206 will eliminate the vast majority of flavoured tobacco products in Alberta for the responsible adult consumer. I’m not in favour of people using tobacco products, but I am in favour of personal responsibility. I’m in favour of the government staying the heck out of the way when someone’s personal decision has no demonstrable harm for others.

Currently in Alberta there is no minimum age for purchasing tobacco. Three provinces have passed flavoured-tobacco restriction laws, but none have been proclaimed; none are in force. The

government thinks that it is bad for people to use tobacco products, and I agree with them on that, Mr. Speaker. Where we differ is that I also value personal responsibility and personal choice.

This government consistently provides an irrational and statist approach to every policy issue that it faces. They choose to chip away at the principles of liberty that every Canadian inherently possesses. They sneak this erosion under our noses because the vehicle they choose to use, this legislation, is purportedly aimed at protecting children. They state the claim that anyone opposed to their legislation is opposed to protecting children. I’m absolutely in favour of protecting children, but nothing in this legislation actually shows that it will reduce youth access to certain tobacco products. It is an outright ban, Mr. Speaker. I simply am opposed to using the guise of protecting children in order to erode Albertans’ fundamental rights to personal liberty.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the 29(2)(a) I’ve been asked about does not apply to private members’ business, only to government stuff.

Let’s go on to Banff-Cochrane, followed by Calgary-Shaw.

Mr. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’m honoured to rise today to speak to Bill 206, the Tobacco Reduction (Flavoured Tobacco Products) Amendment Act. It’s unfortunate that we have to come back to the House to debate something that has been debated many times before. In fact, the intention of previous legislation was to prevent the sale of flavoured tobacco products, but the industry found loopholes, so here we are again.

As we heard in committee debate, other provinces have had similar experiences with tobacco legislation. In 2008 Ontario passed legislation similar to ours here in Alberta, entitled An Act to amend the Smoke-Free Ontario Act with respect to cigarillos. Bill 124 passed an amendment restricting the sale of flavoured tobacco products.

It reads as follows:

No person shall sell or offer to sell a flavoured cigarillo, unless the flavoured cigarillo has been prescribed . . .

and

. . . no person shall sell or offer to sell a flavoured tobacco product that has been prescribed as prohibited.

This act was superseded by the federal Act to amend the Tobacco Act, or the Cracking Down on Tobacco Marketing Aimed at Youth Act. This act came into force in 2010, outlining three measures designed to reduce marketing towards children. These measures are:

No person shall sell cigarettes or cigarillos except in a package that contains at least twenty cigarettes or cigarillos . . .

No manufacturer or retailer shall sell [cigarettes or cigarillos that include] a flavouring agent other than sugar, tobacco, or tobacco extracts or reconstituted tobacco . . .

and

No manufacturer or retailer shall sell a cigar without a health warning label, regardless of the number of cigars being sold.

Unfortunately, these legislative measures have been circumvented by product innovation on the part of cigarillo manufacturers. What they did, in fact, was modify their flavoured cigarillo products such that they became classified as cigars and thus are not bound by such legislation. The amendment proposed here in Bill 206 to the Tobacco Reduction Act attempts to close this loophole that tobacco manufacturers have been exploiting.

Private members in other provinces as well have attempted to address these loopholes by revising legislation, but none of them

have been successful. Bill 66, the Smoke-Free Ontario Amendment Act, was introduced in Ontario in 2012. Bill 66 banned flavoured tobacco, new tobacco products, and smokeless tobacco, but it only received first reading. The Tobacco Sales Amendment Act in British Columbia only received first reading as well, stating:

It is forbidden to sell, or to offer for sale, a tobacco product intended to be consumed in a manner other than smoking if that product contains flavouring intended to enhance the taste of the product.

As you can see, there have been varying attempts to restrict the sale of flavoured tobacco products across the country, but none of them have been able to take hold. I have hope that Alberta can do better and that we can do better.

Interestingly, Nova Scotia does not have any legislation concerning flavoured tobacco products, but they do have measures which reduce the accessibility of tobacco products to youth. Section 7 of Nova Scotia's Tobacco Access Act, made law in 1993 and amended in 1999 and 2006, states that cigarettes are not to be sold in packages of less than 20 and that there is to be no sale of unpackaged cigarettes. Increasing pack sizes and prohibiting the sale of individual units limits availability to youth, who are often unable to afford larger packs. Flavoured tobacco products are often viewed as luxury items and, as such, are marketed individually or in small, more affordable packages. Ontario has also placed restrictions on pack sizes, but these restrictions were only applicable to cigarillos and not other tobacco-related products.

Mr. Speaker, 90 per cent of adult smokers became addicted as youths, and the younger a child begins to smoke, the more likely the child is to become a regular smoker as an adult. Moreover, the age at which children first try cigarettes has been declining and now stands at just under 12 years old. By masking the regular tobacco flavour and scent, flavoured cigarettes make it even more appealing for a 12- or 13-year-old to take that initial puff and keep smoking until he or she becomes addicted.

This has far-reaching consequences, Mr. Speaker. We all know the devastating effects tobacco use has. This is particularly true with respect to the future health of our province's youth. Flavoured tobacco products are especially attractive to youth, and prohibiting their sales would remove the chance for these products to fall into their hands.

4:20

More proactive measures should be taken in order to safeguard our youth from these products to ensure we are doing what we can to nurture the health of our families and our communities. That's why it's important to protect our children from both exposure to unwanted tobacco use and the opportunity to become addicted at a young age.

Mr. Speaker, I do not take the health of children or of Albertans for granted. I'm grateful that we are able to discuss Bill 206 today, which asks us to be even more mindful of what we can do to improve the already exceptional quality of life here in Alberta. We owe it to all of our children to help make sure that they can lead healthy lives, unaffected by the negative, harmful, and long-lasting effects of smoking-related diseases.

As I am sure we can all remember from our own adolescent years, oftentimes we are unaware of the consequences of the choices we make. Back then, getting old seemed like something that could never happen to us, but as time goes on, we realize that our lives are lived on borrowed time and that our own health and the health of those we love is the most important possession that we can have.

Mr. Speaker, flavoured tobacco products are used by almost 170,000 Canadian high school students. As we have seen, other jurisdictions have attempted to deal with the issue of flavoured tobacco. Some progress has been made, and all of their intentions are good and in the right place, yet they have all fallen short of their desired task.

In Alberta we know that there's a responsibility we must assume to promote and protect the health of our young people by restricting their access to tobacco products in whatever form they take. This includes and must include, Mr. Speaker, flavoured tobacco products. That's why I applaud the awareness Bill 206 brings to this issue as well as its proactive stance, and I urge all of my colleagues to participate in the debate of this noble initiative.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, and I don't know if I see Calgary-Mountain View wanting on after that. Thank you.

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to stand and speak at third reading of Bill 206. I have to say, hon. members, I was torn on this bill from the get-go.

A bit of a personal story about, you know, myself, my teen years. I was first introduced to cherry-flavoured chewing tobacco at a party – I was probably 14 years old at the time – and it was something that I took up and continued to do. I chewed winter-green; I chewed cherry. Eventually I graduated to Copenhagen and other such products that were, you know, not the flavoured stuff. But eventually from that, I figured out that it was easier to get a nicotine buzz from lighting a cigarette than it was from putting chewing tobacco in my mouth, so I started smoking, and I was a smoker for 15 years.

You know, I fully recognize the damage that tobacco use can have on individuals, and as the father of a three-year-old son I sincerely hope that he makes a different set of choices than I did when I was a teenager and isn't in a situation where I was after my early 30s, being addicted to nicotine for many, many years.

Now, that being said, I'm also equally passionate about the protection of personal freedoms. At this point in time, you know, I struggle when we as legislators talk about prohibition of any sort of product, especially when we're picking and choosing which of those products we're going to allow the sale of and which we're not. It was a genuinely difficult decision for me to make and one that, quite honestly and quite frankly, I wasn't entirely prepared to make myself.

The beauty of being in this caucus, Mr. Speaker, is that we have free votes. We can vote any way that we want. As I was torn and thinking about how I was going to vote on this issue, I reflected on the maiden speech that I made the first time I stood in this House, when I said that I am not here to represent my own personal views and that I'm not here to represent the views of my caucus or my party; I'm here to represent the views of those who elected me to be here. So I conducted a telephone poll in my riding over the weekend where I asked my constituents how they would like me to vote on their behalf on this particular bill. I outlined the pros, the cons, where we stand, knowing full well that Ipsos-Reid had done a poll that said that 67 per cent, or roughly two-thirds, of the population were in support of this bill. I was quite surprised to find that in my constituency of Calgary-Shaw I had almost the exact opposite. I only had one-third of those who were polled actually in favour of supporting this legislation, 60 per cent were against, and roughly 7 per cent were undecided.

Now, for the sake of all polls, that is a 4 and a half per cent margin of error 19 times out of 20. We've all heard those, but that

still puts me in a pretty comfortable spot to stand here and say that as much as I understand the value of protecting our youth from tobacco, my constituents have asked me not to support this bill, and I will be following their wishes, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar and Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, and that's all I have on the list for the moment.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand to speak to this important and, I think, progressive bill by members opposite to eliminate flavourings from tobacco.

I want to set the record straight. I was confused earlier on one of the amendments that was suggested by the Wildrose caucus. I want to be very clear that I do not support the decision that they seem to be making that eliminating flavourings from tobacco would eliminate choice by adults, who have the responsibility and the ability to make their own choices about tobacco. I do not support that notion.

This is a glaring attempt by tobacco manufacturers and tobacco promoters to push tobacco on our population and to get them addicted in childhood. Notwithstanding this member's – presumably, it was authentic – survey, a randomized one, at least one would expect in a population of 42,000 to have at least a thousand people that one would have to call to get that kind of a statistical certainty. I don't know. He didn't mention how many he actually surveyed, but I would wonder about the validity of the survey and ask that he table the numbers.

Mr. Wilson: It'll be on my website.

Dr. Swann: Okay. I'll go to the online website, as the member suggested, and have a look at that.

The question would be: what question was asked? I guess a lot depends on what question was asked. Given that we're losing 4,300 people a year in this province – and that's not even counting the number who die from heart disease and progressive vascular disease; these are very strictly tobacco-related deaths – I think it behooves us to look at the evidence. Notwithstanding that people have as adults free choice, we're talking about a population – and we have among the highest rate of child and youth uptake of tobacco in this province compared to other provinces.

We have a responsibility to get tobacco as out of the hands of young people as possible. They are unable to make the kind of decisions in the context of a lifetime perspective, unable to weigh the risks and the benefits, unable to detach social acceptability and attractiveness from a lot of these decisions. We have a responsibility to get this addictive product, which is being enhanced by flavourings, including menthol – and I'll come back to that one – out of tobacco products. If people want to smoke, they don't need to be given an added incentive to smoke on the basis of seductive flavourings, which primarily are targeted at getting kids started under the age of 16. There's no question in my mind that it is an important advance for this province to eliminate flavourings.

What I hope we might also talk a little bit about is when we're going to restrict children from selling tobacco products across the counter to other children. At the present time you can be a child in a retail store and sell tobacco. That makes it doubly difficult for them to recognize peers and block peers from buying. It does raise some other interesting questions about how we could further restrict it.

But the key message I wanted to give on this is that in light of the many tobacco lobbyists that have met with this government – and I believe probably a lot of this lobbying was on behalf of

menthol cigarettes and, again, on the basis of the same argument that the Wildrose is making, that we cannot legitimately eliminate menthol just because adults are addicted to it as well – they are the ones that want, very strongly, to see it continued. We know that over 30 per cent of young people are using mentholated tobacco products, that it's also a flavouring, and that it's also adding to the addictive properties and our addiction rates of tobacco use in youth.

4:30

I hope that I'm going to see a very clear indication from this government that they are going to, even though they haven't named it, name menthol and mentholated products as included in this definition of flavourings because I'm sure they've had a tremendous amount of pressure from the tobacco industry to keep menthol in as some kind of a nonflavouring or whatever arguments the industry might make to keep mentholated products in tobacco. I hope we will see a genuine naming and restriction and elimination of menthol from tobacco. That is a critical piece, I think.

Whatever comes out of this bill – and I think a lot of it is going to be to the benefit of our young people and of smokers in the future, tobacco users in the future – menthol will be a very substantial contributor to ongoing addictions. We must eliminate menthol as we are any other flavourings.

Given those comments, Mr. Speaker, I'll take my seat. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Dorward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to support Bill 206. In 1966 I had my first and last smoke in back of the King Edward Park Community League, if I remember correctly. I'm thankful that there was no flavouring in that smoke because I may have liked it. I didn't like it, and I never did it again. I stand in support of all of the youth who have contacted me through various means and asked me to support this bill.

That's all I have to say, Mr. Speaker. I support Bill 206. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure and honour to rise and speak to Bill 206, Tobacco Reduction (Flavoured Tobacco Products) Amendment Act, 2012, in third reading. As I echoed in second reading of this bill, I and my caucus support the spirit and intention of this bill, acknowledging that we as legislators and the government of Alberta have a responsibility and a role to play in protecting our young people.

I'll speak to a few different things. There is one concern that I have with the bill. As was outlined by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, you know, menthol is used by about a third of young smokers. Again, it may not be regulated in this bill, but it may not even come through in the regulations. That's a serious concern that I have with the bill as it's currently written.

However, that being said, I think most of us acknowledge that tobacco has devastating effects on individuals' families and the health care system and Albertans as a whole. I think that this negative cycle will continue to repeat as long as we allow companies to deliberately target vulnerable and impressionable youth.

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, there are 24 tobacco lobbyists registered in the province of Alberta. The PCs have even admitted in this House that they've met with them on this bill. Now, the

lobbyists registry shows many meetings between the industry bigwigs and the government on this type of legislation. However, their advice or information is obviously not instrumental for the PCs to be able to understand and make decisions in this area because the government did not see the need to consult with these lobbyists before suing a large number of tobacco companies last year. Now, in suing the tobacco industry elite, the PCs have acknowledged and inherently do acknowledge that the tobacco industry deliberately designs products to be addictive and targets the vulnerable and those developing these addictions.

Now, what the Alberta NDP believes is that this government won't enact stricter legislation or even bans on certain products. In particular, Mr. Speaker, the government also reproaches the tobacco companies for "targeting youth and adolescents with these misrepresentations and deceptions knowing their particular vulnerabilities." In that lawsuit they also acknowledge that the tobacco industry has breached its duties to warn Albertans about the addictiveness of tobacco products. Now, why does this government expect the tobacco companies to do this when the PCs themselves won't demonstrate leadership in this area?

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, Campaign for a Smoke-Free Alberta conducted a survey of political leaders, and the Premier herself answered yes to each of their recommendations. Now, she's openly supportive of combating youth smoking but does not follow through with action and legislation. So my concern is that the Premier and this government can't be trusted to have the courage to put in place the appropriate mechanisms to effectively protect youth and make progress for the health of all Albertans.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the concerning statistic is that Alberta has the most affordable cigarettes in the country when it comes to 15- to 24-year-olds. Unquestionably, you know, restricting the sale of flavoured cigarette products to youth is a good decision and a step in the right direction. It is my contention that it does not adequately address most of the underlying issues and won't necessarily go far enough to protect the vulnerable and youth from tobacco companies' profit-driven strategies and the fact that they very consciously focus on and target youth especially. Again: get them while they're young; get them hooked and addicted so that they're going to be a loyal customer for the duration of their lives.

The biggest concern or wish that I have – and I know that in Committee of the Whole there were amendments put forward to specifically outline and ban menthol and include that in the bill. Now, unfortunately, that amendment did not pass, but there is a great concern, you know, with the number of young people who start smoking or experimenting with flavoured tobacco products that start with menthol, and the statistic is actually quite alarming, Mr. Speaker.

Interestingly, nine provinces have legislation to curb tobacco sales to minors. Alberta is the only remaining province that is without such legislation. Now, again, what's interesting is that our neighbours in B.C. have achieved a merchant compliance rate of 94 per cent through comprehensive provincial regulation of tobacco sale to minors.

Mr. Speaker, I think this bill as it's currently written is a step in the right direction, but I'd like to see the bill go further. You know, there is a duty that this government and all of us as legislators have to Albertans to protect our most vulnerable, our youth, and to protect them from developing a dependency on extremely harmful products like tobacco. Again, my concern is that the bill only restricts the sale of flavouring agents as listed by regulations, and nowhere is menthol on that list.

Mr. Speaker, I will be supporting this bill. Again, I wish it would take it one step further, but I think this is a good start. I think all of us are concerned to ensure that we are protecting the young people of this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I sense the mood of the House is to perhaps try and get on with the vote on this bill; however, I don't want to prevent those who may wish to speak from speaking. Are there any others who wish to speak to third reading of this bill?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

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

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:40 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Allen	Forsyth	McQueen
Amery	Goudreau	Oberle
Bhardwaj	Hancock	Olesen
Bilous	Horne	Pastoor
Brown	Horner	Quadri
Campbell	Hughes	Quest
Cao	Jeneroux	Rodney
Casey	Johnson, J.	Sarich
Cusanelli	Johnson, L.	Starke
Dallas	Kennedy-Glans	Stier
DeLong	Khan	Swann
Dorward	Kubinec	Towle
Drysdale	Luan	VanderBurg
Fawcett	McDonald	Xiao
Fenske		

Against the motion:

Bikman	Saskiw	Strankman
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Totals:	For – 43	Against – 3
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[Motion carried; Bill 206 read a third time]

The Speaker: Thank you.

Statement by the Speaker

Speaker Not Recognizing a Member

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we proceed with the next item of business, I do need to make a sincere apology to the Member for Calgary-Currie regarding what occurred just prior to the voice vote on her bill about 12, 13 minutes ago. As members here would know, I sensed that the mood of the House was to proceed to a vote, and in that respect I did ask if there were any other members who wished to speak.

Now, I had extended that to all members. However, the Member for Calgary-Currie: I didn't quite catch her signal. She had wished to make a closing speech, which she is entitled to do, and she has up to five minutes to do that. While I can't invite the member to make that speech now, I would invite that member to table her comments so that they would be part of the record and so that the members that were interested in hearing that speech might at least be able to read it.

Once again, Calgary-Currie, I do extend my deepest apologies for the little miscue between us and hope that you will accept that from the chair and that we can then move on.

Thank you, hon. members.

**Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 208
Seniors' Advocate Act**

[Debate adjourned November 18: Mr. Eggen speaking]

The Speaker: I have next on the speakers list Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. It's an honour and privilege to get up and speak to Bill 208, the Seniors' Advocate Act. I notice that we only have about five minutes to start this, so I'm just going to make a few comments. Then we'll continue speaking next week when we deal with this.

I just want to talk about last week, some of the Associate Minister of Seniors' comments when he was in debate about the independent advocate for seniors and how it isn't needed. I have to say that I couldn't disagree more with him. I think that in Alberta and Canada it's important for us to protect the vulnerable freely and openly. We have an independent advocate for children. We spent quite a lot of time talking about that today when we were asking for the Standing Order 30 on emergency debate.

We listened to the minister as he eloquently talked about the importance of having the children and youth services advocate and the important work that he does in regard to being independent. I listened very closely to what the minister was saying and how he eloquently went on about the importance of an independent advocate and what this government has done since 2012 on children's issues. Considering that we're dealing with some horrific things that were in the paper today, it is just amazing to me, quite frankly, that a minister of the Crown can stand up and talk about the Ombudsman's report and what the Ombudsman does and talk about all the things in his report and the need for an Ombudsman but directly criticize one of his own colleagues in regard to the importance of having somebody independent.

What is also striking, that I didn't hear from the opposition, is the fact that Justice Vertes' report – the government spent millions of dollars on it, talked about the recommendations that he recommended, which were many, which the government stood up and accepted – recommends is an independent health advocate. The government announced, I guess, a week and a half ago, when the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and I were at a press conference – they talked about setting up these advocates for health, seniors, and mental health but didn't touch at all on the health advocate being independent, which goes back to what I was talking about earlier. You can have all of the fatality inquiries in the world, and I've read many of them. Since the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* were disputing some of the numbers that the government had – and it's enlightening to me. I've just pulled off maybe six or eight in my office. Recommendation upon recommendation on the public fatality inquiries aren't followed through with by the government, but they're quite accepting of making them independent.

I think, having sobering second thoughts in regard to why – my colleague, who is our Seniors critic, has done an incredible amount of work in our Seniors critic position and has been all over the province talking to seniors and engages with them all the time, quite frankly. She and I got together last night, and she makes me

tired, to be honest with you, with the role that she's taken on as the Seniors critic. She's got so many things going. You know, I think it's important to understand that when we talk about the government and they talk about open, accountable, and transparent and how they're continually consulting with Albertans – well, if they are continuing to consult with Albertans, like they like to say, it's beyond my comprehension that they don't get the fact that there is a need for an independent seniors' advocate.

I've stood up in this Legislature before, having spent 17 years with the government and just about three years – my third-year birthday will be in January – being with the Wildrose, and I talked about the press conference and the government's unwillingness to listen to what people are telling them. I can tell you that I was honoured to be the Seniors critic before my colleague joined us. Seniors across this province need . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, I'm so sorry to interrupt, but at 5 p.m. pursuant to Standing Order 8(1) we are required under Motions Other than Government Motions to call that. Since there is no motion for adjournment on the debate of private members' business, which we've just heard one hon. member speak to, I am compelled to now move forward in our agenda.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Funding for School Playground Equipment

516. Mr. Jeneroux moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to explore the feasibility of providing funding for preliminary work on school playgrounds such as drainage and for basic playground equipment such as a swing or a slide as part of the capital funding for any new school facilities that include grade levels from kindergarten to grade 6.

Mr. Jeneroux: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and open debate on Motion 516. Let me tell the Assembly a quick story. I have a picture in my office of 18 kids standing in a field at Monsignor Fee Otterson Catholic school. These kids, many of whom I have met personally, are holding up a sign saying: help us play. These kids have been making the most of their field and grass and dirt for over two years now, but I feel it's about time this Assembly helps these kids really play.

I'm proposing this motion here today because I believe in the inherent value that facilities like playgrounds provide to our children and to the communities which foster them. This motion is intended to address capital funding potential, with specific reference to the preliminary work done on playground infrastructure such as drainage and any construction related to groundwork preparation that accompanies new elementary schools. We are committed to investing in our families and communities, and this motion provides this government with another avenue to further illustrate this.

Mr. Speaker, our communities face numerous challenges as they work to build needed playground spaces. Let me begin by highlighting a few examples of elementary schools that are currently trying to either build or complete their playgrounds. Bessie Nichols school is a state-of-the-art school with some of the best teachers and passionate parents that exist in our province. However, they too are in their second year of having kids make use of an empty field instead of experiencing the benefits that come with constructive playgrounds. Even more, we are tapping

out the parents and volunteers, who are reaching into every pocket possible to scrape together half a million dollars to help their kids play.

These are concrete, real cases, Mr. Speaker, of schools that are struggling to provide even the most basic playground infrastructure to their communities, their families, and their children. These difficult situations are not the result of a lack of effort or from a lack of commitment. The partnerships formed by various community leagues, parent councils, and municipal governments work hard to acquire these facilities for their schools. The long hours they devote to these initiatives are mainly volunteer hours, important hours of self-sacrifice made by mothers and fathers, by single parents, and by youth leaders. These are hours that could be spent with their loved ones or spent earning more income, engaging in a personal passion or a family pastime.

Mr. Speaker, these are long volunteer hours that come after a hard day at work, after the kids have been put to bed, and otherwise in spare time and on weekends. Instead, these mothers and fathers choose to work on behalf of their neighbours. Instead, these parents assume responsibility for improving their communities. Instead, these youth leaders feel obliged to enhance the educational opportunities of our children and recreational experiences of our families.

Motion 516 provides opportunity for different levels of government and organizations to work collaboratively to respond to community needs. This motion seeks to nudge these playground initiatives forward by increasing the funding avenues available to them. Exploring the feasibility of funding preliminary work on new playgrounds would literally help these initiatives off the ground by aiding them in groundwork preparation, by helping them drain excess water, by helping them fill holes in the ground, and by helping them with the principal landscaping. It would allow these parent councils to focus on the main challenge behind building playgrounds; namely, procuring, installing, and maintaining the equipment itself.

It is no secret how expensive adequate and safe playground equipment is, and our communities are bound by duty to make these playgrounds as safe as possible. The costs of modern playgrounds can range from \$250,000 to \$350,000. Some playgrounds even run as high as \$500,000. These are figures that refer to equipment purchase and installation only, not to the other costs associated with ongoing inspection, maintenance, and liability insurance. These are staggering numbers for any school, Mr. Speaker, and for the respective community leagues and parent councils. These are costs that must be met through fundraising efforts, and the burden of most of these efforts rests on the shoulders of community volunteers despite the generous grants and support programs available to them through different levels of government.

Aside from the need for the school playgrounds, many current playgrounds are at the end of their life cycle and depend on parent groups to raise the needed funds to replace them. If the money is not raised, Mr. Speaker, there is a real possibility that these school boards will have to remove them, and in turn students would have to make do with a recess or weekend that does not include swinging, sliding, or climbing.

Since school boards do not fund playgrounds, parent groups apply for grants, cold-call corporations, and engage their neighbours for cash or in-kind donations. It's a difficult task without a doubt, and each setback they encounter I know personally is difficult to bear. But these parents and volunteers persevere, and they do this because they unite under a shared goal. A playground is just too important to lose. A playground is too important not to be built. Motion 516 asks us to recognize this and to consider

another way that we may assist these communities in building places for our children and families.

Mr. Speaker, these kinds of outdoor community spaces are vital for families and children. The preliminary work that is required to make these new playgrounds possible is not just about cost; it's about an opportunity to continue our important work of building communities and creating lasting legacies for our children's schools. This motion supports healthy and active lifestyles and wants to make a tangible difference in our children's quality of life.

I ask all hon. members to take an interest in this debate and consider fully the advantages of supporting the initiative proposed by Motion 516. Please, hon. members, help our kids play. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

The hon. Member for Chestermere-Rocky View instead.

Mr. McAllister: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will take that comparison any day. The Member for Calgary-Shaw is a good member to be compared to.

I thank the member across for bringing this motion forward. It's all about health in here today it seems, for our kids, and I can't think of a better discussion. I would like to say right up front that, you know, I'll have no problem supporting the premise that it's brought forward on, but it's important that we reiterate that the member said: be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to explore the feasibility of providing funding for preliminary work on school playgrounds such as drainage and for basic playground equipment such as a swing or a slide as part of the capital funding for any new school facilities that include grade levels from kindergarten to grade 6.

Mr. Speaker, not one of us in here, I think, would question the fact that our children ought to have a playground at their school, particularly at the elementary age, grades 1 through 6 or K through 6. We should do everything we can. I think the questions today are: how do we make that possible, how do we fund that, who contributes, and how much is the government's responsibility?

The motion is to explore the feasibility of providing the funding for infrastructure and basic equipment. In this respect we are simply examining the issue at this point is my understanding. This is a good thing. I would support that. But I would like to make a few points, Mr. Speaker. Again, the member bringing the motion forward made a few of them that I would like to add to and maybe even raise in our own way here.

The Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta School Councils' Association have both called for basic funding of playground equipment, so it's good to see this motion forwarded for discussion in the Legislature and for consideration by the government. Those two groups do a great job representing our kids and our parents, and clearly it's on their radar, so I think it's good that the 87 of us have a chance to discuss the issue as well. While this isn't a stamp of approval from my standpoint, I would like to mention for those not aware that British Columbia has recently taken steps to fund playgrounds for schools from the time those schools are built. It is to support the principle that a healthy education system includes outdoor and active play for children.

Technology, we know, is a great thing, and many of us would probably admit to the fact that our kids can run our devices, our technology, a lot better than we can. At the same time parents and educators would probably all agree that sometimes their kids are spending a little bit too much time with their technology and a little bit too much time inside with electronics. Parents, decision-makers, governments, researchers all over this globe are looking at

ways to encourage kids to get outside, to run around and use their imaginations. The Canadian physical activity guidelines recommend that children get at least 60 minutes of exercise per day. I wonder if we would all take a guess as to what percentage of kids actually get that. I wonder what we would all guess in this Assembly. You know, Mr. Speaker, 7 per cent of children and youth are getting that. Seven per cent.

5:10

Now, making sure that our school facilities help and encourage this number to rise is vital, obviously, for the physical and mental health of our kids. For that reason I think examining how we deliver facilities like playgrounds to families is very important. On the other hand, the need for school buildings in this province is severe. Money is a big issue right now in the province of Alberta. All we need to do is go back to the debate in here, the very robust debate that we had Thursday afternoon and in the previous couple of weeks on Alberta's finances. We need to know that the addition of playgrounds at this time does not result in more communities without schools. I'm very interested in looking more at it, getting a real sense of what will be involved, what the total costs would be, what the efficiencies are, and how we can eliminate redundancies, what can be found on the subject.

We did talk last week in question period about the promise to build 50 schools and renovate 70 schools this term. The last thing we want to see, Mr. Speaker, is money taken from that commitment and put into other areas. I think most of our educators would agree that they would rather see the money we have going towards schools that desperately need modulars, et cetera, et cetera. That's taking nothing away from the importance of playgrounds, but I do feel it's imperative that we raise that point and make sure that that money we've committed to putting kids in schools remains there because we have a backlog in many of our constituencies around this province.

I know that the provincial government already contributes substantially to playgrounds across Alberta. I believe we need more information, frankly, about the total contribution of the province to playgrounds through all grants and all channels so we can get a sense of what money may be saved. We may be able to save money here if basic playgrounds were built along with the schools or if the infrastructure for playgrounds like drainage, as the hon. member said when he brought forward this motion, was installed at the time that the school was built. If there are multiple ways that the province is directly and indirectly funding the same playground, then we need to look at how we can streamline that.

Of note on the subject of the playgrounds, I don't think it's just me that finds the cost of a playground has gone up astronomically somehow in the last while. There may be a legitimate reason for it – there may be somebody more qualified to speak to it than I am, and I'd be interested to hear it – but it sure seems like, you know, a quarter of a million dollars or a half a million dollars for playgrounds is getting way up there in the cost. I think we should look at ways without compromising safety one iota on how to bring that cost down, not putting our kids at risk by putting in structures that aren't safe and aren't passing safety standards. But I would hope that we would all agree that it sure does seem pricey to put up a playground at a school.

Fairness and equality are things that I have heard raised from different boards as I travel around and talk about this issue. We know that our communities, our neighbourhoods are not all the same. Some are, you know, very wealthy and have access to fundraising opportunities that other neighbourhoods do not. We wouldn't want to see anybody left behind by any new system that we put in place or anything that we came up with from a govern-

ment standpoint to provide assistance, and at the same time I don't think we would want to punish any community for having the wherewithal to provide and be able to give their kids that advantage.

Now, through our education system the Education minister and previous Education ministers I know have worked hard to smooth out some of these inequities when it comes to educational resources. I think we need to have a discussion about whether playground equipment should be included under this principle as well, and if it is, something tells me that we have the ability to figure out how best that we might be able to do this going forward.

Having said all of this, there are some good things about the community involvement and the community-led projects that we have, and, boy, do we have engaged parents in this province. Again, travelling around as the Education advocate, Mr. Speaker, you see numerous examples of how parents are contributing in communities and how they're making a difference. These projects get community members working together toward a shared goal. There's something special, which likely doesn't happen as much as it used to. We want to make sure that we're still making room to incorporate exciting new ideas that people want to try in their own communities. Albertans benefit, I think, from the ideas of their neighbours, and when they have input in their communities, we are all better off on that front. Whether it's a bake sale, a community fair, or what have you, parents getting involved is always a good thing. A community getting involved is always a good thing. The hard work that fundraisers do in these communities saves municipal and provincial government funds, which can be directed elsewhere.

As a classic example, I had a hot date this last weekend. It was not with my wife. I'm going to confess to you right now, Mr. Speaker, yours truly, that it was with my seven-year-old daughter, Ally Grace. Friday night – and after a very long week in here I hope that we all had that time with our kids – we went out to the Langdon Field House and watched the movie *Epic* on the big screen for date night. It was a great time. You know, the popcorn was popping, and we had a treat that night, and I know Allie loved the Crush pop that she was able to enjoy and all the kids. There were tens of them around there; I don't know how many in total. The point of the story is that the event was a fundraiser for a school playground. It was the community getting together and bringing kids and families together and raising a little money while they were at it. I was happy to support it and to leave a couple of tips wherever I could, financially, of course, so that they might meet their goal.

I think Motion 516 is written in a such a way that all of these concerns will be considered, and I look forward to some of these questions being answered.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by Strathcona-Sherwood Park.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 516. I'd like to speak in favour of this motion and want to thank the member for Edmonton-South West for bringing forward the motion.

You know, I would advocate that this motion doesn't go far enough. I think it's important that the preliminary work for school playgrounds is included. As an educator myself, Mr. Speaker, I find it quite unfathomable how the government builds these structures and then says: "Okay, community. You fund raise for the playground." Now, I will acknowledge that the government of Alberta, through some of its grants, does help out schools and communities with affording playgrounds. The fact of the matter is

that for a playground to be built today, it often costs over and above \$250,000, which is a very heavy and hefty sum for communities to raise.

I know the hon. member from the other side had mentioned how busy families are and how they're pulled in different directions, and for a community to afford and to raise the sum of \$200,000 to \$300,000 is quite significant. Again, it's worth noting, Mr. Speaker, that that's all done by volunteer labour.

What I wanted to speak of to urge the government members to support this motion is the value of play and the significant impact that recreation and play have on our children. I think, you know, that when we look at wanting to encourage Albertans to be active and remain active, play is a very fundamental part of that. If schools do not have the facilities or the equipment to encourage that, first of all, then what message are we sending to our children, that we believe in building schools for our kids, but we don't believe in the importance of being active and participating in recreation?

I've often wondered and have had many constituents ask me, Mr. Speaker: why aren't playgrounds and sports fields and those types of facilities part of the government's proposals or part of the package when they erect new schools? You know, that's a very, very valid question. I know that for myself and my colleagues in the Alberta NDP caucus we believe strongly that these facilities should be part of a school facility and those costs covered by the government.

5:20

Now, I'd love to address, you know, where these dollars are going to come from because I'm sure the minister of Treasury Board and Finance is wondering with all of the schools being built: where do those dollars come from? Mr. Speaker, really, it's a three-pronged answer to this. I think, first and foremost, something that the Alberta NDP has been calling for for decades is a look at and an adjustment of our royalty regime within the province.

You know, the fact of the matter is that the royalty rates in this province are lower than any other jurisdiction in North America, unnecessarily low to the point where the people who are getting shortchanged are really Albertans. I can appreciate the fact that we need to have a competitive environment with our royalties to encourage industry; however, the incentives that were brought into the province back when Mr. Lougheed was Premier, in the '70s, do not necessarily need to be in place today. Giving large corporations handouts and corporate welfare is simply unnecessary. I do believe that it is possible to raise our royalties to a rate that is still competitive, still ahead of other jurisdictions, yet there is a buffer in there. Again, Albertans are the ones who are missing out on this. This would address and bring millions of dollars into the government coffers, which could help to afford to pay for playgrounds for new schools.

The second thing that should be addressed – and I'd almost like to reverse the order – is, again, looking at cleaning up some of the mismanagement and wasted dollars that this government has. I think, you know, prime examples are the layers of bureaucracy and overpaid upper-end managers when we look at AHS. I find it fascinating that when the minister did talk about eliminating the 99 manager positions, they weren't in fact eliminated; they were merely shuffled and placed under different titles. To my knowledge all 99 of those managers are still working for AHS, just under different titles and positions.

The third way, Mr. Speaker, is to look at addressing our corporate tax structure within this province. Again, there is room to move to where we would be competitive and on the same footing

as our neighbours. Increasing our corporate tax rate even slightly would bring in a significant amount of revenue.

Actually, I have a fourth way to bring in more dollars to be able to afford playgrounds like this, Mr. Speaker, or at least the preliminary work on playgrounds, and that's for the Alberta government to really take a long, hard look at a progressive income tax structure for the province.

Now, I'm sure there are some members that would love to jump to their feet to say that the flat tax here in Alberta saves every Albertan dollars, but the fact of the matter is that, no, it does not. There have been countless studies done comparing a base salary of an Alberta household of, let's say, \$100,000 to \$120,000, and the amount of tax that is paid in this province versus a household in the province of British Columbia or Ontario, where there is a progressive income tax system, Mr. Speaker. The reality is that families in Alberta that earn up to \$120,000 in a household actually pay more taxes than families in B.C. or Ontario. So a progressive income tax structure could be such that you are passing on more savings to middle-income families, to average Albertans, where, yes, your top earners of \$250,000, \$500,000, or over a million dollars a year are being taxed harder than families bringing in \$50,000 to, like I said, \$120,000. But that alone would bring more dollars into the government coffers, and at the same time, it would actually save many, many Alberta families on what they're actually currently paying.

You know, Mr. Speaker, time and time again my frustration has been that this government refuses to address those four issues that I've just outlined, from the mismanagement of current dollars – and, I mean, I haven't even gotten into the wasted \$1.6 billion in carbon capture and storage, a technology that's not even proven yet. Their projected amount is \$2 billion. We'll see if they end up spending the full \$2 billion. But between cleaning up the mismanagement of dollars, addressing our corporate income tax, our personal income tax, and our royalty regime, there would be more than enough dollars in the government coffers to ensure that no school gets built without a playground, and I'm talking from A to Z.

We could also do things like pass savings on to Albertans. We could save in our heritage savings account. We could look at truly diversifying the economy. I'd love to get the government's ear to look at investing in solar – I find it shameful that the province of Alberta gets more sunlight hours than any other province, yet we're not doing more to invest in that energy – investing in our health care system and in our education system to ensure that we have enough schools, that our class sizes are reduced, and investing in the future of this province.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's motion bringing this forward. I am in support of this. Like I said, I wish they would take it a step further, but for a first step I applaud the member and encourage all members to support this as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park, followed by St. Albert.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to speak to Motion 516, proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West. His commitment to his daughters and all of our province's children is evident with this proposed motion as he strives to provide our youth with safe places to grow and be active. Motion 516 urges the government to explore the feasibility of providing funding for preliminary playground work at any new school facilities that instruct elementary students.

Mr. Speaker, we all know the challenge our province faced in regard to this summer's unprecedented floods. The resilience Albertans showed is what kept us strong and gave us all the ability to unite and rebuild. We can't afford to cut out the essential infrastructure projects our province needs like schools and roads. Our government has committed to keep building our province so that our youth can continue to enjoy the high quality of life they deserve. Motion 516 aligns with the government's commitment to establish healthy communities and reinforces our government's unwavering dedication to our youth, to our future. Protecting our children's well-being and fostering their education will help ensure that Alberta's future entrepreneurs, future thinkers, and future leaders develop in a province that will make their ambitions and dreams a reality.

Of course, all members of this House know that learning starts from the moment we're born and that we never stop learning. With the help of our loved ones we learn how to say our first words, how to walk. As we enter school, we learn how to become engaged social individuals. Nowhere is this more evident than on the playground, Mr. Speaker, where the imaginations of our young citizens are developed and fostered. The Public Health Agency of Canada, for instance, lists several benefits of encouraging our children to be active at a very young age. They include the opportunities for socializing, increased concentration, better academic scores, a strong heart and bones, healthier muscles, and improved self-esteem. Given the supporting evidence of encouraging our youth to become more active, Motion 516 could be seen as a component of our government's commitment to the well-being of our children.

Some of us might not be aware of the logistics that go into planning and developing and administering the building of playgrounds. There's a lot that goes on beforehand. Playgrounds are traditionally developed on municipal lands and in some cases fully funded, inspected, and maintained by that municipality. Typically the costs associated with building a playground from start to finish can average anywhere between \$250,000 and \$500,000. I know one of the hon. members across talked about the cost of playgrounds. They are expensive, but they're also a lot more elaborate than the playgrounds that some of us had to play on when we were kids, and I think that's a good thing.

Mr. Speaker, there's also ongoing maintenance and inspection costs for these playgrounds, to keep them operating and to keep them safe. Sometimes partnerships between community leagues, parent councils, and municipalities are required to offset these huge costs. The province is not always involved in the construction and upkeep of playgrounds. To put things in perspective, parent councils rely heavily on capital generated through fundraising. I think we've all seen some of our parent councils and what a great job they do of fundraising and getting matching grants and so on to build these playgrounds. We can only imagine how many bake sales and bottle drives and charity auctions it takes just to offset part of the cost that's involved.

5:30

Of course, the funding for community-based initiatives is also administered through the Alberta lottery fund. The grants are awarded to a number of construction projects besides playgrounds. We all know that these funds tend to run out and that not all the requests can be met.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 516 could help mobilize communities who may not have the resources to fund outdoor spaces for our kids. For instance, just having the ground dug up, filled in, and ready for this initial structure would mean a lot for a given project. When a playground is finally completed, think of all the benefits

the space would have for its community's children. It's definitely something that we can all be proud of.

I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West for this motion and commend him for allowing us to have a discussion on a very important initiative that affects the youngest of Albertans, and I would urge our members to support his motion. I think it's a step in the right direction to ensure that all of our kids have somewhere to play and enjoy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre and Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Khan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak to Motion 516 brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West. I would like to commend this member for his ongoing dedication to building strong communities for Albertans, particularly for this province's young people. I know that this member has school-age children himself and takes this issue to heart. I, too, have children who are school-aged and growing up far too fast, and I've witnessed first-hand the value of their time spent in the schoolyard and the recreation value and social interaction value that my children have enjoyed first-hand in the blessed playgrounds that they enjoy at their schools.

This motion seeks to encourage investment in new school facilities and targets basic school recreational infrastructure for funding. Mr. Speaker, as many have mentioned before me, these costs are exorbitant. The school grounds, average school grounds, can cost anywhere from a quarter of a million to half a million dollars, and I share the wonder with a number of my colleagues in the House that this is truly a large expenditure. We see that these expenses quite often are borne by the community groups and the families and parents of school-age children who wish to develop or redevelop playgrounds for their schools and for their community.

Community league organizations and volunteer groups work tirelessly to raise these additional funds to ensure that their children and families have a safe environment to play. In addition to local funds raised, additional costs may be covered through government grants like our Alberta community initiatives program. Mr. Speaker, it's programs like these that exemplify this government's unwavering commitment to Alberta's communities, a steadfast commitment to building Alberta.

As we move forward with the debate on this topic, it's important to look at the best practices from other jurisdictions across Canada. In 2011 our neighbours to the west, in B.C., announced \$4 billion in funding for playgrounds and upgrades for existing structures. The funding was available for constructing 44 new playgrounds and upgrading a hundred more. Prior to this announcement the B.C. government allocated funding to complete 83 new and replacement school playgrounds. As part of this initiative funding was committed to school capital and maintenance projects, which included school playgrounds throughout B.C.

In Saskatchewan – and congratulations to our friends in Saskatchewan for surely yesterday was one of their finest days in recent history – playgrounds are financed through the community initiatives fund, specifically through the community vitality program.

In Manitoba nonprofit community organizations can receive funding and planning assistance through the community places program. Projects that are eligible for funding through the program are ones that provide sustainable recreation and wellness benefits to communities. Playgrounds are an important part of this initiative. The community places program is a new and innovative

initiative for the Manitoba government as of 2013. Announced in 2012, the program has approved over \$104 million in grants to support upwards of 6,800 community construction projects across the province.

Mr. Speaker, as a part of Budget 2013 this government demonstrated its dedication to essential infrastructure like schools and roads. Just recently our Premier announced the building of 19 new schools for more than 13,000 students in nine Alberta communities, including my home constituency of St. Albert. These projects are part of a large commitment to build 50 new schools and modernize 70 more here in Alberta. As we continue to build these schools, I look forward to witnessing the numerous playgrounds that will begin to blossom as part of fostering safe play spaces for our children and families to enjoy. Motion 516 could help spur local community organizations to begin fundraising to cover costs associated with playgrounds.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West for bringing this very important motion forward and for his commitment to building Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, followed by Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville and Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to support this motion. I want to focus on some of the key provisions in the motion that allow me to do this. The motion talks about looking at the feasibility of providing funding. Now, for a first-grader, a second-grader, or a third-grader I don't know of anything more important in elementary school than recess, and that's really how they look at it. As was mentioned earlier by some of the other members of this House, education is more than just the classroom. It is about the health and well-being of these young people also. If they're in a good frame of mind, which is well nourished and exercised, they have the ability to learn better, easier. There are numerous studies that support that.

An Hon. Member: A lot of MLAs like recess, too.

Mr. Anglin: And MLAs like recesses, too. That's just been pointed out to me, Mr. Speaker.

The fundamental value of looking – because there is a problem in this province. Wealthy communities generally do not have as difficult a time raising funds for playgrounds. The poorer communities, while they may get a new school – and by the way, I don't know of any community that gets a school replaced in anything less than 30 years. Many are 40 years and 50 years. So dealing with an elementary school is not something that is routinely done. We are growing as a province, and we will build more schools as we grow as a province, but that's a condition of our economy, and that will happen. To go four or five years for some of these communities to try to raise funds for a playground is an injustice to those young people who need a playground at that level in the first, second, third grades, for them to have to be forced to wait.

What I like about this motion and the reason I'm going to support this motion and ask my colleagues to support it is that it talks about the feasibility. We're not asking the government to forgo building a school because playgrounds cost too much. If we really are open to the feasibility and get creative, there are all sorts of opportunities to save money and still get the job done. I truly believe that because there isn't a playground that I know of that doesn't get built without some sort of grant or matching grant that comes either from the lottery system or anywhere else that

government can be creative, and that's the very point. There are all these possibilities that we can take that would make it feasible and even more feasible to actually save money in the long run. And I think we have the ability to do both.

For that, I will support this motion. I ask my colleagues to support this motion. I just want to state for the record that we're not looking to spend more money. What we're looking to do is be more efficient with the money that we have.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, followed by Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Fenske: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise today to speak to Motion 516, the goal of which is to encourage the establishment of capital funding for basic playground infrastructure and equipment on the grounds that accompany new elementary schools. I'd like to thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West for bringing forward this motion.

5:40

Mr. Speaker, playgrounds are an essential part of the elementary school experience, as we've heard from many members today. They give children the chance to socialize with their peers and develop lifelong friendships. The intent of the motion is to recognize the growing costs associated with building new playgrounds, which can cost anywhere from \$250,000 to \$500,000. It seeks to help alleviate some of the costs for a variety of groups and organizations, including parent councils and community leagues.

Mr. Speaker, one of our government's priorities is investing in families and communities. Our children need to thrive in all facets of their lives, and contributing funds to preliminary work on playgrounds is one way we can help them reach their full potential. Currently our government provides funding to nonprofit and school groups for playgrounds through a variety of grant programs such as those available through Alberta Culture, including the community facility enhancement program and the community initiatives program.

The community facility enhancement program, or CFEP, was established to assist in fostering the unique characteristics of Alberta's communities. The intention of the program is to reinvest revenues generated from provincial lotteries in communities and to empower local citizens and community organizations to work together in responding to local needs.

Mr. Speaker, successful applicants are given up to \$125,000 for construction, renovation, or redevelopment of community public use facilities, including playgrounds. In 2011-2012 over \$4.5 million in CFEP grants were provided to 74 playground projects. The grants ranged from \$1,597 to \$250,000, and 47 of them were specifically for playgrounds at school sites.

The community initiatives program, or CIP, provides funds to enhance and enrich community initiatives throughout Alberta and is intended to reinvest revenues generated from provincial lotteries in our communities. Similarly to CFEP, the goal of CIP is to empower local citizens and community organizations to work together and respond to local needs.

There are several different types of grants available from the CIP that may be used for the development of school facilities, including playgrounds. The first type of grant, Mr. Speaker, is a project-based grant, which provides financial assistance of up to \$75,000 for community organizations to purchase equipment

within Alberta. Another type of grant is a community operating grant, which provides up to \$75,000 for financial assistance to registered nonprofit organizations in Alberta to enhance the organization's ability to operate and deliver services to the community. Both of these grants are suitable for supporting the development of school facilities, including playgrounds.

Along with government grants funding for playgrounds is also available through a variety of nonprofit and community support initiatives. As one of Alberta's longest serving charities, the mission of the Children's Ability Fund is to provide funding to enhance the independence of persons with disabilities throughout northern Alberta by providing funding for specialized equipment. Providing grants to organizations such as the Children's Ability Fund illustrates our government's commitment to investing in all of Alberta's families and communities regardless of ability or disability.

However, Mr. Speaker, not all requests can be met through these initiatives, and as you can see, resources are limited and funding through these initiatives is not solely for playground structures. That being said, this past September a pilot project at the Michael Strembitsky school saw the government contribute \$350,000 towards the \$500,000 cost of a playground. The project at Michael Strembitsky school is an example of what can be achieved when different levels of government and organizations work collaboratively to respond to community needs. I have examples in my constituency where the parents at C.W. Sears and l'école Parc elementary partnered with community and industry and the province to build the so-needed playgrounds.

The establishment of capital funding for basic playground infrastructure as proposed by Motion 516 would aid community leagues, parent councils, and municipal governments in ensuring that children have a safe, fun place to play that can be used during and after school. Once again, I would like to thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West for bringing forward this motion – this motion. Sorry.

An Hon. Member: This emotional motion.

Ms Fenske: It's emotional.

His commitment to educational causes, the safety of our communities, and the health of his and our children should not be overlooked.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it is an emotional subject, I must admit. Our kids' health, our kids' ability to express themselves physically and socially with others is a critical issue and a critical part of health as well as education.

I want to also congratulate the Member for Edmonton-South West on Motion 516, urging the government to explore the feasibility of providing funding for preliminary work on school playgrounds and basic playground equipment from kindergarten to grade 6. I'm a bit puzzled by why we would restrict it to those ages. I think it's a wonderful initiative that should cover all age groups and all schools, and I think the need for and the importance of physical activity doesn't lessen after the elementary years. In fact, perhaps it even grows larger as young people deal with more and more distractions, more and more of what one might call temptations that pull people into unhealthy habits and behaviours and social conditions. So I would encourage a friendly amendment

to the motion to include all school ages, and the member can take that under advisement.

I'm curious to know just how far this is intended to go. It's clear to me that planning a school without a playground is a contradiction, shall I say. All school gatherings, focused as they are on academic and classroom-based learning, need to be enhanced, balanced, complemented by outdoor and physical activity. In my view, it should be a given in all schools that very serious attention be given to the outdoor aspects of children's education and activity, and I would hope that funding through the public purse would be available for this. This is a natural and an important element of all education systems, and I'm a bit surprised that it has to be identified very specifically and highlighted as a consistent part of any infrastructure planning for our children's education. Whether it's from preschool or through to grade 12, it's clearly a fundamental of a healthy and well-educated society.

I fully support the motion and, again, would encourage the member to look at expanding the scope of it. This is clearly an investment. One of the best investments we can make is in our children, and the physical and social dimensions of their education occur often outside the classroom.

I'm, like others, a bit puzzled by the lottery funds. They're making significant contributions, of course, to various extensions of our education system and community development through the community facility enhancement program and the community improvement projects that are identified. It's a reminder, I guess, that for many of us the allocation of these lottery funds is still a mystery and raises, I think, not a few questions in our constituencies about who gets it and who doesn't and what the criteria are for these lottery funds and whether we couldn't make it more public, more clear what the criteria for funding are, how some projects get funded and not others, again, to ensure transparency, to ensure accountability for public funds, and to ensure that decisions are not based on political connections and political benefit.

So I would encourage this government to look at their lottery funds as an important way to ensure that some of what they consider extra – and I don't consider playgrounds an extra in our school system, but if this government is going to provide lottery funds to community, school, and other projects, it's incumbent on them to show and make public the criteria for these funds and how the decisions are being made week to week.

5:50

Certainly, some of the volunteer organizations and nonprofit organizations are asking me the question: why was it that I didn't get funded and somebody else did? I have no way of answering that. It appears that some MLAs have more control over these funds than others. I again have no way of answering questions from groups, including school groups, that want to know about funding their playground, on how it was that decisions were made either to fund it or not to fund it. There's an opportunity to present more openness around the disbursement of these funds.

That having been said, Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to support this motion. It's an important one for the long-term well-being of all of us. I think that for many parents, especially in the lower income areas – there has to be a priority that this motion and potentially a bill that might follow be applied for the districts that are less fortunate than others, to clearly make it a priority for those areas of the province, those communities that have the least financial ability to provide these extras through their parents, through fundraising or through personal donations.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'll take my seat. I very much support this motion.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, are there any other members who wish to speak?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West to close debate.

Mr. Jeneroux: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to just quickly address the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View's friendly amendment. Reading the motion, specifically right at the end, it says: "as part of the capital funding for any new school facilities that include grade levels from kindergarten to grade 6." It doesn't necessarily restrict it to those grades. Those are the grades that, in my experience, spend most of the time on the playgrounds. We often build schools which are kindergarten to grade 9 as well. This would encompass those grades also.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, Motion 516 asks us to consider the feasibility of providing funding for preliminary work on new playground infrastructure. In short, it would be another way to help our communities overcome the costs that are causing many delays in getting these playgrounds built, costs associated with initial playground servicing, landscaping, paving, labour, and materials.

As we know how important playgrounds are to communities and to our children, we also recognize the reality that resources are finite. Our community leagues, our volunteers, and our parent councils need help moving these initiatives forward. There is no shortage of effort from these groups. They show an unwavering sense of commitment and self-sacrifice for their schools, their families, and their communities. The question is not one of commitment, Mr. Speaker; it's one of funding availability. It's one that has practical consequences for our ideas about fairness and equity.

Because such large fundraising efforts are needed to build playgrounds, there is potential that some communities find themselves at a disadvantage. If they are not able to co-ordinate volunteers or raise funds for such a project, then their children and their families are also at a disadvantage. The ability to provide funding for preliminary work on playgrounds will help strengthen the determination of these communities and encourage them to see their hard efforts through to the end.

So as I conclude debate on Motion 516, I would like to remind all members that the intention here is focused on the future. It is about helping build something with longevity. It is about acknowledging and recognizing the importance that playgrounds have on our children's social development and in our families' lives. I applaud our government's efforts and our ongoing commitment to schools. This is yet another opportunity to build on this legacy. As Albertans we are proud of our strong economy and unshakeable belief that we can do anything we put our minds to. We know that through collaborating with our community partners, we can build stronger, more resilient, and sustainable communities for future generations to come.

I would again like to thank all hon. members who participated in the debate on Motion 516 and urge each of you to vote in favour of it so we can help our kids play.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 516 carried]

Mr. Campbell: Mr. Speaker, seeing that it's almost 6 o'clock, I would suggest that we adjourn until 7:30 tonight.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:55 p.m.]

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