



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday morning, March 14, 2017

Day 7

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 29th Legislature

Third Session

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Fitzpatrick, Maria M., Lethbridge-East (ND)
Fraser, Rick, Calgary-South East (PC)
Ganley, Hon. Kathleen T., Calgary-Buffalo (ND)
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Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (ND),
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Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (ND)
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Party standings:

New Democrat: 55 Wildrose: 22 Progressive Conservative: 8 Alberta Liberal: 1 Alberta Party: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

10 a.m.

Tuesday, March 14, 2017

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Please bow your heads. Let us reflect, each in our own way. Allow us to find solutions and resolve in our debate, acknowledging that conflict, if dealt with respectfully, will often lead to a resolution.

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Ms Jansen moved, seconded by Ms Miller, that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois Mitchell, CM, AOE, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

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

[Adjourned debate March 9: Ms Ganley]

The Speaker: Would anyone else like to speak to the Lieutenant Governor's speech? Lethbridge-East.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Thank you. I'm very pleased to stand today to respond to the Speech from the Throne by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor Lois Mitchell. I will try to focus my comments on a few things that were noted in the speech. I think that I will begin with the statements about strong public health care and education systems. Our government will build on its plan to protect and enhance health care and education. I know that things are not yet perfect. My objective as the MLA for Lethbridge-East is to continue to strive for perfection as we move forward in all of our legislation.

There have been issues identified which require action, and they are being addressed step by step as we go. In Lethbridge there are some challenges with triaging in emergency and pressure focused within the psychiatric area. Despite having such issues, we are working to address those, and every day we are working on improving our services and access to those services. We are also addressing the needs within our infrastructure. I thank with all my heart the nurses, doctors, cleaners, LPNs, lab technicians, teachers, aides, principals, administration, school boards, our ministers of Health and Education, and every one of you who makes our health care and education systems work.

In my community the new wing of the Chinook regional hospital was completed under our watch. Parents have come to me and thanked me and our government for not cutting funds to the hospital and for completing the new facilities that now house the incredible neonatal unit so that the facilities were there when their baby was born, where they needed them.

I am truly grateful for the cancer centre in Calgary, which services southern Alberta.

I am so pleased that we will make life better for vulnerable Albertans by the utilization of nurse practitioners on the front lines

to care for homeless women and youth in Calgary and Edmonton and eventually, I hope, in Lethbridge.

The Minister of Education asked that I attend the opening of a school close to my home in north Lethbridge and another in my neighbouring community of Coaldale during this past year. What a privilege it was to have represented him at these events and to see the excitement in the eyes of the students, their parents, and their teachers to be in and to be able to utilize such beautiful, state-of-the-art, functional facilities.

I was asked to be a member of the all-party Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention. I take that work very seriously. My colleagues and I are focused on fixing the problems that have been identified so that our children can be protected. I am not focused on blaming. We are working in what I believe is a collaborative manner, using consensus decision-making. I feel that we are moving forward in a positive manner, which is what needs to happen to make our efforts a success.

I have advocated on behalf of my constituents and many from other constituencies to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities, and I am happy that this government is responding. Work is being done to provide timelier and more accessible services, a small step forward. I will continue to advocate on their behalf to further advance this file.

As you know, I've previously spoken to the issue of domestic violence and to a lack of equity for women. Since giving my statement, thousands of women and some men have contacted me about their particular issues around domestic violence and inequity. I listen and advocate on their behalf throughout our ministries when needed and when requested. It is almost overwhelming to see how much work needs to be done, but this pales in comparison to how overwhelming it is for those who are being victimized. We can't do everything all at once, as much as I would like to, so I guess I'll have to run in two more elections to make that happen. We and myself in particular are not daunted by what is required to be done, so we will continue to build on the work done through Bill 204. In this session we've introduced Bill 2, An Act to Remove Barriers for Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence. I expect that I will be speaking on that bill in the next few days.

I'm really proud of our government and its support of communities. In Lethbridge we are the recent recipient of the largest private investment ever, \$350 million, with the announcement of the Cavendish farm project. When the city contacted me about six or seven months before the project was actually announced, I was thrilled to engage our government in the project and to solicit support.

Our government also supported the city and the county of Lethbridge in their Asian trade mission with letters of introduction and support from our offices in Asia. This resulted in a very positive response throughout the mission.

It would be lax of me if I did not speak about creating better conditions for our communities across Alberta, in particular the protection of our extraordinary natural heritage. I believe this to be an essential direction for our government to take.

I say this following two visits to the Castle Mountain wildlife area. I visited the area with the Oldman Watershed Council in the fall of 2015 and again in the summer of 2016. We visited a few of the same sites on both trips. I was witness to both the beauty and the magnitude of this area. While there in the fall, I saw a number of people random camping at campsites that were set in the woods. There were many, many deep tire tracks into the site for about 400 or 500 metres from the roadway. We walked through the woods to the creek. In some places barriers were laid down and some boulders and fallen trees to deter the crossing of the stream. I saw where diamond willow saplings were planted to deter anyone from

crossing the stream in vulnerable areas and areas where there were bridges available to cross without disturbing the stream.

10:10

During the summer excursion to the same area the ruts in the drive to the camping in the wooded area were greater and deeper. We again walked through the woods and down to the creek, but now I was seeing tire marks and deep ruts along the banks of the creek and then up the bank on the other side. I saw areas destroyed where barriers had been set up to protect the areas of the creek that were vulnerable, and where the diamond willow saplings had been planted, they too were destroyed. It was so sad to see, especially when there was a bridge so close by. I've spoken to a few people who are part of quad groups who tell me that everyone does not behave like this. They, too, are upset with those that do, and it ruins it for everyone.

I've also spoken to a number of random campers who are very careful to leave their campsites with no visible evidence that they were there when they leave. They have complained to me that the places where they have camped for years are being damaged by other groups who do not respect nature, make so much noise during the weekend that they make camping feel like they are still in the city, not what they expect when wanting to enjoy the tranquility of nature. I am proud of my government, that we have taken action and asked for public input before the final decisions are made.

I thank Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor Lois Mitchell for a throne speech which clearly lays out a positive path forward. Thank you.

The Speaker: Any questions or comments under 29(2)(a)?

Ms McKittrick: I know that the Member for Lethbridge-East is a passionate advocate for her community of Lethbridge and for the surrounding areas. I was just wondering: what are the most important things that she found in the throne speech that are going to empower her community and provide economic development for her community?

Ms Fitzpatrick: I think that within the throne speech, as I said, it was clearly laid out what the path forward would be, and I have to say that everything in the throne speech impacts my community. I believe that Lethbridge is an incredibly vibrant community. I've said in this House many times that I love Lethbridge, and I love it because of the community, because of the caring, wonderful people that are there. Despite the fact that sometimes we disagree about things, they care about our community.

They understand the impact of protecting our water supply. We're in the middle of the Palliser Triangle, which is a drought area, and they do understand that protecting the Castle area actually protects our watershed. If we don't have trees in the ground to hold that moisture in the mountains, we're not going to have water to drink in our community, and it's also going to probably end up flooding the Calgary area. So we recognize how important that is.

I think the throne speech overall really speaks to what needs to be done and the direction that our government is taking to do these things. Again, I'm really proud of what our government has done. Keep up the good work.

The Speaker: Are there any questions or observations under 29(2)(a)?

The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm thankful for the phrase we heard from Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Mitchell, Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, during her speech from the Throne

on March 2. That phrase was Working to Make Life Better for Families. I'm thankful for this phrase because I believe it's precisely why I and my colleagues and, hopefully, my colleagues on the other side show up every day. We're here because we're all working to make life better for families. As we heard on March 2, now more than ever the fundamentals matter.

One of those fundamentals is creating jobs. I'm going to take a little bit of a turnaround in this area of creating jobs, creating good jobs across our economy by supporting small business and entrepreneurs and job creators, but I'd like to take some time to talk about those jobs for a population that is all too often overlooked and labelled as vulnerable, a people to be cared for, to be pitied: people with disabilities.

Recently the city of St. Albert created a much-needed policy of inclusive hiring. The purpose of this policy is to ensure full participation of people with disabilities as candidates for employment and as employees with the city of St. Albert. The actual policy states that "the City of St. Albert is committed to hiring Persons with Disabilities and strives to provide a respectful, Inclusive, and Barrier-free Workplace." I'm looking forward to hearing from St. Albert's mayor and council on the progress that they've made.

Until then, I can tell you a little bit about the outstanding inclusive employers that I know personally. The Superstore on St. Albert Trail is the employer of a number of people with disabilities and has been for many years. In fact, they are proud union members, actually, and have learned a great deal about managing their lives. Canadian Tire is another amazing employer in St. Albert and recently hosted a retirement party for one of their employees who had worked there assembling bicycles, with some assistance, for many years. Servus Place is another unique employer for someone with very complex needs, with autism, who after a long time job seeking found the perfect job at Servus Place and is doing quite well. The Youville Home hosts a number of people with disabilities and has for years, and McDonald's in St. Albert has employed Jon, a friend of mine, actually, for about 25 years. Other than being away to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, I don't think he's ever missed a shift.

Albertans with disabilities – mild, severe, intellectual, developmental, and physical – consistently experience low levels of employment. You'll hear rhetoric about who minimum wage earners are. I can tell you that they are disproportionately people with disabilities. People with disabilities are unemployed, and they're ready to work. Every person has a right to earn a living to support themselves and their families. That includes people with disabilities. I can tell you that many of them would be so happy to refuse AISH in favour of a good, mortgage-paying job and that indeed many have.

Take in some of the famous St. Albert events, and you'll see what inclusive employment and volunteerism looks like: the International Children's Festival, the Seven Music Fest, and the Rainmaker Rodeo.

I'm going to switch gears a little bit to housing, and I want to tell you a little bit of a story about my community, my constituency of St. Albert. Sometimes you see the beauty and the strength of people in the community in the face of adversity. Over the last year I've attended two hearings before the St. Albert Subdivision and Development Appeal Board. Sadly, this is not the first time I've had to do this, and I'm happy to report that in both cases the appeals were rejected.

The first was a group of neighbours appealing an application for four people with disabilities to share a home in their neighbourhood. It was painful to watch the faces of the people with disabilities who were actually applying to live in that community. It was horrifying to watch the look on the faces of their family

members and their friends. It was really sad to hear some of the reasons that people were fearful to have people with disabilities in their community. They were afraid of parking and traffic congestion. Let me tell you: people earning minimum wage and AISH don't tend to have cars. They were afraid of decreasing property values. They were afraid of the loss of enjoyment of their property. They were afraid of the negative impact on the character of their neighbourhood, and they were afraid for their personal safety.

The second appeal hearing I attended was a little bit different but no less painful or ugly. Six biological siblings who had been apprehended were set to move into a home supported by a local organization. The siblings ranged in age from one month to seven years old. The applicants again raised the following as reasons for the board to reject the application: traffic congestion, parking, loss of safety and security, decreasing property values. Many people showed up to support this, but what came afterwards was the beautiful part. Sane Albertans spoke up after the hearing. They spoke up privately. They spoke up publicly on social media. They spoke to the newspaper. They wrote letters to the editor, and they encouraged the mayor and council to make some changes to a process that is not working.

10:20

We need to be a community that welcomes children that have had a rough start in life, that welcomes people with disabilities, that welcomes people of every colour, every religion, every age, every background. We need to recognize that inclusive communities are valuable communities.

I wasn't sure that I was going to say this, but I am going to and not for a negative reason, because I do think that the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon is indeed a good person, dedicated to his family and, no doubt, his constituents. However, during the winter session, November 2016, this member stood in the House and proudly shared the fact that he had participated in numerous appeals to prevent a group home from moving into a cul-de-sac in his community. The reason that I raise this is because it is incumbent on each and every one of us to create safe, inclusive communities. I will continue saying this, that inclusion is a verb. You don't get to say it without doing something. Certainly, we can always be better, and I have no doubt that we can all point to ways that things can be done in a better way. However, perspective is important, and I think people look to us for leadership.

Like so many, I was not born in Alberta, but I chose to live here and to raise my children here. Alberta is a beautiful place, full of people who are progressive and who reject the fearmongering and hate-spewing that far too many claiming to put Alberta first endorse. Opposition will tell you that people, Albertans, are overwhelmed by the lack of hope, but I reject that. The sane Albertans that I talk to reject that. Every day the beautiful city of St. Albert walks the talk of inclusion, acceptance, focused on a future that is hopeful and progressive.

The celebration of new schools after years of lots of signs but empty promises: the Lois E. Hole school opened, and students will begin attending in September, and l'École Alexandre-Taché is finally built, the first French Catholic school in St. Albert.

I try to get out at least once per week to meet my constituents one-on-one. I don't hear the hopelessness that the opposition endlessly talks about. I hear frustration with the constant spreading of misinformation, that the opposition is directly responsible for. I hear frustration with rhetoric intent on dividing and harming. I hear fear that professional provocateurs, spreaders of hate are becoming more acceptable, that hateful misogyny and racism are every day. We're not getting used to it. We reject it.

What I hear is gratitude. I hear gratitude for a reduction in school fees, for investment in infrastructure, gratitude for holding the line on education and health. I hear gratitude that massive infrastructure deficits like the Sturgeon hospital – we're thrilled that we got a boiler. We're not asking for a new hospital. We got a boiler because the previous government, that was in power for decades, refused to address the deficit in infrastructure. I heard gratitude for a government willing to create change and willing to stand up for Alberta families.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is going to be under . . .

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

Mr. Malkinson: Yes. That's what I was going to clarify.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to thank the hon. member for her advocacy for Albertans with disabilities. You know, she talked a lot about how it's important that those with disabilities have a job. I was wondering if she could expand on how important minimum wage would be for those with disabilities as well as for those with disabilities to be in the community. I know I have several persons with disabilities who live in various residences around Calgary-Currie, and I know that Calgary-Currie is better for it. I was wondering if you could expand on what minimum wage means for those with disabilities.

As well, I know that as a passionate advocate the hon. member has been paying rapt attention to what the opposition has been saying, so I was wondering if she could expand on what she's been hearing from the opposition and perhaps contrast that with what we're doing differently.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Big question. What I can tell you is that I do know that people with disabilities are – the numbers of minimum wage earners are huge. You have to start at a place, and I think that place is that people with disabilities have the right to earn a living just like you and I. They have the right to live in the community just like you and I. No questions asked. Not up for debate. I think if we start there, then we forge ahead. We make a plan.

You know, I hear, "I am grateful for assured income for the severely handicapped," because there are people in Alberta that for whatever reason, be it medical or otherwise, are unable to earn a living and require that type of assistance. However, I can tell you that there are thousands that want to work. They want to work. They want to support themselves. They want to support their families. So I am grateful for a government that is going to look at progressive solutions to problems that have been stewing and festering for decades. We will look at the AISH problem and the challenges that we face with AISH by looking at creative ways of: how can we support employment for people with disabilities? How can we create real, meaningful lives for people with disabilities?

As far as the opposition is concerned, I'm not going to spend too much time talking about them because it's not really my favourite subject. I'll be honest. What I can tell you is that I've been asking for a very long time, I think since we were first elected, that we be careful with the language and the words and the labels that we assign people. It's people first. [interjection] I don't actually think it's that funny. I don't know what you're chuckling about. It is people first. It's not "the most vulnerable." It's not "those poor

people with Down's." It's people with disabilities. It's people first. It's about respect. That's step one to inclusion.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Westhead: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I know the Member for St. Albert was the executive director of the Lo-Se-Ca Foundation before her election. She was a champion for people with disabilities. I know that it was a difficult decision for her to decide whether or not to run because of how much she loved that job and the difference that she was able to make in those people's lives. I just wonder if she could tell us a little bit more about the Lo-Se-Ca Foundation and the work that she did for people with disabilities.

Ms Renaud: Well, I think I might have to buy you lunch later.

Thank you for that question. I actually really appreciate it. It was a tough decision, but, you know, I think I was inspired by the vision and the platform, and I'm thrilled to be here. I'm also thrilled to represent the community that Lo-Se-Ca is housed in. Lo-Se-Ca was created by a group of family members, friends, and community supporters that saw a solution in community for their sons and daughters and relatives and friends in St. Albert. I believe they've grown at – when I was there, I think we employed between 125 to 150 people. I think they're up to close to 200 people now. I'm not entirely sure.

Their focus is on creating community living options for people with disabilities that are affordable, that are accessible, and that are meaningful. They work very hard to find meaningful employment. Where employment is not possible, they're looking for volunteer opportunities. They're also looking at some really creative ways to support people with disabilities to age in place. I think all of the things that you hear about . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Ms Luff: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do just want to take the opportunity before I start to wish everybody in the House a very happy Pi Day. It is Pi Day today, so I would encourage everyone to take a moment to really appreciate the mathematical majesty that is the circle.

I'm very honoured today to be able to rise to respond to the Speech from the Throne, whose central message was: making life better for families. The choices this government has made are doing that, especially in my riding of Calgary-East.

10:30

We are making life better for families by cracking down on predatory lending. Payday lenders have been multiplying in my neighbourhood for years, preying on vulnerable people who are in a pinch, who need cash to see them through to their next paycheque. We reined in the ridiculously high interest rates, we brought in payment schedules, and we increased financial literacy. I now see more and more financial literacy and savings programs being offered in my neighbourhood. Momentum has been doing them for years, but now Sunrise Community Link and the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association are also doing them, giving people skills to save money and matching their savings so they can go to school, buy a car, or make a down payment. That's making life better.

We're making life better for families by raising the minimum wage. Disproportionately more people who live in my riding make minimum wage, and \$15 per hour goes a long way towards having

a little bit of extra money in your pocket, to being able to buy your child a new book or to pay for some strawberries in the winter. Maybe it means that you don't have to work as many hours and that you have more time to spend with loved ones, more time to spend upgrading your education, more time to spend learning English. That's making life better.

We're making life better for families by introducing the Alberta child tax benefit, which helps approximately 235,000 children in 130,000 families. Again, many families in my riding benefit from this. Antipoverty advocacy groups have been asking for this for years. It's a frightening statistic to me that 30 per cent of children who are living with a single mother are living in poverty. Being poor makes life harder. This is a fact. You've heard from many members of our caucus, who speak from personal experience, about only getting five hours of sleep between work shifts, about being unable to buy a winter coat. This child benefit is making life better.

We're making life better by introducing a school nutrition pilot program, by providing free lunch to every single student in some schools every day. Nutritious, delicious food means that they won't be hungry and that they can learn more effectively. This is positive on so many fronts. Food and food security are community issues, health issues, time issues. Not having to worry about making your kids' lunch in the morning on top of everything else you have to do, knowing that your child will have food they enjoy eating and that's good for them: that's making life better.

We're making life better by reducing school fees. We campaigned on this promise and are following through. This will put hundreds of dollars back into people's pockets every year, all the while ensuring that our public education system remains accessible to everyone, which is what public education is supposed to be. That's something that's making life better.

We're making life better by freezing university tuition. This was something I had the benefit of under a New Democrat government in B.C. in the late 1990s. I knew how much my tuition was going to be every semester, and I was able to budget accordingly. Everyone deserves a postsecondary education. Research shows that in our economy your chances of being employed are significantly better if you have some postsecondary training. We are making that more achievable for people, and that's making life better.

We're making life better by helping apprentices continue their training. Many of my constituents work in the trades. These are good jobs, jobs that support families. Electricians, heavy-duty mechanics, carpenters: many of them are in the course of upgrading their training or pursuing a new trade. We're providing a \$1,000 grant to help with tuition and fees, and that is making life better.

We're making life better for families by investing in public transit. Later this year ground will be broken on the new 17th Avenue S.E. bus rapid transit, a project that was funded shortly after we were elected. People in my neighbourhood have been advocating for this project for at least a decade. It will make getting downtown faster, it will make it easier to live without a car, and it will mean that families like mine can bike to Inglewood on the river pathway in their own designated bike lane without having to worry about getting hit by a car on Blackfoot Trail. This, Mr. Speaker, is making life better.

We're making life better by banning door-to-door energy sales. I had these folks at my house multiple times last spring, and I had people calling me to tell me that they were out. I had community associations that were complaining at meetings. Having to deal with aggressive salespeople out to sell you things that you don't need under false pretenses is awful, and banning them is making life better.

We're making life better by making it easier for people to reduce their energy usage. People ask me all the time, especially when I'm

door-knocking: when will we see a program for solar panels? Soon. When will we be able to get rebates for energy efficient appliances? Soon. Not only will these initiatives lower power bills as well as carbon footprints, but they'll put people to work right here in Alberta. That's making life better, Mr. Speaker.

I could go on. I could go on for a long time: reducing the small-business tax, renewing a school curriculum that's 30 years old, helping survivors of sexual assault, increasing vaccination rates, making it easier to get a birth certificate, putting transgender rights in the Human Rights Act, making work safe for farm workers, getting big money out of politics, increasing the energy supply from renewable resources, investing in affordable housing. We are making life better for Albertans every day, and we're doing it while being hopeful and positive.

It's sometimes hard to be optimistic these days. The tone of discourse in the world and in this province makes me angry and it makes me sad, and it makes me worried for the future of my children. It makes me worried for the world that they're going to have to live in on a daily basis. People operate in silos on social media, where they don't have to hear opinions that differ from theirs, and when they do hear those different opinions, they choose to call names or worse. This is true on all sides. I'm not blaming anyone in particular, but I would just ask that people try to engage using facts, real facts, not alternative ones.

We can start here in this House. People ask me if I'm excited to be back in session, and unfortunately I cannot honestly tell them that I am. The Westminster parliamentary system, within which we exist, is patriarchal and colonialist. It's designed to be combative, to be adversarial, to be theatrical. It is not necessarily designed to encourage thoughtful debate on issues. I think about this a lot and about what the solutions might be. To be honest, short of redesigning the whole system, I'm not really sure what can be done, but I do think that we can try to improve the tone, to be more respectful, to listen to each other. In the wake of the dreadful tragedy in Quebec the Premier said something on the steps of this building that made me hopeful. She said: to those out there giving rise to lies and to hate and to injustice, know that you only strengthen our desire for truth, for love, and for justice.

Now, I also, like the Member for Edmonton-Centre, hear from my constituents very frequently: I've never seen an MLA here before. To me, this says that for too long too many people have been left out of the conversation: First Nations people, whose territory we live on; refugees who have fled their countries in fear for their lives; the LGBTQ community. At the Pride brunch in Calgary last year I heard from some folks who said: before the NDP government, we never got anything from the government that we didn't have to fight tooth and nail for.

Now, I know that one of my passions is democratic engagement. I represent a riding that has very low voter turnout, and I hear from a lot of people that they don't vote because they don't think that it will change anything, that they haven't felt heard, that previous politicians didn't call them back, wouldn't give them the time of day. I strive – and I know that all of my colleagues do – to be open, honest, and accountable to all of our constituents. I think of everyone who has called me or written me or come to see me to talk about issues that matter to them. They give me questions to ask, policy to think about, causes to advocate for. Having government that you can talk to makes life better for Albertans. Having government that does what it promises is making life better. Having government that bases its decisions on science and facts is making life better. Having government that thinks about long-term prosperity by caring about education, air, land, and water is making life better.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to be part of a government that is making life better for Albertans every day and is constantly trying to improve accessibility, transparency, and accountability. Thank you.

The Speaker: The Member for Sherwood Park under 29(2)(a).

Ms McKittrick: Yeah. Mr. Speaker, I'm always very interested by the hon. member's discussion about her riding, and I wish I kind of knew her riding better. I understand that it's a very diverse riding with a lot of people who came here as immigrants and refugees and a lot of persons who do struggle. I was just wondering if the member could elaborate on how the direction of the throne speech is going to be beneficial, especially to the newcomers community.

10:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Thanks very much to the member for that question. I do represent an incredibly diverse riding, one of the most diverse ridings in the whole province, I believe, and diverse because we have people from all over the world. There are certainly pockets where there are large populations of people from a certain country or geographical region, but we really have everyone in Calgary-East, and it's what makes my community so great. Within, you know, 10 blocks of my office I can eat food from probably over 20 countries, and I'm so fortunate to be able to have that.

I think a lot of the focus on education in the throne speech is going to be a huge help for newcomers to Canada. I know that education is a struggle for a lot of them because they come here and they have to retrain. I know, for instance, that Momentum does retraining opportunities to help people get involved in trades and to help people access good-paying jobs. Most of the people who access those programs are absolutely immigrants, so our apprenticeship training initiatives will help them hugely.

Reducing school fees: again, many of these people are, unfortunately, underemployed, so anything that can help to make their life better.

Raising minimum wage: a lot of them, unfortunately, are working minimum wage jobs, so making sure that the minimum wage is closer to a living wage is something that will help a lot of them as well as doing things like reducing school fees. A lot of them have a lot of kids. You know, if you have five or six kids, these school fee reductions are going to make a really big difference.

Also, before I sit down, I think I'd like to move to . . .

Mr. Bilous: No.

Ms Luff: No? Okay. I won't. I'll just sit down.

The Speaker: Any other questions under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing and hearing none, the Minister of Indigenous Relations.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate this opportunity to speak to the Speech from the Throne. I am very proud to be part of a government that is making some very concerted efforts toward improving lives for everyday Albertans, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak, particularly, to how we are improving lives for indigenous people in this province as well.

As Minister of Indigenous Relations I know I've had the opportunity to travel this great province for the past just over 12 months. In that time I've had the opportunity to visit with chiefs and councils and community members from pretty much every reserve in the province of Alberta. I personally have visited as well 34 of the reserves and three of the Métis settlements and hope to within the next few months complete my visits to all communities so that we can make sure that the indigenous people in this province

truly feel like they have an opportunity to be represented in this House, which they have every right to be, and of course over the last number of years they were never given that opportunity.

As some of the previous speakers have mentioned, when we show up at doorways and are told, "I have never seen an MLA" or "I have never seen a minister," we realize how small the contact group of the previous government was in terms of who they cared to talk to and therefore, I believe, in who they cared to represent. One of the things that we are doing that has not been done before is that we are making the basic assumption that we represent every single Albertan and not just special groups who are personal friends of the government. I think that's an important transition in this government.

As Indigenous Relations minister I go out into the communities. I speak to them about the things that are important to them, and I ask them that fundamental question: "What would make life better for you?" The response is: "We would really like to be considered to be Albertans for the very first time." Now, to me, that was almost a bizarre response. How can you imagine that you weren't Albertans all along? You live in Alberta, you've been in Alberta before Alberta became Alberta, and here you are.

They tell us that they've never been considered Albertans. The previous right-wing governments in this province have taken the position that there is a jurisdictional divide and that in that jurisdictional divide there is a responsibility for First Nations people that resides with the federal government, the major Crown, and that as the minor Crown we somehow look at this huge group of people in this province and say to them: "Well, I know that life is not very good. I know that on the United Nations scales your well-being is much less than the rest of the province. We know that the social determinants of health all indicate that your life is much more difficult and less successful than everyone else's. But we're still going to pass you off to someone else because we don't have to do anything."

To hear that that's been the response to this community over literally a hundred years in this province and, I think, particularly over the last 40 years, where we've had real resource revenue – we could have been working with the community to build communities, to build school systems, to build water systems, to enable people to come into the modern age and be equivalent to everyone else in this province. That hasn't been done, and I think it's time that we do that. This government thinks it's time that we do that, and we are taking a very bold and strong stance with regard to how we include the indigenous people in this province.

I'm very proud of a Speech from the Throne that says that the objective of this government is to ensure the well-being of people. Now, that's a word you hear a lot from us. We talk about people all the time. We talk about people with disabilities. We talk about people in the school systems. We talk about people receiving supports from child welfare. We talk about people who are building the economy through the development of industry and small businesses. But you'll notice that what we always do is that we talk about people first, and I think that's a primarily important difference in the way the government is working. Our concerns are about: how do we actually make life worth living in a way that is a life that we would all want? You know, many years ago a leader of our party, J.S. Woodsworth, said that we are to create for others what we would wish for ourselves. I think that's a fundamentally important truism, and it's one that this government has adopted.

When we look at families, we say: "What are some of the things that we know families are going to face? What are the things that are going to need to be addressed?" For example, families have children. That's a fundamental part of many families. So we have

increased the amount of monies that are available for families to raise those children. We have increased the supports for the school system so that those children have teachers in their schools. We have increased the number of free meals that are provided in the school system so that those children are well fed so they can learn well.

We have increased the opportunity for indigenous people to speak not only to, you know, how they learn the things that we typically learn in school but how they are personally reflected in the school. We have signed agreements with Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council and with Maskwacis, and we're working with other communities. We allow them to bring forward information that will help to transform the schools. In fact, one of the pillars of the transformation of the curriculum review is the involvement of indigenous people in defining their own history, their own life experience, and their own hopes and aspirations as indigenous people. All of those kinds of things are reflections of our commitment to making life better for people and, in this case, better for indigenous people. We have multiple layers of success in these areas.

We're looking forward to the budget on Thursday because there are going to be a number of other areas. We've said all along that you can't have people live in communities where they don't have the resources that we have off those communities, in places where they don't have water, in places where they don't have adequate housing and where they don't have the supports they need to be successful.

You know, it just shocks me, I guess, from time to time when I hear people on the other side of the House make the comments that they should just be left to their own devices. I can't imagine why any society would want a group of people who consistently are found to be struggling more than everyone else – and then be surprised when those people enter into the rest of our society and struggle and end up higher on the scale of the issues that we all regret in our society, issues such as family violence or involvement with the courts or mental health or even physical health in the hospitals.

10:50

What we have decided, then, if all those things are true, is that we need to go in and do specific things to change all of the terrible circumstances that lead to a structural deficit. It's not a deficit in the people; the people are wonderful. The people have aspirations and are just like all of us who care for their children, who want to have transitions occur in society so that they can truly become participants. What's gotten in their way is a complete and constant neglect in terms of providing the resources, providing the supports, and bringing that voice here, into this Legislature, and saying: "We as a government care about you. You are Albertans. We will back up our word to you with the resources that are necessary to ensure that your likelihood of success is as great and as forward as the likelihood of success of everyone who lives off-reserve."

This is the whole message behind our Speech from the Throne. This is the message, that we are a people first, that as government we are going to help society make a transition at difficult times. We deeply regret that the economy has been so terrible over the last number of years, and we regret the fact that the previous government, who had oil at \$100 a barrel, failed to find ways to ensure that they actually made lives different for people on a day-to-day basis.

How can that happen? We have all these resources. Instead, what they did was that they cut back and cut back and cut back, and they left us with, really, a perfect storm of a disaster: an economy that's based on a commodity that's not doing well, an infrastructure deficit that is devastating people's lives, and a history of neglect of the indigenous people. That's a three-part storm which has led to, I

think, complete devastation of a community that, if they were simply given the supports that are necessary to be successful – the schools that everyone else has, the medical services that everyone else has, the opportunity for employment that everyone else has – would show us their great resilience, their great determination to do well, their commitment to their families, and success overall, just as we would wish for all other Albertans. That which we wish for ourselves, we wish for others.

You know, it is my intention as the Minister of Indigenous Relations to ensure that that plays itself out over the next couple of years in very specific and concrete ways. We are working on a whole variety of projects that will allow that structural change to occur, everything from our review of the consultation agreement with the indigenous communities to ensuring that indigenous people get on the agencies, boards, and commissions, which they were clearly not represented on under the previous government, to changes in the school system, to changes in the health system, to changes in the child welfare system. It's that kind of commitment, with very specific outcomes, that I think is very important and that we will deliver on.

So all I can say is: watch us over the next two years; you're going to see some fantastic things. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Okay. Under 29(2)(a), the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the hon. minister for his response to the throne speech. I was glad to hear him talk so much about his desire to reach out to indigenous people and Métis people.

I have a specific question. We have a great and huge Métis community in my constituency, in the Cypress Hills and southeastern Alberta, and not only have they contributed greatly to our culture and our way of life for hundreds of years; they've been an important part of our economy. At one of the meetings I was at with them recently, they expressed a great deal of concern about what they felt was an inequity, an unfairness where for some reason Métis people in the southern part of our province don't have harvest rights similar to what Métis people in the northern part of our province have. Please, Mr. Minister, I'd like to hear what you're hearing about this issue, what you can do to help our good people in the south, and what your solution might be.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much for the question. I do think this is a very important conversation to have. The Métis people clearly are great contributors to this province. In fact, you know, much of the development of Canada is based on Métis people coming across the country and developing the fur trade and opening up the west to settlers. In many ways they did so in a much more respectful way than many of the subsequent settlers in that they actually met with the local indigenous communities and joined in relationship with them and developed practices that were reflective and, I think, more respectful than perhaps we've ever done since. So we're very concerned about the Métis people.

Now, with regard to the specific question of Métis harvesting rights we have an unfortunate situation from the previous government where they simply cancelled the Métis harvesting rights across the province and sat down with their friends and said, "Let's pick a number of communities where we think Métis might exist" and literally pointed out on the map a number of communities, drew circles around those communities, and said, "There; Métis have harvesting rights in those communities," not based on any fundamental discussion about Métis people, where they live, or in consultation with the Métis people at all. For example, they didn't talk to the Metis Settlements General Council about this, did not talk

to the Métis Nation of Alberta. They simply, in somebody's office, sat down and picked small areas. One of the devastating outcomes of that was that very few people understood that Métis people live in some parts of Alberta such as Cypress Hills, and they weren't put on the map.

So under the present government's plan we have begun a process of working with the Metis Settlements General Council and the Métis Nation of Alberta and some of the Métis harvester groups to rewrite the policy on Métis harvesting. One of the commitments we make is that there will be one Métis harvesting policy for the province. We're not picking selected areas and saying: these people have harvesting rights; other people don't.

We are in the middle of that process now. It's written into the framework agreement for the Métis Nation, which we announced about a month ago, and of course it's written into our consultation agreement with the Metis Settlements General Council. We anticipate that over the year – we take time to do these things; we're truly a consultative government – we will develop a policy, and I really hope next year to be back in this House announcing a policy.

I'd be happy to chat with the member any time about the particular concerns in your area. Thank you.

The Speaker: Any other questions or comments under 29(2)(a)?
Seeing and hearing none, the Minister of Health.

Member's Apology

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to begin by saying that I've been frustrated by some of the vitriol that's become part of public debate. Yesterday I regret that in response to questions from the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre I contributed to that. So I want to say that I sincerely apologize, and I'd ask that the members accept my apology and that my comment be withdrawn.*

I also ask that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 1

An Act to Reduce School Fees

[Debate adjourned March 9: Cortes-Vargas speaking]

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to rise in the House today to speak to Bill 1, An Act to Reduce School Fees, at second reading. In 2015 our government campaigned on a platform that would make life better for Alberta families, and among our major commitments was a pledge to reduce the burden of school fees on Alberta families. This follows decades of the erosion of what we've come to know of and are proud of in this province, a taxpayer-funded public education system. Over the years the fees that parents would have to pay increased to the point where September was a dreaded month. While parents may have looked forward to the return of children to school because they would not be underfoot in the home, they also dreaded and worried about how they were going to pay the ever-increasing amount of school fees that were shovelled onto their budgets to pay.

We've all seen first-hand and experienced the impact that these fees have had on Alberta families. My own experience comes from being raised in a family of six kids. My mom quit when they started coming in twos. The six children, of course, every fall were

*See page 206, left column, paragraph 3

marched down to a shoe store named Levine's Shoes, on 142nd Street. It actually had a myna bird that talked. It was one of the thrills of going for new shoes. That was one of the things we budgeted for each year.

11:00

The second thing that I now know my mother, in particular, really dreaded was: how was she going to pay for the school fees for those six kids that she proudly trooped off to school every September in those brand new shoes? It's something that I've really wondered about for a long time: how in the world did she pull that off with six kids, especially in the two-year period when my father suffered a construction accident and was on workers' compensation for two years?

I know I lost my first tooth changing lines when my brother and I were on the same house league hockey team. I had busted my stick the week before at a game, and we didn't have enough money to buy a second hockey stick, so as we changed lines, we'd pass the stick to each other. He inadvertently whacked me in the mouth, and that was how I lost my first tooth. Times were a little tough during that period of time, yet those school fees got paid because it was an embarrassment for any parent not to come up with that cash to pay for those school fees.

Those fees from the '60s, when I was going to school, up to this period of time have done nothing but continue to increase, and the scope of them has increased as well. It's definitely a policy of this government to change that, to return, as I say, to a taxpayer-funded public education system that is truly one that looks to all Albertans to shoulder the cost of public education over our tax base to avoid the dreaded September blues that parents now face and will hopefully feel some relief from as a result of this legislation.

To the best extent possible, we will be returning to a true taxpayer-funded public education system in an effort to really make a dent in the costs that parents now face and make a commitment come true, and that is to help Alberta families when they need it most and to really make a difference in their lives, make their lives better in a small way. We'll continue on this path, as the Minister of Education has indicated, but right now what we'd be looking at doing with this bill is covering about 25 per cent of those costs that parents now have to pay out of pocket through our taxpayer-funded public education system improvements and the removal of some of these fees.

I call this legislation uncommon sense. Many people talk about common-sense legislation. Mr. Speaker, I call this uncommon-sense legislation. I think a lot of the things that we have done since we've been elected really are a factor of what one could classify as uncommon sense because what's been going on in the province over the last 45 years really wasn't sensible and has gotten us into some deep, deep financial trouble, which we are slowly working our way out of. Uncommon sense is what we will continue to provide.

This legislation will also provide the government with increased authority over all school fees. We intend to fund the elimination of fees for instructional supplies and materials and busing students to their designated schools for the 2017-2018 school year. Families will save more than \$50 million annually as a result. Think about that, that transfer of money into the pockets of families, who can then do what they wish with it to benefit those individual children as they grow up. It could mean a myriad of things, but that is a very, very significant amount of money that families won't have to come up with.

It is part and parcel of what we truly believe to be a function of government, and that is to provide a publicly funded, taxpayer-paid-for education system that increases, as we progress throughout our

term and hopefully through our second term that we may be privileged to be granted, to fully eliminate school fees that parents now have to suffer as a result of the erosion of the taxpayer-funded public education system that took place over the last 40 years.

Now, this \$50 million annually is money that the parents of over 600,000 students can spend where they need to, on what they need to, and wherever they want to, whether that's on basics like groceries and the mortgage or saving for a family vacation. In consultation with educators and the school boards we'll redefine what a public education is and what parents should and should not be paying for.

School boards collect more than \$200 million from Alberta families in various fees, and Bill 1, as I mentioned before, would cut this by one-quarter. We have our eyes on making further reductions in the years ahead. We're doing what we can in a very difficult economic situation, but we are making progress, and we will continue with that commitment to Alberta families as we move forward in the future.

This bill for now will prevent charges for things like textbooks, workbooks, paper, and much more, the things that you expect they will be provided with when you send your child to school. Yet over the decades these things have become extras that parents have been expected to fork out for. Parents may know these fees by various descriptions: instructional fees, instructional materials, basic fees, among other names. Really, what they've been paying for are the necessities that children would have to have in order to be able to go to school. Period. Regardless of what they are called, they cause significant financial strain on our families.

I often wondered, as I said before, how my mother and father ended up paying those school fees for their six kids as we trooped off each September. If we roll back through our family photo album, one thing that would strike you through the successive years, if you look at photographs of my mother proudly beside her six children, is that she always had the same coat for a lot of years. I'm thinking probably close to 20 years. It's a grey cloth coat that was her winter coat, and that never changed for a long time.

That coat is symbolic of some of the sacrifices that my family made, my parents made to ensure that those school fees got paid. I look at that grey coat that my mother wore for close to 20 years without ever getting a new one and realize that those are some of the things that parents in this province have had to do, to sacrifice to make sure that those school fees were paid for and they didn't have to suffer the embarrassment of asking for a subsidy or some other means of having them paid for under the table by the local school so that their kids would be able to carry on with their school year.

As I mentioned, parents may know these fees by various descriptions, but regardless of what they are called, they cause significant financial strain on our families. When you just roll that number in your mind again, that \$50 million that with this Bill 1 we are going to be relieving Alberta families from having to pay, it's a monstrous amount of money that over the years has sort of built up as a deficit that was hidden.

We talk about the Alberta advantage and we talk about a low tax rate and so forth, but if you really go across all the pieces of legislation, all the departmental costs and fees, and you start adding these things up – \$200 million here, \$400 million in another, half a billion dollars in some other spot – fees that people are paying that aren't noted in the sort of Alberta tax rate advantage that was heralded by previous governments, you realize that there are lots of things that we ended up paying for under the table, disguised as some other type of a fee, in order that the previous government could herald itself as a low-tax regime, when in fact we were actually paying for things out of pocket in a way that wasn't really very progressive.

We're about to change that in the best way that we can: incrementally reducing the fees with Bill 1 that are charged to parents for instructional materials and basic fees, among other things. Poor planning and a lack of funding, as I said, from the previous government led to delays, so many have been left scrambling to arrange busing for their children to inner-city schools. In Calgary many families did their homework and chose a community to move to where it was expected that a new school would be built. That's just one more example of an inconvenience, of having to spend an hour a day travelling to and from school, as those families are charged \$330 in fees per child.

11:10

The instructional fees that Edmonton public schools set at the school level in elementary is usually quite low, but it rises to \$50 a child in junior high, and then it moves to \$145 per child in high school. Parents with multiple children are struggling to pay fees throughout the province. Now, these charges come over and above an instructional supplies and materials fee which is charged to all students and which tops out at more than \$200 for a student attending a high school with the Calgary board of education, Mr. Speaker. We are talking about a substantial amount of money.

I was actually quite taken aback when I heard that \$50 million represented just 25 per cent of the school fees that parents have to pay right now for basic instructional materials and busing that we're going to be addressing with Bill 1. It's astounding that it's something that we're not able to address all at once, but given the economic situation we're doing the best we can to allow this substantial amount of money to be paid for by taxpayers in general rather than to force parents to pay it out of pocket and have to budget specifically, perhaps to have to sacrifice in other ways, every September to pay these school fees for their kids to go to school.

Allison Pike with the Alberta School Councils' Association has told me that families report to her that their annual school fees cost more than their presents under their tree at Christmas. Now, that is astounding. I've heard reports of families taking out loans and borrowing money against their homes just to send their children to public schools. This is not an advantage to Albertans, and we're addressing this. It's not right, and we're taking action.

Our initial focus to make life better for Alberta families with this Bill 1 will be on instructional supplies and materials fees because it is where we see a measure of equity. Nearly every school board charges this fee at some level, and removing this fee will lead to immediate savings for the parents of nearly 600,000 Alberta students. That truly, Mr. Speaker, is making life better for Alberta families in a way that they will notice right away. There are many sitting in this House right here today who will benefit from this legislation to varying degrees, and you can only imagine, sir, the difference it will make on the household budgets of hundreds of thousands of families.

I'm very, very proud of this piece of legislation. I know from talking to people in my constituency that it's being extremely warmly received. "It's about time," they are saying to us, "that we don't have to be suffering the burden of these school fees every September. We were wondering what was happening to our public education system. Thank goodness you're protecting it. We didn't think we'd ever get back to normal."

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Under 29(2)(a), Banff-Cochrane.

Mr. Westhead: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I really enjoyed the member's speech. He mentioned a key phrase while he was speaking about common sense. I'm originally from Ontario,

and the phrase "common sense" is something that I had lived through in the '90s with the conservative government calling it the "common-sense revolution." Common sense for the Conservative government at the time was cutting money for things like education, just like the member was speaking about. It's kind of reminiscent of what happened here in Alberta and why we ended up the way we have today with high school fees. I'm proud that our government is finally taking action to put money back in Albertans' pockets.

On the phrase "common sense" I wonder if the member thinks it's common sense that the Wildrose has said publicly that they plan to undo everything that the NDP has done. You know, they want to raise tuition. They want to roll back minimum wage. Even things like the Ukrainian-Canadian Heritage Day Act is something that they would repeal. So, Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the Member for Edmonton-McClung can tell us: is the Wildrose plan to cut these things really common sense in his opinion?

The Speaker: The Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be happy to respond to the member's question with respect to the terminology that I used. I did very carefully implement the terminology "uncommon sense," knowing full well that in the '90s in Ontario common sense as a phraseology was adopted to describe what the then Ontario government thought was the right way to go in terms of an austerity-type budget, where they slashed and cut public expenses in an effort to get to a balanced budget. The deficit that was created as a result wasn't seen on the balance sheet, but it was seen in human cost.

That's what we're avoiding here. We're adopting a different policy, and I call it uncommon sense. It's maybe against the flow of many of those in this House in the opposition who think that the way to go is to achieve a balanced budget. Although that's a positive goal in and of itself, it's not necessarily the be-all, end-all. It's not a panacea, that some would have you believe. You do obviously want to pay your borrowed money back over time. But to do so in a measured way that doesn't hurt people, that doesn't throw people out of work, that doesn't add to the unemployment problem, to me, sir, is uncommon sense.

Our whole platform really speaks to me about uncommon sense in opposition to what the other side would have us do, and that is to treat people with respect and dignity, to realize that we are here not to serve an economy, that we are Albertans and citizens and the economy serves us. We are not cogs in a wheel. We are human beings. We're a society where we have a government that as a government is here to serve and to ensure that we don't hurt people. Over the long term it's the best policy that a government can have.

It's difficult for governments to think in terms of the long term because of the election cycle, but we're bound and determined to do just that and employ an uncommon-sense attitude and theme in everything we do so that we do return to a taxpayer-, publicly funded education system with respect to Bill 1 and that across the board, no matter what department we end up considering, we employ uncommon sense to ensure that nobody in this province is treated as a cog in the wheel and that any policy that we employ considers the public cost, the human damage that might be caused by a race to return to a balanced budget in a way that forces unemployment and loss of public services.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Any questions under 29(2)(a)?

The Member for Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater.

Mr. Piquette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my privilege to rise in the House today to speak in favour of Bill 1, An Act to Reduce School Fees. I'm very proud to be part of the government

introducing this bill. I think it's not only something that will make life better for Alberta families; it also means that we're keeping another one of our election promises. We are committed to the idea that every Alberta student, no matter where they live or what level of income their family has, deserves a high-quality education. Not only that, they deserve to be able to live within their communities with dignity. I'll get to that in a moment.

Now, what Bill 1 will do specifically is that it will take away the ability of a school board to charge parents for instructional supplies or materials and fees for students taking the bus to their designated school. Just to be clear, these would be fees, you know, for mandatory programs that would impact all the students at the school. It's important to note here that this won't have a negative impact on school budgets. Alberta Education will be providing funding to the school boards to make up the difference, so these changes should not affect the level of education or services that schools are currently providing.

Now, prior to us moving on this, school fees have varied a lot from school board to school board and sometimes even between schools in the same region. This is definitely true of my own riding of Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater, where we have four different school divisions and they're charging anywhere from no school fees to very substantial fees. You know, in the parts of the riding where these higher school fees are being charged, these are definitely eating into family budgets and making it hard for lower income families to get by.

11:20

This is something that I heard, well, I mean, while campaigning and, of course, afterwards as well. It makes me think back to a family that I met at Carol's Country Kitchen. As an aside, if you're going through Redwater and you want a really fine steak sandwich, that's where you want to go. In any event, I was there talking to people, and I met this wonderful family, five kids, and both parents worked. At that time – this was Sturgeon – the family rate just for school transportation fees was about \$675 per family. This is something that was a struggle for this family, to come up with that money at the beginning of the school year.

I mean, many of us are parents here, and I think that we could all agree as parents that September is a particularly expensive month of the year for all of us. You've got only so many dollars and only so many things that you can spend that money on. What that meant for this family was that they weren't able to afford enrichment activities for their children along with their schooling. You know, because they had to pay these mandatory school fees, there were other types of educational activities that their children wouldn't be able to benefit from that others would.

Now, of course, this is something that when I spoke to people at the school boards – and I think I spoke to a principal about this as well – you know, they'd come back and say: well, I mean, if we have families that are facing some type of hardship, we can have these waived. In fact, a couple of them had a process like that. Now, that might be fine to say, but for those of us who represent – well, I don't want to say that it's just rural people in particular, but I definitely think it's true to say that for most rural people that I know, the very last thing they would ever do would be to go and ask for this type of waiver. Instead, they simply would not pay for the additions or struggle to be able to pay the fee. When I spoke at the beginning that I think this actually provides more of a dignified life, that's kind of what I'm talking about. It's not putting parents into this terrible position where they have to make that decision about whether they're going to ask, essentially, for charity or let their children do without.

It also, of course, speaks not just to additional educational activities but to how the child is going to be able to fit in with their peers because if you're struggling to come up with these types of school fees, there are other things that you aren't buying at the beginning of the year. In particular, you know, you're not going to be buying those nice new school clothes. Instead of going to school looking sharp like the other kids, you're going to be wearing maybe your older brother's hand-me-downs. Maybe you're going to have holes in your shoes. These are types of situations that I think it behooves us not to put children through if we don't have to. Thankfully, we're not a society that can't afford this type of support.

I think this is going to have maybe a bit of a disproportionate impact on the well-being of families for the amount of money that we'll spend, not simply because of the reduction in school fees themselves but when this actually impacts families and in what it allows families to do instead of paying the school fees. So I think it's definitely a benefit that way.

Now, my understanding is that overall across the province this should save families around \$50 million, which is pretty substantial just the same, and that nearly every family should see some benefit from the bill. Now, of course, this is going to be dependent, as I said, on, you know, how much in school fees their particular school board is charging, but in any jurisdiction where some type of mandatory fee is being charged, there'll be a benefit.

So I'm very happy that I don't have to go back and face that family in Redwater and say: I'm sorry; you know, we weren't able to keep our promises. Instead, I can go and say: well, I mean, maybe we haven't abolished school fees altogether, but we've made a start, and working with your school board and the other school boards in the province, we look forward to a day when the type of education and educational enrichment that children receive will be totally independent of the income that their parents are able to make.

I guess, finally, in this present situation, where so many families are unfortunately having trouble, you know, making ends meet in the month, every little bit helps, and this is more than just a little bit. I know that next fall you're going to be seeing a lot of these families in Alberta that are going to be a little bit happier and feeling a little bit more secure as the school year begins.

All right. I hope all the members vote in favour of this bill. Thank you.

The Speaker: Any questions or comments under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing and hearing none, the Member for Banff-Cochrane.

Mr. Westhead: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to speak this morning on Bill 1, An Act to Reduce School Fees. Certainly, when I was door-knocking during the election and ever since then, school fees have been a topic that's been catching the attention of my constituents, and it's something that they're really grateful that our government is finally able to move on.

I just want to begin my speech this morning talking and maybe comparing and contrasting a little bit to what the folks in the opposition might do if the tables were turned here. You know, we've seen that the Conservative opposition, the third party now, had a chance to reduce school fees. We all know that they'd been in government for many decades, and under their leadership school fees grew and grew and grew to the point we're at today, where we're trying to reduce them. And even though we are doing a good job reducing them, there still remain some school fees that parents have to pay for. We know that under their watch and under their leadership they were just downloading those costs to families, Mr. Speaker, and we know that given the chance they would do that again.

You know, consider the Official Opposition. We've heard people running for various leadership races and even the members across the aisle themselves have said publicly that they would plan to undo all of the legislation and policies that our government has put into place. Mr. Speaker, that includes the bill that we're debating today. Although it hasn't passed yet, you know, it seems to me that this is something that they've spoken about undoing. Other legislation that we've passed that they've spoken about was protecting communities from wildfire.

Mr. Hanson: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Point of order noted. What's the point of order?
Stop the clock, please.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Hanson: Mr. Speaker, I've heard just about enough of the member opposite making allegations. Under 23(h), "makes allegations against [a] Member," and (i), "imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member." We've been very clear that there is nothing that this government is going to do in the next four years that cannot be undone. We have not specifically picked out any – well, in the next two years. There is nothing that this government – and I'll reaffirm that – is doing in their four-year term that cannot be undone in the next election, in 2019. We'll be very, very happy for Albertans to hear that.

An Hon. Member: No carbon tax?

Mr. Hanson: We will be looking at the carbon tax and Bill 6 specifically, but for the member to impute that we will be pulling the legislation in regard to Ukrainian day is absolutely ludicrous.

An Hon. Member: Or school fees.

Mr. Hanson: Or school fees. Thank you.

Ms Ganley: Mr. Speaker, I don't see this as a point of order. I actually don't know what it is we're talking about here because the member wasn't particularly clear, but I believe the hon. member was simply stating his view of the facts. They, obviously, have a different view of the facts. What we're talking about here is school fees. You know, obviously, this side of the House thinks that school fees should be lower. That's why we're introducing a bill to suggest that school fees should be lower. I'm perfectly well aware that if the members opposite were elected, they could go ahead and reverse that. They have every right to dislike the legislation; they have every right to object to the legislation. But I don't see how that's a point of order at all.

11:30

The Speaker: I must say that I don't believe this is a point of order in this situation as an opinion is being offered. The hon. members do have under 29(2)(a) an opportunity to address questions and issues to the speaker at the end, and I would encourage you to do that.

Please continue.

Mr. Westhead: Well, Mr. Speaker, the crankiness coming from the opposition . . .

The Speaker: Don't take advantage of it, hon. member.

Mr. Westhead: . . . is a good reminder about why we might want to revisit the daylight savings time, to see the effects it has on the opposition.

Debate Continued

Mr. Westhead: Mr. Speaker, I know that sometimes it takes people a little while to make their point, and the opposition are master craftsmen at taking a long time to make their point. I would appreciate the same kind of courtesy that we've extended to them by not calling points of order when they don't like what we have to say. I mean, when the member just got up on the point of order, he talked about undoing protection for workers' rights, allowing Ottawa to bring in a carbon pricing scheme instead of having a made-in-Alberta approach. It goes to show, you know, that what I was saying about what the opposition would do is exactly true.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to maybe talk about some of the more positive aspects of the bill rather than how the opposition would make families pay more. I'd like to talk about leaders in my community that are working hard for schoolchildren, people like Carol Picard. She is the chair of the Canadian Rockies public school board. Actually, just last year she was nominated and won the award for citizen of the year for Canmore. It's people like her and the people who work on their board and, of course, also the people who work at the Rocky View school board, another board in my jurisdiction. These people are doing amazing work for our kids. I know that they're making the best use of the dollars that are available to them to provide education for our children, and we're seeing those results. We've got kids doing great in their test results.

Also, another really interesting thing that Canadian Rockies public schools is doing is that they attract international students from overseas, so that brings more money into the school board. That's kind of an innovative way that school boards are making the best use of the options that they're given, and I'd really like to salute our school board trustees.

Mr. Speaker, it's no secret that my wife and I don't have any children ourselves. I know that when I was younger, one of the things that I thought to myself, just being uninformed and maybe uneducated and, you know, learning life as I was going along – at that time, when I was much younger, I had a mortgage, a brand new mortgage – was: "Jeez, why am I paying school fees or taxes for schools? I don't have kids."

So I thought about it more and kind of informed myself and realized that in Canada we have a social safety net, and we also have people that give generously through their taxes to support that social safety net. Then I realized that even without kids I had a role to play in forming that social safety net as well. You know, children that have a good education grow up to get good jobs, and then they become people like doctors, nurses, teachers, and as I grow older and maybe need a long-term care home one day, these are the people that will take care of me. It really made sense to me when I thought about it more deeply and about how as Canadians we look out for one another.

The most fair way to do that is through paying taxes, especially progressive income taxes, Mr. Speaker, not like the flat tax, that these folks over here would rather have us pay, where their rich friends get off scot-free and put the burden of taxes on everybody else.

Connolly: Shame.

Mr. Westhead: It is a shame, Mr. Speaker. You know, the Wildrose has some pretty far-out ideas that would put the burden

back on Alberta families, and that's certainly not something I would support.

Speaking about taxes, something that we like to talk about on this side of the House is that Alberta, even with carbon pricing, still has the lowest taxes of any province in Canada, about a \$7.5 billion advantage, Mr. Speaker. As much as they would like to drag Alberta down and talk Alberta down on the other side, on this side of the House we know that Alberta retains its advantage.

You know, I think that this reducing school fees program also complements and bolsters other programs that we're doing for schools such as the school nutrition program, Mr. Speaker. These things sort of dovetail together. I know the school nutrition program is in a pilot stage at this point, and we're looking to see how well it's working and will reinvestigate that at a later point. These are all things that parents have to think about when they're getting their kids ready to go to school.

I think back again to when I was younger and was much less informed than I am now. When I was in high school, I always had a good lunch, and I remember that kids would come around – I would get bullied when I was a kid – and take parts of my lunch. We would call these people vultures, Mr. Speaker. Looking back on that, that was a terrible term. When I think about it now, looking back on those times when people would take my lunch, those were probably the kids whose parents didn't have the money to send them to school with a lunch. You know, I think that's a sad fact. Probably sometimes these kids might have been bullies because they didn't know what else to do. They were hungry, and they were cranky. Thinking back about the way we would call them vultures, I regret that nowadays because I realize the situation they may have been in.

Speaking about making things better for schoolchildren, Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity a few years ago to volunteer for an organization called Stephen's backpacks. Now, this was a young man in Calgary. I think he might have been about 12 years old when he started this charity. He started the charity when he saw that kids didn't have school supplies when they went to school. What Stephen did was to create a charity where they would fill backpacks with school supplies and give them to less fortunate children. I had the opportunity to go and volunteer with this group, and it was a really heartwarming experience. Seeing everybody getting together and making it happen for those kids was great.

What else, Mr. Speaker? One thing I remember also as a young child was that a teacher really inspired me. I think it was in grade 2. I was really into creative writing. My sister was a writer, my dad was an English teacher in high school, so I really enjoyed writing. One of my teachers in grade 2 gave me a little notebook, and she said that she liked my writing so much that she wanted to encourage me to do that more. It was probably, like, a 50-cent notebook, but it's something I still remember to this day. It was pretty special.

Mr. Speaker, I just also want to talk a little bit about how this government, in addition to reducing school fees, is helping to build schools across the province. Coming up at the end of this month in the beautiful town of Cochrane, there is a brand new school opening, the RancheView school. It's pretty exciting because I know that Cochrane is a rapidly growing community. It was the second fastest growing municipality in Canada of the small municipalities according to the most recent census. I think they've grown by about 47 per cent over the last several years. In Cochrane, when a school like the RancheView school opens, it actually opens that capacity.

The PC governments failed to plan ahead for the growth that this vibrant and growing community was realizing. They made these announcements for schools, but they didn't put any funding behind them. The Auditor General has been clear about how much they

dropped the ball on that. I'm proud that we're committing the money to also building the schools. I mean, it's great to reduce school fees, but if you don't have the schools and the teachers and the teaching assistants to go in those schools or even the money to build them, as the PCs failed to do – that's something that's important for people in the town of Cochrane, for example.

11:40

I also know that in Banff the Banff elementary school is undergoing a renovation, an expansion. Banff is a very unique situation. Because it's a tourist town and there are a lot of service workers, there are also a really high number of folks with English as a second language in Banff, which is great. I mean, we've got people new to Canada calling Banff their home and living the Canadian dream. I mean, people from all across Canada want to come and visit Banff, and a lot of people also like to come and work there. You get to work and play in this mountain paradise. We've got young children learning English, and we need to make sure that we're funding teachers to go into these schools, Mr. Speaker. You know, it's all well and good to say that you support education, as the opposition does, but you actually have to put the money behind this to hire those teachers, too.

I know they've complained about the unemployment situation in our province, and certainly that's something we're concerned about. We've got a jobs plan. The Minister of Economic Development and Trade is doing a fantastic job promoting our industries at home and abroad. But if you were to follow the plans of the Wildrose and cut funding for these crucial public programs, they'd make the unemployment situation worse. We wouldn't have teachers and education assistants in our classrooms. We wouldn't have nurses and housekeepers in our hospitals. You can't fire people and think that that's going to help the employment situation. Albertans are smarter than that, and they know the Wildrose is just full of hot air.

Mr. Speaker, what else do I have to say here? Oh, that's one thing: young moms in the operating room where I used to work. The operating room was a really neat place because we tended to have a lot of young staff members, and of course nursing is primarily a female-oriented position. With a lot of these moms having brand new babies and going on maternity leave, one of the first things that they're thinking about is: how am I going to take care of my kid? They have a shift work type of job, so they're thinking about daycare. I also think that our reducing school fees plays into our \$25-a-day daycare program because it helps parents afford to take care of their kids and also send them to school.

So there are all of these different costs that parents have to afford, and what we're doing on this side of the House is making life more affordable for Albertans and making a difference in the things that matter in their lives whereas the folks in the opposition would rather jack those fees up.

You know, another thing about making life more affordable: those folks want to freeze the wages of these people making, like, \$20 an hour. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order, please.

Mr. Westhead: They want to freeze wages and impose unilateral wage freezes on workers, and that's something they actually campaigned against in 2013, when we were having the Bill 46 debate, where the government was going to shove the wage freezes down the throats of public-sector workers.

The Speaker: The Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the hon. member for his time and his points. I have a question for you, and I just kind of want to come at it in four ways. I said in my response to the throne speech that I was so glad to be part of a Wildrose campaign and a Wildrose caucus, I guess, candidates that twice, in 2012 and 2015, campaigned on one hundred per cent reducing mandatory school fees. We campaigned on one hundred per cent reducing mandatory school fees. I have not heard a single thing from this side that shows any possibility that we would waver on that or that we would do it differently. So I wondered where your comments came from. I wondered where your information came from. I wondered where your head and your heart were, to be honest with you. Then I wonder how you feel about your cabinet and your government and your broken promise. If memory serves me correctly, Mr. Speaker, the NDP campaigned on a 50 per cent reduction of mandatory school fees and delivered a 25 per cent reduction. As I said in my response to the throne, I applaud that. It's a step forward for all Alberta families. But it's partly a failure. Your government, your colleagues said 50 per cent; they achieved 25.

To me, it's a question of priorities. So often when we stand up on this side, Mr. Speaker, we're talking about where the money goes and where it could be better spent. I was out shovelling my walk this weekend and talking to my great neighbour. Usually I have to beat him to it, to shovelling my walk. I applaud you for talking about how good our schoolteachers are. My neighbour is a former schoolteacher who has impacted the lives of many, many Albertans, as all of our great teachers have, as I've had similar experiences. Thank you for mentioning that. It's never to be forgotten how good our front-line workers are.

I said to my neighbour: what do you think about the direction of Alberta? What do you think? He said some good things, and then he said: what concerns me most is the deficit, the debt, and the interest. I thought of that again when you were speaking. I understand this year's interest expense, Mr. Speaker, is \$714 million. I heard from a colleague over here that this 25 per cent reduction is a \$50 million saving for Alberta families. So \$50 million into \$714 million: my goodness, that's 14 years that we could have paid the other half if we wouldn't have that interest expense making rich people richer, if we could have had our priorities to where that money wasn't going to corporations, to bondholders, to pensions, if we could get that money that we take from Albertans, Albertans that work hard, whether it's private people or public people, and put it to the front lines, put it where it's going to do the most good. So that not only concerns me the most, but it concerns my neighbour the most.

I spoke in question period yesterday about Shell taking their capital out of Alberta's oil sands. I'm reading today that this government gave Shell \$725 million . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, we're talking about school fees.

Mr. Barnes: I'm going to get there.

They gave them \$725 million in 2015. Compare that to the interest. My goodness, how many schools could we build? How many teachers could we hire? And now we've given one of the biggest corporations in the whole world 14 years of those school fees that your government broke their promise on.

You know, another suggestion. High per capita spending: even the CBC put out in the last little while about how Alberta has the highest per capita spending, \$2,700 per person per year. Surely to goodness, one of the things that I hear from Cypress-Medicine Hatters all the time is that where they are disappointed with your government is how it appears that you haven't looked for savings

of any significance. I stood up and applauded when you reduced the wages for high-level executives.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Ms Babcock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're making lives better for families in Alberta through the act to reduce school fees, and I'm proud to be part of a government that is doing so. Overall this legislation will strike a balance between making life more affordable for Albertans immediately and giving us flexibility to see further reductions over time. Since Bill 1 was tabled last week, we have seen support from parents, teachers, school trustees, and many, many more.

I'm also incredibly proud of the hard work and collaboration demonstrated by schools in my riding of Stony Plain. Parkland school division, Evergreen Catholic, and a number of independent schools have decided to embrace a regional busing model, which benefits all of our children. As a region fewer buses are on our roads, and buses are being used more efficiently. This adds to safety for our children and certainty for all our families.

11:50

In the past few years Parkland school division has had to increase busing fees to families within the Parkland school division regional transportation service area in order to maintain the current level of transportation services available. Now, living in a rural area, where busing is not optional, this legislation will directly impact many families in my region every day by ensuring less financial strain on every family. Many of the children in rural areas live outside of walking distance.

For children living in town, it is incredibly important as well. With small children spending more time in child care, sometimes children leave from home and go to before school care or go to after school care and return home at the end of the day. This adds a measure of complication for our school divisions. And expecting a small child to walk long distances adds to the everyday worry for every parent. I know that as a parent it was incredibly important to me that I knew that my children were safe getting to and from school no matter where they had to travel from.

Mr. Speaker, the previous government had many, many opportunities to lower school fees. Today they tell us that they're concerned with making life more affordable for Albertans. I will say that the opposition likes to talk about how Albertans want a hand up, not a handout, and I hope they will consider this legislation a hand up for all Alberta families. I have never asked for a handout, but a hand up like this would have been very welcomed in my home.

When I was a single parent, I was spending my hard-earned money bettering myself and bettering the lives of my children by returning to college. The government of the day was not concerned about how much I as a parent dreaded September. There were many times I eked out \$30 a week for groceries and necessities. Can you imagine how much \$600 to \$800 in school fees impacted my careful budget, asking my eldest daughter to wait one more month for winter boots because my budget didn't allow for three pairs in one month the month after school fees were due?

My children never got kicked off the bus for nonpayment, although I know many families that have had to deal with that reality. Your child gets kicked off the bus for nonpayment, so as a parent you can't go to work because you have no one to watch your young child. Hopefully, your employer is understanding because otherwise you lose your job. How do you ever get out from under that? Families I know have had to rely on payday loans to pay school fees. The amount of time it takes and the impact to the

household budget to pay that off is incredible. The household bills, the rent due: they don't stop just because school fees are due. Not one family wants to be the family that has the stigma of having a meeting with the school to have those fees waived.

These are good, hard-working people, and they struggle to make ends meet every single month. They are not looking for charity, and most people I know wouldn't accept it if it were offered. They just need a break and a chance to get ahead.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, I encourage all members in this House to support this bill. It may seem insignificant to some, but to many families in Alberta it will be more significant than you can imagine.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Malkinson: That is correct, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you. Just a couple of quick comments and a question for the hon. member. You know, she talked in depth about how in rural areas busing is indeed a necessity. We very recently heard at length from the parties opposite, specifically the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, who also represents a rural riding, about priorities and that if we have a problem that is funding related, the solution is just worrying about how the money is spent. I was wondering what her thoughts were on that, considering that that same opposition, of course, wants to balance the budget overnight, as they've said on many occasions, and that the current deficit of this province, as we've mentioned many times during our budget debates, is more than the education and postsecondary budgets combined. I was wondering what your thoughts would be on that apparent position of the opposition, although they are for reducing school fees, which we can all agree is a very good thing. What are your thoughts on when there would be no teachers or schools for your kids to go to in their particular scenario?

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Babcock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I have to say that the priorities that I believe we stand for are making life every day a little bit more affordable for Alberta families, and by doing so, we are actually allowing every citizen of Alberta to get ahead, not just some folks that this wouldn't impact. I can tell you that three years ago my daughter was in a class of 37. This year my daughter is in a class of 24 because we've built schools in our districts. That same daughter has learning disabilities, and she has an EA now. Before she had to share an EA with five other students. I think that with the wants and the priorities that come with making life more affordable every day, it is a chance for us to help all families in Alberta just get ahead by a little bit.

You know, yes, our deficit is definitely something that we need to discuss, and there's a plan in place to work on that as well, but everyday Albertans shouldn't have their lives and their services and their jobs impacted by the deficit of our province. I will tell you that as a nurse I wouldn't have had a job if the cuts had happened that

the previous government had suggested should happen. I will tell you that a class of 37 would probably be one of the smaller classes that my daughter would have to attend if the cuts had happened that the government of the day was proposing.

Mr. Speaker, those are actually the reasons that I got into this position in the first place. As a parent and as a nurse watching my patients struggle to pay for things and watching my family struggle to pay for things and watching my child struggle in school and not having that help available to them and to find out that that little bit of help that was there was going to be taken away, this was not something that I was willing to put up with any longer. They say that in life there's got to be a time when you stand up, and that was my day to stand up, when that proposed budget came forward. I don't want my family and all of the families that I know, whether they live in the centre of Edmonton or the centre of Calgary or in our rural areas, impacted so negatively that we can't afford to send our children to school anymore. My child deserves just as good of an education, whether I'm a nurse, whether I'm a college student, or whether I'm an MLA, that everybody else's child in Alberta deserves.

Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: Any other questions or comments under 29(2)(a)? Calgary-Hawkwood.

Connolly: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member for her speech. I know for myself when I was in high school, which wasn't too long ago, unlike many members of this House, in my English class there were over 40 kids. I think that was grade 11. If everyone showed up, there weren't enough chairs for everyone, and that was precisely from the cuts that were made by the previous government. There was a culture of cutting education and health care first and letting those people on the ground suffer the consequences.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm just looking at the clock, and I was wondering if . . .

Connolly: Keep going.

Mr. Malkinson: Oh, okay. I will keep going, then.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to stand and speak on Bill 1, An Act to Reduce School Fees. You know, I do a lot of door-knocking in my riding of Calgary-Currie. It is a very diverse inner-city riding. What that means is that if I go down a block in my riding, I could have everything from a supportive living Calgary Housing subsidized housing development to original elderly residents from when the area was first developed, just after World War II, to new families and young professionals who are just starting their families, like so many families did previous to them in the riding.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in accordance with Standing Order 4(2.1) the Assembly stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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