



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, November 3, 2015
3:30 p.m.

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The 29th Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Miranda, Ricardo, Calgary-Cross (ND), Chair
Schneider, David A., Little Bow (W), Deputy Chair

Anderson, Shaye, Leduc-Beaumont (ND)
Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-Meadowlark (ND)
Connolly, Michael R.D., Calgary-Hawkwood (ND)
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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participants

Ministry of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour

Hon. Lori Sigurdson, Minister

Andre Corbould, Deputy Minister

Percy Cummins, Executive Director, Policy and Evaluation

3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, November 3, 2015

[Miranda in the chair]

**Ministry of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Hello, everyone. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone here today.

The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2016.

I'd ask that we go around the table and introduce ourselves for the record, and, Minister, when we get to your end of the table, please introduce your staff as well. Starting with our deputy chair.

Mr. Schneider: Dave Schneider, Little Bow.

Mr. Hanson: David Hanson, Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. McIver: Ric McIver, Calgary-Hays.

Ms Jansen: Sandra Jansen, Calgary-North West.

Mr. Taylor: Wes Taylor, MLA, Battle River-Wainwright.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm Lori Sigurdson, and this is Shelley Engstrom from JSTL, senior financial officer. This is Andre Corbould; he's our deputy minister. And Percy Cummins is executive director for policy. Thank you.

Mr. Piquette: Colin Piquette, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater.

Mr. Coolahan: Craig Coolahan, MLA, Calgary-Klein.

Mr. Connolly: Michael Connolly, MLA for Calgary-Hawkwood.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, MLA, Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Carson: Jon Carson, Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mrs. Schreiner: Kim Schreiner, MLA, Red Deer-North.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Maria Fitzpatrick, Lethbridge-East MLA.

Mr. S. Anderson: Shaye Anderson, Leduc-Beaumont.

The Chair: Ricardo Miranda, the MLA for Calgary-Cross and your chair for this meeting.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerrys, iPhones, et cetera, be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as they may interfere with the audiofeed.

I'd also like to remind all members present that we do have pages here who can help us with notes and passing information back and forth.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with the consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour, I would like to review briefly the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party,

if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining we will follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly to either the chair or the committee clerk about the process.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule and we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn following three hours of consideration.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on November 23, 2015.

If there are any amendments, an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on November 23, 2015. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. Twenty copies of amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

I would like to now invite the Minister of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour to begin with her opening remarks.

Thank you, Minister.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's an honour to be here today to discuss Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour's budget estimates for 2015-16 and to answer your questions. One of the main areas of focus in our Budget 2015 is stimulating job creation, economic growth, and diversification, and obviously my ministry fits very prominently into that priority.

Mr. Chairman, the ministry was created in December 2013. The purpose of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour is to support the needs of workers, employers, and Albertans by growing a skilled

workforce for the jobs of today as well as tomorrow, with a workplace environment that's safe, fair, and healthy. Investing in our workers and employers today is the first step in creating an Alberta of tomorrow that benefits individuals, families, and our communities. Our government values Alberta's workers and businesses, and our budget reflects this. With the downturn in the economy and the loss of jobs, we understand the importance of supporting Albertans so that they can get back to work and being a good partner to the private sector as it creates jobs.

This budget of \$207 million is a \$22 million increase over the budget presented by the previous government last spring. That is due to the new job-creation incentive grant program. When we compare to what was actually spent in 2014-2015, there is a \$62 million increase. This is primarily due to \$22 million for the new job-creation incentive program; \$8 million in increased funding from the federal government for the Canada-Alberta job grant; \$7 million in increased funding for the WCB for occupational health and safety and the WCB Appeals Commission; \$1 million in increased funding for the international qualifications assessment service, also known as IQAS, which will be offset by fees collected; and \$22 million that was not spent in the 2014-15 budget.

Mr. Chairman, Albertans are hard workers, dedicated to ensuring that their families are provided for and our communities thrive. I was proud to announce the job-creation incentive program yesterday, and this program will support employers to create new jobs and help get Albertans back to work. It will provide employers with a grant of up to \$5,000 per each new hire, and depending on the amount of each grant, this program will support the creation of as many as 27,000 new jobs.

We're also investing \$35 million into labour market programs that will support people to get the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. This includes \$17.3 million for the Canada-Alberta job grant, which supports employers to train existing or potential employees. Skills training is one of the best investments we can make to ensure a strong and diversified economy.

As I announced just this morning – it was getting into the afternoon – we're fulfilling our promise to reinstate the summer temporary employment program next summer. It's also known as STEP. This program will open doors for students of all ages to get the experience they need to enter the workforce. It will also support small businesses to grow and thrive by connecting them to individuals who are able and ready to work.

3:40

Mr. Chairman, part of setting people up for success in our workplace is ensuring that those workplaces are safe, healthy, and fair. There is nearly \$15 million allocated to employment standards, which establishes the minimum standards for payment of earnings, hours of work, overtime, general holidays, vacation and vacation pay, minimum wage, and much more. This year there will be an increased focus on front-line compliance efforts and proactive inspections to ensure workers' rates are being protected. We have \$43 million allocated to occupational health and safety, a \$5.6 million increase from what was spent in 2014-15. This will allow us to devote additional resources to occupational health and safety, research, education, inspections, and investigations.

Mr. Chairman, this budget will allow us to support Albertans and employers through this economic downturn while ensuring workers' rights are protected. We are creating the right conditions and opening the right doors to support a modern, diversified, and growing Alberta economy.

I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

As I understand, for the members of the opposition Mr. Hunter will be leading the questions. That's correct.

Do you wish to go back and forth, or do you wish to make a statement?

Mr. Hunter: I will go back and forth, but I do have some preamble at the beginning.

The Chair: Absolutely. Please go ahead.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the minister for coming and speaking with us today in this committee. We all know the importance of committees and the value that they have in understanding the roles that the Legislature plays. I would like to start by saying that this process is obviously something that I don't want to be confrontational, and I hope that my comments are not construed as such.

We have an increase in some of the numbers versus last year, which I will be asking about. There are a few major points that I'd like to talk about. Minimum wage, obviously, would be one of them. The other one is the job-creation incentive program that you've brought forward. Then I'll talk about some of the other issues in this portfolio.

First of all, your department's budget has increased by \$62 million, or 43 per cent, from last year, from their actual figures last year even while an economic development ministry has been created, so it's important that we go through these line items to see if we can justify these things now.

Protecting jobs, obviously, is important to all of us. As we talk about this, I'm not prejudging anything or anything that you've done or the ministry has done, and I hope that we can have co-operation on this front.

The Minister of Finance on September 24 stated that major ministries were asked for no more than a 2 per cent increase in their budgets. The jobs ministry was not included with the major ministries and is instead classified as "other." These other ministries were asked to have a zero per cent increase, but you're looking at a 43 per cent increase. The job-creation incentive program, I understand, is a third of that increase, but there are a few other major line items going up, and I wonder if they could be smaller, and I'd like to talk about those as well.

On line 1.3 human resources vastly overspent last year and is now budgeted for a substantial increase over last year. What happened last year, and how did you get to the in-between number now? That is my first question.

Ms Sigurdson: Let me just say, you know, that this ministry was just begun in 2013, so it's a fairly new ministry, and it wasn't completely staffed. There's part of – the services weren't available, and we were working with innovation and advanced education at the time. We're now sort of standing up the ministry so that it's completely functioning on its own. This is an important ministry, and we're committed to it as a government to make sure that it's functioning. Before it really was borrowing services from another ministry, so that's why there is a substantial increase this year. It is about sort of having our own human resources and information technology piece, which was borrowed from Advanced Education. It's really part of standing up the ministry.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. In line 1.4, where it talks about corporate services, it shows a budget of \$2.4 million, then an actual of \$4.9 million, to a new budgeted amount of over \$7 million. Your answer to that question is the same?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. I mean, if I could just, you know, explain a little bit more. Corporate services includes finance and administration, accommodation services, legislative and legal services, corporate planning and reporting, and information technology supports. The 2015-16 estimate is higher to reflect a better established corporate services area, which did not receive sufficient funding when the ministry was formed in December 2013. It really encompasses all of that just to make it a ministry in its own right, which it really wasn't before.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister.

Line 1.5 has you almost doubling your comms department budget. Obviously, the answer that you just gave prior to this would help, but is there not a better use, maybe, of the Public Affairs Bureau in terms of being able to cover this increase?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, this is just another important part of any ministry, that they have, you know, people dedicated to work with the communications piece. It is, again, about standing up the ministry, and I think that that's sort of essential.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. All right. Thank you.

Line 2.6 shows a reduction. How much of that department is labour attraction, how much is retention, and can you say a bit about how their roles shift during a downturn?

Ms Sigurdson: Labour attraction and retention develops and implements carefully targeted strategies for attracting and retaining workers that Alberta needs and supports initiatives aimed at fully engaging Albertans in the workforce. The 2015-16 estimate is lower primarily due to a planned spending reduction of \$10 million in the health workforce action plan as a result of a recommendation in the economic development results-based budgeting review. So that's why that's gone down. The remaining health workforce action plan budget of \$20 million will be directed more strategically to projects that better support utilization, productivity, and retention of the health workforce in Alberta.

The 2014 actuals were lower than budgeted primarily due to the \$6.9 million in the health workforce action plan funds that were not spent since the full list of projects did not proceed as initially planned.

Mr. Hunter: Just to be clear, with the downturn are we seeing not as much money needed to be able to attract proper workers?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said, the reduction really is about results that came out of the results-based budgeting process, and they said that that \$10 million wasn't being used well. It was used for operating and things like that. It was not used properly, so we just reduced it for that reason, to fulfill on what the research had shown us.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you.

Moving on to line 2.8, it shows \$21.6 million budgeted, but only \$6 million was spent. So we have a 549 per cent increase higher than what was spent last year. Again, is this in line with what you were saying earlier?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this is actually about the Canada-Alberta job grant. It's significantly higher due to the increase in the federal funding for the Canada-Alberta job grant, which increased to \$17.3 million from \$5.7 million in the 2014-15 actuals. So it's really significantly about that.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. All right. Thank you, Minister.

Line 3.3: the question here is about OH and S. Why does OH and S have such an increase to their budget? How much of that has to do with the upcoming mandatory OH and S legislation for farm and ranch workers?

3:50

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to make a point here that this program is paid fully by the Workers' Compensation Board – right? – so it's really not something that, you know, comes out of government revenue. It comes out of workers' compensation, which is fully funded by employers who pay insurance premiums. That's how this program is paid for, and this is to support – we have hired a few new officers. I did talk in my opening comments just about wanting to increase investigations and the ability to make sure workplaces are safe, so there has been some increase in staffing already. We're working to make sure that workplaces are safe for Albertans, and that's why there is some increase there. But, again, it's all paid for through the Workers' Compensation Board.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister. I'll skip the next question I had about that because I do have a section where I'd like to talk specifically about the OH and S farm and ranch implementation.

Capital investment on page 171 grew from both the 2014-15 budgeted amounts and the actual expenses by over 50 per cent. Why were the capital expenses increased by so much?

Ms Sigurdson: The increase to the occupational health and safety capital investment was to primarily support the information technology, so that is why it's gone up. The capital investment – this is the Appeals Commission also for the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board. It's gone up, and that's, again, to relocate, actually. That office was relocated so that it could function better in the appeals office in Calgary, and primarily consists of furniture and equipment expenses.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Minister. Can you elaborate on how it needs to function better? Is this in lieu of the increase in OH and S farm and ranch legislation that's coming down, to be able to facilitate the extra workers?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this specifically that I just talked about was the Appeals Commission. It's just about the existing programs that we already have in place. You know, people may run into a bit of an issue because they don't agree with the decision – and they have the right to that – so it's just about the existing coverages that we have now.

Mr. Hunter: So this was planned prior to an OH and S farm and ranch program coming in?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you so much.

On page 174, under OH and S, how much of the \$43 million is recovered from WCB, please?

Ms Sigurdson: All of it.

Mr. Hunter: So it's the full \$43 million?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Do you see that going up as you expand into a larger market such as farm and ranch?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it depends on what employers are involved in the system because it's employer paid.

Mr. Hunter: Can you let me know where that amount is shown in your plan? That recovery is under revenues, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. I was going to ask this question later, but maybe I can just ask this now. Have you done a study to find out what the increased revenue will be through WCB from implementing the mandatory OH and S and workers' compensation in the farm and ranch sector?

Ms Sigurdson: I just want you to know that we believe all workplaces need to be safe for all Alberta workers, and we have a commitment to that. Beyond that, I'm not saying anything further about our plans regarding that. But that is certainly something that we spoke about in our platform, and we are committed to ensuring that workplaces are safe for all workers.

Mr. Hunter: I appreciate that, Minister. However, we have a budget in front of us that has, you know, figures involved with this issue, and we're asked to vote on this. More clarity on this would help us to understand what we're actually voting on.

Ms Sigurdson: How do you know that?

Mr. Hunter: How do I know what?

Ms Sigurdson: What you just said.

Mr. Hunter: You have it right in your budget.

Ms Sigurdson: We're talking in general about occupational health and safety, workers' compensation. But in terms of the specifics about any kind of announcement that we're making, that's certainly not here.

Mr. Hunter: And the dollar figures will be forthcoming, or how does that work?

Ms Sigurdson: About a specific sector? Is that what you're asking?

Mr. Hunter: So what you're saying is that in March we'll have the figures in terms of what the cost is going to be for this program to roll forward?

Ms Sigurdson: That's in the future. We're talking about this now.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you. Well, we'll move on and hope to have more information in the future.

I'd like to talk about the business plan and some of the indicators. Why have all of the performance indicators been reduced from the five-year projections to three-year projections? Do you not think it's prudent to have a longer projection in terms of those indicators?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this was the direction that we received, to have a three-year business plan. So we've fulfilled on that, and that gives us a good plan going forward for the three years.

Mr. Hunter: I appreciate that. What was the rationale behind that direction?

Ms Sigurdson: I think it was felt that it was sufficient for us to have a three-year view, you know, in what we're doing in that time, and I concur with that.

Mr. Hunter: So the capital goes for five years, correct? The capital projections go for five years?

Ms Sigurdson: I don't know. Do they? Perhaps. I'm not certain of that.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Do you not think it would be prudent to have the performance indicators follow those projections?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'll take it on advisement. Thanks.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

Page 73 of the business plan is word-for-word identical to its counterpart from March except for the first sentence. The first sentence of the March business plan section under desired outcome 2 says: "facing some of the lowest unemployment rates in Canada." Following up on a earlier question, what are the big changes in this department given the shift in the need to create jobs rather than fill them.

Ms Sigurdson: You're looking at desired outcome 2?

Mr. Hunter: Yes. I'm comparing last year's versus this year's, and the only difference that I see is: "facing some of the lowest unemployment rates in Canada." That's been taken out of this year's.

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Well, certainly, as I announced yesterday about the job incentive program, we're working hard to make sure that Alberta's businesses have the support they need to create jobs here in Alberta. We just announced STEP, which is another program that supports small businesses and municipalities and postsecondaries. We also announced that program to support the economy, for both students and businesses to be able to be matched, and give them really important work exposure. We've also invested in IQAS, which is looking at the foreign credentials so that people coming to Alberta have support. We put significant money back into that. So these are sort of the active initiatives that we're creating to make sure that Alberta does have the workforce and the jobs they need to be able to continue to do well in this economy.

Mr. Hunter: I appreciate that, Minister. The question was really about the need to create jobs rather than just fill them, but we'll maybe take that under advisement.

Let's move on to the next question, and that's at page 176 of the business plan. We see that workforce strategies will significantly increase over the next few years. This was set to go down in the 2014-15 budget, but yours is going through the roof. Can you give us an idea about what kind of metrics the public should use to determine whether this money is effectively spent and actually creating jobs for people rather than in the department?

4:00

Ms Sigurdson: The increase is the \$10 million for STEP, and then the Canada-Alberta job grant is \$7 million. There are two increases for the Canada job grant, another \$7.4 million, so that's why it's gone up so much.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

I'd like to move on to talk about the minimum wage. This seems to have gotten a lot of press, and I'd like to be able to maybe focus on this issue and the issue of the job-creation incentive program a little bit more now and kind of drill down into the details of these issues.

The Chair: I just want to advise you that you're going into your next 20-minute period.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair. Is there a possibility for us to be able to just go back and forth throughout the full hour?

The Chair: Yes, absolutely. I just wanted to advise you that you've already gone through the 20 minutes. You still have more time.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair.

Once again, I do have a little bit of a preamble on this before I get to my questions. Before the increase to the minimum wage Alberta had the second-highest provincial take-home after taxes for those on minimum wage. Now, after the increase to minimum wage on October 1, 2015, Alberta has the highest take-home wage after taxes and the second-highest before taxes for those on minimum wage. The reasoning for increasing the minimum wage that was given to Albertans was to help the impoverished, create jobs, help employers retain employees, give people a living wage, decrease the wage gap between men and women. I have a few questions to explore some of the costs and measures for minimum wage that were put in place to measure and pay for the increase to minimum wage. Are you going to do an economic impact study on the effects of increasing the minimum wage, and if so, which line item will that money come from?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Absolutely, we want to go forward with this with evidence, so that's why we've met with businesses and we've met with other stakeholders to understand, you know, how this will impact them, what concerns they have, what things they think are great about it. We're making sure that we're listening to business. I've met with many chambers of commerce, I've met with the federation of business, and I've talked to union leaders to manage to understand what they're concerned about. We certainly will be looking at economic indicators as we go forward to see how it's impacting. I mean, it was just introduced October 1, so of course it's going to take some time to have an impact. We need to watch that and certainly be hearing from all of the different groups impacted, and we're happy to do that. We want to go ahead in a thoughtful way, for sure. We as the government . . .

Mr. Hunter: Sorry, Minister. I apologize. I appreciate what you're saying on this, and I'm not trying to be rude on this issue, but an economic impact study is a pro forma look into what would be the impact of a policy. Earlier on we found out that the Finance minister stated that he hadn't done a study on the cost of a credit downgrade. We've asked and other people have asked you whether or not you have done an economic impact study to find out the cost to Albertans of about a 50 per cent increase in the minimum wage. I think that that's an important question to ask, considering that we're seeing now two ministries that have been asked: are you doing a preliminary study to find out how these policies are going to affect Albertans? I think this is an important question and a timely one. The question is: how do you actually establish a go-forward plan without doing these preliminary impact studies?

Ms Sigurdson: We increased the minimum wage on October 1 by less than 10 per cent. We promised in our platform, that we were elected on, that we would increase the minimum wage, and the reason for that was to make sure that there was more fairness and that we would be putting more money into the pockets of, you know, vulnerable Albertans who are working for low wages.

Alberta has the greatest inequality of any province in Canada, so it was something that was very popular with the people who supported our government. We know that it makes a big difference to people when they actually get a little bit more. Then they can spend it in local businesses. So it's seen as, actually, a stimulus to

the local economy because they're going to be spending it right away.

Mr. Hunter: Well, I appreciate that, Minister, and there are obviously some conflicting views on that when it comes to economists.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, there are.

Mr. Hunter: Some indicate that this does stimulate the economy, and others say that this doesn't. I appreciate your position and where you're going with this, but I asked the question specifically about an economic impact study as being a look forward to what the consequences of these policies will be. I have asked this question numerous times, obviously, but I keep on getting the same response, which is basically: we got elected on May 5; the people have spoken; we're going to go ahead and do this. I do believe that it's important for Albertans to also understand what the consequences of this are, and I think that it's important for your ministry to be able to have that impact study done.

You say that you're going to go forward with addressing this issue. How are you going to determine the success of it or the failure of it? What are the performance measures that you're going to use?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're putting together right now a package of economic and social indicators that we will be looking at: unemployment rates, youth unemployment, which seems to be a concern of people, how businesses are doing, maybe their failure rate, those kinds of things. I don't have those before me right now, but we are going to be assessing this, as I say, as we go along. Absolutely, we want to work with business to hear about the impacts of that. We've been meeting with them all along, and we'll continue to do that.

Also, we're talking to groups like the YWCA. I mean, the population that they serve is a pretty vulnerable population, and this will make a significant difference to the people that they serve. I've gotten letters of support from people. For example:

I am writing to let you know that I fully support the increase in the Alberta minimum wage. It will affect the income of many of the students I teach [at the university] and supervise who are trying to pay their way through a degree by working service industry jobs. It is appalling just how many hours they have to work to have the smallest amount of money in their hand, and this will be marginally increased under the new rates.

In the course I teach on Gender and Politics we often discuss the politics of various labour markets, and I'm acutely aware that the majority of minimum wage workers are women, and that women bear disproportionate responsibility for the costs of raising children. Increasing the minimum wage helps to narrow an unjust gender wage gap, as well as providing a little extra support to working families . . .

Mr. Hunter: Sorry, Minister. I only have an hour. I apologize. I appreciate you presenting that, but I have a lot of questions that I need to go through here.

I guess one question I have for you is: in the event that you see through the performance measures you implement that this is actually doing damage to the people whom you're trying to champion, will you break a campaign promise and slow down the 50 per cent increase?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, that's speculation. You know, I'm not going to speculate with you right now. We're talking about what's before us, so let's do that.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. We will move on to another question. When referring to the wage gap between men and women, in 2014 our now Premier asked a question which I would like to ask you. In which line item would we see programs to address inequality for women?

Ms Sigurdson: In this budget? Well, we've created a whole new ministry – right? – the Ministry of the Status of Women. We've shown, you know, strong commitment to support women and to create more gender equity in this province.

Mr. Hunter: So none of your line items will show this, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Just a moment. It's really a view to making sure that we are creating more equality.

4:10

Mr. Hunter: Okay. I just need to understand, though, a little more clearly. Is there a line item specifically that you can show us in terms of expenditures that show us addressing this important issue of the wage gap between men and women?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think we're bringing it forward. I mean, certainly, perhaps you can use part of the communications because, obviously, we're talking. Staff are dedicated to working to educate and talk to employers about this. So there are pieces of many items but not sort of one solely dedicated to that.

The Chair: May I? Sir, are we talking about a specific list item in the budget for this ministry? Is that what you're looking for? Is that the question?

Mr. Hunter: Correct.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. I just wanted to clarify.

Mr. Hunter: I'll actually ask another question about that later on.

Are we going to see performance measures that show how the gap in wages between men and women is improving? Are there performance measures that you'll be bringing forward, or is that actually in a different ministry as well?

Ms Sigurdson: You know, we assess on a continual basis things like this, like how much women are making, how much men are making. Other research institutes do this. I don't know if you're familiar with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, but they just completed a report. Here in Alberta Edmonton was dead last as the worst place in Canada for women to live because of the great gap between men's and women's wages, poor promotion in senior management, lack of child care services. Calgary was 17th out of 20. There are many sort of watchdogs out there bringing this information. We know the wage gap between men and women and that women actually are 62 per cent of low-wage workers. It's a really significant chunk of low-wage workers, and that's why we raised the minimum wage.

Mr. Hunter: So the performance measures in your budget and your business plan are specific to this issue, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said, we look at all sorts of indicators. We track those now, yes, and we tracked those before. It's not new.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. I'm sorry. I just didn't see that in the plan here. How much will the minimum wage increase cost the government, and what numbers of its workers see an increase to their wages once the minimum wage is at \$15?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think that the minimum wage is increased where people work, right? If they work in low-wage jobs or minimum wage jobs, then, you know, their employer will be increasing it. That cost is borne by the employer.

Mr. Hunter: No. I asked about what the cost would be to the government.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, I know you did. I'm just starting there, I guess.

Mr. Hunter: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm going to say, you know, that it's the regular work of our ministry to ensure that employers are fulfilling that. So the monitoring of that and just the communications dedicated to making sure employers are informed about that and following the right employment standards: that's just sort of all part of the operation of the ministry.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you.

I'd like to go back to the wage gap that you spoke about and that I think is important as well. Just really quickly I'd like to read you a letter, just a part of it, that we received that shows the importance of this issue and how we need to address it. A lady by the name of Phyllis Faulkner says:

I am writing to urge you to take action to correct Alberta's shameful gender wage gap and introduce pay equity legislation in this province as soon as possible. Alberta has the largest gender wage gap in Canada. Women earn an average of 78 cents for every dollar earned by a man compared to the Canadian average of 86 cents.

Is this something that your ministry is taking in terms of what your policy will be, what your go-forward plan is, or is this something that's going to be spearheaded by the Ministry of the Status of Women?

Ms Sigurdson: I guess that already we've moved forward with the minimum wage increase. As I said, you know, 64 per cent of low-wage workers are women, so obviously they will benefit from the increase. That will support diminishing the inequality between men and women. The creation of the Status of Women ministry is, obviously, another strong indication from our government that we're committed to making sure Alberta is fair for both men and women. That commitment is there. Actually, even in our elected representatives in our cabinet we have complete gender parity. We have a caucus with almost gender parity.

Mr. Hunter: I commend you for that. That's fantastic. I think that Albertans commend you for that as well. Just to clarify here, you said that 64 per cent of women earn under \$15?

Ms Sigurdson: Low wage. They have low wages.

Mr. Hunter: Sixty-four per cent?

Ms Sigurdson: Sixty-four per cent of low-wage workers are women. There we go.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you for the clarity.

We've talked about the issue of the minimum wage. I believe the reason why I'm spending time on it, Chair, is because this actually has a direct effect on jobs in Alberta, so I'd like to be able to spend a little bit of time. The preamble will be a little longer this time, but I think it's important to be able to understand that I did take a minimum wage tour across certain parts of Alberta. I talked to business owners, and I talked to employees to try to understand from them. Seeing as an economic impact study was not going to

be done, I wanted to understand and to hear from them and look into their eyes. So I'd like to be able to kind of talk about these issues that were brought forward to me and some of the comments that they made, to be able to put it on record if I could.

The Chair: As long as you can stay focused on the main estimates of the ministry for the fiscal year of 2015-16, absolutely.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair.

The job-creation tax incentive program hasn't been received very well by the business community. The Calgary Chamber says that the program will likely miss the mark. "Five thousand dollars isn't likely to change hiring behaviour at all," said Justin Smith, a policy director for the chamber. He says that it will "simply subsidize hiring activity that was already planned" because the cost of bringing a new employee onboard is so high.

The *Globe and Mail* had this to say:

Even though the job incentive program is supposed to encourage job growth, businesses say the grant would likely be an afterthought for any hires they were going to do anyway. Owners and executives simply say they are looking at cutting jobs right now, not creating new positions.

This government has increased capital spending by \$1.3 billion, which is being spent on infrastructure and in general will create jobs, and I think that that's important in this downturn. Therefore, unless you have rules preventing it, a proportion of this \$89 million will just be put towards the jobs that will already be created by the capital expenditures already being spent. Are you worried that the businesses who get these contracts will also be able to double-dip with this \$5,000 grant?

Ms Sigurdson: No. If they have received infrastructure funding, then that's what they receive. They won't then be eligible for the job-creation incentive grant.

Mr. Hunter: Now, if I understand you correctly, the infrastructure is an infrastructure grant, correct?

Ms Sigurdson: I think it's like a procurement. They put their, you know, tenders forward, and they apply for that. They're selected through some kind of criteria that I'm not familiar with.

Mr. Hunter: There is an infrastructure grant, though, correct?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, they're going to be investing in infrastructure. That's another ministry. I don't have the specifics on that. Certainly, I think that's the way they will apply and be procured through Infrastructure.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. So if a business was to be able to win the tender, they would not be eligible for this \$5,000 grant?

Ms Sigurdson: That's right.

4:20

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you for that clarity.

Another company had this to say: "Like many companies in Calgary, almost all companies in Calgary, we've been laying off people for the last several months – and if we needed staff, we would hire them," that from an executive of West Canadian Digital Imaging Inc.

It seems likely that the increase to minimum wage is killing more jobs than the few genuinely new jobs this so-called job-creation incentive program will actually create. Due to the \$1 increase in minimum wage, the owner of Toad 'n' Turtle told me that they will no longer be hiring dishwashers. That is four stores, and they have

three to four dishwashers per store, for a total of up to 16 jobs lost. Is the plan for this job-creation incentive program to help the Toad 'n' Turtles of Alberta?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, we have various programs that we're putting forward. We're in tough economic times. We are. We're in tough economic times, so businesses need to make decisions based on, you know, the environment now. There's no question that the falling price of oil has created difficulty for business in Alberta. There's no doubt.

But I've had a tour of the province. I also talked to many businesses who are still trying desperately to get staff that they need, and this kind of a grant will definitely help them. They will be able to hire new people. We're actively engaging with businesses.

Also, many businesses say that raising the minimum wage actually creates stability for them because people in low-wage jobs are always looking for a higher wage job, so it's hard to retain people. And then you have to train them all again. That's a lot of costs for them. The Dairy Queen in Hinton, for example. We went and met there, and he said that he's had the same staff for two years, which is extraordinary in that kind of an industry. They've been able to retain them because they pay them already, you know, closer to a living wage, which is what creates stability for them. These businesspeople were very much in support of increasing the minimum wage.

I just wanted to add, too, that 71 per cent of Albertans in a recent poll thought that this job-creation incentive grant was a great, great move.

Mr. Hunter: Thanks, Minister. I'd like to see that . . .

The Chair: I just wanted to make you aware that you have 20 minutes left.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair. All right. We'll have to keep this short. Why weren't policies implemented to prevent jobs from being lost? We have a new program that is being rolled out, and that program is going to be brought out in the spring or in January. I'm not sure which one. We've said a couple of things here.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the job-creation incentive grant is in the spring.

Mr. Hunter: It's in the spring?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Hunter: That's when it's actually going to be rolled out?

Ms Sigurdson: That's when the applications will be available, yes.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. We'll talk about that in just a second here.

But the Toad 'n' Turtle and the restaurant Brewsters and, I'm sure, many other restaurants are eliminating hostesses. Many restaurants have around two to three hostesses during peak hours. Many of those jobs are now lost. Those jobs were for young kids, kids under 18 who wanted to get some job experience and learn the ropes. Now many of those jobs are lost because of the minimum wage increase of \$1, and this is just the beginning. What is going to happen when the full \$5, or 500 per cent more, comes into effect? Will this job-creation incentive program allow those businesses to hire them back?

Ms Sigurdson: I just want to say that, you know, we've raised the minimum wage now less than 10 per cent.

We're working with businesses going forward to make sure that we're hearing their concerns, what's happening. We're hearing the positive effects, even, of what it could be and how it's impacting our economy. We're going to be, you know, going through with some good information regarding that, and we're happy to do that.

Mr. Hunter: Minister, with all of the people that I've talked to across this minimum wage tour, I haven't heard one person who has said that this is affecting them positively, and I think that these business owners, who oftentimes are third or fourth generation in these businesses, deserve to have that on record, that these guys are actually hurting. These aren't the fat cats, as sometimes I've heard, you know, the top 1 per cent of people, who we think need to pay a little bit more. These are people who have actually suffered to work hard to be able to establish a business, and they had to scrimp and save, and they moved themselves up from maybe poverty to a position where they can make a living. I think that it's important to remember that.

Restaurants Canada launched a petition to protect jobs. Nowhere in their three recommendations did they suggest giving taxpayer dollars towards job-protection grants. I'd like to read their recommendations for the record for alternative tax-free ways to protect jobs. The first is to adjust minimum wage based on the current economic climate and announce increases annually to allow for necessary adjustments. Second, keep the current liquor server differential, which recognizes that servers in licensed restaurants and bars are not minimum wage earners when you factor in their substantial gratuity income. This allows restaurateurs to pay more to staff who don't earn tips. Third, introduce a first-job wage differential to encourage small businesses to continue to hire entry-level job seekers and students under the age of 18. I think these are fantastic recommendations, and I hope that the ministry will take a look at these recommendations.

Putting together an across-the-board, one-size-fits-all program such as a \$15 minimum wage, from what I heard, is not a good fit for all industries. In the restaurant industry, where you have servers who get the gratuities, they don't want it. I've talked to many of them, and they've said: we don't want it; we will actually lose money by having us go to this \$15 minimum wage.

The other thing that I think is important to say is that a \$15 minimum wage in Calgary won't cut it – you and I both know that; the cost of living is too high – whereas \$15 in a smaller community would be too much, something that maybe they don't feel is necessary because of the cost of living. My question is: why is a one-fit program something that this government is bringing forward when, in reality, we have different dynamics throughout the province?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Well, I just want to go back to some of your earlier comments about the fat cats. Certainly, the owner of the Dairy Queen in Hinton wasn't a fat cat, but he was very much in support of raising it. He was paying his staff \$15 an hour already. Other people, student groups, other businesses I've spoken with – I mean, I understand that you have a specific group of people you're talking to, but I know that there are many Albertans who are very much in favour of raising the minimum wage, and I feel confident in moving forward.

I also want you to know that there is not only one program that we're putting forward here. We have the STEP program, the job-creation incentive plan, the Canada-Alberta job grant. These are all sort of to meet different demands in the marketplace. So it's not like we only have one thing that we're putting forward.

I just want to say on the minimum wage that, you know, people said to us, "You should go all the way to \$15 on October 1," but we

didn't. We are being moderate. We listened to business. They wanted to have some time to plan for their businesses, how it would impact them. We gave them that time, and going forward, we'll continue to work with them.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Minister. I'm running out of time. I apologize. I really don't want to be rude here, but I've got so much more stuff that I need to go through.

In Australia they tried this. They actually went forward with an increase in minimum wage – they have a minimum wage over \$16 – and they saw an increase of 14.5 per cent in unemployment amongst young people in November. I asked you this question once before as well: how will you mitigate the potential loss of jobs amongst that demographic group?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think the STEP program speaks to that right away. I just want you to know that I think both of us could go with a whole pile of research on both sides. You're presenting the research that you feel backs your argument, but we're here in Alberta and we're making this decision for Albertans. I think it's creating a fairness and justice in this province that's been missing for far too long. I'm very proud to champion this and bring it forward. You know, as a social worker who's worked with people who live in poverty, it makes me very proud to know that we're bringing this in.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Well, thank you.

I'm going to have to skip to the job-creation incentive program. I do have other questions that I wanted to ask you about on the minimum wage issue, but I think that I've tried to present what I feel are the ideas and the concerns that the businesspeople that I talked to, the servers that I talked to had represented.

4:30

It doesn't take people long with this job-creation incentive program to figure out some of the ways to be able to trick the system. That's why companies will hire white hat hackers to attempt to hack into their own company's secrets. I guess that would be kind of a way of being able to determine what the consequences of a policy or a procedure would be. What are you doing to ensure that this system does not get misused?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I always want to say that we are using data to determine the net new hires from information that's already collected through employment insurance. All employers need to submit this annually, so that will guide who's eligible for this. We'll look at the 2015 data that's been put forward, and then we'll know from the 2016 data how many new hires are eligible. That's a pretty straightforward thing, low red tape bureaucratically, not a big administrative burden regarding that. I think that we're, you know, using data that exists already, and I think that that's a pretty prudent way to move forward.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

In lieu of the time maybe what I'd like to do is have you table the answers to the questions so that I can get through the rest of my material here. I will ask the questions, but if you can . . .

Ms Sigurdson: You just want them on the record?

Mr. Hunter: Yeah, please, if we could do that.

A report by American Enterprise Institute said that "the loss of 1,000 restaurant jobs in May following the minimum wage increase in April was the largest one month job decline since a 1,300 drop in January 2009, again during the Great Recession." Why is this government implementing a job elimination program at the same

time they are spending taxpayers' dollars in the form of a job incentive program to combat this job-losing policy?

Referring to page 76 of the business plan, it says that the job-creation incentive program has budgeted \$22.25 million for this fiscal year, yet in your announcement yesterday you said that this program would not be implemented until spring. The first day of spring is March 20, yet in question period yesterday the Premier said that it was going to be rolled out in January. You have clarified that that will actually be rolled out in the spring. When is this program actually starting? Again, you've stated on record that it will actually be happening in March.

There's \$22.25 million from January to March if I understand you correctly, till the end of this fiscal year, that will be allocated towards this program. I think, with the articles that I've been reading in the paper, from talking with different people, there's a lot of misunderstanding about how this program is going to roll out, when it's going to roll out. When do people put their applications in? It's first-come, first-served, from what I understand, but, you know, when are we going to find out the exact day to be able to put those forward for businesses to find out who actually gets this money? The \$22.25 million: if the program is not going to start until March and we have the rest of this fiscal year with \$22.25 million coming forward, where does that money go to? Does it go to administration costs? Obviously, this year people aren't going to be able to apply for that \$5,000 grant. Maybe if you can answer that, that would be fantastic.

When you divide the total spending by the number of jobs, we get a number of around 33,000 per year. Are you expecting so many minimum wage and part-time jobs to be the ones getting the subsidy? Did you consider limiting it to full-time jobs over the poverty line?

Next question: is there any way to actually measure . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, did you want to actually have the minister answer these questions?

Mr. Hunter: No.

The Chair: You just want to enter them into the record?

Mr. Hunter: I just want to enter them in because of time.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you very much, Chair.

Ms Sigurdson: Excuse me for one second. First, I just want to make it clear for the record that you wanted to go back and forth, and that's now changed. You just want to have things . . .

Mr. Hunter: Correct. We've run out of time. Is that okay?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. We just want to make that clear.

The Chair: We have six minutes and 34 seconds.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you.

Is there any way to actually measure how many new jobs this creates versus subsidizing jobs that would have already been created anyway?

Next question: where do the administration costs for this program come from? You've stated that this will be a minimal cost. It will not be a heavy bureaucratic cost, but we'd like to know specifically: what are the administration costs? If we could get a number for that. How many staff were hired to implement the job-creation incentive program? How much was spent on the research for this job-creation

incentive program, and where's the line item for that? Did the research tell you how much of this money would be spent on minimum wage employees compared to hiring those above minimum wage? What was the average wage you estimated would be earned by recipients of this program?

What programs were implemented within this program to ensure that it would not be abused? We've talked a little bit about that, but I'd like to have that as well, a little more detail on that. How much did it cost to hire people to ensure that it would not be abused; i.e. laying someone off for a month and then hiring them back? I've heard this so many times from so many different business owners. We've had a huge job loss in the oil and gas sector. Those people who have already lost their job: how long do they actually have to be laid off before they qualify to be hired back again? If they are qualified to be hired back again, can they access the \$5,000 grant or not? I think these are important questions that need to be answered.

Now, originally you had said in your campaign promise in I believe Lethbridge that this was going to be a tax credit versus a grant. I'd like to know if you can help me understand, in writing, why you went from a tax credit program to a grant program.

The other question that I've heard is that a company can go up to \$500,000, if I understand correctly, for this. Now, small businesses are the ones that seem to be hurting terribly from this downturn in the economy. They don't have the economies of scale. They don't have people that can actually be specifically earmarked to go after these grants. Is this fair to small businesses, or is there an unfair advantage to larger businesses that have the infrastructure to go after these grants? If it's first-come, first-served and you have people that can actually go in and specifically work on that for their corporation, I could see that being a lot easier for them versus, say, a ma-and-pa shop business who have to wear many hats and do it themselves. Is this a program that's going to be more accessible to larger companies? That's another question.

This was, according to the Premier, only one of many programs that you decided that you were going to bring forward. One of the programs that she said she was going to bring forward was – the Premier said that an incentive for job creation was to direct orders to ATB on lending. My question is: does that mean that the government is directing ATB in how to invest and which companies deserve investment rather than letting the professionals determine the best course of action?

This is in a little bit of a different vein, but I think it's an important question.

How much time do we have left, Chair?

The Chair: Two minutes and seven seconds.

Mr. Hunter: You know what, Minister? I have thrown a lot of questions at you, and I think that the committee here maybe would like to hear an answer about the issue of how this job-creation program will be rolled out. Is it unfair to the ma-and-pa shops, do you think, versus the larger corporations? Can you answer that question?

The Chair: To be clear, you want to go into the back and forth now?

Mr. Hunter: Correct.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, I think I've been pretty accommodating. You wanted to do it one way; we did it that way. You wanted to do another way. Now you want to do it that way. I think we can just stay with this, so if you have other questions that you want to read into the record for the next minute, then that's fine.

4:40

Mr. Hunter: That sounds great. You betcha.

Well, let's talk a little bit about OH and S. On page 71 of the business plan it says: "providing workers in the farm and ranch sector with the protections workers have in other sectors." How much will it cost OH and S to supervise farms, and how much will just be reallocated from other industries? Which line of the budget will this cost come from? How many more investigators will be hired to cover farms? Is there a cost to implement WC for farms, and how much will that cost WCB? How much of OH and S's budget is spent on safety procedures that WCB already does? Will any revenue be generated from fees implemented on farmers for OH and S coverage, and if so, how much? How much was spent on consultations with farmers to ensure that farmers are happy with OH and S legislation? What line item would that fall under? What kind of buy-in from farms and ranches . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Member. We've run out of time.

I would like to now call on the member of the third party. Mr. McIver, I believe you're the one who'll be leading the questions.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Chair. My preference is to go back and forth if that's okay with the good minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Minister, for being here. You announced the STEP program today. If I got it right – correct me if I'm wrong, please – there's a \$10 million program for 3,000 jobs?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. McIver: So that's about \$3,300 per job.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, it depends because it is, you know . . .

Mr. McIver: The average. The average is about \$3,300 per job, yes. How is that money spent? Is it the full wage for the student for the time, or is it a percentage of the wage?

Ms Sigurdson: Seven dollars. We're subsidizing that wage.

Mr. McIver: Seven dollars per hour?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, for the wage – yeah, per hour. That's right. So if the student is getting \$15 an hour, we pay \$7 of it. If they're getting \$11.20, we pay \$7.

Mr. McIver: So if they're making minimum wage, which is now about \$11 an hour, then the government pays \$7 and the employer would pay \$4.

Ms Sigurdson: That's it.

Mr. McIver: Okay. There's no minimum on the wage outside of the standard minimum wage? There is no other minimum with this program?

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thank you.

On the other program, what you call the job-creation incentive program – now, of course, we talked about that a little bit. You've got \$89 million in the budget for that and up to 27,000 jobs.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, that's right.

Mr. McIver: So if you are able to provide 27,000 jobs, then the average will be \$3,300 per job.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes, and again I'll just say that it really is up to the employers.

Mr. McIver: Ten per cent of that – that would be \$33,000 per year – is below the poverty line, right? It's your math.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, we are creating the environment for the innovators and job creators to do it. So they could pay more than that. It doesn't mean that these are low-wage jobs necessarily.

Mr. McIver: No. I agree with that. But for an employer that gets 10 per cent of the wage, if they're going to pay more than \$33,000, they're going to ask for the whole 10 per cent up to the \$5,000, correct?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. McIver: I mean, I think that otherwise, if you're not smart enough to do that, you're not smart enough to be in business very long. You'd probably agree with me on that. In other words, if the full 27,000 jobs – they're poverty-level wages. Otherwise, there would be fewer jobs, perhaps at a better wage.

Ms Sigurdson: We are committed to making sure that there are fair wages for Albertans. This is an incentive to support employers. We care very much about having higher wages for low-income people.

Mr. McIver: Okay. The \$15 minimum wage that your policy is to get to: is that a living wage?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, if you look across Alberta, it depends on where you live. It is based on geography.

Mr. McIver: In Edmonton or Calgary, where two-thirds of the population . . .

Ms Sigurdson: No, it's not. It's not a living wage. It's less than.

Mr. McIver: It's not. Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: It's \$17. You know, Edmonton Social Planning Council and Vibrant Communities Calgary say that it's \$17-something.

Mr. McIver: All right. So you can see the pattern here – right? – where you're looking at a \$33,000 wage on the job incentive program and you're looking at a smaller wage than that with the minimum wage that you want to get to even though it will kill jobs. And who knows with the STEP program? Okay. Good. I wanted to get that on the record. Thank you for letting me do that, Minister.

Now, Minister, are you putting in farm and ranch legislation for occupational health and safety and the Workers' Compensation Board?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're committed to making sure all workplaces are safe, and that's what we're doing.

Mr. McIver: Is that a yes?

Ms Sigurdson: You'll be hearing further details regarding that in the future.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Well, let me refer you to page 71 of your business plan, the same page 71 where your signature appears at the top of the page. If you go down to the bottom of the page, the very

last sentence says, “For too long, Alberta has been the only Canadian jurisdiction that maintains broad exemptions for the farm and ranch sector with respect to core labour legislation.” Would you agree that occupational health and safety and the Workers’ Compensation Board are what’s referred to as core labour legislation?

Ms Sigurdson: I’m going to say to you the same thing I just said, that we are committed to making sure all workplaces are fair for Albertans, and you’ll hear more details about that soon.

Mr. McIver: Well, you’re dancing like Ginger Rogers, but I’m going to take that as a yes because I don’t know what other choice you could have as to what qualifies as core labour legislation.

May I ask what you’d consider your current core labour legislation?

Ms Sigurdson: I want you to know . . .

Mr. McIver: It’s just a straight-up question. They’re your words. I’m just asking: what do you call your core legislation?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly there are, you know, four aspects: the employment standards, the labour code, the WCB . . .

Mr. McIver: Occupational health and safety perhaps?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Those are the four.

Mr. McIver: Okay. All right. I think we got our answer.

The Chair: I would like to interject at this point. If you could please direct the questions to the chair, that way we can minimize the deviation from the spirit of the discussion, which is to really get answers to the questions you want.

Thank you.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

Okay. So we’ve established, even though you haven’t said it, that you’re coming with occupational health and safety and the Workers’ Compensation Board. Without saying it, you’ve said it. So there it is.

How much in this budget is dedicated to the planned core labour legislation changes that you have coming, without naming them, of course?

Ms Sigurdson: The budget is about the programs that are existing now.

Mr. McIver: No. Respectfully, Minister, I’m actually trusting what you signed your name to on page 71, and it talks about core labour legislation for Canadian farms and ranches. How much is in your budget to address that line of your document on the very page that you signed?

Ms Sigurdson: If I just refer you to 3.3 and 3.4, occupational health and safety and employment standards, there would be funding in there, obviously, to run the programs.

Mr. McIver: Fourteen million dollars. Okay. So that’s what we’re spending on farm stuff. Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Ms Sigurdson: It’s not going to be all of it. It’s not going to be all of that in there.

Mr. McIver: No. But that’s the category under which we would find the expenses for the farm labour legislation core standards stuff . . .

Ms Sigurdson: That’s to provide our programs for Albertans.

Mr. McIver: . . . that we don’t want to use the words “WCB” or “occupational health and safety” for.

On the wage gap – you talked about the wage gap – is it not still so that Alberta men make the highest average wage in Canada compared to other provinces and women in Alberta make the highest average wage for women compared to other provinces?

Ms Sigurdson: In Alberta.

Mr. McIver: Correct.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Good. That’s important because you talked about the wage gap. Just for the record I agree with you. There is a wage gap, but it’s also important for context to understand that women in Alberta make the highest average wage for women in Canada even though I agree with you that there’s a wage gap. Okay.

Now, let’s go back to minimum wage for a minute. In terms of jobs is it not so, if you put in a minimum wage, that it pushes up the whole wage scale and that it will average down to zero over time because, of course, the whole wage scale will go up and all the costs related to that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, I for one think that many Albertans are happy to pay just a little bit more so that people who are vulnerable, low-wage workers, will be able to get jobs where they can care for their families, pay for their education.

Mr. McIver: Yeah. But you’ve already agreed with me that \$15 an hour, at least in Calgary and Edmonton, is below the poverty line or below the living wage rate, so that actually won’t get done.

Ms Sigurdson: So our movement to increase it is a great thing.

Mr. McIver: Yeah, but it doesn’t get done what you say that it will. It doesn’t actually get people where they can look after their families because it’s below the poverty line.

Ms Sigurdson: We said that we’d increase the minimum wage. That’s what we’ve done, so we’re fulfilling our promise.

Mr. McIver: I appreciate that, but you’re not fulfilling your promise, by the sounds of it, by what you’ve told me, to actually raise people up to where they can look after themselves.

In terms of adding jobs, how do you feel about the 3,000 machines that McDonald’s has put in since you’ve done this, where people can order by machine?

4:50

The Chair: Can I just ask that you direct questions through the chair?

Mr. McIver: Through the chair, of course.

Through the chair, how do you feel about the 3,000 machines that McDonald’s has put in? One could argue, since they’re open 16 hours a day, that 6,000 jobs at minimum wage have been lost due to your policies. Is there some redeeming comment that you’d like to make about that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, McDonald’s making decisions about how they’re going to serve customers – and I understand they do this in many jurisdictions internationally. Their decisions about the kind of service they’re going to provide are really their decisions.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Now, on the situation of greenhouse workers in Alberta, which fall under the labour legislation here, they're at a disadvantage compared to B.C. greenhouse workers for hours that they're allowed to work and working conditions. Are you planning on making any changes on their behalf to make Alberta greenhouse workers competitive?

Ms Sigurdson: I mean, just like all workers in Alberta, we want to make sure that workers and employers have safe working conditions and that there's a good match with the people who need workers.

Mr. McIver: I'm trying to help you, Minister. The reason I ask you the question is because when I was doing the job similar to what you're doing now – some would say identical; some would say similar – the greenhouse workers said that they're losing a lot of jobs because product is coming in from B.C., where they have different labour rules, and that they can't compete with the B.C. greenhouse workers. I'm trying to help you to provide the jobs. I'm trying to help you be successful.

Ms Sigurdson: I appreciate that. I'll take it on advisement. Thank you.

Mr. McIver: Now, the Workers' Compensation Board: are they under any direction to increase their revenue from your ministry?

Ms Sigurdson: No.

Mr. McIver: I only ask that because I've heard from restauranters and bars that since you've been there, they have gone into a number of bars and checked employment records and have charged them backwards on WCB claims for what they have estimated to be tips. In some cases they're very large amounts of money, back two and three years. One big bar told me that it was in the neighbourhood of half a million dollars. That's not direction coming from you or your ministry? And, Chair, this is revenue, so this is very pertinent to the budget for this account.

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, I think there are standard reviews that happen periodically, and they're fulfilling sort of the regular practices they do. There's been no directive from my office.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thank you. I'm grateful to know that.

The Alberta immigrant nominee program: although the government has been reorganized a little bit, does that still fall under your ministry?

Ms Sigurdson: It does.

Mr. McIver: Okay. How are we doing? Are we on track to get all our files approved by the end of this calendar year?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We have 5,500 nominees that were granted by the federal government. They set that standard. We would like more, and certainly with this new government we are going to be talking with them to see if we can increase that number because we do need workers in Alberta. So, yes, we're on track to do that.

Mr. McIver: Okay. I don't mean to be unfair to you, because I had the same problem when I was doing the job you're doing now. Albertans would be interested to know what job classifications we are approving immigrant nominee applications for when there are so many tens of thousands of Albertans recently out of work. Which jobs are you needing to actually import people to fill when there are so many Albertans out of work?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Just a minute.

Mr. McIver: Chair, if I sound like I'm rushing a little bit, it's only because there's so little time.

The Chair: It's very fleeting.

Ms Sigurdson: I don't have the specific categories, but the majority of them are high-skilled jobs that we do fill. We can get that information for you about what categories they are specifically. I'm sorry. I don't have that information in front of me right now.

Mr. McIver: That's great. I'll be happy to get it from you in writing at another time, Minister.

The Chair: Minister, if you could provide that to the Assembly so that every member gets that information, please. Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. McIver: Yes. Thank you for the clarification, Chair. That's helpful.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Moving on, in the business plan it says that the ministry will be making sure all workers are treated equally and that Alberta is more, I think, aligned with international standards. Which international standards are you looking to align Alberta most closely with, and where are we falling short?

Ms Sigurdson: Can you tell me where you're looking exactly?

Mr. McIver: Strategic context business plan. It's out of the business plan. You know, Minister, through the chair, of course, I pulled it out of the business plan, and consequently I don't have the page for you as readily as I would like to, and I apologize for that.

The Chair: Once again, what's the reference? What's the document you're referencing, Member?

Mr. McIver: It's the business plan, where it talks about making sure that the ministry will be working hard to ensure all workers are treated equally and that Alberta is more closely aligned with international standards.

Minister, I'd be happy to get that in writing later rather than sit while you shuffle paper.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Yeah.

Mr. McIver: I'll take my share of the blame for not having the page number for you. Is that okay?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

I mean, I think it would be around employment standards, you know, across the country and other jurisdictions.

Mr. McIver: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: If you want more specifics than that, then we can . . .

Mr. McIver: No disrespect, but I can gather the rest of it from what you said. I'm looking for more specifics.

Now, there's money in the budget, as I understand it, to Alberta Enterprise Corporation – and you and the Premier and other members of cabinet have talked about it in question period – to provide investment into Alberta business. There's money in the

budget, as I understand it, for Alberta Enterprise Corporation, Alberta Investment Management, and other places. In your ministry what are you doing to attract investment into Alberta so that more jobs will be provided?

Ms Sigurdson: One of the great things that we just did was develop a new ministry, Economic Development and Trade.

Mr. McIver: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: The creation of that ministry gives business sort of a focused one-stop shop to go to for support. This is something businesses asked for, and we are very pleased to bring it forward. That ministry is, you know, working with business, so I would suggest that you talk with them regarding that.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Now, I tabled in the House the other day a report from last July, an Alberta jobs report. It was yesterday I tabled it. My understanding is that you've had possession of this year's report for two or three months now, but my hearing it from somebody else isn't the same as hearing it from you. Do you have the updated report, and when do you think you'll be releasing it?

Ms Sigurdson: I know it's on our website.

Mr. McIver: This year's report is on your website?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. I think it was yesterday.

Mr. McIver: Oh, it was put up yesterday after I tabled it. Bless your heart. Okay.

Bless your heart, too, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I haven't done anything, but I'll take the compliment.

Mr. McIver: Okay. All right. Now that we know it's there, we will look for it on your website.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. We put it there.

Mr. McIver: What specific things are you doing to create jobs in hard-to-employ categories, or underemployed categories? Let me say that. That's more accurate. I'm talking about disabled people. I'm talking about aboriginal and First Nations people. Are there any new initiatives that you're doing to get them more heavily represented in the workforce?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Certainly, one of the initiatives that we have is working with restaurants for the disabled population, working with them so they can, you know, have meaningful employment in that industry. That's one of the things we do. We continue with Women Building Futures. Of course, that's a focus on women in sort of nontraditional-type roles.

Mr. McIver: Yeah. That's been going on for a while. It's a great program. I'm glad you're continuing it.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, we're continuing it.

Mr. McIver: Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: In terms of indigenous people we're certainly – as I toured the province sort of over the summer and spoke with groups, we did talk to many businesses about just specific initiatives they had and were supportive of them moving forward in that. I think the Aboriginal Relations ministry is more . . .

Mr. McIver: The place to ask? Okay.

Ms Sigurdson: . . . focused on doing work in that area.

Mr. McIver: Moving on, then, if you don't mind, back to the job-creation incentive program. There have been quite a few questions in the House about what the rules are around that. Have you put them on the website in the last couple of days, or can I ask you where I can find the rules on that program?

5:00

Ms Sigurdson: The details of that program specifically will be available in the spring, but certainly we do have some information. It's a \$178 million investment over a two-year period and \$5,000 per new net job. Those new net jobs are determined by employment insurance. It has to be net new over the 2015 . . .

Mr. McIver: Thank you. You went right to my next question: by the employment insurance reports. On those reports: are there going to be controls in place? If somebody lays off 10 full-time employees and hires 20 part-time employees, will they get \$3,300 for each of the part-time employees? Are there checks and balances to make sure that that doesn't happen?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, it absolutely has to be net new. They can't fire someone and then hire someone new, and we'll know that by the numbers that we have from employment insurance. I'll commit to stewarding this program myself, and we'll make sure that there are checks and balances. We want, of course, to invest in . . .

Mr. McIver: I'm trying to help you to be successful, Minister.

Ms Sigurdson: I know you are, and I just want to say a few things.

Mr. McIver: I want everyone to love your program once all the rules come out.

Fifteen seconds left, by the looks of it, but I will take this time, Minister, to thank you for this opportunity. I'm sure we will talk more both in the House and out of the House, but it's important for us to have this opportunity. On behalf of our caucus and my colleagues I'll be talking to you later.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

The next 20 minutes we are going to be spending with our member from the Liberal caucus, Dr. Swann.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Did you want to give a statement, or do you want to go back and forth with the minister?

Dr. Swann: Back and forth would be preferable. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you, Madam Minister, and to your staff for their background. I look forward to a back-and-forth discussion focusing on areas that you'll be familiar with that I've raised over the past while with respect to farm workers and the important new initiatives you've taken.

On behalf of farm workers in Alberta I'd like to thank you and your government for stepping up and bringing Alberta into the 21st century, ensuring that paid farm workers do enjoy a safe workplace, the ability to say no to unsafe working conditions, the benefits of workers' compensation when they're injured, and avoiding the need to go to court over things like amputation or death or significant

long-term disability. It was an important decision that you made, that obviously has budget implications.

I'd be interested in hearing if you have thoughts about step 1, step 2, step 3, where we're going there. I see the budget on page 76, safe, fair, and healthy workplaces, has gone from \$172,000 to almost a million. That suggests some real commitment. The Appeals Commission for Alberta workers' compensation has gone up somewhat. Perhaps you could start with a discussion of how the budget relates to your commitment to improving worker health and safety and compensation.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Thank you. Occupational health and safety – that's the one you're looking at, the increase there, 14.9 per cent – is responsible for the legislated requirements to ensure adequate protection for workers. Employers, of course, are responsible to ensure that the health and safety of workers are protected. Workers also have an equal responsibility to protect themselves and their co-workers and to co-operate with their employer to keep the workplace safe. The 2015-16 estimate is higher, primarily due to the cost of delivering OHS inspection and investigation programs and partnerships in injury reduction. Expenses related to OHS are fully funded through the WCB. So it's just about, yeah, making sure that we are able to have those investigators go out to the different workplaces and ensure that workplaces are safe.

Dr. Swann: I'm relating this to the farm and agriculture sector. Does that include new inspectors for the agriculture and farm industry?

Ms Sigurdson: We're committed to making sure farm and ranch workers are safe. That's the only workplace in Alberta that's not protected.

Dr. Swann: Exactly, and I appreciate that. What of this new money is going into farm and agriculture safety?

Ms Sigurdson: This item is about just making sure all workplaces are safe.

Dr. Swann: These are special people, obviously. Farm inspectors will be different from construction/occupational inspectors. Do you have in mind how many new inspectors you'll need for the farm and agriculture sector inspections?

Ms Sigurdson: As I said, we are certainly as a government very committed to making sure that all workers are safe.

On sort of the details regarding exactly the numbers or things, certainly we want to work with all industries to make sure that they have the right kind of qualifications. There are specific nuances to each industry, so we're going to go ahead and make sure that we know what people need to know if they're going to be investigating in different workplaces.

Dr. Swann: Can you talk a little bit about what steps you plan to take to bring about occupational health and safety standards on agriculture work sites? What is the next step towards getting work-site health and safety standards and protection for workers?

Ms Sigurdson: I think that's going to unfold in the days to come, and really I'm not at liberty to give you those details at the moment.

Dr. Swann: So you don't yet have a plan to institute occupational health and safety?

Ms Sigurdson: I didn't say that we don't have a plan. I'd just say that I'm not at liberty to give you those details right now.

Dr. Swann: Well, what are you thinking about? What is the next step, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. You know, I really can't sort of divulge the details of that at this point, but I could certainly commit to getting back to you in the weeks to come, when I'm able to discuss this more openly.

Dr. Swann: Okay. What about the WCB? What's the plan for the WCB? Every day people are getting injured and getting fired at the job or going to court over injuries. What, if anything, is the plan to expand the WCB to ensure that all workers are, as they are in other workplaces, going to be adequately compensated or protected during their recovery?

Ms Sigurdson: I guess what I just want to talk about in a more general sense is that our government is looking at all the agencies, boards, and commissions, and we're doing a review of all government agencies, boards, and commissions. Of course, the Workers' Compensation Board is one of them. As we move forward, we'll be assessing and reviewing this, and the steps forward will depend on what the review gives us.

Dr. Swann: Well, surely, this is independent of whether you add or subtract the WCB. You have committed publicly to including agriculture workplaces in the WCB. I'm just asking what the next step is to getting to it. How much longer will we expect people to wait to get some action on the WCB in the workplace?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I certainly have not done what you just suggested I did. That's not been something that we've said.

Dr. Swann: You've not committed to WCB in the agriculture sector?

Ms Sigurdson: We are committed to making sure that workplaces are safe for all workers, including farm and ranch.

Dr. Swann: I thought you indicated that you would treat all workplaces similar across the province. Doesn't that include a requirement for WCB protection, and if not, why not? Why would you not include workers on farms and ranches under the WCB? What would be the reason not to?

5:10

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I think people can debate this issue on both sides quite extensively. The government has not made a formal announcement regarding this.

Dr. Swann: No. I'm just asking what your goal is.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the goal is to make sure that workers are safe, you know, so I'll just say the same thing again.

Dr. Swann: Okay. But even safe workplaces have injuries. What is your goal around compensation for injuries?

Ms Sigurdson: As I said, we haven't made that announcement yet, so I'm not going to make that in this room.

Dr. Swann: Do you have a goal around protecting workers?

Ms Sigurdson: Absolutely. We want to make sure that farm and ranch workers are . . .

Dr. Swann: I'm talking about financially, compensating them for injury and death, which they haven't been covered for ever in Alberta.

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Yeah, Alberta is certainly the only jurisdiction in Canada that doesn't include farm and ranch workers, so we are concerned about that.

Dr. Swann: But I don't hear a commitment. Why are you unable to commit to taking the steps towards compensation and protection?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, because we still need to make a public announcement about that, and I'm not going to make that here.

Dr. Swann: All I'm talking about is the commitment.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'm telling you the commitment. I think I said it a few times, that we are committed.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Are you committed to addressing child labour standards in agricultural operations?

The Chair: If I may just jump in here, is the member looking for announcements on bills that could be brought by the government to the House? If that's what you're looking for, you'd know that the minister wouldn't be able to do that as far as privilege. Is that what you're looking for, Member? I just wanted to clarify.

Dr. Swann: Well, one of your goals, as stated here, is that "for too long, Alberta has been the only Canadian jurisdiction that maintains broad exemptions for the farm and ranch sector with respect to core labour legislation." The minister already said that that includes occupational health and safety. The implication is that that would include child labour standards. The implication is that that would include workers' compensation. The implication is that that would include labour code standards. How does the minister intend to improve conditions for paid farm workers?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'm going to say that again. I mean, I'm not at liberty to talk about that detail right now.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Can you talk about the investment in occupational health and safety inspectors? How many are there, and are there plans to increase the number of occupational health and safety inspectors in the province?

Ms Sigurdson: For 2015-16 we have 163 OHS officers budgeted for, and that's up somewhat from 2014-15, which was 158.

Dr. Swann: On page 74, 3(c), performance measures, the percentage of employment standards complaints completed within 180 days. That's six months. So the percentage of employment standards complaints completed within 180 days of the date of complaint is at about 61 per cent now, and the target is 63 per cent. About two-thirds of complaints are investigated within six months. Does that seem reasonable, for a complaint to be investigated within six months? It seems like a long time. I'm looking at the ministry business plan. It surprises me that it would take six months to investigate a complaint at a work site that's unsafe, that it would not be done sooner than six months. I'm just raising that as a question. Perhaps you want to look into that.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Yeah, we'll take that under advisement. You know, it is a standard that often can be very complicated. People have to be interviewed, going out to the site, so it takes approximately that time.

Dr. Swann: So there's a potentially unsafe condition there that's been identified, and it remains for six months.

Ms Sigurdson: No, no, no. I mean, they can order a stop order right away if they go out and they find that there's something there, but sometimes to complete the whole investigation takes a longer period. The unsafe condition is mitigated immediately.

Dr. Swann: But if you haven't defined whether it's unsafe yet, if it takes six months to define it as being unsafe, it might be up to six months before it's actually changed.

Ms Sigurdson: I'm going to ask my deputy minister just to give you more details because it is a more detailed process than just sort of determining yes or no. You know, it's more complex.

Mr. Corbould: Yeah. I would just say that it's the completion of the investigation that takes that amount of time. When the occupational health and safety investigators go in, they immediately and often proactively cease and desist work that is going on in unsafe areas. Oftentimes it takes a much longer time to investigate the details of those cases and why the original unsafe condition was in place. Really, what they're looking for is: are there systemic issues to why it was in place? Is the safety program good or not? Is the unsafe thing that was detected at the beginning a result of the worker being unsafe, or is it a result of the employer not providing a safe working environment? Those are all things that take investigative time.

The other thing is that sometimes we can't go in and do our part, in some extreme cases, until some of the police have done their criminal investigations. All of that contributes to an average, or overall, completion rate of six months. At the beginning, at the very instance when the inspectors go on-site, if necessary, they will issue a stop-work order so that no work carries on in an unsafe environment, and that persists throughout the completion of the investigation.

Dr. Swann: Would you have any idea of how this compares to other provinces in terms of taking six months to complete an investigation? Do we have any numbers?

Mr. Corbould: We do, and we can get that information.

Dr. Swann: Thanks.

I've talked with the minister about the WCB appeal period. Currently it's one year from the time of injury. Beyond one year injured workers can't appeal a decision by WCB to increase or modify their work program or their compensation. Has the minister considered extending the WCB appeal period to at least four years as the result of concerns expressed by many workers that they may be quite disabled, their family may be going through financial difficulties, there may be psychological problems, difficulty getting into a specialist? It may well take a year before they can get a handle on what is reasonable and what isn't reasonable. So I guess I'm asking if the minister has considered that appeal period as something that we should look into.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said before, certainly we're doing a review of all the agencies, boards, and commissions, and reviewing WCB is part of that. You know, this is something that has been brought to my attention by other folks, too, so that is something that we'll be looking into reviewing.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

Regarding equal pay for work of equal value Ontario has brought in legislation around equal pay for work of equal value. Would you consider including that as valued legislation in Alberta?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, we're certainly committed to making sure that there are fair wages for all Albertans, and that's why we did increase the minimum wage. We know that 64 per cent of low-wage workers are women. Certainly, that helps many women be able to put food on the table and care for their families, so we're very pleased to do that. I know that the new Ministry of the Status of Women is looking into pay equity, so I think that perhaps that question would be good to forward to them.

Dr. Swann: To whom, again?

Ms Sigurdson: The Ministry of the Status of Women. Minister Phillips.

Dr. Swann: Thanks.

With respect to your election platform . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Sorry. There is a point he wants to clarify.

Mr. Corbould: I do want to make a point of clarification for the record. In your earlier question you referred to paragraph 3(c) and the 180 days. That is specific to employment standards complaints and their investigation, not OH and S. So while I answered because the question was asked with respect to OH and S, if you look at the line, it is about employment standards complaints.

The same theory applies as the answer I gave. In this case, in employment standards, it's often even more difficult because a lot of the complaints are not even attributed. People are allowed to make complaints through our phone lines, and that takes a lot longer to track down. So it's the same principle. I just wanted for the record to clarify that that line refers to employment standards. We can still get the other information.

5:20

Dr. Swann: You have it reported here on that specific issue I raised, I guess, the duration of time generally to assess a complaint about safety on a work site.

Mr. Corbould: Yeah. I answered that way because the question was asked as about safety.

Dr. Swann: Yeah. Do you have that statistic, though?

Mr. Corbould: We will get it to you at the end, yeah. We will get that to you, and we can measure it out.

Dr. Swann: Thank you. That's great.

Your platform in the last campaign was a commitment to introduce a job-creation tax credit. That's changed into a grant program. What was the rationale behind the transition from a tax credit to a grant program?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we changed it to a grant program because we wanted to ensure that the charitable sector and the nonprofit sector were included and so that they could have access to that. This ensured that they could access the grant also, besides the private sector.

Dr. Swann: Who did the government consult in developing the program?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we're continuing to work with business and the nonprofit sector, you know, to fulfill that and support them, to make sure that they're viable here in Alberta in this challenging time.

Dr. Swann: I guess I'm asking where the idea came from and how it worked in other jurisdictions. How did the program work, and how did it convince you that this was a way to go?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this was a campaign promise, as you've mentioned already, so it came through our campaign. Obviously, we fulfilled that promise. I think it's similar to . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The time has run out, unfortunately. We were having too much fun.

The next group is the government caucus, I think. I believe it's Mr. Coolahan.

Mr. Coolahan: Yes. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you. Are you going to go back and forth with the minister, or would you like to make a statement?

Mr. Coolahan: Yes. If it's permissible, Minister, that would be great.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Sigurdson: I have a question. Do we get a break? It's been almost two hours.

The Chair: We can have a break in concurrence with everybody.

Ms Sigurdson: Can we have a break?

An Hon. Member: Are we going to increase the time after?

The Chair: That was a question I know we had because it does eat into the three hours. We do have three hours allotted for this. The question was whether we add five minutes at the end and let the clock stop or if we continue.

Ms Sigurdson: Could I just ask for a clarification, then? In previous estimates, like in other years past, the three hours had to be every second of it? There was no break allowed?

The Chair: There were breaks allowed. I actually have the *Hansards* from those dates. I went back and researched that question because it was brought up last night, and I can tell you that there were three hours allocated to all of these, and there were in fact breaks, some between five and seven minutes, but the clock was not stopped. It continued. The standing orders only say that you get three hours. So that's past practice up until now.

Mr. Hanson: In Finance this morning they took a break, and they added it onto the clock at the end, so I would ask that we do that here.

The Chair: Okay. Well, like I said, it was something that was brought forward as, I believe, a point of order last night. The ruling that I gave was exactly that, that my understanding is that in past practice up until now you do take a break, absolutely, five minutes, but the clock doesn't stop. Do I understand correctly that you have a motion?

Mr. Hanson: Yes, absolutely. I would move that if we take a five-minute break, we would add five minutes onto the end.

We have a lot of people in the room that want to ask questions, and we are limited to three hours on these debates, so every minute counts.

The Chair: Okay. We have a motion on the floor for adding five minutes. Yes? Okay. No objections from anyone? Okay. A show of hands. Those in favour of the motion to take a break and stop the clock? Those against? Two of you. Okay. Thank you. The motion carries.

We'll take five minutes, and we'll reconvene at 5:30 on the dot. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 5:25 p.m. to 5:31 p.m.]

The Chair: Members, I would like to call the meeting back to order, please. Thank you.

Minister, we're good to go? Excellent.

Now we turn to the members of the government caucus. You have 20 minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Coolahan: Thank you, Chair. We have established that we're going to go back and forth, and I may be sharing my time with MLA Connolly as well.

I just want to continue on the vein of the job-creation incentive program. There were some questions answered about it already. You know, a lot of my Calgary constituents have small businesses and small franchises, the mom-and-pop stores and whatnot. I just wanted to clarify. I think you said a bit of it. What types of organizations are eligible for the grants? Does it include government hospitals and schools as well as nonprofits?

Ms Sigurdson: It's certainly for businesses, large businesses as well as small ones, and registered charities. All sort of government entities such as hospitals, schools, or other levels of government are not eligible. It really is for charities and nonprofits as well as for private-sector employers.

Mr. Coolahan: Thank you.

Can you be specific about how it will help smaller businesses and provide us with some details about the application process?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the application process will be available in the spring. Certainly, we want to make it simple for business. With the creation of our new Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, as we said, we want it to be like a one-stop shop, just to be able to go to their website, and there will be information on this as well as STEP. You know, anything to do with a business, they can just go to one place. They can just click on that, and they'll get all the information they need to apply for that. I know that businesses may be wanting to hire new hires but just really don't feel that they can do that, so this is giving them that bit of incentive. Of course, they have to have their own business plan, whether it makes sense for where they're going with their business. But, I mean, I think it really will help those who want to expand but maybe just need that little bit of incentive so that they can create new jobs for Albertans.

Mr. Coolahan: Very good. Thank you.

I'm just going to change gears a bit here, talk about the health workforce action plan. Now, this plan was developed to address health workforce issues and is aimed to encourage a collaboration between government departments and health sector stakeholders. As such, can you tell us, Minister, why the health workforce action plan was reduced by \$10 million in the tabled budget?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. The decision to reduce the spending for the health workforce action plan was made after serious consideration. A significant portion of that budget in recent years has been allocated to sort of ongoing operational activities, which wasn't the original intent of the plan. The reduction will result in \$10 million, actually, in savings. It should be noted that the \$6.9 million of the

\$30 million fund was not actually spent in the 2014-15 fiscal year since the full list of projects did not proceed as initially planned. We've worked with our colleagues in partnering ministries to determine how the remaining \$20 million should be best allocated for 2015-16 to achieve strategic priorities and with a view to minimizing the impact on Albertans.

Mr. Coolahan: Great. So just to clarify, the entire HWAP, to use the acronym, was not spent in 2014-15? Do we know where that money will go at this point?

Ms Sigurdson: That's right. Just to clarify, \$6.9 million of the \$30 million was not spent in the last fiscal year. Some of the projects were rural pharmacists and chronic kidney disease patients, so that was Health, obviously; physician assistants at Alberta Health Services; physician assistant education program development at the University of Calgary; educational seat expansions in health programs. Those are some of the programs that this does support.

Mr. Coolahan: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go back to small-business support again. The Finance minister's budget speech did mention that we have to reduce our reliance on a single commodity and a single market, a single price over which we have no control. So diversifying our economy is an extremely important issue for Alberta, and we know that small business plays a significant role in achieving this. My question is: how does your ministry plan on supporting small business in Alberta in this economic downturn?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, it is very important for us to support small business at this time, and we're doing several things to support them to continue to operate and create good jobs here in Alberta. We do have the job incentive program, which we just announced yesterday, that will certainly support employers to create new jobs.

Also, today we announced the summer temporary employment program, which is a wonderful program that supports students to have work exposure, and it will create more than 3,000 jobs here in Alberta. It really just connects those students with both the private sector and the nonprofit sector so that they can get the work experience that they so badly need. We announced it today at the University of Alberta along with the president of the Council of Alberta University Students, and she talked about how important it was because it's so hard to get that job experience. So STEP helps students get that job experience while supporting employers to be able to hire them, and then that can help them in their career and the development of themselves as time goes on, just learning some of those basic skills about what it's like to have a job. We're so pleased to support small business with this reinstatement of the summer temporary employment program.

Also, there's increased funding for the Canada-Alberta job grant; \$17.3 million has been allocated in 2015-16. This will help employers use a grant to train current and new employees. So the employees they already have: if they need to upskill, you know, learn some different skills so that they can do their jobs better, this grant is available, and it will be a real help to small business.

Mr. Coolahan: On the training piece can you just elaborate a bit? If there's, I guess, technology changes in the workforce, they will be able to apply for that sort of training upgrade?

Ms Sigurdson: That's right, you know, upskilling people so that they can stay current with what's going on and if they've been in that industry for a while and just haven't been back at school and they need to refresh themselves. It's absolutely whatever employers

see as important for their employees to be able to have the skills they need to do that job.

I just want to say, too, that Alberta continues to be the best place in Canada for a small business. We have one of the lowest small-business taxes. We have a really good environment here for small business, and these programs help make it better.

5:40

Mr. Coolahan: Great. Thank you.

It was already touched on a bit, on your ministry helping underrepresented groups get into the workforce. Now, will the new job-creation incentive program boost participation and help underrepresented groups get in the workforce?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this program is certainly meant to support business to be able to – you know, we're calling it net new hires. So beyond the people they hired in 2015, it's an opportunity for them in 2016 to hire new people, and then they will be eligible for that \$5,000. Employers can hire up to a maximum of 100 positions if they need that in their company. They're eligible for up to that. It's really up to the employers because we're just creating the environment. It's those job creators, innovators, entrepreneurs who are determining what their business needs. So it's really up to the businesses who they're hiring.

Mr. Coolahan: It's great to see you and your ministry taking action on this. Thank you.

Related to this, what review tools are you considering to track and measure outcomes of the job-creation incentive program?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, we want to see how much this may impact the unemployment rate. They will be net new hires, so we're hoping to see some results in that regard. We're putting \$178 million over two years in this program, so that's showing a substantial investment in business. We are wanting to make sure that we also look just at the viability of businesses: is this an asset to them, I think some of the self-reporting from businesses, how they're able to use it.

We just did the announcement yesterday. We were out at a steel manufacturing location, and they were very supportive of this. It will make a big difference for them to expand their business, which they felt they couldn't do unless they had access to this kind of a grant.

So we'll certainly be working very closely with different businesses – small, medium, and large – to see how it is impacting them individually in their business and looking at some of those employment numbers.

Mr. Coolahan: That's great. Was there a target underrepresented group in this?

Ms Sigurdson: I don't think so. No, we don't have a specific target for that.

Mr. Coolahan: Thank you, Minister.

If we can switch gears again to talk about collective bargaining and essential services and how that might look in your ministry. A decision by the Supreme Court of Canada recently has required that Alberta update its legislation to ensure fair collective bargaining for public-sector workers. I understand that your department has started a consultation process for essential services. Can you please speak as to who you are consulting with during this process?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah. Obviously, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that in fairness and justice workers need to have the right to strike. Right now in Alberta we're not congruent with that legislation. Workers in the public service don't have the right to

strike. We have a deadline until the end of March 2016. So we are meeting with, certainly, labour groups to hear their concerns; meeting with public-sector employers who, of course, are impacted by this; and looking at the definition of essential services, how this is going to come out. So there is an extensive consultation process regarding that.

On September 16 an announcement was made regarding the commencement of the consultations on essential services, and the news release was issued outlining the process being undertaken with key stakeholders and invited public input also. The deadline for written submissions was October 30, but there have been some people who have contacted my office, and we did extend that to November 15 because there are a few folks who wanted that extra time. Consultation with affected stakeholders regarding the proposed essential services approach will help mitigate the possibility of future disputes and challenges to the legislation.

The consultation will help identify components of the public sector where the strike prohibitions could be maintained because we also need to have those essential services; for example, certain emergency services, workers, where it is assumed the levels of essentiality will be very high. Police officers, firefighters, of course: these are some essential services. Generally speaking, public-sector unions support a shift to an essential services model. However, in special circumstances they may still prefer a process of compulsory arbitration. Meetings are continuing throughout November, and we're moving ahead on that legislation.

Mr. Coolahan: That's great. I really appreciate the fulsome consultation process on this. I think it's really important.

Does your ministry plan on releasing the feedback from these consultations, be it maybe online? I'm not sure how that would be done.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. We're going to certainly compile all of the information that we've received and, you know, share that publicly, so putting it on our website.

Mr. Coolahan: Okay. Great. As a result of the consultation and the Supreme Court decision, does your department plan to increase the support staff and funding to ensure that essential services meet the expectations of the Supreme Court ruling?

Ms Sigurdson: At this point we're still in the consultation phase, right? We're still working on that. We'll know more later. That may be impacting many ministries, many departments, so I can't really speculate on that right now, but it's something that we will be able to give you more details about after we've gotten more clarity, after the consultation process is complete.

Mr. Coolahan: That's great. Thank you for your fulsome answers, Minister.

MLA Connolly will ask you a few questions.

Mr. Connolly: Thank you very much, Minister.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: Five minutes and 32 seconds.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

To begin with, I'd like to start with the STEP program, which you've talked about in great detail so far. As you know, youth unemployment has been on the rise. Many youth choose to return to school after months of unsuccessful attempts of job searching, as I would have had to do if the election had gone a different way. I was pleased to see that this government has chosen to reinvest in

the STEP program. As a youth who was in university as recently as eight months ago, I can tell you that such a program would have been a godsend when I was studying in Ottawa. My first question is: how much has the minister committed to this grant program in this year's estimates? How many young people does the ministry expect will take advantage of this excellent program?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to say that I do think it was an excellent program, and it had been around for quite a few decades before it was cancelled by the previous government in 2013. I myself was part of STEP many years ago. I really had a great opportunity to do a job that I wouldn't have normally, and it gave me great work exposure, so I really think it is a good program, having personally benefited from it.

We are committing \$10 million to this program. We're saying, you know, that we'll be able to support in excess of 3,000 summer temporary employment jobs for students, so we're very excited. We know that not only students are benefiting, but of course also the private sector is included and municipalities, nonprofit organizations. I know that they are very excited because when this program was cut, that meant a lot of challenges for them.

I know that the green shack program, if you're familiar with that, is a program here in Edmonton where local community leagues could have someone support kids to play and do different activities, art, you know, just a real connection for the community. That program was no longer there because they just did not have that kind of funding. So STEP was such a valuable tool for municipalities to use, and that's just one great example of it. I think it's going to make a big difference, and I'm really excited to bring it back.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

As you said, our students need every possible opportunity to succeed, and my understanding is that with STEP's reinstatement doors will be open again for students to gain skills and on-the-job experience, and employers will in turn grow their business further. Minister, who will STEP be available to now that it's been reinstated? Is it the same group, or has the program been expanded?

5:50

Ms Sigurdson: We've changed it slightly. It includes 15-year-olds and up, and really the only criteria is that you are a student. It's a summer temporary employment program, so you'll be returning to school in the fall. You could actually be my age as long as you're going back to full-time school in the fall. It is really an opportunity for students to have that work exposure. It depends on, you know, if that person is a student or not. But that was something that we heard. People said: "Well, you know, I'm 30, but I'm still a full-time student. I'm looking for some work over the summer, and I'd like to be eligible for STEP." We felt that they are full-time students and that they should be eligible, so we did expand it in that regard.

Mr. Connolly: Right. I know that when I was in school, there were many students who were mature students who needed that extra step – excuse the pun – and could have really been helped by this program.

My next question is: how many students will be subsidized through STEP? When does the program start, and how much money are we committing to it?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're saying that it probably will support more than 3,000. I mean, some of our estimates go up to, you know, the high 3,000s, almost 4,000. It really does depend on what

employers decide as they come up. We are subsidizing students \$7 an hour. We're not determining what they're going to make. Like, if they're making \$15 an hour, we're paying them \$7 from government, from this \$10 million that we've committed to, but they could also be paid the minimum wage, which is \$11.20. It really does depend on the employer. There is some variance in terms of hours and that kind of thing, so I can't give you, really, sort of a hard number, but certainly in excess of 3,000 jobs for students will be provided.

Mr. Connolly: Right. Thanks for your answer.

Why was the program announced now when it doesn't start until next summer?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we really wanted to let business and the nonprofit and charitable sectors know that we are going forward with this. Business and nonprofits tell us: "We need time. We need to plan for these things. If you're going to be introducing something like this, we need to think: oh, okay; well, I could be doing this in the summer." We're just being respectful and trying to support business and the nonprofit sector, charities, as much as possible, and that's why we announced it now.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We've run out of time.

Now we will go back to the same rotation we had initially. However, now the time is going to be cut to five minutes each, which the members can combine with the minister, if they wish, for a total of 10 minutes. Because it's a shorter time, I would also like to stress that we stay focused on the estimates of the ministry for the fiscal year 2015-16 as we look for Alberta's economic future in this committee.

Having said that, I believe, Mr. Hunter, you were to start again for your caucus.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to go back and forth with one of my other colleagues in asking the questions.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Hanson: Back and forth with the minister.

The Chair: With the minister. You'll take turns?

Mr. Hanson: Yeah. I've just got a couple of minutes. Then I'll defer back to you, Mr. Hunter.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you, Mr. Chair and Madam Minister. If I could have your attention, please. Thanks.

Ms Sigurdson: I was just trying to clarify. Are you going back and forth with me?

Mr. Hanson: Yeah. I'm going to go back and forth with you, and then when I'm finished, he'll take over.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. So you're just going to put questions on the record.

Mr. Hanson: You betcha.

I guess I'm a little worried and concerned about the budget and how the numbers were arrived at. The Finance minister in a statement to the press promised that ministries such as yours would be held to zero per cent. I know we've covered this before, but I just need some clarification. Your budget was increased by a whopping 43 per cent. That's a far cry from zero. Your office alone increased

its budget by 17 per cent. You stated earlier this afternoon that you had been directed and also that you had borrowed from other ministries to cover your important increases to the STEP program and others. You mentioned Advanced Education and other ministries that you had borrowed from. Could you clarify what other ministries you borrowed from to come up with your roughly \$62 million budget increase? I'm looking at it that that's only to cover about a four-month period until the next budget is released, so that's quite a ton of money. Which ministries did you borrow money from?

Ms Sigurdson: Innovation and Advanced Education supported what we've stood up now as corporate services, so some human resources, information technology, communications, that kind of thing. You just said something about, you know, how we borrowed from them for STEP. That wasn't involved at all in that. It's really just about those kinds of corporate services, and we borrowed them from Advanced Education.

Mr. Hanson: Okay. Good. Thanks.

Advanced Education also increased their budget by 4.7 per cent and Human Services by 4.5, Service Alberta by 7.7. Those ministries were also supposed to only be sitting at zero. I don't see where the money would have been borrowed from them. They should have been showing a negative growth. Anyway, that's all I was concerned about with that one.

Getting back to OH and S, I guess: what will the threshold be that will trigger a farm to fall under the regulations of OH and S?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said – and I'll say that again – we are certainly committed to making all workers safe at their workplaces.

Mr. Hanson: We understand that. But at what point? Is it a \$500,000 operation? If you qualify for the fuel tax credit, is that going to make you fall under OH and S? Is it a million-dollar operation? You know, some farms employ their kids. That's how they pay for their college funds when they go to university. Where is this all going to fall for the average family farm?

Ms Sigurdson: That information will be available in the coming days.

Mr. Hanson: We've committed quite a bit of money to this, but you can't give us any answers at all today?

Ms Sigurdson: That's right. There will be answers. There will be answers.

Mr. Hanson: See, this is why I'm worried and why Albertans are worried about this budget. That's all I have to say.

Ms Sigurdson: This is a timing issue, I just want you to know, and they certainly will have a fulsome explanation of it all in detail.

Mr. Hanson: In my estimation, it should have come out with the budget, the explanation of where the money was going.

I'll defer to my colleague.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I just want to be able to drill down a little bit more into the \$22.25 million that you have allocated for the jobs grant program. Is it going to be spent this fiscal year?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we have allocated – it's, like, pro-rated – the \$22.25 million, and then the total over the two-year period will be \$178 million.

Mr. Hunter: I know the figure, but the \$22.25 million is what I'm asking about right now. Is all that \$22.25 million going to be spent this fiscal year?

Ms Sigurdson: That money is committed to be spent to support the job-creation incentive grant, and we will be giving out those grants to employers. That money is there for them, whether it actually gets to them right away or not. But we'll have it there. For the grants, as they apply, then that money is available. That money is dedicated to the job-creation incentive program.

Mr. Hunter: For this fiscal year, then?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Hypothetically, then, an employer could apply for this at a given date that we will know in the future that will apply to this fiscal year for them?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. This is the tricky part. Ready? This money is allocated for that, but it's based on the employment insurance information that we'll be looking at because the 2014 period is not over yet. Then for the 2016 period we'll compare the employment insurance information so that we know that it's a net new hire. So employers will not receive the funding until early 2017.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. I appreciate that. Maybe I can segue into the next question that I had. We've shed a lot of jobs in the oil and gas industry, obviously, and it's an absolute shame. In Alberta we've shed 63,500 jobs, from what I understand, since January 1. A lot of those jobs have been in the oil and gas sector. If a person lost their job, say, three months ago, would that company be able to access that job grant money to hire that person back?

Ms Sigurdson: It's not so much dependent on an individual. It's dependent on the employment insurance. If it's a net new hire and it's more than the 2015 information, that would be a net new hire. That's all. We're basing it on that. It's not necessarily that specific person. If they haven't created any net new hires, then they won't be eligible for the grant.

6:00

Mr. Hunter: But my question is that these guys have lost a lot of jobs in the oil and gas sector. It seems like you're penalizing them even though they might be able to get back up to par. So if they've lost jobs, you're saying that they are not going to be qualified to be able to access to this grant?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, one of the things that I know you're very concerned about – and you've already expressed it – is that people don't manipulate this program and take advantage of it, right? We're not wanting people to fire people and then all of a sudden hire them later when they get it. So this is one of the ways that's pretty foolproof that we can use. That's why we are doing it, and that's a commitment.

Certainly, people losing jobs in the oil and gas sector is a significant concern for us. The price of oil has plummeted. These businesses are making decisions based on a global issue, and they need to do that.

Mr. Hunter: I completely understand what you're saying. I just see this as being problematic for businesses and problematic for your own department to be able to go forward without having problems and still be able to provide for an equal opportunity for all businesses. I mean, oil and gas has been losing lots of jobs. How do we help them? This is the sector that really needs it. I mean, if

you're the Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour minister – that's the sector that's really hurting right now, yet this is the sector that will not really be benefiting from this program.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, this is one mechanism that we have. Of course, we've created a whole ministry dedicated to economic development and trade, so that ministry is certainly supporting the oil and gas sector. It's at the heart of our economy. This is just one program. You know, there is no program that's a panacea. We have multiple levers to work with, which we are.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. So when will they actually get the access to the money? Is it prior to them hiring, or is it after they hire? How long after they hire? If they hire in July, do they see it in December, after the fiscal year? How long does it take?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, because we're using employment insurance statistics and we're going to be comparing 2015 over 2016, they won't receive the funding until January 2017. So it is a promise. It's not something that they're going to have in their pockets right away. It is a promise. And businesses have asked us that: that helps us; we can be able to plan for that because we know that money will be there for us. But it is based so that we can be very clear that we are creating net new jobs, and I know that's so important to you to make sure that this program is not abused.

Mr. Hunter: Well, sure. Obviously, we need to make sure that happens, but you know, if you have a program that you bring forward and it's already problematic from the get-go, why bring it forward?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I disagree. I don't know if it's problematic. You know, there was a recent poll that 71 per cent of Albertans were very positive about this. So it doesn't seem to be problematic for me.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Well, you know what? I guess the big concern that I have is: what business is going to hire when they're struggling already and will get the money up to a year, maybe even longer than that, later?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want you to know that – certainly, you're right . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The time has run out.
Now we turn to Ms Jansen.

Ms Jansen: Yes. Thank you, Chair. I'd like to go back and forth if it's all right with you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Jansen: I want to mention really quickly that I was a STEP student as well. My first broadcasting job was Grand Forks, B.C., radio, so I'm very fond of the program.

Anyway, I want to speak more specifically about the wage gap and how that's going to be addressed, and I don't want to talk about minimum wage earners. I'd really like to talk about some other areas. You know, to me, for instance, minimum wage earners represent less than 2 per cent of the population in Alberta right now, so I would like to talk about some significant areas where we can look at women employed in certain fields and what possible measurables you could put into place in order to look at what you're doing in terms of the wage gap and exactly how you can measure your success at dealing with it. I'm talking about the kinds of jobs that women can take on that actually raise them out of poverty and

give them a career. Have you given any thought to what those measurables look like?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to say, you know, that I concur with you. It's really important that women, certainly in Alberta, with the greatest income disparity of any province in Canada, receive some significant support. But even before we think about what kind of jobs and all of that, there are so many barriers to women being employed. There are child care issues. There's intimate partner violence, sexual assault. We have some of the highest rates in Canada.

Ms Jansen: That's right. Sorry. I'm going to jump in here because I don't have a lot of time. We know that those are all areas that have barriers. These are lofty goals to address the wage gap. What are your measurables going to be?

Ms Sigurdson: Again, I'm just going to say that these can be measurables. These are measurables. If there is good access to child care, women are more likely to be able to have good-paying jobs. If they can only work certain hours because they have to run and get the kids . . .

Ms Jansen: With all due respect, you know, when I was younger, I worked as a bank teller, and I remember clearly working as a bank teller, knowing that males my age were being hired and were being paid two or three bucks an hour more as a high school student and being promoted faster. I'm talking about those kinds of situations. It's great that – and I'm all for providing more child care. What I'm saying is that if you have a situation where you have two employees in an office space and they're both doing the same job and one is making more, what are your measurables for those situations? I mean, are you going to hold employers accountable? Are you going to talk to employers? Are they going to be responsible for providing you with information? How will that work?

Ms Sigurdson: Right. Well, I mean, we've made a commitment, of course, to increase the minimum wage. I know you don't want to speak about that, but that's where our commitment is, and we did also create the Ministry of the Status of Women.

Ms Jansen: So even they would have to have measurables.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. And it's, obviously, just a new ministry that's developing, and they are developing their plan going forward. I'm just letting you know that this government is absolutely committed to making sure that women are elevated in the workplace. I think one of the things that we're doing with the agencies, boards, and commissions is having a look at diversity and, specifically, gender because many of these boards are not equally – you know, there isn't parity on that, and they're making a lot of decisions regarding how institutions run and things like that. Having more women represented, just like having more women in cabinet, in caucus, makes a difference because we have the lived experience of some of the challenges and barriers. So that's what we're doing.

In terms of specifics further I think that I just want to defer you to the Ministry of the Status of Women regarding that. But we certainly have made a commitment regarding increasing minimum wage, and we know that the wage workers are most . . .

Ms Jansen: Well, we know, for instance, that no women in the trades are making minimum wage. How are you going to look at and measure the success of women in the trades beyond the hires, and

making sure those women are on wage parity with their male counterparts?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, that's not in our current budget, or it's not in my business plan for this year.

Ms Jansen: No. So unless you're a minimum wage earner, you're not likely to be able to see any real measurables in terms of wage parity for men and women. You'd have to be a minimum wage earner in order to enjoy that measurable.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. My deputy just shared with me that we do measure wages in our labour force survey, so we can track it, but we haven't made that kind of commitment right now.

Ms Jansen: You would track it in which areas? In all areas? In private industry?

Mr. Corbould: All wages are captured in the labour force survey by gender. When we do labour force surveys, it's captured by gender. So we can tell you the difference.

Ms Jansen: And your latest statistics would be from when?

Mr. Cummins: The latest ones we could pull up are probably three months old.

Mr. Corbould: Yeah.

Ms Jansen: From three months ago. So you'll use those statistics, then, to measure whatever success you may be having with what you're implementing?

Mr. Corbould: Yes.

6:10

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. But I guess I want you to know that we made some clear commitments in our platform, and we're fulfilling them. This is the commitment we're making around minimum wage so as not to get too far down the line. I mean, we're being incremental and moderate in our approach, not that we don't want there to be more fairness for women in Alberta, but these are what we're committed to right now.

Ms Jansen: All right. I had one other question. Not to jump too much, but in OH and S when you talked about increased investigations, it was just something I caught. Can you tell me what that's about? You've got a 14.9 per cent increase in that area that you attribute to increased investigations. I'm just wondering if you could sort of explain to me why an increase in investigations.

Ms Sigurdson: Prior to me being the minister, you know, my understanding from talking with ministry staff is that they were understaffed, barely able to keep up with investigations, not being able to do any proactive investigations, and really needing to have a more full staff complement to be able to do that and to be able to reach out and do those investigations in a proactive manner. So this increase is due to that.

Ms Jansen: So you're just talking about clearing out old files. You're not talking about increasing the number of investigations. When you say increased investigations, you're just talking about clearing up a backlog of work?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, we're talking about increased investigators, right? We're talking about people who are going out to be able to proactively assess workplaces. Before it was like we didn't even

have enough to staff the incoming complaints. This is why we want to increase it so that there is good monitoring going on, so that we are making sure that those workplaces are safe.

Ms Jansen: And you're finding right now – is it a significant backlog?

Mr. Corbould: It's not so much the backlog; it's just increasing our capacity to do those investigations and be proactive with the investigations. There are also more complexities like occupational diseases and education that a lot of those folks will be able to improve.

Ms Jansen: So you're saying that there is no backlog?

Mr. Corbould: I don't know the answer to that, but we can get the answer to that in terms of backlog. We have ongoing investigations.

Ms Jansen: Okay. So I'm just wondering. If you're talking about more money for increased investigations and there is no backlog, I'm just curious as to . . .

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, how it makes sense is that there wasn't anything proactive, right? So those weren't necessarily complaints coming in, but just as – in southern Alberta, when I was touring that part of the province, we did go to a construction site. We were unannounced. You know, we just came and checked to see if it was a safe workplace. That kind of stuff didn't happen before because there weren't enough OH and S officers to do that.

Ms Jansen: So you're going to be doing, with that extra money, more unannounced visits to work sites?

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah, to make sure that they're safe in Alberta. It is to sort of have a full staff complement so that they can be proactive to ensure workplaces are safe in Alberta.

Ms Jansen: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: You still have 31 seconds.

Ms Jansen: I have 31 seconds. All right. Well, I'm not going to use that.

Ms Sigurdson: Oh, I can share something. We just found out that there is no backlog currently.

Ms Jansen: There is no backlog, but you're still adding staff?

Ms Sigurdson: We are.

Ms Jansen: All right. Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we turn to the government caucus. I believe, Mr. Connolly, you have questions.

Mr. Connolly: Yes. Thanks again. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks again to the minister. I'm going to start with talking about the increase in ministry spending if that's all right with you, and I'll be going back and forth, please.

Ms Sigurdson: Okay.

Mr. Connolly: Of course, as Albertans we know that ensuring key public services during tough economic times is important. Taking care of each other is part of the Alberta way. In Budget 2015 the ministry is proposing an increase for this year. Why did the minister

feel that it was important to ensure that Albertans had this investment to support jobs and economic growth?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, it's a challenging time in Alberta right now, with the downturn in the economy, so we really wanted to show business that we wanted to work with them and support them. That's why we put \$10 million back into STEP and \$22.5 million into the job-creation incentive grant program, that will obviously help employers to be able to hire staff that they need. Besides that, we also have the Canada-Alberta job grant, that has a significant increase, working with our federal partners regarding that so that staff can be upscaled to meet the needs of their businesses. So all of those are sort of a suite of things that we're doing to support businesses and the nonprofit sector here in Alberta so that, you know, workers can have the right skills and have jobs.

Mr. Connolly: Right. Thank you.

Albertans want to know that their government has a realistic and responsible plan and that they won't be subject to the reckless cutbacks that other private members and parties have proposed. How will the ministry's increased expenditures help Albertans through this economic downturn?

Ms Sigurdson: I guess I just want to say that it is a \$62 million increase over last year's spending for programs. I just identified those different programs. STEP, the job-creation incentive grant, and the Canada-Alberta jobs grant really are a boon to businesses, the nonprofit sector. We are working with them, and we are showing them that we are a partner. We want very much to work with them. I've been talking to many business owners across the province, and we're here to support them through this tough time. We acknowledge that the fall in the oil price has created a lot of challenges for them. We want to be active. We're wanting very much to show business that we want to work with them and are doing what we can to support them. For small business specifically, we're still a great place for small businesses. We have one of the lowest taxes in Canada, and many small businesses do well in Alberta because of this good environment that we have.

Mr. Connolly: All right. Great. You might have touched on this a little bit before. Is this increase substantially higher than in previous years, and can you give us a quick comparison?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, as I said before, this ministry actually was, you know, sort of created in 2013, so it doesn't have a long history. Some of the money from the previous budget was not spent just because of decisions made by the previous government. Really, the only major increase this year over last year is the \$22.5 million in the job-creation incentive grant. We're being prudent in stepping forward, showing business that we care about them, but we're also being responsible about the budget. It is an increase specifically to support business.

Mr. Connolly: Right. Thanks.

Given the challenges facing Alberta, how does this budget balance the maintenance of the much-needed public services and the need for fiscal restraint?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, as a government the major thing that we said in our platform and what we were elected for is that we wanted to stabilize public services, so we have invested in education programs, in health care, and, really, the postsecondary system, created some stability. Certainly, as the Minister of Advanced Education I can tell you that the postsecondary education

sector is very grateful. It's been a very rocky road for them for a long time.

An economic downturn: this is the time when people need those public services, and we very much want to support those to be provided to Albertans, but we're being moderate and prudent moving forward. We're very much not wanting to create more debt than we need to. We have a plan to balance the budget, and we're very proud of that, and we feel like it's a prudent step forward.

Mr. Connolly: Great. Thank you.

I'm just going to change gears a little bit again. The Alberta immigrant nominee program has approximately 10,000 applications awaiting assessment and is only able to issue 5,500 nomination certificates for 2015. My question, hon. minister: what is the plan to deal with these overwhelming applications that are stuck waiting, not knowing what their outcomes will be?

6:20

Ms Sigurdson: I have a bit of a tickle here, so I hope I can continue for the next few minutes.

Of course, the Alberta immigrant nominee program is a valuable pathway for individuals already working in Alberta seeking to settle permanently in our communities and workplaces. This program is way oversubscribed, so what we did to address the backlog was that we put a temporary pause on it. The program pause gives the AINP the time it needs to address the high volume of applicants. We really needed to do this because it was quite unfair for us to just put people back in the queue when oftentimes their work permits would be expiring before the end of the program. It was sort of giving them false hope.

So we did put a pause on this program, and we are working well to take care of the backlog. It's moving quite quickly, and we're very optimistic that we'll be able to get it down to a reasonable number. We've already reduced it; I think it was around 8,000. Yeah. There were 8,879 in the queue as of August 27, and on October 16 there were 7,451. We've been able to make a good dent in that, a 16.1 per cent reduction since that time.

The pause will go on till January 27, 2016. We just feel that this is a much more respectful way to work with those nominees who are interested. We were giving them some false hope before because they would maybe have to go back before their application was even looked at.

Mr. Connolly: Right. Of course. Thank you very much for that answer, Minister.

Can you speak to what the program will look like once the pause is raised and applications are opened up again?

Ms Sigurdson: The potential improvements to the AINP could include implementing nomination application intake guidelines, creating a common set of selection criteria, consolidating streams – one of the challenges was that there were so many streams that it became very complicated, and that delayed the assessment process – and then just, overall, simplifying that application process. This pause is not only helping us reduce the number in that queue, but it's also helping us develop our plan going forward so that we don't get into that situation again.

These things that I've just outlined are some of the criteria that we're looking at to streamline the program. We know that these will make it a simpler, more transparent, and faster process for clients and will also help the province use the limited number of available certificates more effectively. Aligning the distribution with Alberta's labour market needs, of course, is always important.

Mr. Connolly: Okay. Thanks.

Is there a plan to increase funding to this program moving forward?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, you know, this is something we do with our federal counterparts – right? – and of course we have a new federal government. It's something that we certainly want to work with them on. We would like to increase the number of nominees we can have in Alberta because there is demand for workers in Alberta, and we don't have enough still in Alberta despite some challenges in some sectors. Right now we have 5,500 nominees, but we have about 80,000 temporary foreign workers. Where other provinces may have, you know, 5,500 nominees, they also have 5,500 temporary foreign workers, so they have a pathway to citizenship for everyone who comes in. We don't for so many people, and even though they maybe had the information that they would be eligible . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Our next rotation. Are you going with the questions, sir?

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair. I'm going to defer, first of all, to my colleague from Battle River-Wainwright. He'll ask a question, we'll do a back and forth again with the minister, and then he will turn it back to me if that's okay with you.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I have a couple of questions just to follow up on what we talked about earlier on. You said earlier that 64 per cent of low-wage earners were women. What do you consider a low wage? Can you quantify that for me?

Ms Sigurdson: I think it's about \$15 an hour.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Hunter: What?

Mr. Taylor: She said: \$15 an hour.

Now, there's an unintended consequence that I see that's happening with the Dairy Queen that you have going in Hinton; you know, the question you brought up there. Wouldn't this minimum wage for Dairy Queen hurt the employer in Hinton? Right now they can have the cream of the crop when it comes to the workers because they're paying a higher wage, as you stated. Now, if they change this and the minimum wage is now \$15 an hour and they're all being paid that throughout all the fast-food restaurants, wouldn't that hurt the ability of these people to get these workers? One, they'd have to raise the pay that they pay these people to \$17, \$18 an hour. So if the wages go up, then they'll have to either charge more or cut staff. That's my thought on this. What is your take on that?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'd just love to see that scenario. It would be cool to see that everyone is paying, you know, their workers a fair wage, a wage so that they can care for their families. I mean, we're speculating, of course.

Mr. Taylor: Of course.

Ms Sigurdson: But I think that what they are doing at the Dairy Queen in Hinton is fabulous, and they are creating a really stable workforce for themselves.

Mr. Taylor: Okay. Well, thank you.

Can I defer this over to Mr. Hunter?

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Chair. Between August and September we lost 14,000 jobs according to your numbers, and the job-creation incentive program caps out at 27,000 jobs. My question: is that over two years or just in the one year?

Ms Sigurdson: That's annual.

Mr. Hunter: Annually? Okay. So it caps out. One more bad month, I guess, at these numbers, these job losses, and we would already be above that number. Do you think that 27,000, that figure, is actually enough?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I just want to say that Alberta is notorious for having sort of this boom-and-bust economy, where all of a sudden things are going gangbusters and people are screaming for people to hire and then times like now, where it's much more difficult. It has a lot to do with our reliance on the oil and gas sector and the lack of diversification by the previous government and how important it is for us to make sure that we are not so reliant on this one employer, this one source. That's why our government is committed to a more diversified economy. But, you know, it's a global phenomenon. It's not just happening in Alberta; it's happening across the globe. Any jurisdiction that has the reliance on oil and gas is having some difficulties, and we're concerned about that, too.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

I would actually like to just kind of go back to maybe the unemployment rates amongst our young people. This demographic group goes from ages 15 to 24. This is actually on page 73 of your business plan. This is performance indicator 1(a). It would seem that in this demographic group we have a chronic problem of underparticipation. The rate is very low. I would like to know: what other programs are you going to be able to implement that would help these numbers go up? I know the STEP program is one that you've talked about, but are there other initiatives that you're looking at?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, we are continuing the good work of our Alberta learning information system, otherwise known as ALIS. This is a resource for students to investigate careers that they may be interested in, with good information about that. It also is sort of a portal, I guess, for you to come to as a youth and get access to jobs, to learn about resumé writing, to get those kinds of supports. There's career counselling. We certainly have a lot of programs that are supporting youth to do that as well as what we just introduced today, the new STEP program.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. One of the other problems that I'm seeing in that 1(a) diagram there is that the aboriginal population living off-reserve also has lower numbers and percentages of participation in the workforce. Are there specifics that you have to help that group as well?

6:30

Ms Sigurdson: Well, certainly, I understand that soon Edmonton is going to have the largest population of aboriginal people in Canada, superseding Winnipeg, which has it now, so this is a concern for our government, absolutely. I think a lot of the barriers to employment for indigenous people have to do with issues around instability. It could be addiction issues. It could be just not having education levels. That's another concern. Many ministries are working on initiatives to support the indigenous people. Human

Services and Advanced Education have special programs for indigenous people to get education so they can work in the workforce. Human Services helps them overcome some challenges.

Mr. Hunter: I appreciate that other ministries are looking into this, but can you give us an example of an initiative that your ministry is using for this?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I mean, they have access to all the programs that I've already spoken about, you know, so all those things: STEP, the job-creation incentive program, and also the Canada-Alberta job grant.

Mr. Hunter: Would you say that our indigenous people have the same problems and concerns that regular Albertans have, or would you say that we need to do more for them?

Ms Sigurdson: Certainly, as a government we very much are wanting to work with indigenous people to make sure that they have access to good jobs and overcome barriers to them. I mean, women have particular challenges. Newcomers to Canada have particular challenges. Indigenous people have particular challenges. They're not the only group who's disadvantaged. But you're right. Their unemployment is much higher. Their completion of high school education is lower. These are all things that we're working on in ministries across the board to support the indigenous population.

Mr. Hunter: So there's not an actual specific program that you can tell us about right now that would address this issue?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, I'm just saying that there are several programs and that there is not . . .

Mr. Hunter: Not indicative of them.

Ms Sigurdson: Pardon me?

Mr. Hunter: Not indicative of this group.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, for example, Women Building Futures. That program serves a very high percentage of indigenous women. I know that. It's not specifically for indigenous women, but we know that there's a high percentage that use it. Certainly, you know, it provides a suite of supports around them: child care, counselling services, some of these things that have gotten in the way of their being able to develop themselves through education or job experience.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate you sharing that with us.

On page 72 your business plan says that "even with fluctuations in the economy there are still industries where labour shortages persist." We're seeing certain industries or certain areas, sectors, that are actually underperforming or underutilized in employment. Can you tell me which ones you guys have identified?

Ms Sigurdson: One of them is just agribusiness. Certainly, in southern Alberta, Lethbridge area, one of the concerns is just getting qualified staff for that industry. They kind of have a bit of – I don't know – a microclimate, to call it that, in that area, where they don't really seem to be affected by the oil prices as much. They're more of a diversified economy there.

I mean, the tourism sector had a booming year this year. In the parks it was amazing. They were so busy, and it had a lot to do with the low Canadian dollar, but they were having some challenges getting staff to fill shifts.

Mr. Hunter: Okay. I appreciate that.

Let's get back to the agribusiness. I agree that they do have problems . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Member. Your time is up, unfortunately.

Ms Jansen, it's your turn. We're going a little bit further because we didn't stop the clock. We still have time.

Ms Jansen: How much time do we have?

The Chair: You have four minutes, ma'am.

Ms Jansen: Four minutes. Okay. Very good.

I just want to touch on two line items. One is 2.5, the policy and labour market information increase. It's about 16.6 per cent. Can you give me a sense of what that increase is for?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Policy and labour market information works with the government policy and program areas to provide strategic advice. The 2015-16 estimate is higher as the ministry anticipates increased spending on workforce strategies, information and technology requirements, which will result in more efficient and effective service delivery to Albertans. So it is about, you know, information technology requirements and workforce strategies information.

Ms Jansen: Okay. Then 2.7, labour qualifications and mobility. The increase is about 28.9 per cent. Can you go into a little bit of detail on that?

Ms Sigurdson: Sure. The 2015-16 estimate is higher primarily due to the increase in funding for the international qualifications assessment service, or IQAS. This is a new immigration assessment stream which will assist overseas immigrants who arrive in Alberta to enter the labour force. This is really giving us some more support so that we can support people coming to Alberta to be able to assess their credentials and see, you know, if they can be certified depending on what kind of occupation they have, giving them access to the market more quickly. We're giving it more resources.

Ms Jansen: Then, finally, 2.4, business and industry partnerships, was cut by 25 per cent. That's about \$730,000. Can you tell me why that cut happened?

Ms Sigurdson: Okay. Sure. This estimate for 2015-16 is lower due to a funding requirement in the Canada-Alberta job fund agreement, which dictates that the ministry needs to allocate more funds to the Canada-Alberta job grant program over the next three years. This will result in slightly less federal funding for business and industry partnerships. So it is about the part of our agreement that we had previously regarding this Canada-Alberta job grant. You know that that area increased significantly.

Ms Jansen: Then just on the OH and S piece. This actually is the first time in estimates that we've had a line item in there that there are no details on, so it's a little bit unusual to be talking about, you know, the increase and what effect it will have on farms and ranches. Are you saying that that information is going to be here within days? I don't think I've ever been to an estimates where we've had a line item that we weren't able to actually discuss. That's what estimates is all about.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, the 2015-16 estimate is higher primarily due to the cost of delivering OHS inspection and investigation programs and partnerships in injury reduction. Of course, I'll just say again

that the expenses related to OHS are fully funded by WCB. So I can share that with you.

Ms Jansen: All right. So as far as what a program might look like for farms, that's something that we just have to wait and see.

Ms Sigurdson: Yeah.

Ms Jansen: So you've budgeted the money, it's a line item, but we can't . . .

Ms Sigurdson: We budgeted money to make sure all workplaces in Alberta are safe.

Ms Jansen: All right. Thank you very much. We appreciate your time, Minister, and, of course, all your staff as well.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you.

The Chair: Well, I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has now concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet next on November 4 at 3:30 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:39 p.m.]

