



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on the
Economy

Department of Employment and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, February 16, 2010
6:30 p.m.

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Third Session**

Standing Committee on the Economy

Bhardwaj, Naresh, Edmonton-Ellerslie (PC), Chair
Taylor, Dave, Calgary-Currie (AL), Deputy Chair
Taft, Dr. Kevin, Edmonton-Riverview (AL), Acting Deputy Chair, February 16, 2010

Allred, Ken, St. Albert (PC)
Amery, Moe, Calgary-East (PC)
Boutilier, Guy C., Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (Ind)
Fawcett, Kyle, Calgary-North Hill (PC)
Hinman, Paul, Calgary-Glenmore (WA)
Lund, Ty, Rocky Mountain House (PC)
Marz, Richard, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (PC)
Taft, Dr. Kevin, Edmonton-Riverview (AL)
Weadick, Greg, Lethbridge-West (PC)
Woo-Paw, Teresa, Calgary-Mackay (PC)

Also in Attendance

MacDonald, Hugh, Edmonton-Gold Bar (AL)
Notley, Rachel, Edmonton-Strathcona (ND)

Department of Employment and Immigration Participant

Hon. Thomas A. Lukaszuk Minister

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6:30 p.m.

Tuesday, February 16, 2010

[Mr. Bhardwaj in the chair]

**Department of Employment and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Welcome. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Just a couple of opening remarks for the benefit of everybody. You don't need to touch the microphones. Our able *Hansard* staff will operate them.

I'm just going to go around and have everybody introduce themselves and have the minister introduce the staff. Then we have a motion which we will need to deal with right off the bat. We're going to go to my right.

Dr. Taft: Kevin Taft, Edmonton-Riverview.

Mr. Lund: Ty Lund, Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Marz: Richard Marz, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Amery: Moe Amery, Calgary-East.

Mr. MacDonald: Hugh MacDonald, Edmonton-Gold Bar. Good evening.

Mr. Hinman: Paul Hinman, Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. I'm Thomas Lukaszuk, Minister of Employment and Immigration.

If I may, also sitting with me is Shirley Howe, our deputy minister, and also with me is Alex Stewart, assistant deputy minister, strategic corporate services division. If you don't mind, Mr. Chairman, I also would like to introduce, sitting here in our gallery, Shelley Engstrom, our senior financial officer; Janice Schroeder, director of communications for the ministry; and Mr. Jordon Copping, my executive assistant.

Mr. Fawcett: Kyle Fawcett, Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Weadick: Greg Weadick, Lethbridge-West.

Ms Woo-Paw: Good evening. Teresa Woo-Paw, Calgary-Mackay.

The Chair: My name is Naresh Bhardwaj, MLA, Edmonton-Ellerslie.

We have a motion, which we need somebody to move, that

Dr. Taft be designated deputy chair for the Tuesday, February 16, 2010, meeting of the Standing Committee on the Economy.

We need somebody to move that.

Mr. Marz: So moved.

The Chair: Okay. And seconded by Ty. All in favour? Okay. Motion carried. Thank you.

Your hand was just too slow, Mr. MacDonald.

I've got a few things to read in for the *Hansard*, just process kind of stuff. Standing Order 59.01(4) prescribes the sequence as follows:

- (a) The Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes,
- (b) for the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition

and the Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may speak,

- (c) for the next 20 minutes, the members of the third party, [Wildrose Alliance] if any, and the Minister or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, may speak, and
- (d) any Member may speak thereafter.

With the concurrence of committee the chair will recognize a member of the fourth party, NDP, if any, following the member of the third party, and for the next 20 minutes the member of the fourth party and the minister or the member of the Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may speak. Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. Department officials and members' staff may be present but may not address the committee.

Members may speak more than once. However, speaking time is limited to 10 minutes at a time. A minister and member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they plan to combine their time with the minister's time.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Department of Employment and Immigration. If the debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the department's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will be adjourning at 9:30 p.m.

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

The vote on the estimates is deferred until Committee of Supply on March 18, 2010.

An amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be propose to reduce the estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is also deferred until Committee of Supply. That is March 18, 2010.

Written amendments must be reviewed by Parliamentary Counsel no later than 6 p.m. on the day they are to be moved. Seventeen copies of the amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members to consider.

Before I ask the minister to speak, do we have an agreement in the committee that after the Official Opposition speaks, we take a 10-minute health break? Is everybody in agreement with that? We don't need a motion. We just need sort of nods.

With that, then, I'm going to invite the Minister of Employment and Immigration, the Hon. Thomas Lukaszuk, to give opening remarks for 10 minutes, please.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I do that, I would be remiss if I didn't introduce one more person, and that's Ms Angela Woo, who is our deputy minister's executive assistant. She also is here with us in the gallery.

Mr. Chairman, since the economic downturn hit the province just over a year ago or so, getting Albertans back to work and re-engaging them with employment has been one of our main priorities in the ministry. Over the past month I have learned a great deal about what the staff members in this ministry have been doing to connect Albertans with employment, assist those in need, ensure our workplaces are fair, safe, and healthy, and help immigrants integrate and settle into their respective communities. This budget was developed by many Employment and Immigration employees in consultation with other ministries, Mr. Chairman, and I am confident it will allow us to continue our important work for Albertans and deliver on the goals set out in our business plan.

Ministry spending has been increasing at a steady rate, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, employment training, immigration, and safety have been steadily supported by this government, and they still are. The government has committed to being back in the black by 2012. Employment and Immigration is contributing to this goal by reducing our spending by \$87 million from 2009-2010 spending levels. With a reduction of this magnitude, although the reduction seems large, keep in mind that our budget of \$1.1 billion is \$130 million more than we spent in 2008-2009.

When the economic downturn hit and Albertans faced layoffs, our income support and health benefits program saw an increase in caseload. Over the past year we've received \$177 million in supplementary funding from Treasury Board to cover these additional costs. As the economy improves, we should see some reductions in our income support, health benefits, and employment training caseloads.

To achieve the target reduction of \$87 million, we first looked at ways to reduce our internal costs. We reduced our administration, hosting, travel, and manpower budgets by \$10 million over the 2009-2010 forecasted spending. We are also adjusting allocations to some of our programs, and I'll take you through some of the affected areas as we go through the presentation.

Our employment programs are at the highest level ever, with \$909 million allocated. This area accounts, Mr. Chairman, for 83 per cent of the ministry's total spending budget. You will notice that we are reducing expenditures for a number of our employment and training programs to \$177 million, down from \$192 million in the 2009-2010 forecasted spending. One reason, Mr. Chairman, for this reduction is that last year's employment program budget also included \$16.3 million in federal labour market agreement funding that was carried forward from the 2008-2009 fiscal year. As I mentioned, we saw an increase in demand for these programs when the economy worsened. As the economy improves, conversely we expect demand to go down. Our budget in this area remains significantly higher than 2008-2009 spending.

We are reducing expenditures in areas that make the most sense. For example, for some time we have been moving away from basic skills and academic upgrading and are focusing our attention on training for work programs instead. We are finding that the skills learned through training for work provide much quicker access to employment for those enrolled, which is our primary goal. Mr. Chairman, I firmly believe that there aren't many Albertans who'd choose to stay on benefits. They do want to be re-engaged with employment.

For some time we have been asking training providers to adjust their programs to incorporate basic literacy and numeracy skills into their programming, and this budget continues that shift. We have also reduced the workforce partnership budget allocation. This area works with employers on attraction and retention issues, and given the economic situation we have seen a reduced need for these types of services on a short-term basis.

6:40

We are continuing to provide companies who are laying off more than 50 staff with services to connect affected employees with jobs, training, or financial assistance. Fortunately, the demand for these services is declining as fewer employers are having to reduce their staff at this point in time. You will see that funding for most of these elements compares favourably to 2008-2009 spending levels.

The other side of our employment program provides financial assistance to Albertans in need, often while we connect them with training or work. Our income supports and health benefits cover basic living costs and health-related items such as glasses, prescrip-

tions, and dental care. Spending levels for these programs will be consistent with spending from 2009-2010 with a couple of exceptions.

We are reducing the overall budget for people expected to work or working. Our focus with this group is to get them into labour markets so they can become less reliant on financial assistance. As the economy improves, we expect to see more people regain their independence. We are also reducing the budget for learners on income support, Mr. Chairman. There have been inequities in the amount of benefits that different types of learners receive, and we are looking into policy changes to address these differences. These changes would not affect current learners and would come into effect sometime this fall.

Another core business area in this ministry is keeping Alberta's workplaces fair, safe, and healthy. Unlike most other elements in our budget spending in workplace standards is relatively unaffected by the economic downturn. Regardless of the economic situation we still need to provide mediation services, educate employers and workers about their rights and responsibilities, and enforce the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Employment Standards Code. There will be some new work on safety initiatives as a result of \$1.1 million in additional funding for the Workers' Compensation Board. We will be putting additional effort into identifying occupational cancers and other diseases and reducing work-related traffic fatalities.

Our immigration program is seeing a \$9 million reduction in expenditures from 2009-2010 spending. Last year's budget included \$6 million in labour market agreement funding that was carried over from the 2008-2009 fiscal year. This was one-time funding that no longer is available to our province.

The economic downturn means a lower demand for workers in some industries, so we are adjusting our international labour attraction activities accordingly. However, we will continue our work to attract skilled workers in areas that have continued labour shortages in order to prepare the province's labour force for the future. Foreign qualifications recognition will receive \$4 million to help people with foreign-earned qualifications, training, and experience gain meaningful employment in their field. Funding for the Alberta immigrant nominee program remains higher than 2009-2010 spending in order to process the increasing number of applications from immigrants who want to live in Alberta. This province, Mr. Chairman, as you know, was built by immigrants, and we continue to need a permanent workforce for economic strength. Once again, you will note that with the exception of the labour supply element, which includes labour attraction activities, spending for each of these programs compares favourably with 2008-2009 expenditures.

We are expecting to spend \$35 million on informing, attracting, developing, and retaining our health workforce in the upcoming fiscal year. This is approximately \$5 million less than we spent last year. We are confident that this level of funding will allow us to meet ongoing commitments to projects that will improve the health, safety, and efficiency of our health care workers.

The federal government has provided \$10 million in community development trust funding. This will enable us to continue our work with communities and to develop training programs for people who have been affected by the global economic downturn such as workers in the forestry industry. These funds will also be allocated to training programs that will enable us to increase labour force participation by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people.

Both the Labour Relations Board and the Appeals Commission for the Workers' Compensation Board are seeing slight reductions to their funding. These reductions are mainly administrative in nature,

and I'm confident that Albertans will continue to receive timely service from each of these entities.

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to present the budget to this committee, and I am prepared to answer any questions that the members may have. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

At this time the chair would like to recognize Mr. MacDonald. You have one hour, sir. Would you be going back and forth with the minister, a combined time of one hour?

Mr. Lukaszuk: It probably will work the best.

Mr. MacDonald: Sure. Let's try that.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. MacDonald: I appreciate that.

I think we should perhaps start with the employment and training budget. Alberta's unemployment rate was 6.6 per cent in January, which was unchanged from December. The province, as I understand it, gained 6,300 full-time jobs but lost close to 14,000 part-time jobs. As of January of this year close to 140,000 Albertans, unfortunately, were unemployed, and that's 47,000 more than the year before. Alberta had the third-lowest unemployment rate in January, behind Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Now, in last year's budget the estimate of the number of unemployed was significantly lower than what actually occurred. My first question would be: given that there was today in the Assembly a supplementary appropriation for the department and that last year, according to the third-quarter update, you had an additional 130 million plus dollars needed, do you think the employment estimate for this year is accurate, or will it be higher and we will be going back requesting more money for needed income support programs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. MacDonald. Obviously, the initial response is that it is never a minister's goal at the time of tabling a budget to anticipate having to return to the Treasury Board with a request for supplemental funding for the ministry. As you must appreciate, this ministry in most of its core work responds to needs at hand which change from time to time relevant to the prevailing economy. But I believe that this budget strikes a good balance in being fiscally responsible. Bear in mind that the overarching goal of our ministry, much like the government of Alberta's, is to be in the black by 2012 and contribute to spurring the economy, in turn to contribute employment, in turn to reduce Albertans' dependency on the programs of our ministry. That's one side. On the other side, we are fully aware of the fact that we will be providing Albertans with benefits on an ongoing basis.

At this point in time I am confident that we have found a balance relevant to dollars for assisting Albertans who are not employed and being able to engage Albertans back in employment. I know that vulnerable Albertans will be well taken care of in the times to come, but the goal of the ministry will be to engage as many of them as we possibly can with employment.

Personally, I am confident from my previous work with this ministry and with low-income Albertans, as I alluded to earlier in my comments, that there are very few, if any, Albertans who want to be dependent on any form of social assistance. Frankly, if you meet with low-income Albertans, they will tell you that not working is demoralizing, not working is not self-fulfilling, and being dependent is not something that they want to experience in life. Hence, the primary goal of this ministry right now will be putting

forward programs that will enable Albertans to become self-sufficient and not reliant.

We also expect some employment growth in 2010, which will see a reduced demand on some of the income assistance programs that we have and on the training and education aspect of our programming as well. At this point in time I am confident that we have the budget, and we will be working with the budget that we have to our greatest extent to fulfill those two mandates.

6:50

Mr. MacDonald: Okay.

My next question then would be – and this is a reflection of what is stated in the fiscal plan. The unemployment rate benchmark as a percentage for Alberta in this budget cycle: the Conference Board of Canada estimates it to be as high as 7.7 per cent, and the low mark would be Global Insight at 6.3 per cent. The province, or your government, is indicating that it will be 6.6 per cent, and it will go down – and I hope you're right on this – to less than 5 per cent in the year 2013. How many of the jobs that will be created will be part-time jobs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you're correct in quoting your numbers. Our forecasts are that in 2011 we'll be in the realm of 6 per cent; 2012, 5.3 per cent; and then 2013, approximately 4.9 per cent. My goal and the goal of the ministry is to engage Albertans in not only full-time but permanent employment.

Hence, many of the programs, as you will notice, within the ministry not only support unemployed Albertans by way of providing them with financial assistance, but they actually follow them into the employment realm. While they are employed, perhaps at entry level jobs, we continue to support them with additional benefits so that they remain employed and progress through the pay scale into a more secure, long-term employment position. That is the only proper way, I would suggest to you, of assisting unemployed Albertans so that they don't find themselves in the revolving door of being employed for a while and then returning to benefits.

Another aspect of employment, as you know and for those who were listening to our debates today in the House, is that Alberta probably is the only province right now that still heavily invests in infrastructure. That particular industry generates not only full-time jobs but long-term jobs with this ongoing investment and well-paying jobs. That's part of our government's investment as well, to create employment.

The fact of the matter is that government in itself does not generate employment; government creates an economic climate in which employers prosper, who then in turn hire Albertans. That is the primary reason why we are determined to be back in the black in 2012 and to make sure that our economy is buoyant so that these Albertans will get employed not only on a part-time but on a full-time basis.

I see you like it. You're smiling, so that's good. We must be on the right track.

Mr. MacDonald: No, hon. minister, I'm thinking of a commercial where a group of men are watching an NFL football game, and they have rather small black cocktail dresses on. Like that commercial, I'm not confident that your government will be back in the black, as you say, in three years.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, my parents never allowed me to watch channels like that, so I haven't seen that commercial.

Mr. MacDonald: It's on TSN.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Oh, okay. Good.

Mr. MacDonald: It was on TSN, but it was pulled.

However, before we get any further, I would like to suggest to you, as I have in other years – and the hon. person sitting to your left used to run the PAO – that I think that in order to have efficient, effective government, the PAO should be run out of your department, not the Treasury Board. That being said, is your department doing any statistical analysis of the age of the civil service?

Mr. Lukaszuk: As part of our workforce development for the province of Alberta not only are we doing age analysis of the civil service, but we are also doing age analysis of Alberta's entire workforce. Even though employment or unemployment rates may fluctuate, particularly right now, it is one of our prime tasks to make sure that Alberta is ready into the future with not only a sufficient workforce but a properly trained and qualified workforce and also distributed properly throughout the province.

As you know, Mr. MacDonald, that is one of our goals. That is why we are working very closely in co-operation with the ministry of advanced education on training our workforce for the future. We are working with the federal government on a number of programs that are aimed at training the Canadian workforce. Also, we pay very close attention to developments in Alberta's workforce. We also, obviously, are in continuous consultation with employers, who provide us with feedback on what a particular industry's needs are, where they are, and when they are. As I alluded to earlier in my comments, the main role of this ministry is to be responsive to those needs to make sure that our economy is not stagnated in any sector by a shortage of well-trained, qualified, and willing employees.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you.

Now, you talked in your opening remarks about employment and training programs. The total budget, as I understand it, is estimated to be \$177 million for this budget year, and that's a decrease of approximately \$15 million from the forecast in 2009-10. Cuts, as I understand it, were made to smaller programs such as academic upgrading and career services while the largest training program, the training for work element, was given a small increase of 1 and a quarter million dollars. How did the department arrive at the \$15 million figure, or the decrease?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, when you're talking about a budgetary decrease, you are correct as far as you compare it only to last year's spending. I would suggest to all committee members that as we go through line items, let's look a little further back. I'm not asking you to stretch too far back, but start looking two, three, or even four years back, and you will find that there was a significant investment by this government into this particular ministry.

As unemployment increased beginning late 2008, the demand for our employment and training programs also increased substantially, as you know. However, the investment in these programs has definitely increased significantly over the last few years, so while we're looking at a reduction right now to employment and training programs from 2010 to 2011 of the \$177 million, our investing represents a substantial increase, actually, over the 2009-10 budget or the actual expenditures of 2008-2009. I can tell you more specifically: \$177 million is \$13 million, or, if you wish, 8 per cent, above the 2009-2010 budget; it is \$14 million, or 9 per cent, above the 2008-2009 expenditures; and it is also \$33 million, or, if you wish, 23 per cent, above 2007-2008 expenditures.

I also believe that as the economy improves – and I think everyone around this table has reasons to believe that the economy will

improve – I expect that the demand for these services will lessen accordingly.

Let's be honest here. We need to achieve savings in this budget. There is no doubt about it. At the outset I have indicated that expenditures in the budget have been diminished. However, the realignment of the budget, I suggest to you, is balanced. It balances between the overall government goal and between the responsibilities that I have as minister to deliver adequate and responsive programs to Albertans who need these programs.

7:00

Mr. MacDonald: Well, we'll see. I have some additional questions.

Before we go any further, I believe – and you can correct me if I'm wrong – that in your opening remarks you talked about a reallocation of funds from '08-09 into '09-10. That money was spent in '09-10. I was led to believe from your remarks that this was operating funding. Was it operating funding, or was it capital funding that was reallocated?

Mr. Lukaszuk: That was operating funding, and that was one-time funding that no longer will be available in this budget before you.

Mr. MacDonald: What authority do you have to reallocate operating funding? I thought that had to be put back into the general revenue fund, that it was only capital amounts or capital funding that could be reallocated.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Just bear with me for a second.

Mr. MacDonald: Sure.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The labour market agreement allowed, with the approval of the Treasury Board, that is, a transfer of \$22 million from one expenditure year to the other. It was not a unilateral transfer by this ministry, but it was with the approval of the Treasury Board.

Mr. MacDonald: That labour market funding would be all federal money? It would be that hundred million plus allocation, right?

Mr. Lukaszuk: That is correct.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you for that. I appreciate that.

Now, you were talking about savings, and I see – and I'm bouncing around here a little bit – element 5.0.1, the health workforce development, where there is a reduction from the 2009-10 budget of \$45 million down to \$35 million this year. I was surprised at one point in the year last year when Dr. Duckett and officials in Alberta Health were telling us we had too many nurses and that we had too many health care professionals. If you go through the public accounts, you would see where your department was going abroad or sponsoring people to go abroad on the province's behalf to recruit health care professionals. It seemed to be a total contradiction. One official said that there was too much, and the other official said, "Well, there wasn't enough, and we need more," and there was a lot of money, in my view, wasted.

Is this budget reduction here a reflection of the fact that the department realizes that there was money wasted in the past and that we do not need to be spending millions of dollars recruiting health care professionals that, if they do come to this country and to this province at all, are sent back immediately?

Mr. Lukaszuk: The simple answer to your question would be no, but let me extrapolate a little bit upon it. When you review the role

of this ministry in workforce attraction from abroad, you will soon come to realize that this ministry responds to need as identified by an employer, whoever that employer happens to be, whether it's private sector or public sector. Now, whether a need actually exists is not this ministry's determination. As you know, our federal government has strict guidelines where they issue what they call labour market opinions, LMOs, which basically is a permit to an employer to go abroad, outside of Canada, and attract workers.

Now, to obtain this LMO, this labour market opinion, employers must satisfy the federal government that, indeed, there are no workers available within a given province or within Canada. Our ministry's policy has been – and I can tell you that during my tenure as minister this policy will continue to be – Albertans first, Canadians second, and then, when a workforce is not available, search abroad.

To go back to your question more directly, this ministry responds to need. When need is identified and substantiated by way of having an LMO, this ministry then will go out and facilitate the finding of employees for employers. That is why even during an economic downturn this ministry will continue some level of activity abroad. Alberta's reputation also is very important to us. We want to make sure that those foreigners who come to Alberta not only (a) have a good experience working in Alberta but also fulfill the market need of the employer, and (b) when they return back to their home countries, we want them to return with positive reviews of the experience of working in Alberta so that when further employers may require foreign workers, there will be a much more willing cohort of potential employees out there, having heard positive remarks about Alberta.

I have to tell you that not only through my tenure as an MLA but through my involvement I think this ministry has been very responsive to employers, and with this current budget allocation I think we will continue to meet that need as the need has diminished over the last few months. But you just don't shut it down, quote, unquote, cold turkey because I am positive, I am optimistic, I believe that the economy will turn around, and I believe that we will continue to solicit workers from abroad when need is exhibited.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I can appreciate that.

I have met with individuals who were recruited to this province, qualified health care professionals, and when they arrived, there was no job for them. They were recruited by an outfit – and I would, Mr. Chairman, withdraw my remarks if I'm wrong, but it was Geneva international – an organization, I think, with their head office in New Zealand who recruit health care professionals. This province and this country were not served well by the promises they made in recruiting these people. There was no work for them. I hope that by the time we meet next year, if Geneva international is in the public accounts under contracted services, it's for a significantly lesser amount than what will be there this year and last year because what they did was not acceptable.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, if I may, Mr. Chairman. In response to that, I have to tell you that I have zero tolerance for any activity that may be arising that is proven to be questionable or unscrupulous, and if and when such a situation arises, sir, the onus would be on you as you become aware of it to report it to my office immediately. I can assure you that the staff in Employment and Immigration are not only equipped but task mandated with investigating any such situations and taking appropriate actions.

As you know, there is legislation in place that is designed to deal with such situations, but the forum in which you would inform me is to directly call me, write me a memo, write me a letter, or simply

come into my office. I hope that we don't find out about situations, if indeed such exist, through public accounts or through forums like these. I would encourage any member of the public and/or elected members to keep us apprised. We are in contact continuously with employers. We educate them on what their responsibilities are. We educate foreign workers on what their rights and responsibilities are. But if there are any such activities, I would be the first one who would want to know, and I trust that you will inform me of it accordingly.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Well, this matter was discussed in the House, and it was not settled in a satisfactory manner. In fact, these individuals who came to our office have left this country. They left this country with significantly less money than when they arrived, and they didn't work an hour while they were here.

My next question would be on youth unemployment, which, unfortunately, reached record levels in 2009. In January 2010 the unemployment rate for young people aged 15 to 24 stood at about 10 and a half per cent. Our research indicates in this year's budget cuts to the youth connections program of \$2 million, and that's from the 2009-10 forecast. We are on page 144.

Also on page 144 the STEP program, the summer temporary employment program, is being cut by over \$2 million from the 2009-10 forecast. Given stubbornly high unemployment rates with young people, why is the department cutting programs that primarily serve younger workers?

7:10

Mr. Lukaszuk: Part of that funding that you're referring to from last year was part of that reallocation from one fiscal year to another of the labour market agreement. That was part of the funding source for this particular program. To those who are not aware of the youth employment program, it is a program where either staff of our ministry and/or other service providers provide youth with information relevant to employment and attaining employment. In many cases it would be either summer employment or, upon graduation, full-time employment.

Indeed, there is a diminished budget for this particular program in this budget before you. However, we have instructed our staff to look carefully at some of the contracts we have and to eliminate any redundancies. For example, if a school was offering a program in a certain location and also the public library was and perhaps one of our offices was providing the very same program, we will be looking at co-ordinating some of these services and making sure that there is as little redundancy as possible.

Technology comes into play as well. A lot of the information that is available and has been offered to youth via these programs can now be delivered and made available to young people via technology, primarily web-based technology. That information is already available, so we will be directing our young clients to avail themselves of that information via the web.

We definitely will do the utmost to deliver as high a service as possible with the reallocation of funding, but there is no denying that, indeed, funding has been diminished in this one particular line item.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you.

Does the department have any data on the degree to which other programs such as work foundations or training for work benefit younger workers? You indicated early in your remarks – and I agree with you – that hopefully the jobs that are created are permanent and full-time. Do you have any idea how these programs are working? Do you track the clients that are in those programs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: To supplement my previous answer, one thing is that there are also reasons to believe that there may be some additional federal funding made available to the province over the next few months. If that indeed materializes, any shortcomings that may be, not necessarily but may be, in the youth connections budget may be then supplemented with these federal dollars. But I have a policy of not spending dollars we haven't seen yet, so we will deal with it if and when the time comes.

To go back to your previous question, our target is 75 per cent employment after a program. Well, that's our achievement rate right now. Seventy-five per cent of our clients who have undergone programming find themselves employed in a full capacity. As I indicated earlier, my goal also is that for these young people who find employment or, frankly, any Albertan who has utilized our programs, I don't want to see them back in our offices again. Hence, the focus is right now in our ministry to continue supporting who used to be unemployed Albertans but now possibly are low-income Albertans through part of their journey as they progress into more secure, more stable, and hopefully better-paying employment. It's a bit of a sliding scale, where the more the low-income Albertans earn, the less reliant they become on government services, and there is no disincentive for engaging in employment for fear of losing some nonmonetary benefits that you would now receive from EI.

I'll give you an example. If you have a single parent with young children, medical services are very important to you for the benefit of the children, so taking an entry-level job that offers no benefits, even though sometimes it may pay a little more than your social services benefits, would not be attractive to you because those medical benefits are so important. Well, now a single parent can take an entry-level position with no benefits and just then collect the medical services benefits through our child health benefits and adult health benefits and work, feel better, engage in employment, progress, and then one day, when he or she earns more money, not be reliant even on the medical benefits.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. We are quickly running out of time here, and I have a lot of questions. Hopefully, at some point we will get back to those details in the budget.

I would like to ask some questions about income supports and poverty and poverty measures. Individuals with modest incomes in Alberta were experiencing difficulty making ends meet prior to the recession, and now that the recession has hit, well, we know what the results are. Food Banks Canada estimates that Alberta experienced a 61 per cent spike in food bank usage in 2009 compared to the previous year. Employment and Immigration increased the funding that was available by \$138 million to accommodate increased caseloads and income supports and health benefits programs. I think that was appreciated all around, and your department should be commended for doing that, but I don't see a reduction in that, unfortunately, this year.

One of the immediate challenges facing Alberta is the prospect of a very large number of workers that, if they have not already, soon will exhaust their EI benefits. Many individuals, after using up their financial assets, will be forced to turn to your department for financial support.

Now, in this budget year there are very few changes in health benefits funding. Adult health benefit spending has been held at around the 2009-10 forecast, benefits for learners remains almost identical, from what I can understand of this, and the people expected to work line item – and this is again on page 144 – was reduced by over \$4 million from the forecast in 2009-10. Now, when we look also at benefits for learners contained in income supports, there was a reduction, from what I can understand, of over \$14 million. How did the department arrive at this deduction?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, as I indicated earlier, you would not arrive at a fair picture of the department's expenditures and the government's priority on delivering these programs if you only look at the two years, but let's look at it this way. You will know that \$230 million in 2010-11 is \$67 million, or 41 per cent, higher than 2008-09 – now, I'm not quoting dates far back; 2008-2009 wasn't that long ago – and \$100 million, or 77 per cent, higher than 2007 and 2008. This is just around the last election. If that isn't an increase and depiction of the government's priority of helping those who are most in need, I don't know what would be.

7:20

We will give priority to those expected-to-work clients for employment and training programs so that they utilize their existing skills. If they are coming off EI, good odds are they already have an existing skill set that could transferable. For those who require some skill upgrading or require some help identifying their skill sets, we will predominantly focus on that. That takes me back to my initial statement that I don't believe these fine and up to recently hard-working Albertans now want us to keep them on financial benefits infinitely and not provide them with any training.

You know, you probably find the same in your constituency office, but most people who come to your office will ask you to help them find a job, help them get a program that will assist them in finding a job. That's exactly what we're doing. When these constituents come to your office asking you for assistance – cutting a cheque is a very simple thing to do. You know, you cut them a cheque, and you condemn them to a life of poverty, and you keep them on welfare, quote, unquote, as we don't call it anymore, forever. But giving them the ability of developing skills, marketable skills where they can become independent and earn money and live in dignity: that is more challenging. It requires a lot of effort on behalf of our front-line staff, and it requires a great deal of compassion and social work, but that is the proper way of assisting these Albertans, and that's what we will be doing.

Relevant to poverty Alberta has the lowest poverty rate in the country as measured by the MBM, the market basket measure. As I said earlier, my philosophy and the ministry's philosophy is to give these individuals a hand up as opposed to a handout. Most of them want a hand up and not a handout.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I certainly don't share that view that you have just expressed regarding our poverty rates. We have some child poverty and the related issues around that that are very un-Canadian. I don't think it is fair to say that we are doing well in that manner. We have many young students going to public schools in this city; unfortunately, whenever they enter the school in the morning, they have an empty stomach. I think we can do a lot better.

Now, the funding reductions that you talk about and you explain: are they appropriate given whether it's Alberta's polytechnics or technical institutes or something like Centre high, where you see this real spike in enrolment? Are these funding reductions appropriate, you know, given the fact that we have seen a significant increase in enrolment, particularly from young Albertans seeking to upgrade their skills? You said earlier – and I agree with you – that we need to be creating permanent and full-time jobs. Is this an overreaction, these funding reductions?

Mr. Lukaszuk: If that didn't happen, the criticism would be that government did not react or government did not anticipate. That's fine. I guess each one of us has to do his job. But, again, to answer your question, simply it is no. You will find a shift in focus by this

ministry from what could be colloquially called academic upgrading to more skilled-based upgrading focused on attaining employment. This shift has already occurred prior to my being in this position, but now with this budget it will reinforce our ministry's goal to provide Albertans with tangible skills that will lead to meaningful and long-lasting employment.

We are, as you know, partnering with various service providers throughout this province, and we provide approximately 47 institutions across this entire province, including 18 in Edmonton. I can give you some names: Grant MacEwan, which now is the MacEwan University; NorQuest; NAIT; Academy of Learning; Women Building Futures; and 11 in Calgary such as the Bow Valley College . . .

The Chair: Gentlemen, 40 minutes have lapsed, so 20 more minutes to go. Carry on, please.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you.

. . . with significant funding to provide Albertans with skills that are required at this point in the workforce.

Just to put it in perspective for you, we have helped some 20,750 learners, 12 per cent more than at this time last year, upgraded their skills so they can return to work. Now, that's a healthy population: 20,750 learners have attained skills. As you know, our batting average is 75 per cent employment. That's a lot of Albertans who are now working, earning money, paying taxes, who if not for these programs would have been on our financial assistance benefits, not feeling good about themselves but also not paying taxes, with no prospects for any improvement in their plight, in their family's plight.

I think the balance is right. I think we have reacted accordingly. Let's not forget that there are signs of improvement in our economy, and we will adjust our priorities within the ministry accordingly. That's the interesting part of this ministry, that it is a very responsive ministry to the prevailing needs of the workforce. Sometimes we need more workers; sometimes we need fewer. Sometimes we need to attract; sometimes we need to service those who are already here. Sometimes we need to train individuals to give them skills; sometimes we simply need to put on job fairs, as we do in many of our offices throughout the province, and simply connect employers who can't find workers and, incidentally, workers who can't find employers. We play that liaison role as well between both, and we match skills. It's a pleasure, actually, going and visiting some of our offices and seeing individuals utilizing these offices and being matched with employers. Those services are available, and I think we're striking the right target.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Thank you.

Page 36 of the fiscal plan notes that tuition allocations were reduced to particular programs in the employment and training budget such as basic skills and academic upgrading. Were tuition allocations reduced in the income support learners program as well, and what reductions were made?

Mr. Lukaszuk: There will be no changes to current learners, so those who are receiving benefits at the present time will not be affected. However, as I alluded to in my opening remarks, there are variances between different learning programs and the amount of assistance that these students receive while being engaged in learning. Frankly, having reviewed these differences, I find that there was very little basis on which these differences occurred. Simply, different programs developed differently and carried different financial benefits to these students. To make sure that all

students are treated fairly and treated uniformly throughout learner programs within the ministry, we will standardize them and make sure that all students receive the same financial assistance, obviously, with variables, with variances for the family size and that, but they will be standardized.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Also in that section of the fiscal plan is a note on immigration programs. Will the temporary foreign worker program continue, or will it be suspended in this fiscal year? Certainly, each and every one of us at our constituency offices has probably encountered individuals who have been a victim of the temporary foreign worker program. Is it going to continue, or has it been suspended?

7:30

Mr. Lukaszuk: It will continue. It's a very important program. I know that a great number of students look forward to it. However, again, going back to my initial comments, there is a decrease in our budget. As such, there will be components, line items if you may, in our budget that you will see a reduction in, and this particular program is one of them.

I have asked our staff that not-for-profit agencies be least affected by the reductions in that one particular line item because we know that not-for-profit agencies deliver many valuable programs throughout the province, many of them, actually, to our clients, to the ministry's clients. I have also asked that municipalities, who have many worthy programs, particularly in mid-sized and small towns in rural Alberta, who deliver valuable programs using these workers, be least affected. Probably the brunt, if I may, of reductions will be experienced by the government of Alberta because the government of Alberta has employed many of these students and also perhaps by some of the offices. But I will not speculate on individual cases because they will be reviewed accordingly.

Keep in mind that there was a discrepancy also between the number of positions applied for by employers and then the actual number of employee students hired. I'll give you an example. If you choose to use a constituency office – although that may not be the best example – an employer could have applied for two students but ultimately only ended up hiring one, and the budget allocation for that not-hired student would have expired. So we will be much more diligent in looking at trends of how many students employers apply for and how many they ultimately end up hiring. Perhaps a portion of the budget reallocation will be absorbed simply by making sure that employers apply for as many as they actually need so that there's less discrepancy.

You were also asking, I believe, if we're going to keep the temporary foreign worker. Is that what you were talking about? You're looking puzzled. I was talking about the STEP student. So there's your answer. In case you wanted to ask me about the STEP student, you already have your answer.

Mr. MacDonald: I already did.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Foreign workers. Yes, the ministry will be active in facilitating a recruiting of foreign workers. However, I anticipate that the demand now will significantly diminish over the next few months or so. It is important to know that there are still sectors within Alberta's economy that experience a shortage of workers, and as long as these employers can satisfy our federal counterparts that they have a bona fide shortage of workers and are issued LMOs, then this ministry will engage itself in assisting these employers with bringing in foreign workers. As I said earlier, we don't make those determinations of who needs them. We make the determination of

how we can best assist them when they satisfy our federal colleagues that they, indeed, need them.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

You mentioned earlier that you had a priority for Albertans first, the rest of the country second in job creation. I really think we should ensure that for individuals who are working in this country, regardless of whether they have citizenship or they're landed immigrants, each and every worker has the same rights, basic rights whether they're in the workforce or whether they're in the Constitution. Temporary foreign workers, unfortunately, do not have the same rights as the rest of us. It's, again, a slight to them, and it's a poor reflection on us as a province and as a country. If we need workers, let's recruit them on a permanent basis and give them the same rights that each and every one of us enjoys.

I was at a rally last fall over at Churchill square, and it was embarrassing how those temporary foreign workers had been treated in this country. Many of them, regardless of whether they were going to the Philippines or to Germany, were essentially being deported. When they have that happen to them and they go back to their countries and their families and communities and they explain how they were treated here, again, it's a poor reflection of this province and our country. I can't see the benefit nor the value of having two tiers of workers, and that's what we create with the temporary foreign worker program.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, let me make some comments relevant to what you have said. From a provincial perspective all foreign workers are covered by the Employment Standards Code and the Occupational Health and Safety Act. They are covered by this act the same way as you are, as I am, as any Alberta-born Canadian, landed immigrant, citizen, or noncitizen. The benefits of that act are exactly the same.

Now, you make references to Canada's immigration policy. Well, sir, if you look into any foreign worker's passport and into their work visa, you will quickly notice that that visa was issued by the federal government. It is the federal government's policy to issue work permits, to issue entry visas, and to put any and all speculations or limitations on those visas that they deem suitable. They can put term limits. They can put limitations on whom the person can work for, how long they can work, whether they can engage in educational programs or not. All those limitations that you refer to as breaches of their rights are set in law by the federal government, and those are the terms under which these workers enter Canada. Those visas are issued abroad before they actually board the plane and enter Canada, so they do know that. However, I would be naive to assume that there aren't situations where perhaps workers' rights or privileges have been breached.

I will turn the tables on you on this one. I would suggest to you, sir, that instead of attending rallies with these workers, instead of bringing these issues up in the House six months later, when the House is in session, you have a fiduciary duty to these workers, just like I do, to bring them to my attention immediately and directly by sending me a memo or picking up a phone. If you tell me now, six months later, that you attended a rally with some workers that are allegedly abused, you're not serving them at all. As a matter of fact, you're perhaps unwillingly contributing to whatever situation they may be in, and you're not giving me and my ministry an opportunity to address that issue so that they don't go back to their country of origin with a bad experience. I suggest to you that from now on you pick up the phone and you let me know about it, and I can assure you that we will deal with not only the workers but the employers.

Mr. MacDonald: I can assure you that your department was aware of the unfortunate situation of many of those individuals, and we have brought that up on a consistent basis. I would remind you that it's your department and your officials who at public expense travel to many places, including Germany, including the Philippines, to recruit temporary foreign workers. Sorry; the public record indicates that substantial amounts of money have been spent by this government in your department recruiting temporary foreign workers. In fact, another department, advanced education, if it is necessary, would vet the qualifications of those individuals before they're allowed entry to this country.

7:40

Now, it's a program that has to be fixed. I don't know how to do it. I think we should be looking at the provincial nominee program. You make some rather broad suggestions in the business plan as to what you would like to do, and I commend you for that. But, please, we can only bring forward to the government and to the offices that you have opened the plight and the conditions of the temporary foreign workers. Many of them are afraid. They're afraid of the government in their own country. They're certainly afraid of the government here. They're afraid of their former employers. It's a very difficult situation, but hopefully we will be able to now contact your office directly and get some action, where in the past these people were just given, unfortunately, the brush-off.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I can tell you one thing with a great degree of certainty, that instances that were actually reported while the workers were still here have always been investigated, and in most cases a resolution was found and some level of satisfaction was definitely reached.

Just to give you a bit of an overview of the Alberta Employment and Immigration workplace standards statistics, the total number of inspections, and that includes follow-up inspections, as of December 31, 2009, was 352. There were 259 initial inspections, 93 follow-up inspections, and the number of employees, which includes temporary foreign workers, that were affected by these inspections was 10,714 workers. So we not only respond to complaints levied – we will if you bring them forward to us – but we also do proactive work in inspecting places of employment to make sure that there are no breaches.

That doesn't only pertain to temporary foreign workers, unlike your comment, because temporary foreign workers are treated by the government of Alberta as any other worker. They have the same benefits and privileges under the law in Alberta, under Alberta statutes, as any other person working in Alberta. When we inspect places of employment, we simply randomly inspect them, and many of them happen to be employing temporary foreign workers.

On your issues, sir, I will not argue whether they're valid or not, but the majority of the issues that you're bringing to my attention are actually within the realm of the federal government. I'm looking forward to meeting soon with Minister Kenney and discussing perhaps the possibilities of improving this program. However, it is not the government of Alberta that makes the determination whether these workers get to stay or leave or what terms they get to enter Canada under. That is something that is within the federal realm, and I have very little, if any, influence on it other than through moral suasion and working with CIC.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, I wish you the very best in your dialogue with the federal minister of immigration. However, I would like to remind you and get on the record that temporary foreign workers in this province do not have the same rights as the rest of us because

they're restricted and limited to who they can work for. The labour market opinion prevents them from working even part-time in the evenings with another employer. So it's not correct to say that they have the same rights as the rest of us, because they do not. They're restricted and they're limited. The province signed the agreement with the federal government to initiate this program.

You indicate that it's all going to be bells and whistles in the department now. If that is true, when can we see an end to the standard where farm workers in this province don't have the rights that other workers have regarding either WCB or the Occupational Health and Safety Act? They're not covered under either statute, and they should be. This has been brought up consistently in the House. Your department has ignored this request in the past to ensure that those workers have rights, too. Are you now telling me, after your last statement, that that is going to be changed and farm workers will have the same rights as the rest of us?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, sir, reading between the lines is one thing, but you took it to a real stretch from a temporary foreign worker to a farmer in Alberta unless you know many temporary foreign workers that are farming in Alberta. Otherwise, I find it very difficult to make that connection. But let's work with this. I think I can accommodate you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Your allotted time for this is up.

Can we ask everybody to take a nine-and-a-half minute break, please, and when we come back, we'll start with Mr. Hinman.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 7:46 p.m. to 7:56 p.m.]

The Chair: Well, thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome back. We're going to start with Mr. Hinman. You have 20 minutes, Mr. Hinman. Would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Hinman: Yes, I would.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to be here. It's always enlightening to hear the responses from the minister on the directions that we should be going.

I guess, to start off, I'm always greatly concerned because of those 47 educational facilities, I think, that the minister referred to, to go in and actually visit with some of those teachers and whatnot. We have an incredibly high employment rate here of 75 per cent. I would really like to know whether the ministry actually tracks these individuals and if that's 75 per cent after three months, after six months, one year. In fact, does the ministry ever actually look at the repeat students that go through, that get a job, and then they're back in short order? I've talked to several of these teachers, and the students are back for the third and the fourth and the fifth time going through. What's the basis of this 74 per cent finding jobs, and how long do they stay in those jobs?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, those that you hear about, you know, second or third time through: I'm not disputing that it occurs, but it's rather anecdotal. I think they would fall within that 25 per cent of individuals who don't engage in employment. Keep in mind that tracking employed Albertans long term is a bit of a tricky undertaking because once they're no longer on our benefits and their case is

closed, unless a case reopens, we assume that they're employed because they're not drawing any government benefits.

After three months following a program we actually physically call graduates from our programs and inquire: where are you at in your pursuit of employment, or are you still employed? Seventy-five per cent of those tell us that they're employed. Then later, which to me actually is a success story, we lose track of them. We want to lose track of them. We never want to see them again. We're one of the few businesses that doesn't want repeat clientele coming back to our offices. So 75 per cent do engage, we believe, in meaningful employment to the point where they no longer rely on any assistance from our ministry.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I guess I'd like to ask the minister – it's easy to lose track, but perhaps we should keep track, and maybe like our financial records we should have them for seven years so that we can actually monitor and see. I mean, just because someone moves from one community to another one, you're telling me that if someone comes back a year later, there's no record to realize this is the same individual coming back, then?

Mr. Lukaszuk: No, that's not what I'm saying to you. What I'm saying to you is that three months following the completion of the program we actually call them and find out whether they're employed. And 75 per cent, roughly, of those tell us: yes, I am employed; I have a job. What happens to them after: the only time we run into them and we can verify that it's the same person is if they walk into one of our offices anywhere throughout the province, identify themselves, and apply for benefits. Then we know that it's the same client coming back for assistance. That would compose, still, the 25 per cent statistic.

Now, yes, I guess we could have a system in place where our staff would call these individuals and track their addresses and their mobility and call them every six months and say: are you still employed? But I have a feeling you will soon say that we're spending too much money. You know, that would be a very intensive undertaking to keep calling these individuals, finding them, and tracking them.

Mr. Hinman: No, no. I just would like to have a provincial registry so that we know if they're showing up, rather than just one office. If they move from Edmonton to Calgary or Calgary out to rural Alberta, do we not have a provincial registry to follow these individuals?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, there is a de facto registry. We have our financial assistance programs, so when they find themselves in need, they go to the nearest office and apply for benefits. The moment they do that, we know who they are, we know their history, and we know what their reoccurrence of applying for benefits is. But just because you lost employment for a while or you had some circumstances in your life that caused you to apply for financial assistance benefits doesn't mean that we as a government right now will have a registry and will track you for the rest of your life or for 10 years or seven years, where you are and what you do. Most Albertans become independent and never come back to us again, and that's the goal.

Now, having a registry. You know, I don't have to remind you that registries don't work very well when they're run by governments. There is one, I think, that you have on the top of your mind that our federal colleagues tried, that didn't work very well. The system works well the way it is. We can track reoccurrence simply by them coming back to us and asking for benefits.

Mr. Hinman: Well, we'll go down a different lane here because we're not progressing very far on that one. It's always a struggle when I listen to you talking about the constitutional responsibility of the federal government and the failings that we seem to have with the federal immigration program. There are two desires here. One is to help immigrants. You talk about the importance of us needing new immigrants in order to continue to grow our workforce and also those that need to be retrained or recognizing the training that immigrants may come over here with. I guess I have to ask you: are you looking at talking to the federal minister and becoming much more like Quebec in realizing that we need to focus our immigration needs and policies around provincial needs and not have all these restrictions that you talk about? The federal government can put on these temporary workers; it just seems that to ask the federal government to look after those things isn't going to work.

The provincial nominee program. We just started to gear it up at the peak of the boom, yet it didn't seem like it was addressing the actual needs of industry here in the province. Are you looking at any direction at all for perhaps reclaiming some of our constitutional responsibilities for immigration?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, first of all, your opening comment was that it's always difficult for you to listen to me talk about our constitutional limitations. Well, I find that strange because, actually, I never talked about it. This is going to be the first time.

Mr. Hinman: I'm talking about your government.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Okay. I thought I had a lapse of memory, that I talked about it somewhere and I didn't remember.

First of all, again, what do you mean by reclaiming our constitutional rights? You're suggesting that there was a point in time in Alberta's history where we had full jurisprudence over immigration policy and somehow we frittered it away and lost it. Now you are tasking me with the job of going to CIC and reclaiming our constitutional rights. Well, the social teacher is coming out of you. Alberta never had any jurisprudence over Canada's immigration policy or Alberta's immigration policy.

As a matter of fact, we have more authority over immigration policy than we ever had in the history of the province. The reason is that right now the federal government is responsive, in their issuance of visas, to our requests and our priorities. When you're referring to Quebec's immigration policy, it is no different than Alberta's immigration policy except that Quebec uses a different measuring stick. To them linguistics is important, cultural background of applicants is important, and even geographic location of potential settlement of an immigrant is important.

In Alberta I would suggest to you that we have a much more pragmatic policy. We don't care what language you speak. We, frankly, don't discriminate based on where you come from in the world. We just want to make sure that our workforce needs are met so that our economy can flourish and those who come here can benefit from coming here by finding employment.

If you want to look at the number of provincial nominees for the year 2009-10, British Columbia had 3,500; Saskatchewan had 3,500; Manitoba had 4,300; and Alberta had 4,214. So I think, you know, we're batting above average or definitely within average. Our priority is to attract workers or, as you call them, immigrants that satisfy the industry's demand. Our policy is skill based as opposed to language, culture, ethnicity, and whatever else. I think that is a proper way of attracting immigrants.

However, I will continue reviewing Alberta's needs, and I will continue meeting with our federal counterparts to make sure that

their policies are reflective of what our needs are. But to say that Alberta somehow lost its autonomy over immigration is simply factually wrong.

8:05

Mr. Hinman: Well, I disagree with you that we've never exercised our full constitutional authority. I would very much say that we should be looking at areas on the types of workers and skilled people that we need. When we have to rely on the federal labour market opinions, it doesn't often fit for our area because they have some across the country, but we have shortages here. I think the provincial nominee program would serve us very well. Yes, last year maybe the averages were closer, but historically that hasn't been so.

I guess, just to go a little bit further on the provincial nominee program, though, do you not find that perhaps, on two fronts here, one, when we spend an incredible amount of money on people expected to work who are not working and going through these 47 institutes that you talk about in retraining of skills – are you attempting to increase working with actual industry, where they can bring these people in and train them and have some programs for actual industry training and following those people right through with a job rather than sending them to school and then hoping to find a job?

Mr. Lukaszuk: The answer to your question, as I said in my opening remarks, is that I am going to ask the ministry to reprofile some of the training that is made available to our financial benefit recipients so that the training becomes more employment focused as opposed to academics focused. That is not to diminish the importance of literacy, numeracy, and academia. But at this point in time it is my priority to engage these benefit recipients in schooling that will actually lead to tangible skills and employment. So I guess the answer is yes.

Now, historically we have utilized a variety of educational facilities, some vocational in nature, some academic in nature. But over the next few months, as contracts are being renegotiated or reassigned, you will find more attention, more focus placed on those that provide our clients with employment focused, marketable skills as opposed to academic skills. I think you will agree that that's the appropriate approach.

Mr. Hinman: Well, absolutely, we need people trained for their jobs to go forward. Then, hopefully, the academics will continue to follow, and they can continue to upgrade if they have a job.

I have another question. It just seems like we spend an incredible amount of money trying to upgrade these skills and get these people working. Do you have any performance measurement in place to see if some of these facilities are doing a better job than others, or do we just continue to keep rewarding all those facilities with the funding? Are we having any program that actually is finding success, and are we duplicating that throughout the province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you will be happy to know that when this ministry enters into contractual agreements with third-party service providers, there is a performance clause built into our contract so that the full amount is not paid out to the service provider until they meet their specified targets, which are listed in their contract. So it is incumbent on every third-party service provider to meet the minimum requirements, at least, if they want to be fully compensated for their services. Then what we also do, as I indicated earlier, is track our graduates three months postgraduation to see what the efficacy of the program was: did it actually materialize in employment? There is that dual measurement process. We also measure

success rates based on individual institutions, and we will renegotiate contracts with these institutions based on their performance evaluations and their success rates.

Mr. Hinman: Is there a place where one could easily find those performances of these different institutions? Is it public knowledge, or is it something that is a great deal of trouble to find?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I think the contracts are proprietary with the institutions. I'm not in a position right now to answer the question in such minutia, but if you have any questions relevant to any particular institution and whether they met or haven't met their targets, I can provide you with those answers at a future date.

Mr. Hinman: I think that the public would greatly appreciate to have a performance chart to show how these different institutions are doing that. If there are some proprietary parts to that, I can understand that, but I think the overall performance by the institutions – Albertans would appreciate to see where their dollars are being spent and how well they're being rewarded.

Mr. Lukaszuk: One thing I can tell you is that, you know, the ministry obviously is audited by the Auditor General. I had a very pleasant meeting with the Auditor General just about two weeks ago or so where the Auditor advised me that he has no significant concerns with the ministry at this point in time. I think his audit reports will indicate that.

However, it is in my best interest as the minister of the department to make sure that these institutions not only meet but exceed relevant to their expectations to deliver programs and ultimately engage our clients in employment. If they don't, then these clients remain on our caseload as recipients of financial benefits, and that is not the goal of the ministry. So I want to personally make sure that only those institutions that provide our clients with meaningful educational programs that ultimately result in employment have their contracts renewed and that they all meet their individual targets.

We also do our own internal audits. The ministry itself does internal audits of these institutions and of the efficacy of the programs that they deliver.

Mr. Hinman: How many minutes do we have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Three minutes.

Mr. Hinman: Three minutes. I'll maybe ask a few questions and then you can get them back. You talked a little bit about nonprofit organizations. Again, I want to cover the area of temporary foreign workers. There are two or three areas in the province here where I get a lot of feedback that there is a shortage, and I guess I'd like to have that verified by the minister if he would.

To have live-in nannies or child care, it seems like there are a lot of foreign workers. Also, with our current health care facilities and those looking after seniors, it's difficult to get into facilities where people feel that their loved ones are being cared for in a proper manner. So we have a lot of in-home workers taking care of seniors in their homes and then again, like I say, in the child care industry. If you could comment a little bit on that and the fact that we seem to have a shortage in that. Is that Canada-wide, or do we run into the problem with the labour market opinions that restricts that?

Also, the workplace monitoring. I see that we're spending an incredible amount on that, but perhaps we're looking at enhanced prosecutions when there are problems. In Calgary there have been several deaths and problems with material flying off building areas.

I don't know that we can afford to hire another 1,000 or 2,000 people to monitor them, but you're looking at something to increase occupational health and safety through enhanced prosecution rather than more employees running around saying this isn't working well and no results from that.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, let me try to squeeze in answers to both of them. Let's start with occupational health and safety. There isn't one department in the ministry that is more important than the other, but I can tell you that occupational health and safety is something that I personally take very seriously. Every time there is an incident at a work site anywhere in Alberta my BlackBerry buzzes, and I get a full report on what it is and how it happened. Ultimately, I wish that my BlackBerry would stop buzzing. I want every worker to return home to his family – children, wife, husband – in the same shape as he left in the morning.

8:15

The fact of the matter is that when I read these accident reports, which are quite detailed, I tell you frankly that most of them are preventable. The government of Alberta has spent an enormous amount of effort on educating not only employees but employers about safety features, but the fact of the matter is that education goes only so far. I can assure you that I have just very recently, a few days into my responsibilities, sat with industry leaders, and they will be bringing forward further suggestions to me on how we can tackle and, hopefully, diminish the number of accidents that we have experienced.

The Chair: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Mr. Hinman, your allotted time has been used up.

We do have a fairly lengthy speakers list, ladies and gentlemen. You don't have to use your full 20 minutes if you don't want to.

We will begin with Ms Notley, please.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Sorry. I hate to break it to you, but I will probably use my full 20 minutes.

The Chair: And you'll go back and forth with the minister?

Ms Notley: Yes, I will. Thank you.

In fact, maybe what I'll do is just start on that issue that we just ended talking about, the issue of health and safety and your unfortunate buzzing BlackBerry. You mentioned that you've met with industry people. I guess the first thing I would ask of you is whether you've had a chance to also meet with worker representatives and organizations.

Flowing from that, you talked about how prevention is the key, and I agree with you. You talked about how we are operating within a restricted budgetary scenario or context here, and to some extent I agree with that as well. So having just met with people that represent the interest of workers, are you yet prepared to consider moving Alberta into the position that pretty much every other province in the country is in, where we have mandatory worker health and safety committees where you actually have workers on the work site with the legislative authority to inspect, enforce, and monitor their own workplaces and ensure that safety breaches are corrected early on?

Of course, we are the only province in the country that doesn't have that, and that seems to me to be a pretty cheap way of getting more prevention happening in the workplaces. I'm sure your industry folks weren't advocating for it, but I suspect that the literature would tell you how effective it is and that you would also

hear that when you met with worker representatives. So is there any consideration to moving towards that effective way of engaging in prevention?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Your assumption is predicated on a philosophy that I personally don't buy into. You're making an assumption that the industry would come from a certain perspective and necessarily advocate or not advocate for something. I have to tell you – and perhaps it will be a little bit of good news – that not only have I met with industry, but as early as this morning I actually met with a representative of the building trades world, and I have met with other labour leaders.

One thing that I have to tell you I find full agreement on is that all of them want to make sure that the work sites are safe whether it's the worker, whether it's a large employer, or whether it's a small employer who actually works on the job site along with his employees. I don't think you will find any sector that simply is not serious about this. So if you want to get into the argument that it's one versus the other, go ahead, but I don't find that. I actually find a high level of co-operation. No employer wants to see a worker die on his job site or get hurt, and obviously no worker wants to get hurt.

Having said this, in Alberta we have the lowest rate of incidents of anywhere in Canada, so obviously what we have been doing up to now has been working well. Considering our rate of employment compared to other provinces and considering the heavy industry that we primarily are engaged in, our rates of incidents are significantly lower than anywhere else in Canada. So we're doing something right, and I'm not about to abandon that.

Now, is it good enough? No. It's not the BlackBerry that's unfortunate; it's the worker and his or her family that are unfortunate. My goal is to do better. That may include other measures. I will not speculate at this point because I will continue consulting on a short-term basis with not only employers but employees through unions and other labour groups and individual employees to see what else we can do as a province to bring those rates down so that they are safer.

Is it education? I don't know. Is it prosecution? Perhaps. Are there any other measures? There may be. I found it very encouraging, actually, to see employers coming up and being tough on themselves, tougher than perhaps I would anticipate they would be. So hold on. Wait and see. I think we've done some great work here up to now, and I will try to enhance it. Whether your mandatory committee is a solution: it's not anticipated at this point. The act is not about to be opened and reviewed, but I will be looking at all possibilities for making the workplaces safer.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, I appreciate that, and I'm not going to get into a long debate about the politics of health and safety. Perhaps sometime we could meet and discuss it. Since I've spent about 15 years in the industry, we could have a little bit of a discussion about some of the things that you might want to be on guard for. Nonetheless, I would suggest that you give serious consideration to these committees. The research is there. It's unequivocal. We're the only province that doesn't rely on them, and it's unfortunate.

Mr. Lukaszuk: And I look forward to learning from you, and I hope to meet with you. Let's get the politics out of it, and let's focus on making the workplaces safer.

Ms Notley: If I could move on to a couple of other questions and try to move a bit more quickly because, of course, I don't have that much time, I want to just touch briefly on the issue of income support. I know it has been discussed at great length, but I'm just

wondering. I mean, I've just done some quick calculation with respect to the numbers here, and it looks to me like last year, in '09-10, you basically saw your caseloads go up about 8,000. Unfortunately, I'm pulling numbers from different documents, so I may be a little bit off, but more or less you looked at about an 8,000-person increase in your caseloads. That resulted in roughly 90 million extra dollars that you had to invest in income support. Then I see that, for instance, even just in the last two months we've seen those rates continue to spike, and we've seen an additional 2,000. So I'm a little concerned that, really, your numbers aren't based on any sort of realistic assessment of what we see coming.

You talk about your three-year plan and how you want to be back in the black and all that good stuff, but it seems to me that if you're going to get there, you need to start with some very realistic assumptions. Last year, when we met with the previous minister, we raised our concerns that the assumptions upon which he was relying were not realistic, and clearly those concerns have been shown to have had some merit. The same concerns are here. Once again we're looking at cutting the budget, and we have no real reason to expect that the caseload numbers are going to go down at this point. My question to you is: need we be concerned about this? Are there plans afoot to limit the duration of claims or to limit the criteria for eligibility with respect to income support? On the face of it it doesn't make sense, so I'm worried that there are going to be other ways in which the ministry reduces the costs in this area.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, first, the answer is no. There is no anticipation and no work being done on changing the criteria for eligibility for benefits. That would be the simple answer.

The duration of claims. Again, there are no policy changes aimed at changing the duration of claims. Of that I can assure you. However, the duration of a claim will change if the worker finds employment, right? That's the best way to change the duration of a claim, and I think that's the way that most if not all of our claimants would like to see their claim end, with gainful employment.

8:25

Now, I think that there are rational reasons upon which one would base the assumption that our caseload will diminish. Part of it would be that I think it's commonly agreed in Alberta that our economy is recovering. Also, our unemployment rate has plateaued. We don't see a spike any further. We have two months back to back of the same report of unemployment rates, which hadn't occurred for a number of months prior. It had been increasing from month to month. Finally, we have plateaued. So there is another reason.

Thirdly, there is one variable that we do have some control over, and that is the one of addressing claimants' skills and actively pursuing programs that will avail them of skills that will result in employment. That's why I earlier alluded in answers to questions that we will focus more from academic upgrading to college vocational upgrading so that more expected-to-work clients will engage in gainful employment. With these three variables in place I think we will see the number of claims diminish.

Just to put that in perspective, your calculations were fairly good. The number of actual claimants for 2008-09 was 27,821. The 2009-10 forecast for the third quarter was 36,430. My target at this point for 2010-2011 is 35,000, so you're looking at a subtraction of approximately 1,430 claims. I hope to exceed that target, but this is how the budget has been based.

Ms Notley: Well, as I think many people have said, we have some concerns about the budget going forward on that basis, with those assumptions, because we're not convinced that you're going to get

more people working with less money dedicated to retraining, nor are we convinced that you ought to assume a plateau based on two months of, you know, the news staying the same. I think that might be a tad premature. Optimistic, maybe, but based on what has happened in the past, perhaps not the wisest approach.

Nonetheless, if I could go on, then, to the issue of temporary foreign workers, I have a very specific question for you. You spoke about an issue that I was planning on asking you about, which was the outcomes of the proactive inspections into the temporary foreign workers' workplaces because I had heard about those as well. I had heard a number of sort of anecdotal statements about a rather alarming percentage of workplaces that were found to be in noncompliance in one way or another and by anecdotal reports were as much as 50 per cent. Clearly, that may not be correct, but even with the numbers that you gave us with the 259 initial inspections and then 93 follow-up inspections, I would expect that those follow-ups had to occur because there were things that were identified within the initial inspection that were not appropriate. So then, of course, we're looking at over one-third, and that's just in the workplaces that you've managed to get to.

My specific question for you – I don't want to take too much time on this because I'm going to run out of time – is whether it would be possible for you to provide to members of the committee, with respect to those proactive inspections, documentation about the number of infractions either of the safety code or the Employment Standards Code that were identified on a per-workplace basis just so that we could get a sense of that concern?

Just to sort of carry on with some of the points that were made before, one of the biggest concerns with these temporary foreign workers is that they are, because of the system, so tied to their employer. The system clearly works against them feeling as though they actually can complain about their work conditions. It's a system that's designed to interfere with the complaint-based process that might work for a more empowered group of workers. I'm wondering if we can get that information.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Yeah, you can. I am not certain at this point whether I can give you employer specific; that is, listing the name of the employer.

Ms Notley: I wouldn't expect that. I would just be looking at the number of work sites.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Good. I can definitely give you the number of inspections, the types of violations found, and how they were dealt with subsequently. By all means, you should have that available to you, and in due course I'll provide you with those numbers.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Looking at the numbers that you gave the previous person speaking, 259 initial inspections and 93 follow-ups, is it a fair interpretation that those follow-ups had to occur because the initial inspections identified some problem?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Possibly but not necessarily. Most of those inspections were payroll inspections, making sure, ascertaining that workers get paid what they contractually were entitled to be paid.

Ms Notley: Basic employment standard stuff.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's right. Then follow-up would happen, perhaps, where infractions were identified but even in cases where there were no infractions just to make sure that standards are met. I will provide you with more detailed answers to that question

without actually naming the employers. That'll give you some information to work with.

Also, one thing I want to point out is that the ministry has been working really hard on the proactive aspect of it. You know, it's unfortunate when not only a foreign worker but any worker is in a situation where he or she feels to have been shortchanged in one way or another, and the best way to stop it is through education. The ministry has been working with employers, and there are websites that assist employers in learning what their obligations and responsibilities are.

Ms Notley: Sorry. I wonder if I could maybe interrupt. With all due respect, I'm just so short on time here.

I'm wondering, then, with respect to the cuts that were made to the immigration section of your budget, the settlement and integration. I believe that education of temporary foreign workers and sort of various integration efforts were included in that line item. Does that continue, or is that one of the programs that was cut?

Mr. Lukaszuk: That will continue. Integration and settlement services will continue. Where you will see differences is in our efforts of attracting immigrants, foreign workers into Alberta. That will diminish because, obviously, there is . . .

Ms Notley: I think the settlement and integration line item doesn't actually include attraction efforts. I think it's just settlement and . . .

Mr. Lukaszuk: The settlement and integration remains.

Ms Notley: Except it's been cut quite substantially.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Correct. Well, as I said earlier, there are definite reallocations of funds – there's no doubt about it – but we will continue focusing on it. The main change in the line items under immigration is in the attraction part of it.

But we will continue working proactively with foreign workers. Mr. MacDonald brought up a very good point, indeed, that instructing foreign workers of what their rights and obligations are is always more difficult than doing the same with native Albertans: language barriers, cultural differences. The relationship with government or law enforcement agencies is different because they come from a different culture. My task as minister is to overcome as many of those barriers as possible.

Ms Notley: With the same amount of money dedicated to those efforts?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you know, money is not always the answer. It's the approach, how you do it.

Ms Notley: No. But just because this is a monetary discussion today.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, it's a monetary discussion, but I can argue with you that I can achieve the same or better goals by simply taking a different approach, and that's what I will be doing. My parliamentary assistant, Ms Woo-Paw from Calgary, is very well versed in matters of immigration and foreign workers. I have to tell you that I happen to know a thing or two about immigration as well. I am convinced that we will be able to provide Alberta foreign workers and immigrants with a compassionate level of service that will address their needs.

Ms Notley: Going back to temporary foreign workers, which we just chatted about briefly in a different context. In the agricultural setting, as we discussed in the break, a significant portion of agricultural workers are temporary foreign workers. Now, there was a consultant's report that had been discussed in the last round of estimates with the previous minister about the likelihood or the willingness of the government to consider extending to workers in the farm sector the protection that other workers in the province and throughout the rest of the country enjoy both in terms of the Employment Standards Code as well as workers' compensation. I'm just wondering: what is the status of that report? Maybe I missed it. Has it been released? Can it be released if it hasn't been?

8:35

Mr. Lukaszuk: No, you haven't missed it. I can tell you that one of the reports that landed on my desk as a new minister of this department would be this one. I can also tell you at this point that our Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and I, who happen to be officemates, have already met on this matter, and we will be reviewing this report jointly because, obviously, it affects his ministry and that of mine. We'll be making some decisions relevant to that report, and I will keep you posted on what our intentions are.

Ms Notley: When do you think we might receive a copy of that report?

Mr. Lukaszuk: You know, I hate to tie myself to a deadline right now, and then you shout at me in the House a month later.

Ms Notley: Indeed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Which you will. At least you admit to it. Good. You know what? I will not give you a deadline right now, but I can tell you that our minister of agricultural development is aware of this report. It's a new ministry to him. It's a new ministry with me. We will be getting on it shortly.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Ms Notley, your allotted time is used up.

I think we'll move on to Mr. Lund. Once again, you have 20 minutes, and you don't have to use all of it.

Mr. Lund: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. A quick comment. It looks like there are about eight people left, and I think we've got about 40 minutes, so that means about five minutes each if my math is right.

First of all, in your opening comments you made some reference to reducing the traffic injuries, and I didn't catch the whole thing. I don't know exactly what you meant. Well, if it takes too long to find it, I don't want to use up that time. I was really curious, if you find it, how you plan on doing that because, quite frankly, the biggest problem we've got in rural Alberta is these jerks that will not slow down. I see it constantly in the oil industry – constantly. That's one of our biggest problems out there.

Now, turning to goal 4 and 4.1, I'm getting picky here, but I want to know the reason for it. You use verbiage in 4.1 about workplace disabling injury and illness, but that's the last place you see illness. Then it moves on to 4.2, and it talks about other work-related diseases. Then if you go down to the notes, it constantly uses occupational injury or disease. I'm curious about the verbiage "disease" because in 4.2 you clearly differentiate between occupational cancer, which would be an illness in my opinion, not a disease, yet we're using disease down here. What is it we're trying to avoid?

Mr. Lukaszuk: We're not trying to avoid anything. It's semantics, really, to be honest with you, but there is a difference between disease and illness in the world of the ministry and in the world of the Workers' Compensation Board.

Let me give you an example. A worker that develops a repetitive strain injury as a result of pulling wrenches or typing excessively or carpal tunnel syndrome: that is considered an illness. But if it's a medical condition acquired – let me retract. A worker that develops carpal tunnel syndrome as a result of repetitive work over a long period of time that is inherent to the industry or the work that he does: that would be an occupational disease. Firefighters, for example, recently in Alberta have been accepted with cancer being an outcome of their work, and that is considered an occupational disease. Illnesses are medical conditions that stem from an incident, from an accident and result in time lost and usually end up being claims with the Workers' Compensation Board.

Some are caused by an actual accident or an incident, and some are caused simply through repetitive or the nature of work that one is involved with. If that didn't make it any clearer for you, don't blame yourself because I didn't help.

Mr. Lund: Well, we'll have this discussion sometime later, but the verbiage, I think, could be improved because it really looks like there's a problem here.

Now, going to your performance measures in 4(a), the percentage of collective bargaining agreements settled without a work stoppage, very good. The results last year, 99 per cent, but you reduce it to 98 in the out years, and I'm wondering why.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Yeah. Well, first of all, I can't pat myself on the shoulder because I can't claim any of the success, but our labour relations in this province actually have been exemplary. The amount of labour disputes that have been negotiated and settled amicably is not one of but is the highest in Canada, and I plan on continuing it.

I'll be frank with you. There is no one specific reason why the 99 dropped to 98. Both are very high levels of achievement, and maybe I have given myself a little bit of room to be an overachiever by 1 per cent if, indeed, we reach 99 again. But I will be a very happy minister if we reach either 98 or 99 per cent, and I have no reason to believe that we won't fall within that target.

We have developed in this province – and that's something I'm very proud of but, actually, everyone around this table should be proud of – a great culture of mutual respect and understanding in the labour relations world, and I hope to only improve it and build upon it.

Mr. Lund: Best in the country.

Turning quickly to the Workers' Compensation Board because this has always been a problem that I have noticed. Why on earth would it take 172 days on a standard appeal before it goes into a decision? This is very unfair to the workers. Unfortunately, I've seen the horror stories; for example, one where a person was in an accident, a vehicle accident. It was at a work site. The WCB said: "Well, no. It's not us. You go to the insurance." The insurance points back at the WCB, and in the meantime the poor worker sits there with nothing. I went to the minister at the time and said: "Well, for heaven's sake. Why doesn't the WCB pay for it and then recover the money from the insurance company?" Anyway, we'll leave that one alone.

I'm going over, then, to your actual budget. If I don't, we won't get here. Going to your actual budget on the occupational health and safety, this is the one line item where you do actually have an increase. I'm curious what it is that you are planning on doing there that you need the extra million dollars.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The good news is the increase is not from Alberta Treasury but is from the Workers' Compensation Board. The Workers' Compensation Board contributes to our bottom line in the ministry for provision of safety-related programs. We expect to receive \$1.1 million directly from the Workers' Compensation Board, which, in turn, is employer paid. It comes from the industry. We will use these dollars, as I said earlier in my response to Ms Notley, in a manner that I certainly hope will lower the number of accidents and returned claims to the Workers' Compensation Board.

Now, with your question relevant to the length of time that it takes to appeal a file. First of all, keep in mind that many of those appeals are actually employers appealing as well. It's not only workers appealing, but some of those appeals are employer generated as well. One has to put this all in perspective. The Workers' Compensation Board at any given time has approximately 130,000 active claim files. And the Appeals Commission: in the last few years their batting average for appeals has been just slightly over 1,000 appeals. So out of 130,000 claims over 1,000 go to appeal. I'm really bad at math, but percentagewise that's a pretty low number of files that go to appeal.

8:45

Now, why it takes so long is because when the worker is not satisfied or the employer is not satisfied with a WCB decision, they don't directly go to the Appeals Commission. It is the case manager and the manager of the department that have a chance to review a claim. Then it goes to an internal appeal within the Workers' Compensation Board, and if no solution is found to the dispute, then it goes to the Appeals Commission. So the average time is definitely extended. Many of the workers who appeal a case are on benefits from the Workers' Compensation Board because they are appealing certain aspects of their claim, but I agree with you that that's not always the case. Some workers appeal the denial of a claim, and then they would be without benefits for the duration of that time.

Mr. Lund: I've got just one more question, and I don't expect an answer tonight because I think you probably have to research it. I had an incident out in the constituency where a welder was welding at a site, and there was an explosion. He got burned and was in bad shape. It looks like – I don't know for sure yet – there is the possibility that the owner of the facility will be charged because it looks very much like negligence. Now, in a situation like that I know that an individual cannot sue because he's covered by workers' compensation, but if it's negligence on the part of an owner, can he then sue if they are charged and convicted? That's the question. I'm not expecting an answer. I'm sure that it's more complicated than that.

Mr. Lukaszuk: If you asked me that question eight years ago when I used to represent injured workers, I would give you advice, but I can't give you legal advice. That's what our lawyers are for. Workers covered under the Workers' Compensation Act are compensated by the Workers' Compensation Board, but there are exceptions for subrogated claims. But I can't comment on that specific file. Sorry.

Mr. Lund: No. I know that.

The Chair: Okay. Any more questions?

Mr. Lund: No. That's fine.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move on to Dr. Taft.

Dr. Taft: Thanks. And I have . . .

The Chair: Twenty minutes.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Out of respect for others I'll try to keep my questions brief. A couple of issues have been briefly chatted on, and there were some very good – I would certainly agree with the Member for Rocky Mountain House that 172 days for a standard appeal doesn't make sense.

I want to go back to something that was raised briefly, I think, by a couple of members, and that's around farm safety, the consultant's report that is sitting on your desk. You know, I've raised this issue in the Legislature a number of times. I've brought in injured workers. It's simply unfair, unjust, it seems to me, that a mechanic employed by a large agricultural operation isn't covered under WCB or occupational health and safety or the labour code while the same mechanic working in a shop in the town is. It goes on and on: drivers, labourers, all kinds of people. So I would urge you to find the resources in your budget to give, as you were saying earlier, all Alberta workers, including many who were born and raised here, the same coverage.

Alberta trails the whole country on this issue. I know there is disagreement on it, but it's a matter of basic justice. There is no reason that all of us should have rights that workers on farms don't have. I can see a little bit of a fudge room or wiggle room for the family farm, but for the corporate farms, where there are sometimes payrolls in the dozens and dozens, it's wrong. I would urge you to find the money in this budget to address that issue because I and others will continue to hold you to account on that.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Just by way of comment, this is not a budget issue. This is a policy issue. As I said earlier in my response, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and I will thoroughly review the report, and we will do what is right for Alberta farmers.

Dr. Taft: Your job is to do what's right for Alberta workers, okay? So why don't you do what's right for Alberta workers?

Mr. Lukaszuk: When I say farmers, that in itself implies, Dr. Taft, workers. Farmers work.

Dr. Taft: Lots of workers on farms aren't farmers.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The fact of the matter is that it would not and will not have budgetary implications on my ministry one way or the other because if they're covered, it would be a matter for the Workers' Compensation Board, and premiums are paid by employers, not by this department. So I'm not sure how . . .

Dr. Taft: Well, I'm thinking, for example, that you might need to hire extra occupational health and safety inspectors or even people who are out on farms educating farmers about proper work safety. I mean, I can start referring to business plans and so on, but there are a number of provisions in here where your department assumes, and rightly so, a lead position in improving workplace safety. If you are going to visit however many farms are left in Alberta, 40,000 or something, presumably that's going to take extra staff. You're going to have to go out, and you're going to have work with farmers, most of whom are interested in improved safety. Anyway, we don't need to spend an hour or even another five minutes on that. I just urge you on this one to catch up to the rest of the country.

Secondly, again the Member for Rocky Mountain House raised some interesting points about occupational illnesses and diseases.

In the business plan on page 86 there are a few strategies that refer to it, but I particularly want to focus on occupational cancers stemming from asbestos. If you read widely on these diseases, it's actually quite amazing that in Europe, for example, where they take a more intense accounting of these, how many people die of cancers that they've acquired because of breathing in asbestos. It's far and away the leading cause of occupational disease, as far as I understand, at least of diseases causing death. So my question around the budget: is there funding for aggressive enforcement and prosecution concerning the safe handling of asbestos?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, the addition of \$1.1 million, that we will be receiving from the Workers' Compensation Board, will be in part used for not only determining the cause of diseases but also to stem the onset of these diseases and make our workplaces safer. Prosecution, to me, is always a last resort because I would rather our workers not acquire these diseases to begin with rather than having to prosecute anyone once it's already too late. If you prosecute, that implies that you already have a victim.

Dr. Taft: Yes.

Mr. Lukaszuk: So the \$1.1 million – I hope you agree with me – will be much better spent in minimizing workers' exposure to asbestos, educating both the employers and the employees of the dangers of asbestos, and perhaps developing better processes by which we handle asbestos right now. Now, the last resort is always prosecution. I hope to not have to deal with that often, but that is also one of the tools that I have in the tool box when necessary.

Dr. Taft: I don't have your department's figures in front of me in terms of the number of deaths stemming from occupational disease, but it's significant, and I'm sure that the largest category is asbestos-related cancers, if my memory is correct. So there's a big stake in this for the WCB. I know that there's a class-action suit under way in the early stages involving the Holy Cross hospital and asbestos abatement there. I would urge you to be aggressive on this issue because if we had a true count of the number of people who died from asbestos-related cancers, I think we'd all be shocked.

Mr. Lukaszuk: You are, Dr. Taft, correct that the leading cause on the occupational disease side is asbestos, followed by motor vehicle collisions, exactly what Mr. Lund referred to. Those are the two leading causes of death at the workplace.

8:55

Dr. Taft: Again I'd just urge you to use the resources of your department to get on top of the asbestos issue because if you look at the experiences in Europe, it begins to actually surpass tobacco in terms of the cost to society.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Point well taken.

Dr. Taft: The third point, which hasn't come up, is around the minimum wage. We would have to agree to disagree on your decision to freeze the minimum wage. I'm wondering if there's any evidence that the fact that the minimum wage is kept as low as it is has an effect – I've lost the line here – on your income support expenditures. Do more people end up on income support because, frankly, it's hardly worth their time working for \$8.80 an hour? I don't know if you have the answer for that, but this may be where it's a penny-wise, pound-foolish situation.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Good question. I do have the answer for that. Actually, the opposite is true. You would be a hundred per cent correct, and I would agree with you, if we were still in the old model of delivery of benefits where we did not provide employed low-income Albertans with supplemental benefits. Then that single parent with two kids that I told you about who is working at an entry-level job and earning minimum wage would probably make a rational decision to say: to heck with this job; I will be better off on low-income assistance because at least I get dental, optical, medical, prescriptions, and the whole gamut of benefits that come along with being on low-income assistance.

Our ministry changed the delivery model a number of years ago already, actually, following the low-income review, which I had the pleasure of chairing, in 2003. Now what we do is allow this person to continue earning be it a low-income wage, but we supplement his or her salary with additional benefits, making it so that the person is always better off working than not working. I can tell you one thing. While working and receiving our additional benefits, the person always has the potential of getting a wage increase or perhaps being promoted to a better paying position, whereas once you're on income assistance, that prospect simply doesn't exist. That's one side of the variable.

The second side. I assure you that the decision to freeze the minimum wage was a decision that I made with a great deal of examination of what would and could happen, looking at other provinces and experiences. Even though 20,000 employees work for minimum wage in Alberta, the lion's share, more than 50 per cent of them, are students, and many of them work in an industry that entails tips and gratuities, so their actual wage is very difficult to ascertain. I'm not a fool, and I know that there are Albertans who actually live and survive on this particular minimum wage, but often increasing minimum wage would put them at risk of possibly being laid off. That is a risk that I personally don't want to take.

I'm actually very happy that you and members of the NDP caucus, I know, and others are interested in getting engaged in this issue because I think it's high time to look at how we deliver minimum wage in this province. Frankly, in the past government would simply increase it or not increase it, and the argument always was: if you didn't increase it, why didn't you; if you did, you didn't increase it enough.

The question is: are we doing it the right way? Are there better ways of managing minimum wage elsewhere in the world and in Canada that we can perhaps adopt and put in place a system that is predictable to employers, predictable to employees who earn minimum wage, is right for Alberta, and is reflective of the different groups, cohorts that actually earn minimum wage. I would really encourage you in a constructive way to get involved in this. I'm hoping that an all-party committee will look at this issue. I think we can do better for Albertans with minimum wage than simply every year making that decision and getting into a partisan political debate that, frankly, doesn't do Albertans any good.

Dr. Taft: In respect to people who have other questions, I'll draw mine to a close. Thanks.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Dr. Taft.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Taft.
We'll move on to Mr. Marz.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to start off by offering my congratulations to the minister on his appointment to this portfolio. I think that the way you've answered questions so far

tonight would show that you've put a lot of hours in, burning the midnight oil to get up to speed on this file, and I commend you for that.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you.

Mr. Marz: I've got a couple of questions. The first one relates to some of your opening comments relative to the numbers on page 89, where you mentioned the health benefits and income supports. It's evident that those two line items have seen a significant increase in funding between '08-09 and 2010-2011. On the income supports I can kind of understand that, but if you could maybe provide some clarification on what I'm about to ask. You also talked that during that time there was a downturn in the economy. I would assume that there would be less jobs, so I could see extra expense in income supports. If you could comment on what we got for that extra \$85 million, how effective that expenditure was.

On the health benefits during that same time frame there was an extra \$20 million of expenditures. If you could clarify why we needed those extra dollars if there are less people in the workforce. Maybe I'm missing something here. Why would we need extra health benefits if there were actually less workers?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, the moment your caseload increases, obviously, that translates to extra expenditures for the ministry just for the financial side of the benefits.

Mr. Marz: On the income support side I can see that.

Mr. Lukaszuk: On the income support side. But our income support beneficiaries also receive health benefits for themselves and for their dependants, for their family that are qualified on the claim as well. You will see that every time you open a new file for an individual or for a family, you also provide a whole wraparound medical service for that family. So there is another line item for medical expenses.

Now, again, at the risk of being redundant, even when some of these workers leave our caseload, when they're no longer receiving financial benefits, often they continue to qualify for the wraparound medical benefits while they're employed. The reason for that is because many of our clients enter into entry-level positions in the workforce, and many of these positions don't offer any medical plans, any group benefits for these workers. To encourage them to stay employed as opposed to come back into our financial services, we continue providing them up to certain thresholds, financial earnings thresholds, with ongoing medical benefits. That is known as the child health benefit and the adult health benefit. Often you will not see a correlation in the budget for the income benefits versus health benefits because health benefits will continue outside of the income benefit world. But all individuals who are on low-income benefits do receive the full spectrum of medical benefits.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Marz: Kind of. Carrying this forward to the next two years, then, those numbers in the health benefits are still the same. Given that we're looking at a recovery of the economy, are those dollars going to be adequate? Too much? Are we going to need that many dollars? As I see it, there's a slight reduction in the income supports. Given the predicted recovery, should those dollars be as high as they're actually shown here?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I believe they should be. That goes back to my initial answer. As the economy improves and the job market

improves, our clients will be finding employment and becoming self-sufficient financially, but we don't expect all of them to enter into high-paying jobs initially. Many of them will get into low-paying jobs, where they will continue drawing on medical benefits. So as our income support budget line will continue diminishing – that's our assumption – because of the increasingly buoyant economy, the medical benefit line will lag behind for some time until these workers find better paying employment or receive group benefits from their employer. Your medical benefit line always lags behind your income support for those reasons.

9:05

Mr. Marz: I have one more, and that's relative to the business plan. What I don't see in either item 4, 5, or 6 is a performance measure on WCB. How do you measure the performance of the WCB to ensure it's meeting not only the needs of the employer but, certainly, of the worker? I think I've had fewer calls in the last couple of years than I've had in previous years, but I don't think that's a very scientific way of measuring it. I think we've usually seen those types of satisfaction ratings, at least. I'm not saying I was totally satisfied with the science behind that particular measurement either. But how do you measure WCB performance?

Mr. Lukaszuk: There are a number of measurements. There are scientific measurements, where injured workers are polled by the Workers' Compensation Board, finding out the level of their satisfaction with the service that they have received. But I agree with the comment you made. The number of phone calls to an MLA's office is probably not the most scientific way of measuring the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, but probably it's most indicative of changes that have occurred within the realm of workers' compensation. I can tell you that as an MLA since 2001, when I first was elected, getting WCB calls was probably the most common call that you would have received at an MLA's office. That no longer, by far, is the case.

Another way of measuring WCB's performance is looking at the ratio between claims and appeals. You will find that the number of appeals is dropping on an ongoing basis at the Appeals Commission, and the number of judicial appeals also has dropped significantly within the Workers' Compensation Board. Viewing the system from arm's-length distance, I am satisfied that the access to appeals and the actual assistance to workers lent by WCB in pursuing their appeals has also improved. So there is another way of measuring their level of satisfaction.

Mr. Marz: In the interest of time – I know I've got colleagues that want to ask questions – could you just provide a written copy of an update of the latest comparison of WCB satisfaction over the last few years?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I can. Also, WCB has targets that they self-impose upon the system of the rate of return to work and the timeline during which a worker returns to work. That is, again, more scientific than phone calls to an MLA office, but that is another way of assessing their performance. I will provide you with those targets and where they're at, for sure.

Mr. Marz: Okay. I appreciate that.
Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Marz.
Mr. Hinman, you have 20 minutes.

Mr. Hinman: Because there are so many, I'll just ask one question, and then we'll go on.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Hinman: Going back to the workplace monitoring, that we're finishing off with, one of the things that disturbed me – and it was great to be a part of and see the government change – was that we used to have those people who went and monitored the restaurants and food preparation facilities, yet it was never made public. To me the purpose of the government and these programs is to make the public aware of the problems. Now the public can go on the Internet and see where a restaurant was not keeping up with the standards, but we don't have that, to my knowledge, with different industries, specifically in the contracting industry.

I'm wondering if the minister would look at making those things public, that if a corporation has had several incidents and complaints and been caught not keeping up the standards, there could be a website where workers could go and look and see that ABC Company has had 24 violations in the last year and actually make it public so that there'd be more pressure put on there to increase the compliance in a very efficient way rather than a bunch of bureaucracy.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I would love to take your compliment and accept it and pat myself on the shoulder for posting the restaurant outcomes, but it wasn't me. It was the ministry of health.

Mr. Hinman: No, no. I'm saying that we've already done that. The government has done that. We worked on that, and it was great to see. We need to do it for child care. We don't have that in child care. We could do it in the workplace. Would the minister take that?

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's right. What is happening to sort of duplicate that system – sorry; I misunderstood your question. As you know, right now there are some FOIP requests, and our Privacy Commissioner is reviewing the possibility of making individual employer's or all employers' track records as they relate to occupational health and safety in Alberta public for you and me and any potential employee to take a look at. That's something that I'm currently looking at, and I will be asking my ministry and stakeholders to provide me with the best approach to achieve that because one has to be very careful, when publishing information en masse, that this information is accurate to begin with.

You know, I would hate to put myself in a position where I say that a certain employer has an exemplary record, and somebody chooses to work for that employer and finds out the opposite to be true, or I'd hate to malign any employer with a terrible record and then find out that that information was simply not correct.

My priority, number one, will be making sure that the database that we have available to us – and that will come from the Workers' Compensation Board and our ministry, sort of combining it – is not fairly but very accurate so that the information you access is actually real and usable for whatever means you will be using it. That's something that I'm right now looking at, how to generate a database that is fair, that is adequate, and that is very accurate so when I share it with the general public, they can use it in a meaningful way. At this point in time no such database exists, just so you know.

Mr. Hinman: When there's been an inspection violation and a notice given out, right now industry receives that; for example, if they didn't have material properly anchored down, and it was reported and inspected. Those reports are kept with the government

and the industry, but I don't see the problem. We can take out the data and, like I say, show those workplace violations and make those, I think, public quite easily without breaching FOIP or any of those other areas.

Like I say, I'd urge the government to help improve our occupational health and safety in the workplace by making those violations public for people to have easy access. There's nothing more motivating to a company than to toe the line because they don't want to have that report online.

Mr. Lukaszuk: That's right. Well, my initial concern is to make sure that our Information and Privacy Commissioner has no concerns with me releasing that information. You know, you may not see a problem with it, but I want to make sure that our Privacy Commissioner sees no problem with it. Before I release any information on any employer, being good information, that maybe some employers would love to boast about, or negative information, I first have to satisfy myself and the Privacy Commissioner that the information is accurate and that it is true to what the record actually shows.

I already made a commitment to Ms Notley in her question that I can provide you with reports of what breaches were found, but at this point I'm very hesitant. As a matter of fact, I'll go further. I refuse to provide the names of the employers because of the fact that I want to make sure that the information is factual and that it would be used properly, to the benefit or the detriment of the employer, whatever the information may be showing.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I think that that's one of the problems that we've seen in history too often, that we're protecting the perpetrator and not protecting the victim. I think that we need to look at that and ensure that this is for public safety, not for the safety of some corporation that can hide behind FOIP, saying: I don't want that information out. I'm talking about violations, not just information that someone has called in. We're talking inspectors that have been there, that there's been a violation noted and recorded, actual facts, not speculation or complaints that have been filed on the actual incidents.

9:15

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, going back, as I said earlier, you know, perhaps this is where you and I differ. I don't view this as a world of perpetrators and victims. I tell you that you will be well served if you sit down with groups of employers, stakeholders, and groups of employees. You will be surprised how much they are on the same page. You will find very few employers that want to have a dangerous work site. Why? Because I think that overall they're righteous human beings. But if you want to look at pocket issues, their premiums go up with the Workers' Compensation Board. They become less competitive, they don't do well bidding for contracts, and the list goes on and on.

The same with workers. You know, there are very few workers who purposely injure themselves on the job. I think the goal is common. The trick is to make sure that we continue educating, and then, yes, where there are persistent breaches of the act, where we find either employers or employees choosing to ignore the act and the regulations, there will be different and, I can tell you right now, more aggressive means by which we will be enforcing the act. If you start approaching this matter from the world of perpetrators and victims, you won't get very far.

Mr. Hinman: Well, I think that we're on the same page, yet we're not reading it the same. I totally agree that we have a great province here because 95, 97 per cent of the businesses and the people all do

want to do that. The problem is that we get regulated to death and have costs go up because those ones that aren't complying can hide behind smokescreens and reports. If we make them public like we did with the restaurants, all of a sudden we don't need to have as many people running around monitoring. We reach that threshold.

It's very frustrating. When I talk to other industry workers or companies, they say: "It's so frustrating, Paul. We're going to the ninth degree to make sure we're within the law, but that company that we're competing against is constantly violating it, and nothing is happening." So we're only talking about those few. I agree with you: it's those few that we need to make sure that we identify and point out so that the majority don't suffer because we pass new regulations and one or two have failed to meet those regulations. That ounce of prevention and being up front is far more valuable to the province and our entrepreneurs and hard workers than having a smokescreen and not being able to identify and show those people and have them held accountable for their violations.

Mr. Lukaszuk: At this point in time I'm not sure if setting up registries is the way to do it, but I can tell you I share with you in the ultimate goal. Perhaps our approach to that goal will differ somewhat, but my job from the Premier is to make Alberta workplaces as safe as possible, and I will devote any effort and any means that are within the realm of law.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hinman.

We're going to move on to Mr. Weadick. You've got about 11 minutes and 20 seconds in the regulation time.

Mr. Weadick: Thanks. I'll be quick with two questions and maybe leave a few minutes for someone else as well.

The first question is not exactly to do with just the budget. Last year your ministry brought in a new professional corporations act. I carried it through the House, and I was very pleased to do it. It's been very well received. The one question I've received probably a thousand times is: are we going to consider adding family trusts to that legislation? I'm not asking you that question tonight. I'm asking you whether or not you'd be willing to put a process together to look at what the impacts of changing that legislation would be.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Weadick, we can discuss policy matters at a different forum. A hell of a question period question. If you want, I can write you a couple of supplementals as well. It really has zero impact on our budget whether we do consider it or not, so maybe we can defer that to QP and ask budget-related questions.

Mr. Weadick: Great. I thought I'd put that on the table just so you knew it was out there.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Good stuff.

Mr. Weadick: The question I have with respect to the budget. Specifically, you've talked about it in a couple of places, and I want to get to the point. A couple of times over the last weeks I've had the privilege of sitting down with some of our aboriginal leaders in Lethbridge. Two challenges they're facing significantly are housing and employment. I know you've got some stuff in here that looks good, and I really support developing and supporting labour market initiatives designed for aboriginal people. I think that's great. It's on page 83. We have said that a number of times, and I guess what I want to get to is: what do you have for some specific program ideas? What are you as the new minister or your ministry looking at doing to try to help aboriginal folks, especially young aboriginal folks, because they have a significantly high unemployment rate?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you for that question. Indeed, any person in Alberta who has a skill set or a potential to have a skill set that is underutilized is a great loss not only to that person but to our entire community. It sounds impersonal when you talk about human capital, but that's what it's really all about. We should be utilizing every person in this province to the maximum of their ability, and this is really what our ministry is all about. Even though our jurisdiction, as you know, on reserves is limited or often nonexistent, we have not allowed that to be an impediment for us to serve our native populations on reserves.

We have entered into a number of agreements, trilateral agreements, with the leaders of various bands and reserves, the federal government, and ourselves, and we are delivering programs to our native population. We support over 50 projects at this point that help aboriginal communities in gaining jobs and job-related skills. Just to give you a few, some of the projects include a heavy equipment operator program out of Saddle Lake; training 50 Stoney Nation members for jobs at the Stoney Nakoda Resort, including servers, bartenders, cooks, and shuttle bus drivers. As a sidebar, if any of you are driving on the old highway from Cochrane to Banff and you have a chance of just pulling over and visiting the Stoney reserve and their hospitality place there, what a great place to see and to visit. We are also training 10 members of the Sucker Creek First Nation to be emergency medical responders.

I acknowledge there are many challenges, but the challenges will only make me more determined in addressing these issues. One of the peculiar aspects of this ministry is that from coast to coast these ministries are not exactly ideally aligned, so I have four federal counterparts that I will be meeting with. I look forward to meeting with my federal counterpart that is federally charged with economic development on our reserves and off reserve because I think there is one area that has a lot of room for improvement.

It's not for lack of effort. You know, in meeting with our front-line staff and those who deliver the programs within our ministry, I tell you that in the short time that I've been in the ministry but also from my background doing reviews for this ministry, I'm just impressed because there is a lot of heart put into the work that they do, often in very challenging circumstances. They have to be very innovative in using some of our programs to best benefit these recipients. I'm hoping to put direction in place that will even better address these issues, and that will simply be through collaboration with reserves, with our federal government and, obviously, our ministry perhaps taking a lead on it.

There is a pool of workers out there that if properly supplied with the skill sets that are required in our industry would not only satisfy some of the need that we still have throughout the province but would definitely personally, from a human perspective, benefit from it, and that's one of the areas that I also will be paying close attention to.

Mr. Weadick: I noticed you referred to some labour market initiatives. How do you get that message out to First Nations people about these programs that we do have? I know that's one of the challenges. The last part of that if you could. I notice that in the budget you also have reduced funding to accomplish that. We have a bigger challenge. We've got to try to get the message to our First Nations people, and we actually have less money to do it. If you could just maybe do 30 seconds on it.

9:25

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, we're partly doing it. As you may know, there is an MLA committee right now that is literally travelling the province and meeting with leaders and stakeholders within reserves and various nations, not only informing them, because that's part of the process, what programs are available but also trying to gain a

better perspective on what are the actual needs. You know, often we think we know the answer, so we fail to ask. Right now they're asking: what are your needs? How can we best serve you? I expect to receive a report from that particular committee within the next few weeks, literally. Hopefully, there will be some advice on how we can improve the delivery. As I said earlier, it's a challenge, but we are determined to address it.

In total we have in our budget over \$10.6 million dedicated to helping Métis, Inuit, and First Nations, which is not an insignificant amount for connecting them with employment and training. We will continue working with business because there is another potential partner that has already been engaged but perhaps could be engaged to a greater degree. Businesses, industry, and labour groups can be of assistance and, ultimately, the federal government.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. I'll leave the rest of my questions, and there might be time for one last shot for someone.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms Notley, you've got three minutes and 16 seconds remaining.

Ms Notley: Oh, my goodness. We have to talk fast and briefly, really briefly.

Just flowing from that last question, the goal last year was to have 74,000 off-reserve aboriginal people in the workforce. What number did we actually achieve in that regard?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I believe we're at 73 point some per cent success rate at this point in time.

Ms Notley: What was the off-reserve number? The target was 74,000 employed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, the off-reserve labour stats now show that our labour force as of January 2010 is at 73.7 per cent.

Ms Notley: Per cent?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Sorry. Thousands. It's 73,700.

Ms Notley: Okay. Thanks. That's great.

If I can move on to a different topic really quickly, I just want to talk a little bit about the market-basket measure because you mentioned that early on in your comments. By all means, it may well be that my numbers are a bit off, and I'm sure you'll correct me if they are. My understanding is that the current market-basket measure for a single-parent family with one child is roughly \$21,000 per annum. If that single parent were earning the minimum wage right now, that single parent would earn roughly \$16,800, something like that, and if that single parent was on income support benefits,

that single parent would be receiving about \$14,000 per year. If I'm wrong, please jump in because I'm again pulling from different years.

The thing, of course, about the market-basket measure is that it doesn't actually include the cost of child care for that person that's trying to work. Do you see, then, that there might perhaps be a problem in terms of continuing fairly extreme levels of poverty both in terms of the accessibility of child care, the minimum wage paying what it does, and our income support levels being at the level that they are?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, quickly. I hope I can make it. The market-basket measure, first of all, is not set by Alberta, as you know. It's the federal government that establishes the thresholds for the market basket.

Ms Notley: And they do it for each province, and that's Alberta's.

Mr. Lukaszuk: They do it for each province, and we simply adopt it and we implement it. I guess, quickly – and I'd love to sit down with you and chat about it – our financial benefits alone are meant to be short-term transitional benefits and not benefits on which one is expected to live for a prolonged period of time.

Ms Notley: Or raise a child.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Hence the focus on re-engaging with employment. However, keep in mind that when our client finds employment, is matched with employment, then we do pick up as the government of Alberta the tab for the majority of the child care. You're right. If a person works for minimum wage the child care costs would not be in the MBM because the government of Alberta picks up the tab for child care, and the parent only pays a copayment.

The Chair: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. Sorry. I hate to interrupt, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business is concluded.

Thank you, Mr. Minister. Thank you to your staff. Thank you, everyone, for being here.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you.

The Chair: I would just like to remind the committee that our next scheduled meeting is on Monday, February 22, 2010, to consider the estimates for the Department of Transportation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(2)(a) this meeting is adjourned. Thanks once again.

[The committee adjourned at 9:30 p.m.]

