

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ALBERTA**Title: Thursday, May 5, 1988 8:00 p.m.**

Date: 88/05/05

[The Committee of Supply met at 8 p.m.]

head: COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY

[Mr. Gogo in the Chair]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Committee of Supply, please come to order. Estimates before the committee tonight as called by the government is the Department of Social Services, page 297 of the government estimates book, the Hon. Connie Osterman.

Before proceeding, perhaps we could with the consent of the committee take a moment to welcome back our very special guests, the Forum for Young Albertans. Perhaps the Chair could take a moment to explain what this place is all about tonight.

As you may be aware from your civics class, we're steeped in the parliamentary system tradition. It goes back a long time. What we're to experience tonight is what happens when people want to spend money. Under our system, started in 1377 under Richard II, people exerted their rights to question the King. As a result, the House of Commons was able to exercise certain authority. There are only three members elected in the Legislative Assembly: one's the Speaker, of which nothing can happen; secondly is the Chairman of Committees, which I am; and the third is the Deputy Chairman of Committees. Those three people hold office for the entire Legislature subject to three things: resignation; motion of the people who elect them in the House -- that is, the members -- to put them out; and, contrary to popular belief, death.

Once a government is formed, only those people who form the majority party are made the government, and the Premier then forms a cabinet. Members of that cabinet take a special oath to the Queen, and only those members are allowed to propose expenditure of public funds to the Assembly. The control of the Assembly, of course, is the ability to defeat or amend or reduce any of those proposals. No member of this Assembly may propose any Bill which results in expenditure from the public purse, but any member of the House may move a Bill which can become law. All it needs is the support of the majority of the House.

So tonight we're dealing with one of the most significant departments, the Department of Social Services, with over \$1 billion of expenditures. Tonight we have the Hon. Connie Osterman as minister, who is proposing her estimates to this Assembly, consisting of three votes. Members of the House will be able to question the minister and make amendments to those votes.

The final comment I'd make is that years ago it was perceived by the members of the House of Commons, the Mother of Parliaments, that the Speaker, who had been appointed by the King, was a spy for the King. So the members then chose in the House to elect one of their own in passing all laws and expending all funds. That's why the Speaker is not allowed in the Assembly when we deal with matters such as supply -- that is, the spending of funds -- like we are tonight. Nor is the Speaker allowed in the Assembly when Bills are before the House that are going to be amended. That's why Mr. Speaker is not allowed in the House tonight.

So before we proceed, perhaps hon. members who are inter-

ested in comments, questions, or amendments to the votes before us could indicate to the Chair.

Department of Social Services

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. minister, would you care to make opening comments to the committee?

MRS. OSTERMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate, first of all, the opportunity to make a few comments on a budget that amounts to some \$1.223 billion, which is very significant, obviously, for a population of 1.25 million.

Mr. Chairman, this has been a pretty eventful year in the lives of most Albertans and particularly for those who labour in the Department of Social Services, who seek to deliver services to Albertans in need. I think, first of all, that Albertans as a whole should congratulate themselves on a very significant contribution at a time when our economy was down and we asked them to carry an extra burden in terms of cutting back on what they had believed had become their right in this province to receive resources from one group of Albertans giving to another. I think that as we look at an improved economy -- that is witnessed as you look at the department estimates. For instance, in the projection of the single employable category that number is down significantly, and so obviously the amount that is voted for that particular category is down significantly as well.

I wanted to, as well, thank my colleagues for their forbearance, because as we sought to rationalize and prioritize our programs, all of them were on the receiving end of the concerns that were raised in their constituencies, and I have appreciated how well they have handled that and brought information back on either the job well done or, alternately, on where we should improve and make changes over time. I think it is important, as well, to recognize the job that has been done by not only my personal staff in the minister's office but the senior people working for the department as they bring together information from the folks who work for us right across this province.

In particular, tonight I have some folks that I would like to introduce, and I'd like them to stand as they're introduced and then maybe we can all give them that very warm welcome that is the tradition of this House. First of all, Dr. Stan Remple, who is the deputy minister: Dr. Remple is a recent appointment, has accepted the challenge with great gusto, and I'm very, very pleased, as well as people right across this province in terms of what I hear, with respect to the job he is doing. Stan's lucky enough to have his wife with him tonight, and hopefully -- now please rise also -- she will enjoy this evening's proceedings and have some understanding of the immense task that her husband has.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. minister, I hesitate to interrupt. Perhaps in accordance with Standing Orders the Chair could put the question that we could revert to Introduction of Special Guests.

MRS. OSTERMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Hon. minister.

head: INTRODUCTION OF SPECIAL GUESTS

MRS. OSTERMAN: Sorry about that, Mr. Chairman. I'd for-

gotten that committee demands the same rules.

The second introduction I'd like to make is David Kelly, who is the assistant deputy minister responsible for policy, development, service, and design -- also a very important area, particularly when we're trying to rationalize and streamline our services. As well in that important role is Barry Burgess, assistant deputy minister, resource management. Barry's been a tremendous help to us over the course of almost a year now, particularly a number of months where he was acting deputy minister and had a fair amount of responsibility for the initial work done on the budget. Working with Barry and assuming a major role in the budget process as well was Brian Elliott, who is the director of financial operations and budgets. Assisting Brian is Duncan Campbell, manager, budgets and forecasts. Duncan, if our forecasts are wrong, we may not be introducing him next year. The unsung heroes at times, of course, are people who stand behind us and the public doesn't always know about. I'd like to introduce Lorraine Kureluk, who is the assistant to the deputy minister.

From my office staff, some folks who have stood behind me through thick and thin and through some bursts of temper and ill temper and various moods: Tom Burns, director of the minister's office; Doug Cameron, executive assistant to the minister; and a recent arrival -- and he's still hanging in there; that's because he really doesn't know how tough the job is yet -- is Hugh Tadman, the senior communications adviser. Would you give them a warm welcome.

head: **COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY**

Department of Social Services
(continued)

MRS. OSTERMAN: Mr. Chairman, as we speak to this eventful year, I think what is important for us to acknowledge are the challenges that Albertans have faced, the stress that all of us have encountered as a result of the rapid change all around us. We are involved in province building and continue to be. I think that on one hand we consider ourselves a very mature group of people as citizens in the province of Alberta, but as we compare ourselves to provinces across this country, in particular central Canada and the eastern seaboard, we realize how young we are and, of course, that we are still province building.

With that in mind, I think we all must have a vision. Some of our visions are long term, some of them are medium, some of them are short, especially if you are in dire need. Of course, with those visions go goals, which I hope all of us would have -- particularly important, I think, as we've acknowledged the group of young people who are in our midst today. As they make goals for themselves and should have some amount of optimism that they'll be able to achieve those goals because governments will do the responsible thing and have put in place a good future for them by not jeopardizing that future. So the Department of Social Services, I think, has to some degree a role in all of that, because I believe we do have the opportunity to shape attitudes by what it is that we do, what it is that is mandated by government.

What role should government play? It's a big question. How do you define need? Because the Department of Social Services, of course, addresses need. Mr. Chairman, I have to ask for your guidance here because I don't want to run afoul of the process, but is it all right if the minister reads a set of principles out of a policy document to lay a background for the rest of

my discussion?

MR. CHAIRMAN: The Chair would have no objection, hon. minister. I would point out that if it's not done in less than 23 minutes, the minister won't have an opportunity to finish.

MRS. OSTERMAN: I'll hurry.

Principles, Mr. Chairman. A document called Caring & Responsibility: if I could just highlight some of the comments that are in here that your government believes in. I think it's important for the young people to understand what it is that we use and will use in the future to measure the programs that we contemplate. Against what backdrop should we do our measuring? Well, the principles are this:

- Government policies and programs must promote and facilitate individual initiative and self-reliance, self-sufficiency and responsibility.
- Government policies and programs must recognize the paramount importance of the family as the basic unit of our society and the diversity of family structures, and must support and strengthen the role of the family in Alberta society.
- Government policies must enable individuals, families and communities to build on our strong tradition of volunteerism, and to take increasing responsibility for caring for themselves and for those in need of help and support.
- Government policies and programs should involve, to the extent possible, communities and community agencies in the development, delivery, and evaluation of services to Albertans.
- Government policies and programs must support and complement private business, industry and community agencies, and provide an environment in which the private sector can work cooperatively with government in meeting the needs of Albertans.
- Government policies must support the individual's ability to make choices and decisions.
- Government policies and programs must be adaptable and responsive to the changing needs of Albertans.
- Government policies and programs must focus on the development of strategies that address the causes of social and health problems and the ways of preventing their occurrence.
- Priorities for government services and programs should be established on the basis of responding to the greatest needs; should take into consideration the financial circumstances of the individuals affected; and, where possible, should be designed to help individuals regain their self-sufficiency and independence.
- The development of policies and programs must involve Albertans actively in describing issues and in considering alternatives; and once policies are developed, Albertans must be well informed about the programs and services available to them.

And lastly:

- Government policies and programs requiring inter-departmental cooperation must operate without duplication and as smoothly as possible for the consumer.

Chairman, those were the principles. There were a number of other important comments on that document, but against those principles we look at the programs that are provided by the Department of Social Services and, of course, other departments as well. I think we should be thinking about those principles as the backdrop. So I ask the question: what role should government play? I think we are in a helping role, but we are not in a role that interferes in the lives of Albertans to the extent that particularly one point is diminished, and that is that government policies must support the individual's ability to make choices and decisions. The more government is involved in the lives of Albertans I think automatically means the more taxes we must demand from Albertans to pay for that involvement, which, of course, means that many, many Albertans, as they see their disposable income diminish, lose their choices. So we

look at the individual's ability to make choices and decisions, and I think we must continue to ask ourselves the question: are we jeopardizing one of those principles? I think that as we look at our vision in terms of either the short, medium, or long term, again we must have those principles in mind.

Let's look at some of the visions, particularly the short-term one for now, because in a budget that is working on a yearly basis, there's a number of things that are short term. It would be wonderful, I suppose, if we could say that the Department of Social Services wasn't even needed, that in fact all the needs of Albertans were met without government interceding, but of course we know that is not the case. So that we may make sure that Albertans have the most budget money possible devoted directly to services, we obviously have to streamline our department, which means we must have efficiency and accountability. Programs should be delivered on a businesslike basis.

So what are some of the things that we have discussed and implemented over the last year to try to develop that efficiency and accountability? Well, we've had a number of projects. Most of them would fit into the pilot project category. We have an automation pilot project in several district offices that we believe will enhance the operations, particularly relieve some of the paperwork done by social workers so that they can importantly address their role as a direct consultant to the people they are serving.

We've had a pilot system in licensing enforcement for day cares, and our initial information is that this is very successful. I think that is going to help us better measure the quality of care in the province and particularly on a consistent basis.

We began a fraud and error control pilot project last summer. It has just concluded, and the information is being put together. Mr. Chairman, it is our view that this project has been very successful, and hopefully before the end of the Legislative session I will be able to report on that.

We've had another project in the day care area where we have gone to control and verification, particularly verification of numbers. That has meant that every parent with a child in the day care system has been contacted so that we will have an understanding if the information that we receive and the dollars that are being paid out are appropriate.

We have a standards document now available that is being discussed around the province. Many members, including my own colleagues and members of the opposition, have been very interested in the preparation of that document, because importantly, as we see others delivering services, there must be an accountability for the dollars they receive for those services they are delivering and that certain standards are met. We certainly hope this type of documentation will help us do that.

Those are a number of the initiatives, Mr. Chairman. I think there's one other area, because as we talk about standards development, we of course do that in relation particularly to services that are delivered by outside agencies that I've already mentioned. But of course direct government services should also be measured by those standards. But privatization -- that word has begun to have an interesting connotation and to some degree, I think, because of the "the sky is falling; the sky is falling" attitude by a number of people in the opposition. I hope I can give them some level of comfort that we believe that indeed the people who are outside the direct bureaucracy of government delivering services are, in fact, doing a very good job, and we can see to it.

Mr. Chairman, I have a confession to make. We have just an enormous privatization project that's been going on for some

time right under people's noses. Not only that; I intend to enhance that project in terms of its importance. The biggest outside deliverer in the Department of Social Services is privatized, and they're called foster parents. Foster parents play an incredibly important role in the lives of children in this province, particularly children who have problems and who have come into the care of the department. I don't think there is a better example of privatization.

Mr. Chairman, in keeping with delivering of services to those most in need, I think it's important to mention a number of areas that we've enhanced this year, particularly with the introduction of the first Bill in the Legislature sitting, the council on the disabled, and that's of course the Premier's prime project. We have enhanced a number of programs that deal with that particular group of people. First of all, the handicapped children's services has had an enormous increase, and of course we'll be able to serve more families -- a very important area. There will be additional funding for vocational rehabilitation that recognizes the number of young people with these disabilities who are coming out of our school system and need special attention. As well, we have more people that are going to be served under our assured income for the severely handicapped pension program. While the numbers are increased, Mr. Chairman, of course it is noted that the amount of the pension has not increased. We have added to handicapped benefits, particularly in the social allowance area. These initiatives, as I have said, coupled with the announcement of the Premier's council I believe are going to augur well for the disabled in this province, both mentally and physically handicapped.

Mr. Chairman, a very important project is just getting under way that I'm sure all members will want to take an interest in, and that is in the area of programs for the mentally handicapped. A colleague of mine, Roy Brassard, MLA for the Olds-Didsbury constituency and member of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee, will head up a group that's going to do an entire review of that program area. I think it's important to note that as we addressed the Michener Centre and the long-term shape of Michener Centre, it begged all sorts of other questions in terms of meeting the needs of people who were in the community and who desired to live in the community and what services were available and, more to the point, what services should be available in the future. So I am very delighted that my colleague has undertaken this important task, because I believe that by next winter we should have a document that should serve us well for future guidance in this area.

Mr. Chairman, as I raise the Michener Centre and the important work that is going on there -- it is a very large budget item; I think some \$55 million -- I have to mention my colleague who is sitting directly to my right. I could jokingly say that I mention the Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services because he threatened me if I didn't, but it is not really true. Actually, the Department of Social Services owes him a lot in terms of his support of physical facilities and this year a major upgrading at Michener Centre. But there are all sorts of smaller programs around the province and particularly here in Edmonton that the minister, to use his words, has bailed me out and seen that the services would continue. The minister remains very thankful, as does the department and all the people who are being served. So I thank the gentleman to my right and say please keep up the good work.

As well, Mr. Chairman, in the last few minutes that I have available, I should speak to a number of other areas that have been enhanced in the budget. Again addressing the foster par-

ents area, we have increased the per diems there to a very deserved group of people. It was our belief this year that government should certainly support it, and as we examine rates across the country, we still stand well in that examination and comparison, but I felt the 4 percent this year was the very least we could do when our fiscal situation was improving.

As well, Mr. Chairman, we have instituted an insurance program -- and it will just be getting under way -- a very important concern of foster parents because it is a very difficult area when they have children in their home that are not their direct family, yet they are like their direct family. There is some problem in maintaining the appropriate insurance if there is damage done or something happens with respect to a foster child in the home. So we will be looking after that insurance area.

Another important program, Mr. Chairman, is women's shelters. We have been able to add a significant amount to the budget this year. Of course, as always many will say, as the minister could say, "We wish it were more," But it will ease their burden somewhat. Of course, they are still raising money in the community for important facets of their program in the counseling area and so on -- maybe not some of the very direct emergency services in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, but we hope that our support can continue over the years and be enhanced. Obviously, the minister is saying to the community at large that this is a very important group running shelters across the province. Their work in terms of value just can't be overestimated, and I hope that the community will continue to support them as they have in the past.

Another area, Mr. Chairman, is food allowances, under the social allowance area. There's a very significant increase this year, recognizing that while families could purchase food within the categories that were appropriate to the needs of people who are on social allowance, it is also important to note that the choices within those categories were getting narrower and narrower. So as we see a healthier fiscal situation, I'm sure Albertans will concur with us that the food allowances should go up and have, Mr. Chairman, as of the first of this month.

A very important program under my colleague the Minister of Career Development and Employment is the employment alternatives program. We saw a significant change in the social allowance statistics, Mr. Chairman, I believe a great deal of which was attributable to the employment alternatives program. There are many, many people out there whom we believe will have long-term employment. Obviously, for those who were shorter term, they're in a much better position to seek employment because of the employment experience they will have had.

Mr. Chairman, overall we continue to struggle with sharing the resources that we have in a fair way. That's why I raised the paper called Caring & Responsibility, because we must be responsible to all citizens of this province. We must particularly look at the longer vision, the very distant vision out there that is sometimes hard to look at when we believe we are in need. But I think that as we minister to more and more Albertans who may be marginal in terms of their need and we get them dependent on government, I believe it is no favour to those Albertans. In fact, it is a disservice in the longer term because we send them a message that we don't believe they have the capacity to respond, that we don't believe they have the inner strength to look after themselves. I meet so many parents that say to me: "You're ruining our children because of the programs that you have. They can walk out of the home and say, 'We don't like the rules here, and the government will look after us'." Obviously, there's a happy medium there, because it isn't always as simple

as that for children who come into our care either through a social allowance system or through the Child Welfare Act, which means there have been some very serious problems in those children's lives. But I think we have to have that longer term focus so that we don't cripple people in terms of their ability to function in the longer term.

The front-line workers in our department continue to struggle with a very heavy workload, as do all people in the department. They are doing a yeoman's job, and I can't laud them enough, particularly as I look at those people who work in the child welfare area, who have extraordinarily difficult decisions to make. Of course, as I look at the people around who help us, I can mention two specific areas. First of all, senior citizens. We must continue to keep our eyes on seniors and their changing needs. In that vein my colleague Mr. Alger, who is the MLA for Highwood and I hope will be available still this evening to make some comments about seniors, chairs the Senior Citizens' Advisory Council, and we look for good advice. Those citizens come from all across the province and speak to the needs of seniors in Alberta.

As well, the Social Care Facilities Review Committee. Mr. Chairman, I think most people are aware of the very excellent work done by that committee. I might mention this evening that we all look forward to the return to the Assembly of the chairman of that committee, Janet Koper, MLA for the Calgary-North constituency. She had an accident, I understand, is now recuperating and well on the way, and we look forward to her return in this Legislature and, obviously, taking the reins and continuing the very excellent work done by the Social Care Facilities Review Committee.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I'm not sure how many minutes I have left, but I'm sure I will be asked questions on two major areas that I will take the opportunity to speak to later, depending on how the questions are framed. One of them, of course, is day care. Day care, that program, affects the life of every Albertan. It certainly affects dramatically the lives of every family in this province that has children under the age of six years old.

I am corrected. Janet is the MLA for Calgary-Foothills. Thank you.

So when we look at the families, the 80 percent of the families in this province that are paying their own way for child care and many who are staying home and foregoing some of the luxuries, some of the extras -- the things that maybe our society is now calling essentials -- but they are foregoing many things in order to raise their own children: we are taxing those people, Mr. Chairman, and they are paying for institutional care for many families that can well afford to handle those payments themselves. So that must be addressed.

As well, Mr. Chairman, we can leave the day care area, and I'll be delighted to talk about education and a whole range of things that will come up as a result of the discussion and final conclusions when we look at the shape of the federal program and the kind of dollars that will flow from it.

Speaking of children, we must talk about the children in our care and permanency planning. Of course, this speaks to the issue particularly of native children, because the highest percentage of kids in our care, 40-some percent I believe it is, are native children in the care of the Department of Social Services. Mr. Chairman, I'm absolutely committed to trying to secure a permanent home for these children. For far too long we have ignored permanency planning, and there isn't a child, regardless of what kind of home life they have, even under the most incredible circumstances, who won't say to you if they are asked,

"I want to go home." They want a permanent home. So we must speak to that.

Those are but a few comments as an overview of a budget that I think is extremely important to Albertans. I look forward to my colleagues' comments, hopefully constructive criticism so that we may improve in the future. There's always room for improvement. The department staff are here, looking forward to the debate, and of course the minister is looking forward to everybody participating in the debate and supplying whatever information may be necessary as the evening goes along.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MS MJOLSNESS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Excuse me, hon. member, for just a moment. Our guests are leaving. Perhaps we could wave to them, or wait till they leave.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MS MJOLSNESS: It's always a pleasure to participate in the debate on Social Services, on the budget in this particular department. I too think it's a very important department and certainly a very important budget, and there certainly is a long list of issues that needs to be debated this evening.

I thank the minister for her opening remarks. I was quite interested that she quoted from the policy booklet from her government. I too would like to make some comments on that particular policy and the principles that are within that particular policy booklet. I would argue, too, with the minister that in fact providing adequate social programs to people in need does not make them more dependent that in the long run it will make them more independent.

Now, not wanting to rain on the minister's parade, I would like to start off by saying that having moved from 7 votes a couple of years ago, within this department now we see 3 votes. We did last year and again this year. It certainly continues to make things a little bit difficult in trying to find out where certain services receive their budgets and their funding. In this budget, Mr. Chairman, we see increases in a few areas throughout this department. I feel that while these increases are extremely important -- and I base my comments on the representation I have had from various individuals and organizations that point out to me the lack of services -- what I find alarming in this particular department's budget this year is that the overall funding is being reduced by over \$15 million.

I'd like to start out by looking at vote 3, Mr. Chairman, which is support to individuals and families. In this particular area, vote 3, we're talking about things such as treatment centres and residential services for young foster care and services for handicapped children. We're talking about support programs for families, like women's shelters, counseling services, and also the licensing for day care. In this vote it includes counseling, training, and other services for the handicapped. Clearly, these are extremely important services that are provided, and last year they were cut by \$7 million.

Now, I recognize that in this year's budget we see an increase of \$8 million, 3 percent but I would say that in considering last year's reduction and in considering last year's slashes of many of the programs and the hurt that was experienced by many recipients of those programs, we can't expect to correct this injustice simply by making a meagre increase this year. I

think any government must recognize the value of social programs and acknowledge that as a society we have a responsibility to provide for those who are unable to provide for themselves. Mr. Chairman, what we need is continuity and consistency in the development and in the implementation of the social programs, and we need, above all, a commitment for adequate funding to those programs. I think it's extremely dangerous to alternate our funding from year to year. When we're dealing with human beings, we must have consistency in funding. It's not like building a highway or building a golf course. We have to have that consistency, because we're dealing with human lives.

The Budget Address states that the budget -- and I quote:

... strengthens the vast array of government services and programs designed to assist and strengthen our families and communities.

Now, Mr. Chairman, while this might sound very nice, in reality this budget is being reduced by \$15 million. I think this is a sad direction to go in view of the fact that we have large gaps in services at the present moment. I also know that there is a steady erosion of funding for services and support by this government to social programs.

Now, in the area of social assistance, which is one area that has received a lot of attention in recent months, we see some increases in certain areas and decreases in other areas. I think most of us realize -- I would hope -- that going on social assistance is a very difficult thing to do for many and they only will turn to the government for assistance as a very last resort. In many cases people lose their independence, and in many other cases they lose their dignity. Certainly, Mr. Chairman, when you go on social assistance, you become very poor.

Now, I think that as a government and as a society when we have compassion and consideration for those less fortunate than ourselves, this is certainly a mark of a humane society. But Mr. Chairman, how can we be proud of a system in Alberta that operates right now that is not meeting the basic needs of individuals that need assistance? I have in the past asked this minister to produce the criteria on the basis of which the rates are set for social assistance. Now, we've heard from the minister about the Canada Food Guide. In addition to that though, we know that there are other things involved besides food when people are trying to meet their basic needs. The increase of \$24 million allocated under vote 2 is certainly welcome, and it will average out about \$15 per month per person. I recognize that this certainly will help matters.

But the problem that remains is that people who are on social assistance are not receiving adequate funding to meet their basic needs when it comes to shelter allowance, when it comes to clothing, when it comes to utilities. What they're having to do is continually take funding from their food allowance to pay for these other basic necessities. I think that without adjustments in these other areas, they're going to continue to have to take this money from their food to pay for their shelter or their utilities or whatever. So I think the government is being very unfair when they set rates arbitrarily, without any criteria regarding what the true costs are. I think the government has a responsibility to set a concrete measurement so that we know exactly where people stand when they are -- and how much they fall below the poverty line or whatever measurement we're going to use. Because what we're doing, Mr. Chairman, is putting people in desperate situations where they're having to use their food money to pay for other necessities.

Now, I know that the minister has said that people don't

know how to budget their money, and I'm sure that some of them don't know how. I mean, that's just -- it's awfully difficult, Mr. Chairman, to budget when you're not getting a heck of a lot of money in the first place. But I know for a fact that the income security workers don't have time to spend with their clients and discuss how to budget, give them some counseling, due to their high caseloads. And I know for a fact that even clients who want to make appointments with their social workers can't get an appointment.

To illustrate this, I would like to share with you something that happened in our office the other day. A person wanting to access social assistance came into our office, had gone down to the district office. Having been told that he must go home and make an appointment he tried for one hour to get through to the district office, and he was unsuccessful. So he came into our office wanting some help. We got through to the district office; they told us that he had to phone and make an appointment. We got through to the supervisor, actually. So we were told that he would have to phone back and make an appointment with the workers. So we had two people on two different phones phoning for 20 minutes straight until we finally got through. But these are the kinds of things that are happening, and it's happening a lot. Clients are unable to get through to their social workers, and it's causing a lot of problems.

The department in 1986 made a commitment to, number one, respond to phone calls within 24 hours; number two, another commitment was to ensure an interview with the worker within two days of a request; and number three, to respond within 24 hours if an emergency situation arose. Mr. Chairman, it's not being done. We have well-trained, professional staff working in the income security department, yet they are unable to use their skills because they are unable meet with their clients. They're left with just simply processing, a lot of times, the financial assistance.

Last June the minister stated, when I questioned her about high caseloads and violence towards social workers because of the frustration that many of the clients were facing, that -- and I quote:

As opposed to looking at a specific caseload, it was our belief that the fundamental thing that was being sought after was fast delivery of service to clients.

Well, Mr. Chairman, we're not getting the fast service, and we're certainly not getting counseling time for those particular clients. So we're losing on both ends. I think these are two fundamental reasons why clients need to have access to their social workers.

Now, under vote 2 we see a decrease in funding of over \$50 million to the single employables. The minister has explained this already, that we're anticipating that this many people under this category will get employment. Certainly that will be welcome if that becomes true. One thing under that area is the fact that when we do decrease funding in this particular area to single employables, I'm sure that will free up a lot of income security workers. I would ask the minister if she would make a commitment to keep those workers on staff so that the areas that I have mentioned tonight could be improved.

Now I'd like to spend a little bit of time talking about poverty and especially hungry children in this province. I don't think there's anything that's more sad or more unforgivable, Mr. Chairman, than having hungry children in this province, in this great province of ours. I think the government is making a statement, and it's a disgraceful one and it's a shameful one, when they allow children to go hungry in this province. Then

they say it's because people don't know how to budget. Even if that is happening in some cases, the children are still going hungry. That is still an issue.

Now, in Edmonton in 1987 there were 113,722 adults who were using our food banks, and of that number over 60,000 were children under 12 years old. They categorize them under 12 because those over 12 don't receive milk and certain other food items. This is disgraceful. We have charitable organizations coming to the rescue to feed these children. We have seen *Sports Illustrated*, which is a multinational sports magazine, fund a program in Calgary, much to the embarrassment of many Calgarians and Albertans, I might add. But still we have seen no action on the part of this government to deal with this very important situation. I know that this department has increased the food allowance by \$15 per month, which is what it averages out to be. But having acknowledged that and having acknowledged the fact that other areas like shelter and utilities haven't been increased, then we're still facing a problem. We need some action on the part of this government, and I would hope that the minister has a comment to make on that particular area.

Another area, Mr. Chairman, is the working poor in this province. Because I get a lot of people in this category that come into my constituency office. Now, these people, they're working hard. They're making low wages, so they're not doing very well in terms of making ends meet. In some cases, I have seen people come into my office that have legal fees to pay; they have health care premiums; they have dental care to pay; they have to pay for eyeglasses and eye care; they have to pay school user fees; they have child care fees to pay. I know there are cases where people have just given up. They can't make ends meet, so they just simply give up and they go on social assistance. I think this is very sad indeed. I think we have to address the concerns of the working poor. I can only say that thank goodness this government decided to raise the minimum wage, even if it did take them seven years to do so.

Now, the government stated in their Budget Address that it is committed to the family. I would ask the minister: what commitment is there to the working poor and those families that fall into that category? Because we do know that the government has deinsured eye care; they have raised the health care premiums; they eliminated the renters' tax credits; they endorse school user fees; they support a flat tax. All of this directly reflects on the quality of life for those families. So I would ask the minister to make some comments about the working poor, because a lot of families are really hurting out there.

Under vote 2 comes the AISH program, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped. Now, I appreciate the minister's comments in terms of where the money is going to for the increase, because I was wondering about that. Some people have made representation to me saying that under that program they haven't had an increase for many years now; they haven't had a cost of living increase. So I was wondering if that money was going to go to raise their income or if it was going to be used for new people coming into the program. I think the minister has answered that.

Under vote 2, though, we see a decrease under social allowance for handicapped, under mentally handicapped and physically handicapped. I'm concerned a bit that this will affect the AISH-plus program. It's a good program. It's a badly needed program that helps people come into the community and pays for any additional costs they might encounter because of that. I would ask the minister if that particular program would be affected by the decrease under the AISH social assistance.

I would like to add, too, Mr. Chairman, that under the AISH program I understand caseloads are up to 700 per worker. This means that social workers cannot consult with clients to get them into jobs or get them into training. I had a social worker phone me one day and say that this is causing a lot of problems, because she felt that they could get a lot of people off AISH and into jobs, and they would become independent if they simply could get some assistance to begin with in terms of job counseling and training. Apparently, clients are spending up to two months trying to see a worker. Many of the social workers would like to make home visits, but they can't because their caseloads are so high. They feel that they're working only to process new applications, and they do about half an hour a month of social working. So that's a problem for them and for their clients.

Now, another problem with the AISH program that's been brought to my attention is that many people on AISH need home care and they are expected to pay for that home care. When you're only getting \$720 a month it becomes a problem.

The other concern I had with the AISH program was that apparently when you are successful in obtaining a job, you are then classified as employable. Then if you consequently become sick, you are not allowed to go back onto AISH. So this is a real disincentive to find work in the first place. This was another problem brought to my attention. The minister can correct me if I'm wrong on that particular aspect of the program.

When it comes to mentally ill under AISH, Mr. Chairman, we are in dire need of support programs and decent housing for these people. Now, one might argue that it's the responsibility of the Community and Occupational Health department or the Municipal Affairs department or whatever, but the fact remains that these people are out there. They're living in housing that -- well, I can hardly describe what the housing's like; I've been to some of them myself, and it's pretty awful. I would like to see the minister take some action in this area and provide that support that they need or do something about the housing that they're having to purchase and pay for with taxpayers' money. I know the minister talks about choices for these people. Well, I'll tell you that these people don't have choices, and that's why they're living in these places -- because there isn't decent housing for them to access, and it's a real concern.

Mr. Chairman, it has been said that the measure of any government is the amount of social and economic security which it provides for even its humblest citizens. So I would really encourage the minister to look into this, because it's really a concern.

Now, getting into the area of child care -- and I know the minister expected this -- I think it's unacceptable, Mr. Chairman, that we spend more on child care than any other province and yet we are the only province that does not require any training. Therefore, I feel we have the lowest quality in all of Canada, and, again, we spend the most money. So something, in my view, is very, very wrong.

Now, in 1986 the minister stated in this House that she would tighten up the accountability of day care operators and the whole area and the administration of the day care. I know there has been an attempt to catch "ghost kids," as they're labeled, and this is certainly a move in the right direction, but it's not enough, Mr. Chairman. We continue to hand out huge amounts of money to child care centres, and we have virtually no accountability in terms of where that money is going to. We have no idea if it's going to the program, if it's going to the equipment, if it's going to the physical setup of the place, or if,

in fact, it's going for profits. We have no idea where that money is going to.

Something that really worried me when I read in the Budget Address in the area of child care was -- it states in the Budget Address that:

The government is reviewing our day care system to ensure that these subsidies are provided to families with the greatest need.

Okay; it's referring to subsidies in that particular quote. Now, I assumed in that Budget Address that the minister would be talking about operating allowances as well as subsidies given out to parents. Now, first of all, Mr. Chairman, I've had calls to my office about rumours that the operating allowance is going to be eliminated. This happened a year ago, and it's happening again. People are concerned because they recognize that if operating allowances are eliminated, in fact they will have to either raise the fees for the parents or they'll have to close the centres down. So there's a lot of concern out there right now in this particular area, and I would really appreciate if the minister could clarify this.

Now, it's my understanding that in 1980 this government introduced the operating allowance. It was given to both commercial and nonprofit day care centres. It's also my understanding that the operating allowance was originally planned to include training, but in fact for some reason the government abandoned this particular directive. Now, I feel very strongly that the operating allowance should be tied directly to standards and quality of care, but I think that to eliminate the operating allowance will cause centres to close, and perhaps parents will be forced to pay higher fees. I think this would be a very regressive move, because fees are already high, and parents cannot afford nor should they have to pay more for child care.

Now, subsidies have not been reviewed since 1981, and I think that in that particular area there's a lot of needs that are not being met. So I would ask the minister if she is planning on eliminating the operating allowance, or what exactly is her intention in that particular area? If she does plan on eliminating the operating allowance, I would ask her what she will be replacing it with.

I would like to also ask her if she would be implementing, Mr. Chairman, a needs test or some kind of an income test so that she will have more control over who will have access to day care. So these are important questions that I think need to be answered.

One other concern that's been brought to my attention, Mr. Chairman, is that some people who are applying for the operating allowance do in fact receive that operating allowance, and other people do not get that operating allowance. Now, it was my understanding that there was a freeze on operating allowances, and yet this continues to be the scenario, where some are getting it and some aren't. So is there a freeze or is there not a freeze, and what exactly is happening with the operating allowance?

I'd like to talk a little bit about the policy paper that the minister referred to in her opening remarks. I know that many excellent services are being delivered by many excellent agencies. But they are concerned, Mr. Chairman, that the government is moving away from a commitment to fund them. They are moving away from their responsibilities in terms of providing basic needs for people. Now, I don't think I know of one agency that isn't forced right now to fund-raise on their own, and this is just to simply provide the basic service they're delivering. It's not for the extras and it's not for the frills.

So I think it's clear through the statements in this particular policy paper that the government does put more emphasis on the volunteer sector. I would like to say that the volunteer sector is getting very worried, because I don't think we've had a commitment in funding by this government. The trend is one that services will be funded by charity, and I think this is a very dangerous move. These many volunteer agencies feel that the government does have a responsibility in the area of service delivery, the least being that of funding. So they would like to hear this government put forth a commitment to the funding.

Now, I know that services are being tendered out and lost to commercial businesses, and this I also think is very dangerous. There has been no consultation in many cases between the department and between the agency that is losing that particular service they have delivered in the past. I know in Calgary, for example, a lot of the group homes that were delivered by a non-profit agency in Calgary were all of a sudden tendered out to a business. Parents weren't notified, clients weren't notified, and there was a lot of concern over that particular issue. [interjections]

[Mr. Musgreave in the Chair]

The Member for Calgary-Glenmore tells me that I should stick to where I should know best. Well, I'll tell the member that I was in Calgary. I met with parents there, and perhaps you would like to do the same to get to know some of the issues. These people had no idea what was going on, and I think this is a common occurrence when certain services are being tendered out.

There are many, many areas I could get into tonight, but hopefully some of my other colleagues will get in and talk about some of them. In the area of family violence, certainly we welcome the increase there. I know one shelter that could use that whole sum of money in itself to just continue the programs it's offering. It's not a lot of money. Women are still being turned away from shelters and put up in hotels, which is not an alternative to a shelter.

I know the minister talked about foster homes, and I agree that foster parents and the whole area of foster care is a very essential, very important service. I found out this morning, though -- one particular person came into my office this morning, and she was telling me about a foster home where they have six foster boys, all of whom have been abused. The foster parents have no access to counseling. They just cannot get services. So when we talk about foster parents, certainly it's a good service; we recognize that. But we also recognize there are problems within that system and we have to pay more attention to the needs of the foster parents and the needs of the foster children within that system.

We talk about -- and the minister mentioned this -- if we provide too many programs for young people, they're going to just start leaving home. Well, usually kids leave home because they have been abused, and we have a lot of kids on the streets right now in Edmonton, in Calgary, all over this province. They have very little access for services, and I know that people working in these agencies that deal with these young kids are now having to counsel them, and they're not trained. Many come in, they're very suicidal, and there's just no services for them to go to. So that certainly is a concern. I think the government is in many cases using a bandage approach to funding in the implementation and development of programs. I think what they need to do is take a long-term look into the area of the social programs and

recognize the importance and value of these programs.

I still have time?

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Twelve seconds.

MS MJOLSNES: Twelve seconds. [interjection] Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Before the hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon speaks, the Deputy Speaker asked me to advise the House that at the end of the second period Edmonton is leading, and the score is 1-1.

MR. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That was read like a true Flames supporter. [interjections] I know it's been tough for years to be a Liberal in Alberta, but it's even tougher to be a Flames supporter in northern Alberta. Nevertheless, that's probably the only thing the minister and I will agree on tonight.

I'd like to make a few general comments, if I may, to the minister without taking too much time, because I noticed a gang of hungry Tories wanting to get the floor. One thing that's a little puzzling is the overall reduction in spite of the dramatic increase in demand. The government, I know, will probably answer that by saying their employment programs will be increased and therefore they'll pick up the slack. But there's no real proof of that, and I'm afraid the minister may have believed the current hype that's going through the front bench that things are going to improve, oil is going to go to \$20 or \$25 a barrel, the Canadian dollar will go back to 60 cents, and we'll just be rolling in money. But I would think the minister might be more careful than to listen to some of the blarney that maybe spreads through the economic forecast on the front bench, because we're playing with people's lives here, people's dignity. Consequently, it could be dangerous to cut the money too far as far as our estimates of what we need in social services.

One of the problems is that if you don't allow enough in the budget, then you feel compelled to try to cut the awards that are going out to welfare, make it tougher to get because there isn't enough money to go around. That's the old Greek philosopher Procrustes. Maybe some of you have heard of the procrustean bed. If you arrived at this innkeeper's home and you were a little too tall for the bed, all he did was chop off your ankles and make you fit the bed. On the other hand, if you did not fit the bed. . . [interjections]

It's now 2-1 for Detroit. Is that it? Well, that's rather depressing news, Mr. Chairman, because once the Flames went out of it I did throw myself fully behind the Oilers.

But this procrustean bed, as I'm back again, which the minister seems so fond of using in her department also -- if you were a little too short for the innkeeper's bed, he put you on the rack and stretched you till you fit it. I feel the bed of Procrustes is something that could be applied to the way our minister would apply her department. I notice she has four or five rack stretchers in the gallery to help her, and I don't know what they'll say after this is over.

Then I come to the second part that bothers me a bit here. There must be some difficulties in operating effective programs under several departments with interlocking jurisdictions. The unemployed come under Social Services, Career Development and Employment community health, the workers' compensation, Advanced Education. It seems to me this is a case of worrying about keeping the Tories that are elected in jobs rather than keeping the unemployed with effective services. What we

are doing is creating departments much like Gilbert and Sullivan did in their opera *H.M.S. Pinafore*, to make sure there's lots of offices to be filled. Whether or not the navy ever gets launched seems to be secondary. I think the sole purpose of the department should be to make sure that the unemployed and those that are less fortunate have a very good, efficient system of administration. So I would like to hear the minister's opinion on why the department can't be more concentrated. As a matter of fact, if she were to propose that these all come under one minister, I might even move that she be made the minister. That's a bit of a bribe, I know, Mr. Chairman. Nevertheless, it is a thought she should consider.

I'm a little worried about the government's social policy paper, *Caring & Responsibility*. It is something you would expect to lift out of a Charles Dickens novel and would not expect to reappear here. Nevertheless, it appears that it says the government will care, but we must undertake more responsibility. We must undertake more responsibility here.

This is probably as good a place as any to go over the classical ideological differences between the Conservatives and Liberals and the NDP. The socialists or the NDP . . . [interjection] My friend from the dryland country has managed to wet his tonsils enough to yell across the floor, but usually he's so dry. The socialists always feel that poverty is an example of a failure in the distribution system, a failure in the economic system; therefore, they should spread the rewards more evenly. Consequently, the Tory, of course, is at the other end of the extreme, but maybe God wished it that way, because there has to be some incentive to get out of the poverty ghetto. The Liberal likes to look at it from the case of the dignity of the individual itself. It might lead, in some cases, to a bit of anarchy, but I think if we have to err at all, it's to err on the side of making sure the individual has the dignity and the self-respect to move ahead. And the hon. minister's comments, like hungry children are due to bad management, don't do anything to improve that. Sure, it's due to bad management. That's like telling us that the sun is going to come up tomorrow. The question is not whether it's due to bad management but whether we can do something about it.

The time lapse between educating parents -- and its showing up in children that have food and are properly fed in school -- is so far apart that you lose a generation. In fact, by the time you've educated the parents, the chances are the children have grown and then they're passing on their philosophy. You're always one generation behind. So the idea of counseling the parents is not going to work, and I would suggest to the hon. minister that it's probably in the same spirit of good Conservative thought to feed the children in school and where they are going without food. Because remember, even *Oliver Twist* was allowed to come back and ask for more gruel. I would hope we would be feeding more than gruel. Nevertheless, since Charles Dickens seems to be the sociological image this government likes to promote, they could take some of the books out of the schools of *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* and try to put a little gruel in the bowls of the children at school.

I move on a bit more in the ideological thrust. I'm also concerned about the ideological thrust of this government to commercialization of human services. Somehow or another it's been the thought that if it's private and enterprising, it must be good. Well, I think one must remember that even if you're a hard-rock Conservative and read Friedman every night before you fall off to sleep in your little blue and orange underwear or nightgown, you still are going to have to realize that supply and

demand means a discerning buyer and a willing seller. And to talk about child care and poverty and the idea of supply and demand is ridiculous. How can a six- or eight- or 10-year-old child, for instance, weigh the quality of a day care? Putting that on a free market is foolish. I mean, they're not in a position to do it. Sure, put used cars, cars on a free market, but not child care and decide that the use or lack of use of child care or group homes is due to lack of wisdom. The point is that they are not in a position to be able to make that competition, and it's an unfair match to match up supply and demand in that area. No, the areas of child care, group care, group homes that we're talking about, job clubs, and even hospitals I think I would venture into very, very carefully, Madam Minister, as to whether to involve private or commercialization. The problem is that private and nonprofit services are not accountable to the community, but commercial services account to no one except their banker.

If I may go on to another item -- I made some notes here -- social assistance payments: well, food is up \$3 a week. That is not too impressive. There again, we were talking about food a little earlier. Food could be up more per week in the home and also certainly in the schools. Housing has not gone up. Utilities have not gone up. Yet I noticed that utility companies have suggested or are going after an increase in their rates. Telephone, transportation, clothing all remain, which seems all right. But in none of them in any way, shape, or form, Madam Minister, can we be accused of sapping the will and the strength for these people to move out of the poverty ghetto. This is one of the classical tenets of conservative thought which has always puzzled me, that once your income moves up over \$200,000 a year you cannot be spoiled with free gifts or money or grants or guarantees, whether your name is Pocklington or Esso or anything. There is no way that you can be ruined with free money once you've got up to over \$100,000 a year in income. However, if you're down below \$20,000 a year, somehow or another a grant of even a few dollars saps the very moral fibre of the nation; somehow or another they're going to grow up bent and warped, and some of their family may even vote NDP, heaven forbid. [interjections] Oh, a shocking revelation that could be. That's worse than the Oilers losing a game. And yet this government consistently feels that giving grants to the rich somehow or another is one of the God-given rights they're supposed to do, even if they taxed the poor to get that gift, and giving any sort of unwarranted, unsought for, unworked for, and unknissed for award or money to the poor is absolutely out of character.

When we come to child care, Madam Minister, there seems to be no inclination on your part to put any kind of training standards in for the employees, no way of trying to phase them in. Well, I think in this modern day and age nearly everyone should have some training for whatever they do, but somehow or another not only are the children not to be fed in school but they're to be looked after in the privately run day cares by anybody who's got a good heart and a good soul. Well, I agree; good heartedness and being a loving person means a great deal in looking after children. But I submit that a bureaucrat is the last person to assess that quality, and the minister, much as she would be good at it, hasn't got the time to do it all. So consequently we have to do some narrowing down, and I think a certain amount of training for the job would help do that.

The Child Welfare Act. There's no question that it needs to be reviewed. I think the question of curbs on the Children's Guardian has to be looked at. The Children's Guardian should be, I believe, a part of the Ombudsman's office, not of the social welfare business. This is asking the fox to look after the chick-

ens, or Colonel Sanders even may be a little less mean. But the point is that a guardian should be operated entirely separate, because if there are infringements on the rights of children today, they're quite often done by the minister's own department. I'm not saying they do it with any deliberate malice aforethought; actually they have a reasonably good department here in Alberta. But that big department is going to contain some people who get a little tired and cranky and maybe a little autocratic. Consequently, it doesn't hurt to know that they could have a Children's Guardian to review some of the decisions.

Which leads to the next item: native repatriation program. Here again, it's a little bit like . . . Have you ever watched the old comic book or movie on Mickey Mouse and the Sorcerer's Apprentice? Somebody got the idea that native children from foster homes should be returned to the reserves. And I agree: all equal, if there's a break in the process and they're being left out of one home and go to another, maybe try to put them back a native. But to sit there lurking almost behind trees, and when the child wanders out of the yard, snipping out and grabbing hold of him and then trying to run him back to a reserve, is getting a little ridiculous. And this is what we appear to be having: some overenthusiastic child welfare workers that are literally out there with butterfly nets looking for native children to recapture and put back on reserves. I think this is absolutely foolish.

Getting near the end, Mr. Chairman . . . [interjections] I like the smell of roasting Tories from over here, so I'll keep going for a while. The next is the child abuse program. Well, we don't seem to have developed a program for child abuse, for spouse abuse -- and I mention males as well as females. The other day I read where 12 percent of male spouses have been abused versus 11 percent of female spouses. In my family that's probably right, but I'm not sure if the experience is that good. In other words, abuse takes place on both sides. And there's also elder abuse that the hon. minister could be looking at. So child abuse, spouse abuse, and elder abuse are three areas that this government is doing very little on. I know the budget has increased allocation to shelters, but it does not make funds available for satellite shelters. These serve the needs of isolated women and children and should be put into the whole program.

In summary then, Mr. Chairman, vote 1 -- where the costs are down -- looks good, although if some of these programs I've just advised the hon. minister on were to be put in, I'd be quite ready to vote for it to be increased. Vote 2 is reduced, social assistance by 4.8 percent. I believe here again that I'm afraid the minister, as I repeat, will try to fit those needing social assistance to her Procrustean bed, and that has me very concerned. Vote 3, an increase of 44 percent to handicapped children. And I'd take my hat off, if I had one on now, for the minister; she is operating in the right direction there. I did want her to know that I had a couple of compliments before I sat down.

But what we need is a comprehensive strategy and program that provides support to those in need and those that are most vulnerable: children, the aged, the handicapped. What we have is a piecemeal, fragmented, and reduced program pushing more and more back onto the backs of individuals, individuals that have already shown they are having trouble coping with our modern society. Admittedly churches, community groups, and municipalities should be involved more, but there seems no concrete program on how this will work out.

That, Mr. Chairman, is my summation. Thank you very much.

MRS. OSTERMAN: Mr. Chairman, I thought it might be ap-

propriate, since we've had two rather lengthy speeches already, that I might respond. I appreciated the interesting comments by the hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon and also the comments made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder. I would point out to the hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon that he's wrong on several counts: I don't have a blue and orange nightgown, and I'm a Montreal fan. [interjection] I've got another Montreal fan here? Good. This is disclosure time.

Mr. Chairman, some interesting observations have been made, and I think it's appropriate to respond to some of them. The hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon particularly somehow alludes to, or more than directly alludes to, the idea that the government members, the minister, whoever, over here somehow want to hurt people in this province who have a lower income. That's sheer nonsense, and I think he knows it. But he has to do the political thing and say something like that I can't believe the hon. member, with the background he has, could make some of the comments in his belief that people with a lesser income in this province can be denigrated, because it almost is a denigration the way the opposition spits out the word "poor."

I recall over the years where people have tried to make me feel lesser at a point in time in my life because I didn't happen to have as much money as they did. I think that is quite incredible, to talk about, in the same breath, that somehow people don't have dignity because they may have a low income. The way they purchase dignity is not through their own self-efforts. It's the land of thing that is inherent in every Albertan, but you purchase dignity for them by government largesse. What an incredible comment to make about the people of Alberta and their ability to manage. Most of the people I know, that I have either been raised with or grown up with or those who are young right now, are very proud of the fact that they manage on limited resources. It would be interesting to hear what Mother Teresa has to say about the poor of the world and where she finds the greatest love and greatest heart amongst people on this globe. So it is not a service to people of this province to talk in that manner. It is certainly a service to people to talk about what are the real needs in society for those who are much less fortunate in a number of ways in terms of handicaps and so on. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, indeed, raised some of those circumstances, and I think they have to be addressed and we should continue to try to address them. But I feel badly that some members of the House would continue to talk about citizens of Alberta in that manner.

There isn't one person -- and I should have waited until the end of the opposition's comments -- there won't be one person in the opposition that in my view would have alluded to responsibility. There's a lot of discussion about rights. We got a Charter or Rights. Too bad we didn't have a charter of responsibilities.

MR. TAYLOR: That's what we're trying to educate you to.

MRS. OSTERMAN: I have heard from teachers, either by way of a direct phone call to my office or calling my home on the weekend, who have said, "It is marginally children who come from people that are on social allowance who need a lunch program." What are we talking about, a lunch program? A lunch is enough for the children of this province? What about the other two meals? What about asking the parents in terms of delivering the program? Where is the parent's responsibility? Not one person has mentioned parents. They've immediately turned their heads and said, "What is the government going to

do?" Because those teachers will tell you that many of the children have money in their pockets; there's been no stress on what they should buy with it. Or alternately, they just have no money and no lunch prepared for them, but they come from higher income families. So you're saying the people who are struggling in this province to make their way feel good about it. No wonder they'll give up, because we're going to tax them some more to pay for the people who do not accept responsibility.

MR. TAYLOR: Like Pocklington.

MRS. OSTERMAN: Let's talk about responsibility, because indeed there are some people who have much higher hurdles to surmount. But I can assure hon. members that from my meetings across the province, those people fit into some categories that are not the ones that have been addressed particularly by the hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon. If we're going to recognize the individual efforts of Albertans and have a belief that they should enjoy the fruits of their labour, then surely we're not saying to them that they must pay for people who are not accepting responsibility. The hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon somehow says, "Albertans can't learn quickly how to budget." Boy, I'll tell you, if there was no other money around, they'd sure as heck learn quickly.

MR. TAYLOR: Simon Legree.

MRS. OSTERMAN: Not Simon Legree, Mr. Chairman; just somebody who believes in Albertans' ability to manage when they haven't had the notion put in their head that there's all sorts of reasons why they can't manage. We have a firm belief that the biggest budget in Social Services per capita -- and by the way, I made a mistake on the population of Alberta; it should have been 2.25 million and not 1.25 million. Surely it is appropriate to direct the biggest budget per capita in terms of services to those in most need and encourage those . . .

MR. TAYLOR: How do you pick them?

MRS. OSTERMAN: That's the prime thing, isn't it? How do you pick most need? You certainly don't by indicating to anybody that's having a problem that they can't manage their problem and automatically government should come in to fix it. So maybe one of the best things the Alberta Legislature could do is, in fact, start a whole new thing, and that is: let's list the rights that we have; let us list also the corresponding responsibilities that we have to the people of this province who we believe ought to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

There are a number of programs that were mentioned, Mr. Chairman, that I think are important to note. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder talked about cuts in some areas. I think it's important to note that the cost for eye examinations for children continues to be covered in the health care scheme. Of course, health care premiums are related to income, so low-income people are not going to be paying premiums. I think it's important also to note, as the hon. Provincial Treasurer has noted, that we have had a huge number of Albertans who were on the lower end of the income scale come off the income tax rolls altogether.

The AISH program. I'm going to have to get clarification from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, because I'm not sure. There seems to be some confusion in the Official Opposition's ranks, because one of her colleagues, the hon. Member for

Edmonton-Highlands, talked about the need to have some incentives and that there ought to be some income allowed in other things that weren't immediately deductible and that there should be also a prorating in that area. And we have exactly that, Mr. Chairman. I'm not sure whether it is possible that maybe the In Review book that I have provided for all hon. members doesn't have the detail that it needs. I didn't want to make it too wordy, but I think that potentially we could add some information so there would be an understanding of the income exemptions and so on in that area.

I think it's also important to note that AISH is a pension program and, as such, doesn't demand, as we have with social allowance of course, an examination of assets by individuals. It is the most generous program in the country. There is not another one like it; it is very unique. I think it can continue to be generous in numbers on a monthly basis, as would be indicated in terms of what the average Albertan can afford to share. I think that's an appropriate comment. It was our belief that this year, given the relativeness of that program to all others across the country, we still had a very reasonable program and that this year we were not in a position to raise it.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder also spoke about consistency in funding of services. Well, I hope the hon. member will recognize that the same dollars, or slightly more dollars, going into the same program every year doesn't necessarily mean that services are appropriate. Needs change. We see a decline in the number of institutional beds. It is less expensive and is, in my view, far more appropriate to administer to children, when possible, in their family setting. The family must be made whole, not just the child.

And in respect of the hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon talking about the numbers that are now given for the social allowance area -- and that, incidentally, is accounting for the decrease in the overall budget -- if we are wrong in our forecasts, we won't have Duncan's head. What we will do, obviously, is have to put more money into the program. It is absolutely demand driven. We are not going to have social workers suddenly finding a way to say to people, "You're not eligible." The program is there; the criteria are there. We've developed a new income security manual we believe is very good and much clearer, and we'll develop the consistency across the province that is appropriate.

Mr. Chairman, as we look at the employment programs and the improved economy, it's once again a reflection of the difference in views from opposition members to government members. Our view is as we see Albertans, and they are busying themselves getting into the mainstream of the economy, taking the kinds of risks that are traditional in this province in terms of province building. Our forefathers took incredible risks. We haven't been asked to take the same number of risks, but the risks are still there. To somehow say that Albertans in 1988 shouldn't have any risk in their lives, and we should borrow on the backs of the kids like the kids that were in the gallery today because we're so deserving it doesn't matter what the heck happens to them, is just an incredible statement to make. Mr. Chairman, this government is not going to do that.

Mr. Chairman, I'm sure other members have comments, and it will be appropriate at this time for the minister to sit down.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for St. Paul.

MR. DROBOT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to commend the minister and her department for their contribution

to our society and their concerns in the field of social services. Listening to the hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon reminds me of his usual political dance: one step forward, two steps back, and then sidestep. I jotted a few notes, Mr. Chairman:

Oh, listen to the opposition speeches
That baffle, beef, and bore
As they waffle through the evening,
Trying to make a score.
Oh, those opposition politicians
Who taunt us, one and all,
They're riding to oblivion
On their socialist cannonball.

Listen to their ranting --
May they forever stand,
And they will be discounted
By all the polls in this land.
The NDP are jeering,
And though it may appall,
They are joining the Liberals
In riding for a fall.

Mr. Chairman, I come from a constituency where family life . . .

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I hope the hon. member will now address the estimates.

MR. DROBOT: . . . and close family ties are still sacred. As a result of this, we have a lot of foster parents in the constituency, mainly because of their love of children and their contribution to our society. Yes, foster parents are an important part of our social structure.

Mr. Chairman, a challenge exists on a number of levels of foster care. The development, recruitment, and training of foster parents should be one of our major functions. Foster parent associations agree that foster care is becoming an increasing, specialized task. Foster parents themselves are often the best recruiters of new parent agencies, new parents who wish to take children and raise them in a family surrounding. Foster parents are an important way to privatize some of our children placement services.

My constituents do not believe in state-run schools from the cradle to the grave. Like all human institutions, the family is an important instrument, but in our complex, uncaring world the foster family must be commended. But they do need some help and guidance in the primary job of child rearing. The lack of foster parents -- we need more of them -- is costing some children their hopes of real family happiness. Foster care is a shared responsibility. Foster parents care, and caseworkers and social service agencies all work together. Foster parents play a very important role in the caring of children who for some reason cannot remain in their own homes. Research has shown that foster care and placements work best when foster parents are experienced, trained, and supported by the government. Does the Alberta Social Services play any role in ensuring that all foster parents in this province are properly experienced and trained for their responsibilities?

The other question I have to the hon. minister: has the minister's department initiated any studies or reviews of the foster care system in our province to ensure that it is operating in the best possible manner? Can the minister elaborate whether there is any increase in foster care for foster children, and are there any plans in the near future to provide funding for the establishment of a provincially funded insurance policy program for foster parents?

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The score now is Oilers 3, Detroit Red Wings 3, early in the third period.

The next member is Edmonton-Avonmore.

MS LAING: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In responding to the minister, I'm struck with her concern that she will cripple people by supplying too much. However, I do not hear her concern that people may be crippled by overwhelming odds. I believe we need to be more concerned about the latter rather than the former. Indeed, the minister used the example of parents who are concerned about children who walk out of homes because they don't like the rules. That may be a case for a very few children, but we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that children walk out of their homes because those homes are violent homes. They are walking out to escape the violence of alcoholism, of physical and sexual and emotional abuse.

As the Member for Edmonton-Calder has said, people hate going on social assistance. It is only when they see no way of getting off social assistance that they become crippled by despair, apathy, and hopelessness. We cannot constantly castigate them, treat them as second-class citizens, and not in that process rob them of any sense of competency, self-esteem, or hope. And that robbing is what cripples people. Giving them an opportunity to live in dignity while they build or rebuild their lives is what restores initiative and independence.

I would hope that the minister, in moving to automation -- that this is not a way of reducing staff; that indeed the automation will mean lower caseloads, with social workers -- well-trained social workers -- able to spend more time with their clients to deal with the many issues that fill their lives.

A third issue or principle that was raised was the issue of privatization. I am concerned that we don't have a clear definition of privatization. Does it mean privatization to the nonprofit charitable sector or to the for-profit business sector? I have great concern that business would be able to profit through providing for the basic needs of people, be they adults or children. And I also am concerned that the private, for-profit sector be subject to the same degree of scrutiny as department social workers are and that nonprofit agencies are subjected to. We know that competition becomes a guiding force in the for-profit sector. Success and profit can only be achieved through reduction in quality of service and the wages paid workers.

I'd now like to go to vote 3. We note that the increase in funding to shelters was 8.5 percent or about \$300,000. This sounds very good until we realize that there are 14 shelters in Alberta and that that comes to approximately \$20,000 per shelter. It is said this is up to 90 percent of the CORE funding requirements, although recommendations have been made that the shelter should be funded to 100 percent of CORE funding requirements. We know that in communities there are limited resources, both in terms of charitable dollars as well as in terms of volunteer hours, and that many precious volunteer hours are spent fund-raising. In addition, we know that shelters presently do not meet the demand. In fact, the shelter in Edmonton turns away about a third of the women and children that come to that shelter for care each year. So we not only need a bringing up to 100 percent CORE funding as the shelters now are, but we need to extend the number of shelters and the number of shelter beds to be able to provide service to all women that seek help, and also we need to move into second-stage shelter funding.

I have great concern for services for women in rural areas of Alberta. They have all the difficulties that go with being battered in an urban centre plus the difficulty of geographical isolation.

tion. We need and it has been recommended by the Advisory Council on the Status of Women that we have a provincewide, toll free line that would link into regional centres. Such a crisis line would ensure anonymity and would ensure that trained, qualified, and supervised volunteers man those crisis lines. When I hear of volunteers with only 10 hours of training on a suicide distress line, I am deeply concerned. At the very least we must be sure that when people reach out for help, they are not harmed. We would hope to help, but we must be sure that they are not harmed.

There are many myths that are still alive and well in this society, and they dominate many people's thinking. One of the most dangerous myths is the suggestion that suicide or an attempted suicide is just a way of seeking attention. Someone that is insensitive to what is really happening for the suicidal person may, in fact, drive them to suicide if they do not hear their pain and recognize that seeking attention is for good and just reasons. Many people still believe that an assaulted woman is really to blame for the assault and maybe she should just go home and try harder. Or they may give her some techniques to deal with her husband that may put her at greater risk. We know that the majority of women that are murdered in this country are murdered by their spouses. So we must be absolutely sure that people on crisis lines have adequate training so they do not harm.

We also need to ensure that people seeking help from crisis lines can then have resources that are available to them, especially in a time of increasing education around the area of violence in the family, be it spouse assault or sexual violence against children or physical violence against children. There is an increasing awareness of the damage that does. People are reaching out for help and there needs to be resources for these people. There is nothing worse than for a child to disclose that he or she has been sexually abused and then for it to take an extended period of time for that child to receive treatment. Crisis lines are essential for reaching out, as I said, but we must then have the backup resources, particularly in the rural areas. We need satellites. Some of the satellites are resource centres and provide some beds for women and their children. In most cases they do not receive any funding from the provincial government, as they have been funded through Secretary of State. Yet they are a very necessary resource for rural women.

I would also ask the minister what commitment and initiatives she has made to reach out to native women and to immigrant women who also may experience violence in their own homes. This may require an initiative on the part of the department to work with these women in their communities to develop services that meet their own needs. We need also to hear more about prevention, and we hear much about prevention. The primary line of prevention is treatment of children who have been raised in violent homes.

More than that, we need to provide intensive treatment for offenders. Programs are not funded for the most part, and I hear of them closing down. Jail or fines are not enough to change these people's behaviour. They need to learn how to deal with their feelings and, in most cases, need their attitudes towards women and children changed. We need to have resources for the first-time offender, who is shocked when he batters his wife and reaches out for help. If this government cares about families, it will ensure that these resources are there for early intervention.

I have great concern about the Child Welfare Act that focuses so strongly on the family and, I believe, in some cases leaves a child at risk when a child is returned to an abusive fam-

ily before the parents have learned to deal with their anger in real and appropriate ways. We need to help people deal with their feelings. We need to teach them how to relate, to nurture, to parent, and we need resources to do that. Otherwise, we will pay the price in terms of more wife assault, more child assault and, in fact, in our prisons, as these children grow up to act out the pain that they have endured in their homes.

Mr. Chairman, in this province we have excellent programs in two of our major cities to deal with child sexual abuse, but child sexual abuse and physical abuse occur in rural areas as well. I would ask that the minister ensure that there be programs for these children and their families in all parts of the province so that they, too, can get the treatment they need.

The minister talked about child care and mothers who stay at home and forgo luxuries, and the lack of choices for some because of taxation. Quality child care is necessary in our society whether we like it or not. Often it is not a choice for a woman to work. She may be willing to forgo luxuries to stay home, but she works out of necessity, for food, clothing, and shelter, and she needs quality child care for her children if she is not to be burdened by unending worry about the welfare of her children. Perhaps instead of cutting back on child care to decrease the burden of taxes on some families, the government should consider fair taxation, taxation on corporations, and the government should be less concerned about the destruction to individuals of the support they receive and be more watchful of the handouts and tax write-offs they give to large corporations. As the Member for Westlock-Sturgeon said, such handouts are not held to destroy business and corporation initiatives.

I would address, finally, the issue of responsibility. Responsibility means the ability to respond to another. I do not see much in the minister that demonstrates such an ability. Parents, people want to be able to respond to the needs of their children, their families, themselves. That is human nature. We do not destroy that human impulse by making sure that people can feed, clothe, shelter, and educate their children.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The Member for Olds-Didsbury.

MR. BRASSARD: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I, too, have a few questions for our minister, but before I ask them, I'd just like to take a moment and congratulate her on her handling of a very demanding portfolio in such a capable, competent and sincere manner. Without reflection on any of her predecessors, I feel that a new perspective has been introduced, which is not only timely but refreshing. We have openly discussed and debated areas of personal responsibility and accountability, not in any confrontational manner but based on understanding and sensitivity and true caring. So I congratulate you, Madam Minister, on your handling of this extremely difficult portfolio.

I'd like to talk for a minute on the AISH program. This government has a definite record of caring in the area of services for the handicapped, Mr. Chairman. The establishment of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities is just one fine example of this, and this department is also very involved in helping disabled Albertans. I note in vote 2.2.3 that the Alberta Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped is at \$137,501,000, up fully 9.1 percent or \$11 million, from last year. I'd like to know if the minister could indicate just what this new funding will be used for. I know that there are some people who have complained about the private income scale used for those on the AISH program and how unfair it is. I

would like the minister to briefly explain how this scale works and whether or not it is seen to be a major problem. I'd also like the minister to inform this House if her department is actively encouraging participants of this program to find work and whether there are any support mechanisms available for those who wish to do so.

I look at vote 3.1.5, Mr. Chairman, and it deals with Handicapped Children Services. This is a program that serves well over 3,000 families with handicapped children, enabling those children to be cared for in their own homes, at home with their families instead of in institutions. This is where the children should be, Mr. Chairman, at home, where they are best looked after and are the happiest. This is an important program that makes this possibility for Alberta's handicapped children a reality. Program support for Handicapped Children Services has been increased fully 44 percent. The Member for Edmonton-Calder pointed out that entire vote but really didn't indicate any change of any significance, and I tell you, Mr. Chairman, that that's a very significant change and a change that's responding to the changing demands of the care.

In the budget speech we heard that the '88-89 budget includes \$32 million to be allotted to co-ordinated home care. This enables Albertans to remain in their homes when dealing with health setbacks. The program provides such services as Meals on Wheels and help with household chores. This not only lessens the strain on hospital beds for those who can care for themselves; it helps maintain the proud, independent spirit of Albertans. I wonder if the minister could indicate how this service, provided by her department, compares to similar services in other provinces across Canada.

Social Services operates a number of institutions -- Michener Centre, Baker centre, Eric Cormack Centre, and the Rosecrest centre -- all for the handicapped, to help them develop their maximum potential and independence. Residents of these centres have access to life skills, educational and vocational training. These centres are a crucial part of helping Albertans with special needs become more self-sufficient and thus increase their own sense of dignity.

Mr. Chairman, we must not confuse needs with want, as the Member for Edmonton-Calder appears to do. We do have a responsibility to supply a safety net, but we also have a responsibility not to create a dependence. No one, particularly the opposition, has a corner on caring, regardless of what the members for Edmonton-Calder and Edmonton-Avonmore particularly would have us believe.

Once again I commend you, Madam Minister, and ask that you keep up the good work.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

MR. GIBEAULT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to get in a few comments on the debate tonight, particularly in respect to the area of social allowance. The minister is probably aware -- I certainly hope she is reading the series that the *Edmonton Journal* is doing now on what it's like to live on welfare. I don't know if the minister has ever taken the time to try and live on the kind of resources she's proposing that some Albertans have to live on. Even though I know that some members opposite despise the *Edmonton Journal* because it hasn't prostituted itself as an organ of Conservative policy -- given that, they have done, I think, a very commendable effort in trying to indicate just how difficult and traumatic and degrading it is trying to exist on the

meagre resources that are provided from social allowance.

I have to wonder if the minister has been moved by these stories. Is she at all concerned? Has she considered trying to put herself in those people's shoes for a month and see if she can, after that, stand here in her place with a straight face and talk about how it's just a question of budgeting those resources? You know, I'd really like to put that challenge to her. I'd have a whole lot more respect for a lot of those comments if she could do that: just put herself in those people's places for a month or two and then come back in this House and tell us that the resources she provides are very adequate. The fact is, you know, if you listen to anybody who's tried to make it on those resources, that it just is a very degrading, dehumanizing experience, and I'd like to see how the minister feels after she's done that for a couple of months.

I want to talk a little bit about the social allowance system, because there are some people in my constituency who are victims of this government's economic policies and its lack of commitment to organizing our economy so that all of the people of this province could be productive and have jobs. I have to wonder if she or anybody in her office or her staff there have recently tried to imagine that they'd be in a situation where they'd have to get social assistance from the government and if they have tried contacting some of the district offices, like the one in Mill Woods. If they have, Mr. Chairman, they would have got a response similar to what I have gotten when I have tried this myself after receiving many complaints from constituents. What happens is that you get a busy signal over and over and over and over. So out of frustration people go down to the district office and ask to see a caseworker. And what are they told? "Well, go back home and phone for an appointment." So it's catch-22, you know. You can't get through on the phone, and if you go into the office, they say, "Phone." So it's a recipe for frustration, and I want to tell the minister that people really get very, very frustrated, annoyed. I can understand when occasionally I read stories of people taking very dramatic actions in social services offices because their frustration level has just been pushed beyond any reasonable limit for endurance.

So I suggest to her, as someone who's so keen on the private sector: how can you have tolerated, Madam Minister, such a shabby level of service to customers? I mean, the prime slogan or motto, if you like, in the private sector is: keep your customers or your clients happy. You know, Madam Minister, that's just not happening. The service is poor, and I think it reflects an attitude on the part of the government, really, of contempt for those who have been victims of, as I said, this Conservative government's economic policies.

I want to tell the minister of a very educational experience I have had recently. One of my constituents has been put into a situation where he has to apply for social assistance, much to his chagrin because he knows it's a degrading experience. He doesn't relish the idea at all, but he knows that his family has to survive somehow. He lined up an appointment to see a social worker, and he mentioned this to me. So I asked him if I could join him when he went in, in order that I could better understand how the department serves its clients.

I was expecting a friendly welcome because I thought that the department would appreciate an opportunity to show the local MLA just how good a job they're doing. But you know, it came to my attention afterwards that my visit created quite a stir. The only humorous element of it, if we might call it that, is that my appearance at the office seemed to create quite a stir. There were calls to the regional office, I understand, trying to

get some guidance about what to do in this situation, because I guess this was very unusual. My predecessor, I guess, never troubled himself to find out what was happening to Social Services clients in the Edmonton-Mill Woods constituency. I guess he was too busy looking after his friends in the oil companies. So this was a very unusual experience, and when they called the regional office for some guidance, apparently everybody was in a meeting, so the bureaucracy just caved in on itself, and it couldn't even find out what to do about such an interesting development.

First of all, when you approach the district office in Mill Woods, Madam Minister, if you ever have a chance to go out there, you'll notice that there's no signage on the office. You know, there's no sign there that says: this is the Mill Woods district office of Social Services. I wonder why that is, Madam Minister. Is it because we want to spare people the embarrassment of going into a place like that? Is it because we want to avoid people having the same kind of feeling that they might have if they went into an adult bookstore or some sleazy strip joint where, you know, you'd rather not see anybody, not have anybody know that you're going to such a place? Is that the reason why there are no signs up there, and it's sort of like going into some undesirable location?

In any event, there are no signs, but if you find the office and you go in for an appointment, they have you go into a little room there which reminds me a whole lot more of an interrogation-type room than one that would have been designed to help distressed persons relax a little bit. There are no windows in this room. They've got two doors. The clients come in one door, and the social workers go through the other door into the inner sanctum, where the sacred files on all these people are kept, files that individuals are not allowed to look at. Certainly when I was there, it was curious to me to see this social worker, who I'm sure is trying to do the best job she can under the circumstances: very extensive caseloads and so on. The manner that she wrote down the information regarding my constituent's circumstances was very interesting, because she was writing it down with one hand and covering that same information with the other hand, as if to convey the message that this was some sort of big secret. You know, we can't have common social allowance recipients seeing what's in these top-secret files.

I would suggest, Madam Minister, that that whole environment -- the kind of office, the kind of reception people get, the way they're treated, the body language of workers, their tone, and so on -- is something that really conveys a message, and I wonder if it's the message the government is trying to convey. It really conveys a message to people that they really are not worthy of even basic respect. I would have to suggest that if this minister is really serious about caring, she would take a look at some of those procedures, because they are conveying to people that they are worthless, that they are to be somehow blamed for circumstances that are beyond their control. Really, it's a situation that should be turned around, especially if the government has, as it says, some interest in trying to assist people getting off social assistance. The whole attitude of the system is one that creates dependency and fear and mistrust and is totally counterproductive. As I said, that was a very educational experience, and it was a disturbing one, Madam Minister, to see how my constituents are processed by this particular system in your department.

I'd like to give you another example, Madam Minister. Just this afternoon one of my constituents went down to an appeal meeting on a decision regarding her AISH pension. She had

received a written letter advising her of the appointment, set for 1 o'clock this afternoon. She showed up on time, only to be told that they couldn't find her file and would she mind coming back in a week or so. Madam Minister, after listening to that story from my constituent this afternoon and thinking about this other story that I related earlier, I had to wonder: is this the way Peter Pocklington is treated when he comes for a handout from this government?

MR. OLDRING: Point of order, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: A point of order.

MR. OLDRING: A point of order, and I cite Standing Order 62(2):

Speeches in committees of the whole Assembly must be strictly relevant to the item or section under consideration.

Mr. Chairman, you have a lengthy list in front of you. There are some of us that have some relevant comments to make to the estimates in front of us this evening. This member seems to spend more time watching the clock to see that he's filling his half hour, and I'm tired of watching them do that. I've listened very carefully this evening. I haven't heard one new idea. I haven't heard one positive suggestion. I haven't heard any constructive participation whatsoever, and I think it's time the rules of the Legislative Assembly be enforced.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

MR. GIBEAULT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess respect and compassion are ideas that the member doesn't relate to.

On behalf of my constituents I do want to make just a couple more comments. I have to just think about that sort of double standard. We've got one standard for rich friends of this government. We've got another standard for ordinary folks, particularly people who have come upon hard times. You know, this whole social services area, Mr. Chairman, I think is one that concerns me because there is such a gross imbalance of power in that system, and that's really what we're talking about here. The system is set up in such a way that people who are clients have virtually no power or influence and the department has all kinds of power and influence. People are always afraid of asking for things that they're entitled to or for basic treatment of respect because there's always that fear that they could be cut off, you know, or that bad things could happen.

I would put this suggestion to the minister. If she is concerned about people being treated in a respectful manner by her department and if she is interested in people eventually coming to a point where they can get beyond social assistance and once again become productive members of our society, self-reliant, and so on, I would like to suggest -- and I put this suggestion to her for her consideration. I wonder if she wouldn't consider establishing an advisory committee of clients at each of the district offices so that clients could get together to discuss with the district office manager and the staff there once in a while, perhaps on a monthly basis, problems that people have: you know, getting through on the phone, the kind of just basic reception, how they're dealt with, making appointments.

You know, I bet a lot of those kinds of problems could be ironed out if there were some sort of a communication mechanism in place, where people were treated with a little bit of respect: an advisory committee. I mean, we have all kinds of

advisory committees; right? But when are we going to have an opportunity for people who are on the bottom end of our society to have a chance to, in a respectful and a mature way, discuss with people who are providing service how it could be improved? You know, not all of the good ideas for improving service come from the people at the top. Sometimes it's a good idea to talk to the people who are getting the service, see what their ideas are and what their suggestions would be. So I would put that idea to her for consideration.

One of the other problems I want to mention in terms of the whole area of social assistance, Mr. Chairman, is this very rigid nature that it seems to take. I want to tell the minister about a constituent of mine, whom I've written to her about and have yet to receive a written response, so I'm going to raise it here again. That's the question of a constituent who's come down with ALS, the same disease that the Member for Edmonton-Parkallen has been suffering with. So he can't work any longer, and his wife, like a lot of women unfortunately, makes a very marginal income, barely over the social allowance limit. It's difficult to support their family in a reasonably comfortable way. They are falling somewhat behind, but they can't get any support from Social Services because they're not totally destitute. They've got a home and they've got a car. They've got a bit of a retirement plan that they put away because they were trying to be responsible: you know, that word that has come up on a number of occasions tonight.

But before Social Services is going to look at their situation, they want them to liquidate all the resources that they've got, become totally destitute. I really would put to the minister that I don't think it's productive to force people into destitution, because once you get down to the bottom of the barrel, it becomes a whole lot more difficult to get up again. Couldn't we have some sort of a flexible, sliding scale arrangement where people who have temporary difficulties in their family income could get some temporary assistance, some limited assistance to allow them to maintain some basic family dignity without having to come to a total position of destitution and dependence on Social Services?

So with those ideas, Mr. Chairman, I'll look forward to the minister's response.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Madam Minister.

MRS. OSTERMAN: Mr. Chairman, I will just make a few comments.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, as well as a number of my colleagues that participated: I appreciate their comments of support as well as recommendations. One has just been made, and I appreciate that as well. I would say to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods that I do regularly speak to people, particularly in my own constituency, that have on occasion been on the social allowance system. So it is not that those people are not represented. They are speaking to MLAs. Information comes forward to me, not only from my elected colleagues but from department people and people that I visit with that are a part of that system. In particular, there are some areas where there are groups of them who have gotten together and have managed to expand their horizons by sharing in a number of ways: sharing of information, sharing of some chores with respect to children, clothing, and so on. I think that obviously is very commendable, and they're proud of what they can do.

The hon. member has talked about some glitches in the sys-

tem. There is no doubt that on occasion that is going to happen, because we don't always have a smooth caseload or a set number of calls that we're going to get on a daily basis in order to have it operate in the way that we would like. But I don't think that means that the whole system is wrong. It would be nice, just for once, for the members of the opposition to make a comment about people's responsibility, because somehow as soon as we raise the word "responsibility," there's an automatic reaction, as if we believe that everybody in the world is irresponsible, that anybody who is on the system is irresponsible. And of course, that is not the case.

For instance, I have a letter from a doctor who said that I could use his letter and his name, if I wished. He has done a survey of his clients, and he talks about the difference in habits of some people. Some of these habits, because he's classified his people -- he talks about the ones on social allowance with families and those who come in that are from the citizenry as a whole. Mr. Chairman. . .

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Pardon me, Madam Minister. I wonder if we could have a little order in the committee, please.

MRS. OSTERMAN: Mr. Chairman, the discussion relates to some things -- and I have said it before in this House and outside. Surely it is recognized that there are people who are on social allowance, they have children, and they spend money on things other than necessities. If the hon. members in the opposition are saying, "We shouldn't discuss that, and for goodness' sake, let's not talk about it, because we shouldn't ask them to give up any habits in order to feed their children." Well, I'm sorry; I can't agree. I do believe there are areas where we can demand responsibility, and there are many people in this world who will always need our help. We must speak about those things, because knowing that there isn't a bottomless pit surely we want to take the money that's available and make sure that it goes to the people who will always need that helping hand. I think that's important, Mr. Chairman.

My colleagues have raised several things about where there's been an increase in budget. I think I answered the question on handicapped children's services: that we will be able to serve additional people. With respect particularly I wanted to get back to the foster parents, because they have been raised by my colleague in reference to his own constituency and the good folks there who are doing fostering, and it is an incredible program right across this province. We do have a number of things, particularly seminars and occasions where foster parents from right across the province get together. They are able to access workshops and so on that allow them to upgrade their skills, allow them to come together and share information that obviously puts them in a position of doing a better job.

Leaving aside the fact that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods had to rely on the *Edmonton Journal* for his opening remarks, I did want to speak to AISH, or the last situation that he raised. I'm not sure what the specific situation is in that very serious health matter, but it occurs to me that we ought to be talking about a pension in that case, when the person is unable to work, and not social allowance. The AISH pension does not demand that assets be liquidated; in fact, it is entirely the opposite. So I would encourage the hon. member to have the person that he knows apply for the AISH pension. If there's a question about eligibility, there certainly is the potential for an appeal.

Mr. Chairman, there were a fair number of comments

tonight, both in terms of the minister's comments and the members from the opposition, that I guess we could classify as philosophical and would not have changed from last year. I think it's important for me to say that although I will be critical of their comments, I recognize their earnest desire to serve people in this province. What we have is a difference in approach. I would hope that while I recognize your desire to serve people and don't agree with your approach, I nonetheless believe that it is a sincere one. Mr. Chairman, I would like to think that members in the opposition, by the kind of budget that's been made available in the province of Alberta, notwithstanding the fact that they might not agree with the way we approach some of our programming -- the members from the government side care every bit as much about people in this province and, of course, are urging the Minister of Social Services to do all that she can in serving those people.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Government House Leader.

MR. YOUNG: I move that the committee rise, report progress, and request leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

MR. MUSGREAVE: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports progress thereon, and requests leave to sit again.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Having heard the report and the request for leave to sit again do you agree?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

[At 10:21 p.m. the House adjourned to Friday at 10 a.m.]

