

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 1, 1990 2:30 p.m.**

Date: **90/05/01**

[The House met at 2:30 p.m.]

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

head: **Prayers**

MR. SPEAKER: Let us pray.

We give thanks to God for the rich heritage of this province as found in our people.

We pray that native-born Albertans and those who have come from other places may continue to work together to preserve and enlarge the precious heritage called Alberta.

Amen.

head: **Notices of Motions**

MR. SPEAKER: The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the Member for Calgary-McCall.

MRS. HEWES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give notice that at the completion of question period today I will under section 30 of the Standing Orders request that the House adjourn the Orders of the Day in order to deal with the urgent matter of the job action undertaken by social workers in the public service.

MR. NELSON: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to give oral notice that under Standing Order 40 I wish to present an urgent motion to the House today relevant to the Calgary Canucks Hockey Club in Calgary.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

Bill 19

Financial Consumers Act

MR. ANDERSON: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 19, the Financial Consumers Act.

The purpose of this Bill is to promote fairness in transactions between consumers and businesses involving investments in certain financial products. The legislation is written in understandable language and is the first of its kind in Canada to require financial contracts to be written in plain language form. Major aspects of the legislation include disclosure of important information, standards of conduct, responsibilities of consumers, arbitration of disputes, the provision of regulation of financial planners.

[Leave granted; Bill 19 read a first time]

Bill 22

Agricultural Development Amendment Act, 1990

MR. ISLEY: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 22, the Agricultural Development Amendment Act, 1990. This being a money Bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this Bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

The purpose of the Bill, Mr. Speaker, will be to increase the lending limits of the Agricultural Development Corporation and to provide enabling legislation for the Ag Development Corporation to carry on such activities as vendor-mortgaged financing, venture capital, and others.

[Leave granted; Bill 22 read a first time]

MR. SPEAKER: The following members, in this order: Edmonton-Avonmore, Drumheller, and Edmonton-Jasper Place.

Bill 254

An Act to Amend the Individual's Rights Protection Act

MS M. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 254, an Act to Amend the Individual's Rights Protection Act.

This Act will extend the protection not extended by Bill 8 to protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and, in areas of service, on the basis of marital status.

[Leave granted; Bill 254 read a first time]

MR. SPEAKER: The Member for Drumheller.

Bill 259

Tobacco Control Act

MR. SCHUMACHER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 259, the Tobacco Control Act.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 259 sets forth new legislation which will provide fines or licence suspensions to those retail outlets guilty of selling tobacco products to minors. I need not dwell on the serious health implications of smoking; suffice it to say that over 30,000 deaths last year in Canada alone have been attributed to smoking.

[Leave granted; Bill 259 read a first time]

Bill 269

"Whistle Blower's" Protection Act

MR. McINNIS: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce a *Bill* being Bill 269, the "Whistle Blower's" Protection Act.

This Act would protect individuals who report violations of environmental, fish and wildlife statutes. It would protect municipal councillors who report ethical violations on the part of government members from coercion, intimidation, or threats of coercion and intimidation and protects the right of every Albertan to contact their MLA or the Ombudsman.

[Leave granted; Bill 269 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

MR. GOGO: Mr. Speaker, I wish to table the following annual reports for the year ended 1988-89: Grant MacEwan Community College and Keyano College.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I rise to table responses to Question 149 and Motion for a Return 169.

MS BARRETT: Welcome home.

MR. McEACHERN: Welcome back, Ralph.

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. Order. Thank you.
Additional? The Member for Banff-Cochrane.

MR. EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I rise on behalf of Alberta Tourism to table the 1989 annual report for the Alberta Tourism Education Council.

head: **Introduction of Special Guests**

MR. ANDERSON: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and to members of the Assembly leaders from Alberta's financial community here to discuss the Financial Consumer Act with me today. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask them to stand as I mention their names. There's Mr. Paul Boeda, from the Canadian Association of Financial Planners; Mr. Tom Cumming, president of the Alberta Stock Exchange; Ms Meredith DeGroat, who has assisted us greatly in this Bill, has been chairman of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Financial Planning; Mr. Al Gustum, from the Credit Union Central; John Walsh, from the Canadian Life and Health Insurance Association; and Bruce Webster, from the Canadian Bankers' Association. They are also joined by department members who have worked hard on the Bill: Dave Hudson and Don Bence. Could they all now stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly and thanks for their assistance.

MR. SPEAKER: Edmonton-Belmont, followed by Edmonton-Avonmore.

MR. SIGURDSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly 60 workers from local 6 of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. They're here as part of their political awareness and political education, and they're hoping that their visit is mutually beneficial to the government as well. They're seated in the galleries. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

MS M. LAING: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this House 19 students from Hazeldean elementary school in the beautiful constituency of Edmonton-Avonmore. They are accompanied by their teacher Don Brooks and parents Candace Kadach, Frances Maddison, and Tina Stricklin. I would ask that they please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

MR. THURBER: Mr. Speaker, it's indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly 55 students from the Calmar school. They are accompanied today by Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Erdmann, both teachers, and by parents Mrs. Walsh, Mrs. Stettner, and Mr. Olynyk. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this House, please.

MR. SPEAKER: Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MRS. HEWES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to be able to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 12 students from St. Brendan school in Edmonton-Gold Bar. They're accompanied by their teacher Mr. Gino

Marrelli. They're in the public gallery. I'd ask that they rise to receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you five constituents representing the town of Hanna. They are His Worship Walter Smigg, the mayor; councillors Ron Gaida, Mike Manning, and Bernd Stober; and the town administrator, Alec Simpson. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

MR. SPEAKER: The Solicitor General.

MR. FOWLER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to the members of the House 32 students from the Wild Rose elementary school in St. Albert. They are accompanied by Mrs. Juliet Rush and Mr. Tony Sware. I would ask them to rise in the members' gallery and receive the welcome of the House.

head: **Oral Question Period**

Smoky Lake Poultry Plant

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has now listened to the tape of the public meeting where the Member for Redwater-Andrew dropped all manner of hints that if the proposed chicken plant wasn't given approval for his land, then chances were pretty good that it wasn't going to be going ahead at all. The Member for Redwater-Andrew went on to note that all the other towns in his riding were also pressuring him for industrial development and that it could take years for Smoky Lake to get the money to sponsor utility servicing into the preferred site; that is, the one that he didn't own. Well, Mr. Speaker, good for the town councillors who blew the whistle about this type of bullying, who now know that there are millions of dollars up for grabs for this type of utility servicing from the province. My question is to the Premier, and it is this: will he now assure the councillors and the citizens of Smoky Lake that they won't be the losers in the Premier's political campaign to protect his Conservative backbencher; in other words, they won't be punished for blowing the whistle on what they see as a conflict of interest?

MR. GETTY: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I must say to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands that the lead-in to her question was filled with so much misinformation that the distortion was dramatic. I must also say . . .

MR. FOX: Name one.

MR. McEACHERN: You say that every day. Name one.

MR. McINNIS: Be specific.

MR. SPEAKER: Order. [interjections] Order.

MR. GETTY: I understand their sensitivity, Mr. Speaker. After all, the hon. members have an unsubstantiated position that they can't seem to handle.

So I must say that we've dealt with the matter in the Legislature many times. If they have any new information, I'd be happy to consider it, but there is nothing new.

MR. McEACHERN: Name one example.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplementary, Edmonton-Highlands, not Edmonton-Kingsway.

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, this Premier has in this Assembly dragged the names and the reputations of those town councillors through the mud by indicating that their statements constituted "flimsy" evidence. That's what he said: "flimsy" evidence. Now the Premier says that the allegations and the tape recording itself do not constitute any evidence. Well, this attitude is disgusting, and I don't think the people of Smoky Lake are going to buy it. My supplementary question is simple: does not the Premier realize that his absence of commitment sends out a signal to these people that they haven't the right to bring to the attention of members of this Assembly apparent wrongdoing by their MLA?

MR. GETTY: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to make sure the hon. member understands: there is no absence of commitment.

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, there is definitely an absence of commitment from this Premier. If he was so fair and upstanding . . .

MR. SPEAKER: Let's have the question.

MS BARRETT: . . . he would accommodate the requests of those town councillors to a fair hearing that they have asked for so that they could present all of the evidence that they have about this apparent conflict of interest.

Why is it that the Premier isn't encouraging and applauding the people like the town councillors of Smoky Lake, who are only trying to keep the government honest, by telling them and making it clear that it was the Member for Redwater-Andrew who was wrong to do what he did and not the councillors or the people of Smoky Lake?

MR. GETTY: Well, Mr. Speaker, just yesterday I applauded the members who participated in the meeting. It was an open, public meeting, a group of Albertans getting together to deal with a problem facing their community. They did it, and they did it well and openly in a public meeting. To have the hon. member try and make something sinister out of that kind of an operation I think shows that they're just grasping for some kind of straws here.

MR. SPEAKER: Second main question on behalf of the New Democrats.

MS BARRETT: Call the judicial inquiry and clear the air.

MR. SPEAKER: Second main question.

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to designate the second question to the Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Social Workers' Contract Negotiations

MS MJOLSNES: Mr. Speaker, my questions are to the Minister of Family and Social Services. We are in the middle of a crisis in this province. Social workers and people who need their help have not been treated fairly by this minister or by this

government. Not only have caseloads been far too high, but child care workers, social workers, and psychologists working in this minister's department get paid less than those working in the Solicitor General's department doing the same type of job. I would ask: why has this minister allowed these wage gaps to occur? Is it because he is trying to balance his budget on the backs of social workers in his department?

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. I would want to say at the outset that when we have situations like we're facing today, it really does call for calmer and cooler heads to prevail, and I don't think it serves any purpose to try to exploit the situation through the Legislative Assembly. Obviously, we are very deeply concerned about what we see happening in Alberta today. Obviously, we as a government are very interested in finding some reasonable solutions to it. But we recognize that the only way this can be accomplished is through the negotiating process, through the bargaining table. We're anxious to be at the bargaining table. We've put some solutions and some proposals to the questions that the member raised on the bargaining table, and I would only hope that social workers in this province will show some good judgment and continue to bargain in good faith and put an end to this illegal strike and come back to the negotiating table so that we can resolve these issues on behalf of those Albertans that desperately need their services.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplementary, Edmonton-Calder.

MS MJOLSNES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the minister obviously doesn't recognize the value of these workers, because his solutions aren't being accepted.

These wage disparities are very serious. I would ask: when will this minister recognize that these wage gaps are unfair and take some action to ensure pay equity for all the workers in his department?

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, again I can only say that we, at the bargaining table, have said that we're prepared to address the wage inequities, that we're prepared to negotiate with them in good faith. But, again, it takes two to tango. I want to say that we do care about social workers, that we do realize what a difficult, demanding, challenging job they're called upon to do day in and day out, and that certainly we're there to provide those services with them.

I just want to point out some of the initiatives that we have taken, because we are concerned, and we do want to find meaningful solutions, and we do want to work with them. I want to start, perhaps, with the child welfare workers, because their job is particularly difficult. They are called upon to make some very tough decisions. But I would want to point out that in child welfare in 1986-87 in terms of full-time equivalents there were 704 in our department. In 1989-90 we were up to 884, an increase of 180. Now, Mr. Speaker, we recognize that that obviously hasn't solved all the problems, that there are some offices that do have and are called upon to carry some very high caseloads. We want to be able to address that, and we have offered a process for being able to do that through the negotiating channels.

I also want to point out, Mr. Speaker, that the caseload as it relates to child welfare is on the decline. As of May of '89 in terms of caseload and face-to-face investigations there was a total of 9,900. In February of '90 that's down to 8,900. So that's

about a 10 percent reduction, and we're certainly pleased to see that.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, hon. minister. We'll have to save some.

Final supplementary.

MS MJOLSNESS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are experiencing a crisis situation in this province. Day after day we get rhetoric from this minister, and that's about all. My final supplementary is: how can this minister expect anyone to believe that he cares about children and families in this province who need help when he will not make a commitment today to pay the workers what they deserve?

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, clearly that commitment is there. We value these employees, and we want them to get fair and equitable treatment. We're prepared to sit down and negotiate what that should be, through a process that has served this province very well and worked very effectively. I'm only sorry that it's come to this point so quickly. I'm only sorry that they wouldn't accept the offer or the suggestion of bringing in a mediator. Let's sit down together and solve this. But we can't do it alone. We can't dictate solutions to this. We can only be one of two partners towards resolving the situation. We're prepared to accept our responsibilities, and we just want them to share in those responsibilities so that we can make sure those services are being provided to those Albertans that need them.

Social Workers' Strike

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, there are approximately 150 people outside of the Legislature at this very moment. There are a number of social workers in the audience today. These are professionals. These are people who are declared and determined under the Social Workers Act of Alberta, passed in this Legislature, to be professionals. We say in that legislation, I think, that you have a high degree of competence, you have a high degree of education, the government isn't going to regulate you for everything, and you can determine your codes of ethics and can determine your standards of work and so on, at least to a certain degree. But the government's own investigator says that the caseloads that social workers are now working under are wrong. The caseloads are too high. I spent some time with about 30 of the workers outside today. One lady said that she has 48 child welfare cases right this month, and the recommendation is for 20. They're in an impossible situation, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Premier. Given that the social workers are in this impossible situation, that they can't meet the demands that are placed upon them, and given the fact that the government isn't giving them the resources they need, will the Premier commit and undertake that no legal action, no civil or criminal action will be brought against these people and that they will not be fired because of the problem that they did not bring on themselves?

MR. GETTY: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Minister of Family and Social Services said, these employees are valued employees, and we want them to return to their work and to be part of meaningful discussions and negotiations in order to reach an agreement. But at the same time, I want to make it clear to the hon. member that just asked that question and to all Albertans that it is a very serious matter when you break the law. When you

break the law, you have to remember that this Legislature has the responsibility, first, for the making of the laws of this province and, secondly, for seeing that they're upheld. So I want the workers to realize that they are valued workers, but remember: they cannot negotiate while they are breaking the law, and the government will not negotiate with them while they are breaking the law. The matter of their pay, the matter of caseloads are all matters for negotiation and solution, but one solution is not breaking the law.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, these people have not brought on this difficulty by themselves. All of the people that I spoke to in that group of 30, looking after children, looking after income requirements, Albertans who need special income attention: every one of their caseloads is too high, too great. They're stressed out. People are leaving the jobs. They can't give proper assistance to Albertans. Will the Premier commit that no legal action whatsoever will be taken against these people, that everything will be done to get these people back to work as soon as possible?

MR. SPEAKER: That's the same question as the first one, hon. member.

MR. GETTY: Mr. Speaker, there's a great duplication in the two questions.

The hon. member is making a case, if I understand, this way, and that is that for 99 percent of Albertans when you break the law, you must in some way make up for that. You must in some way have some kind of reaction from the lawmakers of this province if you break the law, or else you have chaos. Now, I gather the hon. member's position, even though his responsibility here is as a lawmaker and by being here surely wanting to uphold the laws of the province of Alberta – I gather now that that is not his position and that he would condone breaking the laws of Alberta.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Premier is saying that he is going to be cruel and callous even though these people didn't bring this problem onto themselves. It's the government that foisted this problem on them.

Mr. Speaker, my last question is to the minister responsible for the social workers. Given that we now have situations of people being under stress, given the fact that Albertans are not being tended to, given the fact that even under good circumstances it takes three or four weeks to look after children who are in need, what contingency plan has the minister worked out with his ministry to make sure that children, particularly children, and all other Albertans that need assistance are going to be properly looked after during this period of stress?

MR. OLDRING: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, obviously we're very concerned about the repercussions to our clients. I can only say that the resources that are available to us will be focused on helping in particular those children that need our help as well as the handicapped and the elderly. I can say that the strike seems to be focused in the city of Edmonton and certainly pockets in rural Alberta, but for the most part I am pleased that at least caseworkers are continuing to provide those services, and where they aren't, management will move in with the clerical personnel that are there to provide those essential services so that Albertans won't be at risk.

MR. SPEAKER: Lesser Slave Lake, followed by Edmonton-Avonmore.

Forestry Projects in the North

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that the forestry department has been assessing two forestry projects which are vying for the High Prairie forest area. One of these projects is necessary for my region for the same reasons my colleague from Athabasca-Lac La Biche has been citing, that of high unemployment. There is no primary industry established nearby, and many, many people, particularly the native people, are existing mainly on welfare. Mr. Speaker, they're tired of being on the welfare roll and want a chance to work. Would the Minister of Forestry, Lands and Wildlife tell my constituents and this Assembly what stage the proposals are at in their review?

MR. FJORDBOTTEN: Mr. Speaker, there are two proposals for that region, and I thank the hon. member for her strong representation on behalf of her constituents. As well, the Member for Smoky River has made representation on behalf of communities in his area. We have two proposals now that we are reviewing. By "we" I mean the Treasury Department as well as Environment, economic development, and transportation. Once that review is completed, Mr. Speaker, then we would be in a position to announce which project was successful.

MR. SPEAKER: Supplementary.

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you. This review, Mr. Speaker, has been going on since 1987. It is imperative that a decision be brought forward as quickly as possible. The people in my area are very interested in getting a favourable decision for the High Prairie region. Could the minister, then, give me a time frame when there will be a decision made?

MR. FJORDBOTTEN: Mr. Speaker, I have some difficulty with giving an exact date, and in fact even after we complete the review, it would be subject, of course, to proper environmental impact assessments and a hearing process. We are moving with all due haste, recognizing that the companies themselves as well as the communities are anxious to see that economic development proceed in those areas. If we come to a satisfactory conclusion in our negotiations with them, I would hope that before midsummer we would have some more to say about the two projects.

MR. SPEAKER: Edmonton-Avonmore.

Women in the Public Service

MS M. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the minister responsible for women. When it comes to righting the economic inequities between male and female employees of the Alberta government, things are not as rosy as the minister says they are. In fact, the situation hasn't changed since 1986, when women earned 71.5 cents for every dollar that men earned. In view of the minister's statement about how well things are going for women, how does she explain this stagnation?

MS McCOY: Mr. Speaker, there is no question that we haven't arrived as far along the path as we would like to, and there is a

statement on everybody's part that we are looking forward to full participation of the women in all the benefits of this province. The numbers that the hon. member has given I shared with her at her request, and it just points, in my view, the way forward.

We are, however, taking a number of steps that we would hope will over time bring the situation into line. One of our first steps was to do an administrative support services review, which in fact took the largest cluster of women in our public service, those at the lower end of the wage scales, those in support roles such as clerical roles, and we in fact gave them an overall 3 percent increase by massaging the categories and by such actions which indeed did decrease the wage gap throughout the service.

We have also taken steps in other areas, which I think will over time lead to a balancing. We do not, for example, have as many women in the higher paying end of the jobs. We talked about that the other day. But we are about to announce a mentoring program. We announced in the Plan for Action an accelerated management training program for women and other such strategies that I think over time will bring more and more women into equality in the public service in all of the jobs, and that will in turn have an impact on the wage figures.

MS M. LAING: Mr. Speaker, the record of the last four years shows no improvement. In addition, according to statistics released by the minister's office, the number of women in management positions has indeed increased from 459 in 1986 to 556 in 1989, a 13.3 percent increase to 16.4 percent of management positions. You would think that with more women in supposedly higher paying positions their average economic position relative to men would have improved, but as we have seen, this is not the case. So my question to the minister is: does this mean that this progress has had little effect on reducing economic inequities between women and men and that women managers are less well paid than their male counterparts?

MS McCOY: No, Mr. Speaker, it doesn't. Let me just point out that over the last 10 years we have in fact doubled the number of women who are in senior management positions in this province, and of course just recently we doubled the number of women who are deputy ministers in the public service. But we also have to recall that when a person is first appointed to a job, the likelihood is that the salary will be at the lower end of the range, and those who've been in the job for many years will be paid at the higher end of the range. What we are seeing now is a simple arithmetical average. Many of our women coming into these management positions are coming in at the beginning levels and many of the men – and the men still dominate in senior management – are at the higher end of the ranges. When you put those numbers side by side, you are going to find that a gap still exists. But, if you take in comparison a man who has just been promoted into a senior management position, he will in all likelihood be paid at the same level as that woman who is newly appointed to a senior management position. We do have equal pay for equal work in this civil service, and we watch that very closely.

Social Workers' Contract Negotiations (continued)

MRS. HEWES: Mr. Speaker, today's job action by Alberta social workers results from a compounded problem that the

government has been well aware of for many years but has chosen to ignore. The problems of no established standards for caseloads have been exacerbated by the government's incapacity to fill existing positions for mental health workers, counselors, social workers. These positions remain empty because of the stress related to working conditions in the absence of pay equity. For the past year and a half Lac La Biche has been unable to fill a position of children's mental health worker, a third of all the child welfare workers left the Edmonton offices last year, High Level has had an 85 percent turnover rate, the northern region averages 50 percent, and Lacombe, Stettler, Ponoka, and Drumheller haven't filled four therapist positions for 12 months. My question, Mr. Speaker . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Question, question.

MRS. HEWES: It's all right; it's all right. To the Minister of Family and Social Services: would he please tell the House what his plans are for recruitment to fill the urgent need? Children and families need our help, Mr. Minister. The social workers' action is a manifestation of what's wrong.

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, again, we'll continue to make every effort possible to fill these positions as quickly as we can as they become vacant. It isn't always possible to get as quickly as we'd like the kinds of skilled personnel that we want, particularly in some of the more rural locations, but if the people are available, certainly, Mr. Speaker, we make every effort to fill those positions as quickly as we can.

MRS. HEWES: Then, Mr. Speaker, will the minister commit to restoring the northern living allowance, which was an incentive before?

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, again, it's a very precarious time to be discussing these kinds of things that are really more appropriate items to be discussed at the bargaining table, and I think that the member knows that. I assume that she's had some experience with bargaining. As I said earlier, we're anxious to sit at the bargaining table and find some meaningful solutions, but it takes both parties being there to resolve that. So the real solution, Mr. Speaker, is again for cooler heads to prevail, for a calm and rational approach to finding some meaningful solutions to problems that we are facing together. As I indicated earlier, we want to be a partner to that, and I hope that social workers will return quickly to the bargaining table as well so that they can be a part of the solution.

MR. SPEAKER: Grande Prairie, followed by Edmonton-Jasper Place.

Yellowhead Highway

DR. ELLIOTT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Along the west side of this province we have a major highway route running north and south known as the Bighorn route, originating in Alaska and ending up in Idaho. This involves the Bighorn Highway, Highway 40, south of Grande Prairie, but it also involves that portion of the Yellowhead Highway running through Jasper National Park. My question is to the Minister of Transportation and Utilities as to what his position is with respect to the twinning of the Yellowhead route within the park area.

MR. ADAIR: Well, Mr. Speaker, our responsibility for twinning Highway 16 rests from Lloydminster in the east to the boundaries of Jasper National Park, and we're on schedule, I might say, for completion of that twinning. Within the park we have requested of the federal government information leading to their long-term plan for the twinning of the road through the park. As a matter of fact, I made that statement at the Yellowhead Highway Association annual meeting this past weekend. I should clarify also that I did say that our number one request was for information leading to the long-term planning of twinning, and if they couldn't provide us with that, would they consider – it was a suggestion by me – turning over the corridor to the province of Alberta so that we could do the planning.

DR. ELLIOTT: Well, Mr. Speaker, if the work on the Yellowhead Highway is up to date and the federal government does not yield the area in the park for department of transportation construction, does that mean there'll be additional funds released for a rapid completion of Highway 40 between Grande Prairie and Grande Cache?

MR. ADAIR: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the representation relative to Highway 40. The dollars that were budgeted over the last almost nine years for Highway 16 are up to the park boundary.

MR. SPEAKER: Edmonton-Jasper Place.

Pulp Mill Emissions

MR. McINNIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was this Minister of the Environment who promised a new community input process prior to issuing permits to pollute under the misnamed Clean Water Act. "Forget the past," he said. "Look and see what I can do." Well, in Grande Prairie the Wapiti River has been subject to massive amounts of organic chloride pollution, which has been linked to cancer, chloracne. These substances are extremely biocumulative. Severe damage has been found at levels below the detectable level. People who work in these mills have a death rate from cancer which is some four times the average for certain types of cancer. Yesterday the minister issued permits – or somebody did in his absence – to dump 8.6 million kilograms of organic chloride substances into the Peace River system. Will this minister say what gives him the right to load that kind of pollution into the river without even giving the people downstream a fair hearing?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, a renewal licence was issued to the Procter & Gamble mill at Grande Prairie conditional on an action plan to spend about \$100 million in environmental control to reduce the amount of chlorinated organics. It's quite consistent with the national objective to clean up those other rotten, stinking, belching, polluting pulp mills in Ontario and Quebec and New Brunswick and British Columbia. Again, Alberta has taken the lead, and we have a commitment from this company that they're going to clean up the mill.

I guess if you follow along the hon. member's reasoning, when the mill was really bad, he didn't complain; as it started to get better, he started to complain a little bit more. He started to complain. I guess when the mill is absolutely perfect, that's when he'll want it closed down.

MR. McINNIS: People in Grande Prairie were given exactly two weeks to respond to the Procter & Gamble proposal, which is what the minister put into effect yesterday. Every last thing Procter & Gamble wanted, they got in his permit; every last thing. People in Grande Prairie did respond. They asked for public hearings. Instead, they got more pollution rammed down their throats. People in Hinton were not even given a chance to request a public hearing. They didn't even get the chance to be formally ignored. They were informally ignored. They got 5.9 million kilograms a year. In the minister's absence and again today he's hinting that the alternative is a shutdown in Hinton and Edson. How can he remain a part of a government which gives no say in the matter to the residents of these communities and kicks people in those communities all the way down? How can he remain part of a government that acts like that?

MR. KLEIN: With respect to Hinton, Mr. Speaker, that mill has come on stream as a fully upgraded mill. It's probably one of the cleanest mills in the world, meets all the finest and the best environmental technological standards. I really don't understand where this member is coming from. You know, he's demanding zero dioxins. He knows there's only one way to achieve it, and that is closing down the mill. That is closing down the mill, Mr. Speaker, at Hinton. I also wonder if the hon. Member for West Yellowhead agrees with his party's position that there be zero dioxins and that that mill be shut down. I'll bet the folks in Hinton didn't know when he was running – that is, the Member for West Yellowhead – that his real slogan was: vote for the NDP, and we'll close the mill.

MR. SPEAKER: Calgary-Mountain View, followed by Edmonton-Whitemud.

Cormie Ranch Sale

MR. HAWKESWORTH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand this government plans to approve the sale of Don Cormie's Tomahawk ranch to a foreign-owned consortium for some \$6 million. Because it's a sale to foreigners, it's required to become involved in this sale. Albertans want to know whether the government will finally use this opportunity to look out for the interests of Alberta taxpayers and the interests of investors in the failed AIC/FIC companies. To the Provincial Treasurer: given the millions of dollars that have been lost by both investors and Alberta taxpayers because of government bungling and incompetence in this fiasco, can the Treasurer give his assurance that all of the proceeds from the sale will go to the investors and Alberta taxpayers and not to the Cormies?

MR. JOHNSTON: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member, of course, is placing a lot of faith in what he reads in the papers. Unfortunately, the decision has not been taken by government as to what we're going to do with respect to that development. Our care and our concern is balanced between wanting to have the development, on one hand, of course, which I think would add to the economic tourism potential of this province, which is expanding and growing and attracting worldwide attention, but on the other hand, as the member points out, this government has been careful and scrupulous in protecting the interests of the contract holders and the taxpayers of this province throughout the Principal affair. I know Albertans know that the way in which we have set in place a strategy to deal with their interests, to protect their position will continue. I can assure Albertans

and the contract holders, Mr. Speaker, that there will be no sale of that property which puts one nickel in the hands of the Cormie family. I think that's clear enough.

MR. HAWKESWORTH: Mr. Speaker, Albertans and investors in the Principal Group of Companies know that they can't trust this government to protect their interests, but they're darn sure that they're prepared to look after their own interests, and they're darn certain the government's always prepared to protect their own if not anyone else. Will the Treasurer confirm that one condition for his approval of this sale is a requirement that Mr. Cormie drop his lawsuit against the Treasurer and the last two former ministers of Consumer and Corporate Affairs?

MR. JOHNSTON: I think this member must be traveling the Hubble space machine away out there on some other planet, Mr. Speaker, because he's not at all got his feet on Earth; I can tell you that.

Let me say that we have made no deals with the Cormie family or with the principals of the Principal Group itself, the owners of that corporation. You can be darn sure, Mr. Speaker, that we'll do everything we can to ensure the rights of the contract holders are protected. As a matter of fact, the very generous offer of this government to protect the investors in those two failed AIC/FIC contracts has received about 80 percent response. About \$65 million of the \$84 million so far has been sent to those contract holders, and another \$7 million or \$8 million is now in process, Mr. Speaker. About 80 percent of the contract holders have responded to our reply. What does that mean? It means very clearly that the contract holders know that the province of Alberta has their interests foremost in our minds and that we will continue, as we have done in the past three years, to protect their interests. There have been no deals, Mr. Speaker, cut with the Cormie family at all.

MR. SPEAKER: Edmonton-Whitemud, followed by Bow Valley.

Lottery Funds

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the minister responsible for lotteries admitted that all government MLAs received personalized Samsonite briefcases to carry the information packages pertaining to the community facility enhancement program at a cost, according to him, of at least \$100 apiece. To the minister: will the minister responsible for lotteries tell me who else besides government MLAs received the free Samsonite briefcases?

MR. KOWALSKI: Mr. Speaker, on October 17, 1988, an announcement was made with respect to the community facility enhancement program, and at that time information was made available to government MLAs, including the briefcases. That, of course, was very public. It's not a question of admitting yesterday, on April 30, something that everyone has known since the fall of 1988. Basically that is the range of individuals. Government members offered to accept the challenge to work and serve as community liaison officers with respect to the community facility enhancement program. In my view they've done an outstanding job since that time. Statistics as of yesterday indicate that some 1,399 approvals have now been provided under the community facility enhancement program for a total figure of approximately \$46 million. Other than members

of the Assembly, myself as the minister responsible, there may have been several people in my office who've used these briefcases as file folders to assist me in the task that I have undertaken. Essentially that is the range of individuals.

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, will the minister undertake to table with this House a listing of all tangible benefits government MLAs have received from the community facility enhancement program or lottery dollars?

MR. KOWALSKI: Mr. Speaker, I think we can do better than table. I don't know how you can table such a general question. Perhaps I'll just use the opportunity afforded me now to respond to the question by just outlining some of the benefits that we've all received. Certainly in our province of Alberta we've had in place now for nearly two decades a very well-run, well-organized, and well-administered lottery fund. The Alberta division of the Western Canada Lottery Corporation is part of the western Canadian scheme. It has allowed us, Mr. Speaker, to return these dollars to literally thousands and thousands of beneficiary groups in our province on an annual basis, projects that will improve family life, community life. The most tenable benefit that each member of this Assembly can get is to know that he or she represents an area of people in a particular constituency in this province that is very determined to improve family life, community life, to encourage sporting activities, recreational activities, cultural activities; in other words, to improve the general health and welfare of the province of Alberta.

In addition to that, of course, we allocate dollars indirectly from the government through some 20 different beneficiary groups throughout the province of Alberta, and if you, Mr. Speaker, would permit, I would be very pleased to outline to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud those specific groups in Edmonton-Whitemud that have received specific dollars.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you.
Smoky River.

Agricultural Assistance

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta agricultural community is rapidly preparing for the spring production year. Due to world subsidies, low grain prices, difficult weather conditions, and consumer support programs – and I'd like to point out that less than 11 percent of the consumer dollar in Alberta is spent for food – the agricultural community finds itself in some difficulties. Now, it is my understanding that there have been some negotiations with the federal government regarding an aid program for these agricultural producers. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture. Could you perhaps share with the House and with the farmers of Alberta where this process is at now?

MR. ISLEY: Mr. Speaker, we continue to have discussions with our federal counterparts and with the ministers of the neighbouring prairie provinces. All prairie provincial ministers are still encouraging the federal government to come forth with the farm aid program that they have announced. We still feel very strongly that if it's addressing low commodity prices in the grains and oil seeds sector which are caused by international trade wars, that is a federal area of responsibility. If it is addressing debt restructuring and high interest rates, that is again a federal responsibility. I'm somewhat optimistic that the federal govern-

ment will sooner or later see our view point and proceed with the distribution of funds.

MR. PASZKOWSKI: My supplementary question is also to the Minister of Agriculture, and it involves the canola industry, a very important and very dominant part of the agricultural industry in Alberta. The industry is being threatened by a very devastating disease, and that is the blackleg. I'd like to know what precautions the province is taking to try and limit the extent of this disease. What, indeed, are we doing as a province to try and curtail the spread of this very devastating disease?

MR. ISLEY: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has identified a serious problem in the canola industry. We are working through the seed cleaning plant associations to ensure that no diseased seed is used. Hopefully that will solve the problem in the long term.

Weldwood Pulp Mill Emissions

MR. DOYLE: Mr. Speaker, workers in pulp mills have a larger than average incidence of certain types of cancer commonly caused by chlorinated organic substances which come from chlorinated bleaching in pulp mills. Yesterday the Minister of the Environment renewed Weldwood's operation licence whereby they'll be allowed to discharge over 15 tonnes of chlorinated organic substances into the Athabasca River each and every day. And it wasn't me that printed that garbage the day before the election about the mill being shut down; it was the former member of this Legislature. He lost by over a thousand votes, thank God. [interjections]

MR. SPEAKER: Order please. No matter the frustration of the hon. member about comments made previously in question period, the purpose of this is for you to ask a question about this subject. You don't get a chance to refute the other information. So please continue, bearing in mind that it sounds almost word for word in the earlier parts like the one raised earlier by Edmonton-Jasper Place.

MR. SIGURDSON: It's different, and what about the minister's response?

MS BARRETT: That's right.

MR. DOYLE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

MS BARRETT: So the minister should be out of order too then.

MR. SPEAKER: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, if you'd be quiet, perhaps I could hear from your member in the back row. [interjections]

MS BARRETT: You know, it wasn't me who interrupted him.

MR. SPEAKER: It's me who's interrupting him right now; get that straight. And this question period will not continue unless there's absolute silence.

The buzzer is going. Is there unanimous consent to allow this series of questions to continue?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. SPEAKER: Opposed? Thank you.
West-Yellowhead.

MR. DOYLE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Having regard for the health and the jobs of my constituents, what is the minister doing to phase out chlorinated organic pollution in pulp mills such as Weldwood at Hinton?

MR. KLEIN: Well, I guess we could shut it down, close it up completely, but that wouldn't be the logical thing to do. Mr. Speaker, what has happened is that this mill has gone from spewing out something in the neighbourhood of 5 kilograms per air-dried tonne of chlorinated organics to something less than 1.5. It seems to me that we have achieved through our standards, the highest standards in the world, technological advances that have reduced the chlorinated organics that the hon. member is talking about.

Now, the technology, Mr. Speaker – and I hope that the hon. Member for West-Yellowhead will understand this because his colleague from Edmonton-Jasper Place certainly doesn't. Right now you cannot achieve zero chlorinated organics. The only way you can achieve it in the town of Hinton at the Weldwood pulp mill is to shut the mill down. Is that what the hon. member wants?

MR. DOYLE: Mr. Speaker, last Tuesday night in the Legislative Assembly the minister challenged the Member for Edmonton-Jasper Place and myself to debate the issue in a town hall meeting in Hinton. Mr. Speaker, we are prepared. Is the minister now prepared to give us a date, or is he all talk and no action?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I'll consider the hon. member's proposal after he responds to my challenge. And just to clear up any confusion, I will read from *Hansard*. [interjections] I will read from *Hansard*. Mr. Speaker, I said to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Jasper Place, and I'm quoting:

I'm wondering if this member, who talks about total elimination of chlorinated organics, will stand up with his NDP colleague in Hinton at a town hall meeting and say, "Close down the mill." No. He talks a big storm, but I doubt if he would go to Hinton and stand up at a town hall meeting with his NDP colleague and say, "Close this mill down."

There was no question of a debate. After he does that, Mr. Speaker, then I will consider debating either one or both or all of them.

MR. SPEAKER: A request under Standing Order 30. Edmonton-Gold Bar.

head: Request for Emergency Debate

MRS. HEWES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under section 30 of our Standing Orders to request support of all members of the House to suspend the business of the House to debate the circumstances which we find ourselves in today of job action having been commenced by social workers in the Alberta public service. Mr. Speaker, I spoke yesterday to the urgency, and I won't repeat all my comments except to insist to members of the House that we are now, today, in a crisis situation. Job action has in fact commenced.

Yesterday we heard from the Associate Minister of Family and Social Services that a task force had been suggested to the workers. Clearly that's not acceptable. The Minister of Labour

yesterday told us that the social workers needed to be at the table in order for anything further to happen. It's obvious, I believe, by the action that has commenced this morning that there was nothing on the table that the workers believed was substantive relative to the circumstances under which they are dealing presently. It's also obvious, Mr. Speaker, that if there's nothing on the table from the government for the social workers to relate with, nothing of a substantive nature relative to their caseloads or the other circumstances of their working conditions, then there's no reason for them to come to the table.

Mr. Speaker, the urgency of the matter also deals with our legal responsibilities in this House. Clients of the department who are, in fact, wards of the province are the minister's direct legal responsibility, and I am sure the minister feels very strongly about that, as do other members of the House. We have no opportunity here to dillydally and to wait until something breaks.

MRS. BETKOWSKI: Are you arguing for . . .

MRS. HEWES: I'm arguing for urgency, Madam Minister.

Mr. Speaker, this morning I talked with some of the workers at the Yellowhead centre and saw the young people who reside in that centre, who are there under our care, who are on the street today and lacking the support of the workers. The urgency is certainly not at question in my mind or in the minds of either the workers or the users of the services. As I mentioned yesterday, our constituency offices are now besieged with calls from people who need the services, who are frightened, anxious, don't know how they will be able to access food vouchers or other necessary items.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier has indicated that these are valuable employees. Certainly they are. They are valuable to the government, to the department, and they are valuable to their clients. They are valuable people in their profession as well. Mr. Speaker, everyone loses by what's happening today. The urgency is that the social workers are not just bargaining for themselves – and I think we have to be very clear about that – they are bargaining for the direct needs of the very most vulnerable people in our province, and I believe it's incumbent on us to debate this issue and learn what on earth the government is doing about it at this point in time.

MR. SPEAKER: The Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the Deputy Government House Leader.

MS MJOLSNES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleagues in the Official Opposition I'd like to express support for this motion, and I will speak to the urgency of this motion sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

We know very well that negotiations have broken down, and we must be very concerned about the situation that is developing in this province. Mr. Speaker, I was able to talk with child care workers and social workers very early this morning, as my colleagues from Edmonton-Belmont and Edmonton-Beverly did as well. This afternoon many of us were able to speak to workers outside the Legislature, and I think if there's anyone in this Assembly that doesn't think that this is a very urgent matter, they should in fact go talk to some of these workers, because they will tell you how urgent things are.

Mr. Speaker, they are good people, they're very dedicated workers, and they've had enough. They've been forced into a corner, and they're being forced to fight back now on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the people who receive their

services. They are concerned about their working conditions and what happens to them from here on in, and what happens to the people they're working for.

It's extremely unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, that things have developed in such a manner, but they have. We heard earlier today from the Minister of Family and Social Services what a wonderful job he's doing in terms of offering them all kinds of things, but obviously we wouldn't be on strike if the offers have been so great. I think that what unfolds from here on in will affect every one of us in the Assembly today, and so I would support the urgency of this matter and would say that this motion should be debated today.

Thank you.

MR. GOGO: Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak under Standing Order 30, the motion by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I have some difficulty with it for a couple of reasons, not that the government is not concerned about the children and the child care workers; that's not the issue at all. We're seeing evidence today that under the legislation in this province, what people are in the process of doing is committing an illegal act. That has been mentioned somewhat earlier. Reference was also made to the fact that hon. members had been advised prior to today that the one department most concerned about this matter is up for estimates this very day, and the hon. minister has indicated she will be in the House. Mr. Speaker, I would refer hon. members to *Beauchesne*, citation 390, and I would quote from that: urgency, which is the basis of the hon. member's request today before you, sir, to suspend the normal business of the House:

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

Mr. Speaker, our Order Paper today tells us that this very day the Department of Labour estimates will be discussed, and I simply conclude with the note that although I respect the intentions of the hon. member, Standing Order 30 makes no provision that any question would be put or any conclusion would be reached in the matter anyway.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, the government would oppose the request by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MR. SPEAKER: The Chair appreciates that appropriate notice has indeed taken place as required under Standing Order 30(1).

The Chair has listened with respect to the urgency of debate and has also listened in particular to the comments just made by the Deputy Government House Leader with respect to *Beauchesne* 390. The difficulty is that the estimates which are to be called this evening are for the Department of Labour, and the issues being raised there would deal with the matter of negotiations, or the lack of the same, which are taking place at the moment. Whereas, had the estimates for the Department of Family and Social Services been up, then there could indeed be full-ranging debate with respect to this particular issue. That could not take place with respect to the estimates of the Department of Labour.

Therefore, the Chair would now agree to the matter of the urgency of debate as outlined under the provision of Standing Order 30(2), but directs all hon. members to look to their little Standing Orders booklet to look at Standing Order 30(3), because other things now come into play. The Speaker does now rule in favour of the motion to be put, and the Chair

therefore puts to the Assembly: shall the debate on the urgent matter proceed? Those in favour, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

MR. SPEAKER: Subsection 4 of Standing Order 30 now comes into play. Objection has been taken to the question, and therefore the Speaker requests those members who support the motion to rise in their places.

[Several members rose]

Thank you. Sixteen members have risen. The provision in Standing Orders is for 15 or more. Therefore, the matter of the following subsections of Standing Order 30 applies. Debate will proceed, limited to 10 minutes, and the Chair recognizes Edmonton-Gold Bar.

head: **Emergency Debate**

Social Workers' Strike

MRS. HEWES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is not a circumstance or a matter that has come upon us suddenly. This situation has been developing for many years, and certainly it's been developing for the four years that I have been in this House. It's been very evident, and a number of members have spoken to it over and over and have questioned this minister and other ministers regarding their intentions and their actions and their programs in regard to the circumstances of heavy caseloads. We have questioned the minister about a number of other circumstances that have developed relative to foster children, and we have watched and debated while the new Child Welfare Act came into being.

Mr. Speaker, we have here a tragic circumstance where a group of professionals – social workers, mental health counselors, child care counselors, psychologists – have had to take job action simply because they have not been able to resolve with the government department that is their employer their working conditions. These working conditions are such that the workers themselves, who are professionals and who adhere to a professional code of ethics and who work within the mandate of the Social Development Act, find themselves in breach of both of those pieces of legislation: their code of ethics, the Social Development Act which requires that they produce certain things for their clients, and the Child Welfare Act. The workers have found themselves over the years, because of the workload, the caseload, unable to perform within the requirements of those pieces of legislation. Mr. Speaker, it's bad enough that we have put them in a position where they as professionals cannot adhere to their own professional ethics. It is unconscionable, in my view, that we've put them in a position where they are in breach of our own legislation.

Mr. Speaker, these workers are making positive inventions. They're making government programs for food, clothing, and shelter, and many other necessities of life. They're making them functional for thousands of people in our province. Many of the clients are, of course, children, and I've already spoken to that, Mr. Speaker. These are children who probably are wards of the

province who have come into wardship because of difficult circumstances in their family or behavioural problems. We also find these workers dealing with disabled of all ages, people who are required to exist under the AISH program. They are workers who are dealing with social assistance rates, allowing and subject to the verification programs, whether or not with that high caseload they've given too much or too little to someone who is temporarily or permanently without employment and without income.

Mr. Speaker, they're dealing with abused children whom they must apprehend. It was our understanding that where there is a case of suspected abuse, the inquiry will proceed immediately. In fact, at this point in time children and families in some cases are expected to wait for three to four weeks before an inquiry on child abuse proceeds.

These workers are dealing with native foster children, and I have spoken many times in this House about the agony that all of us feel when we experience things like the Cardinal case or the Moberly case, where we do a government report, a commission tells the department what we need in the way of workers and of training for workers, and this does not proceed. So we have exploited professionals, I believe. We have set them adrift, working with some of the most difficult and powerless people in our province, and have not supplied them with the resources to function within their own profession, as they would expect to do.

Add to that, Mr. Speaker, that in our province of Alberta we've had a few years of increasing unemployment and underemployment. While the employment situation appears to be better, we are now facing more and more part-time jobs, underemployment, where people need to have their income topped up. They need support from social assistance, and under the circumstances of this job action they're not going to be able to get it. Mr. Speaker, I have spoken often to the social assistance rates. Workers are faced with having to tell people, "You've got to live on less." The price of food, the price of clothing and shelter has gone up. The rates have not changed since '82. I would defy any one of us sitting in this House to sit across the table from a recipient and tell them: "Make do with less. Take the money from your food allowance to pay the rent." This is a very, very tough job. We're placing them in untenable positions. Mr. Speaker, we're seeing increasing family violence in our province, increasing incidence of divorce and of family breakup, of adolescent suicide and difficulties with foster children.

Mr. Speaker, I believe this should have been resolved months ago. There is no question in my mind that it could have been resolved. I believe it should have been resolved. They are professional people, as several of the ministers have attested, and they are valuable workers. I think the situation of the caseloads can and should have been dealt with months or years ago. It doesn't seem to me that it is that complicated. I know it must vary in different parts of the province and in different client groups, but it does not seem to me that that's an insoluble problem in any way, shape, or form. It's happening in other provinces and other parts of the world. I believe that caseloads can be determined, and they can be properly adjusted to meet the needs of people.

Mr. Speaker, finally, the minister tells us that there is a contingency plan of some kind. I believe our House members and people in our constituencies need the reassurance of knowing what that plan is. I think it's a tragedy that we have to get to this stage, and I would urge the government to tell the House what their plans are, what they anticipate in the way of

developing precise caseload work programs so that all in the province, whether they are professionally employed in the province or outside, will have an understanding of what the caseloads are anticipated to be.

Mr. Speaker, I'm appreciative that the House is dealing with this matter, and I hope the minister and the Premier will be able to give us some information on their intentions in this regard this afternoon.

MR. SPEAKER: Edmonton-Belmont.

MR. SIGURDSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I met with a number of social workers that represent local 6 of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees in late March or the very early part of April, and at that time they expressed a concern to me and some of my colleagues who were attending that meeting at the lack of process and progress that was going on at the negotiation table. They had made a number of offers in the first instance, just offered a date, Mr. Speaker. I was advised that they had put forward some 13 dates to the government negotiators to discuss matters that were important to their local and their union. All of those 13 dates were declined, and now we have a problem. Now we have a crisis, because we find that social workers are out on the street and not behind their desks processing the very important work they would normally be doing today. They're not administering to those people that normally would be within their care. Some members of this Assembly wonder why we are here on May 1, with a number of social workers in our province who are out on the street and not at work. Well, the problem, Mr. Speaker, is because the government was, quite frankly, not willing to address the matter long before this date came about.

Mr. Speaker, I've met with a number of social workers. Today, specifically, I met with social workers at the Yellowhead Youth Centre as they were out on the picket line first thing this morning. It was amazing to talk with these workers. They had a great deal of concern about what was going on inside or, more importantly, what was not going on inside, because they had had their clientele, their young people, come out to the picket line to serve them coffee, to show some kind of support to those workers, their friends who have served them well over the last number of weeks or months or however long they've been in the Yellowhead Youth Centre. They've come out to show their level of support for the workers that are there, and they told some rather amazing stories today to those workers who were out walking on the picket line.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

These people that certainly require proper nutritional guidance, what did they get for breakfast? Well, they got pop and Cheezies, Mr. Speaker. Isn't that wonderful? You've got kids in the centre that probably need a very regulated diet that's been prescribed by nutritionists, and what are they getting from management? Pop and Cheezies. Boy, that should really go a long way to make sure that these kids are doing what they're supposed to be doing. That should really serve those kids well.

What else did we find out from these kids? The Minister of Family and Social Services says, "Well, management is doing their job, trying to do the job of many." We found out that at that same centre, Mr. Speaker, the kids that are supposed to be on regulated medication weren't given the drugs they were supposed to have taken this morning. Goodness knows, with

the running around they were doing today, if they'd be on other kinds of drugs by this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, when I talked to those social workers, they expressed a great deal of care and concern. They're professionals. They've taken an oath to try and serve their clientele.

Now, I understand that at 2 o'clock this afternoon the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Family and Social Services held a press conference to say that they won't negotiate while illegal activity is being conducted. Well, you know, if that's the case, maybe that, there, is the reason we've not had negotiations for the past two months or for the past number of years. Because what we've had is a violation of statute that's gone on long before 6:45 this morning. We have had violation of the Child Welfare Act, because they've sworn an oath to provide a service to those children that is going to be immediate service, and they can't do it. They can't do it with the caseloads they've got, with the staff complement they've got. They're violating that Act now, and maybe because they're violating that Act, that's the reason this government was not prepared to negotiate with them prior to today.

So what I think we've got, Mr. Speaker, is some rather selective examples, selective times that we're going to negotiate. The government says, "Well, we won't negotiate now; they're out on strike and the strike's illegal." Were they prepared to negotiate when they were violating the Child Welfare Act or the social welfare Act? Were they prepared then? Obviously not. Maybe they were a little more willing, because what they were doing at that time was saving this government some money. Maybe that's what it comes down to. With this group, the bottom line is the bucks.

Mr. Speaker, we overspent. The department overspent by \$11 million last year in overpayments. Oh, oh. Oops, we made a mistake. Who can we blame? Let's blame the social workers because they weren't doing their job. Mr. Speaker, the truth is that if we'd had enough social workers in place, if we'd used some of that \$11 million to hire more social workers to bring the caseload down, perhaps we wouldn't have had that amount of money being overspent. Perhaps we would have had social workers doing their job by going out and seeing their clientele, making sure their clientele was able to access the programs that are available and the programs that are necessary, so that people will be able to get off of welfare and back into the productive force. But no; that's not the point. Studies have come out and said that income security ought to be at 125 cases per social worker. Some of them have cases of 400, 450, 500 clients. How in the name of all that is reasonable is one supposed to service that kind of caseload? It can't be done. You shuffle paper from one pile to another pile, and you never see the clientele.

Now, there may be doctors that might say, "Well, we can do that; take in an appointment every few seconds or so." But that's not what you do here with these people. These people need time to be with their social worker. They need the guidance that a social worker can offer.

Mr. Speaker, if this government is at all committed to the rhetoric we hear, if they're at all concerned about the people that are utilizing the Department of Family and Social Services, and if they're at all committed to those social workers who today are not at their worksite, what they will do is put an offer out, put an offer out today to try and get a response, because what's been offered so far has been withdrawn. There's nothing on the table right now; nothing there. So, Mr. Speaker, if we're going to negotiate, let's for goodness' sake negotiate in good faith. Let's bring people back to the table so that we can resolve this

matter and get the social workers back to work and make sure that their clientele is receiving the proper care and attention it deserves.

Thank you very much.

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, it's not often that the Speaker rules and finds that a matter is of importance, of urgency, so as to allow the opposition a special opportunity to stand and talk about what they believe to be a matter of urgency. That doesn't happen often. It happened today. It seems to me the purpose of Standing Orders that talk about urgency and the need to debate matters of urgency is to have the government explain to Albertans that the situation of urgent discussion is either out of control or in control, or that these solutions have been studied and these alternatives and options are available and the government intends to do those things, the purpose being to allay the fears Albertans may have that some wrongdoing, something untoward might happen to some of their fellow Albertans.

Now, we're talking about a ministry that does not have a particularly good historical record. We're talking about a ministry where there have been deaths because some people felt there wasn't the kind of care and attention – the kind of attention in terms of specialists looking in on certain problems. I don't want, the Liberal Party doesn't want, to see the possibility of people dying or being injured or not being looked after properly who need that kind of special care and attention.

To me it is incredible that a matter of urgency which is being discussed today doesn't even have in this Legislative Assembly at this moment . . . And thank God, he just walked in. He's missed part of the debate.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Order.

MR. DECORE: Well, I don't think it goes without notice that the minister has been absent during an important part of this debate. [interjections]

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. Order please, hon. member. The hon. member should know that that comment is not in order.

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, not only is it not in order . . . [interjections]

MR. DECORE: Mr. Speaker, I wish to continue. I think the floor is mine.

MR. OLDRING: . . . I was listening to the full debate.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. Order please. Is the hon. minister rising on a point of order?

MR. OLDRING: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order please.

MR. OLDRING: Mr. Speaker, I know that it's not appropriate to make reference to a person's absence, and I know that the leader has, but I would also want to point out that I listened – a lot better than the members opposite are listening right now – to all the debate that went on around this very important matter.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

MR. DECORE: I'm glad to see the hon. minister here.

Mr. Speaker, during question period I noted for the record that there were approximately 150 social workers outside on the steps, and a number of them came in to listen to the questions and to the debate today. These are people that are licensed; social workers are licensed under the Social Workers Act of our province. Many of you probably participated in the debate giving a professional status to those social workers. The objects of that Act say that they can pass certain bylaws and establish certain codes of ethics, the principle of professionalism being that the government doesn't want to meddle and intrude itself into an area where there are people that are well trained and well educated, believing that they can look after themselves, that they should be able to determine codes of ethics, that they should be able to discipline themselves, that they should be able to determine what's a good investigation and a proper investigation and how a good and proper investigation should be carried out. That's all in the legislation. We give them that authority. We trust them, believe in them that they can exercise that authority.

Then another statute, the Child Welfare Act, says that if a problem arises, it is the director's obligation to ensure that a proper investigation takes place. Mr. Speaker, we have the situation where I believe proper investigations are not taking place. The evidence seems pretty clear. In fact, the hon. minister himself – who happens to be laughing and chuckling about this at the moment, for the record – admitted today that there are problems in certain areas. I think it's much more widespread than even he admitted in that comment. But he admitted that there is a problem in caseloads, that there aren't enough people looking after the caseloads in certain sectors.

I talked to one child welfare social worker. She said that her present caseload is 48 this month. The recommendation from the expert that the department itself got to look at this whole area of concern suggests a caseload of 20 per month. That same social worker informed me, Mr. Speaker, that she peaked at a caseload of 70 last December. I asked her, "What happens when you go way over the suggested number, way over the 20?" She said that a number of things happen. She and others have to work 10 or 12 hours a day; they're only paid for 7.2 hours. They work weekends. Often they can't get to the problems and deal with the problems that are important. She suggests that maybe – maybe: I'm not sure that there is evidence of this – there's too much money paid out or not enough money or not enough resources put into some of these serious problems, because you simply don't have time to assess the situation completely and thoroughly. You say, "Well, I can only give you so much time because there's a backlog of other people waiting." Mr. Speaker, the danger here is that we allow ourselves to see duplicated, replicated, the kind of misery that has occurred in this department historically in the past.

Now, I asked for the minister to stand and talk about a contingency plan, and all he has said is that managers are going to take the spots of the social workers, and they're going to look after the situation. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to know what steps have been taken to have emergency lines put into place. What kind of signage or posters or ads are going to be put into the newspapers to tell Albertans who are in need that they can go to such and such a person or such and such a place or phone so and so to be looked after? Because they're not going to be

looked after. If you can't handle a child welfare case for three or four weeks, as is the case now, how can a few managers who are taking up these spots be expected to look after the whole requirement that's being dumped on them? There's no way. So what is the contingency plan? What has the minister and his ministerial officials worked out to assure Albertans that this situation is under control? That's the purpose of this debate. That's what I want to hear. That's what the people in Edmonton-Glengarry want to hear.

Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that by a minister partially admitting wrongdoing by the government – wrongdoing in the sense that a specialist has looked in on these caseloads and has said, "There's a problem; we've got to reduce these caseloads." It seems to me, when we have evidence from United States studies which shows that certain caseloads in such and such a area should be X and we're way over X, that the minister could easily solve this strike by saying, "Okay; we're going to separate this particular issue and get this thing put under control." I'll bet you a dollar to a doughnut, Mr. Speaker, that if he took that bold action, this strike would be over in a matter of hours.

Mr. Speaker, we need some proof that things are under control. We need some evidence that a contingency plan is in place. We need some evidence that emergencies – which are great in this particular area, in this ministry – are going to be handled effectively and properly so that no Albertans, particularly children, are going to get hurt.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MS MJOLSNES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The working conditions and high caseloads have been issues with child care workers, social workers, and psychologists within the department for a long, long time. I remember going to Calgary over a year ago now, meeting with income security workers there, and I couldn't believe the kinds of things they were saying at that particular meeting. The kinds of conditions they had to tolerate as professionals were very disturbing for me, to have to sit and listen to these workers. It was very evident when they were talking about their concerns that what was paramount to them was the service that they couldn't provide to their clients, and the well-being of their clients was certainly at heart. I couldn't help but think that as professionals they should be just as concerned about their own health. They were talking about – if they're sick for one day, for example, there's no one to replace them. If they go on holidays, there's no one to replace them. Their workloads just keep getting larger and larger. There were a number of concerns that they had at that particular time.

So, Mr. Speaker, what I'm saying is that this is not a new issue. These working conditions have been an issue for a long time. High caseloads have been an issue for a long time. It's very evident that, sooner or later, people simply burn out, and these are very dedicated, very committed people that simply just quit.

Now, when we talk about child welfare, the kinds of things that are happening in the area of child welfare I find extremely frightening. I was phoned one day about six, eight months ago by this fellow who worked in the department. He had his masters degree. He was working in the area of sexual abuse, an area where there certainly is a lack of personnel. And what happened to him, Mr. Speaker? Where is he now? Well, he's certainly not working for the department. He's working in a

hospital as a social worker there; He just simply got fed up, and he quit. He tells me now that they're getting children that have been abused in the hospital. They're getting parents to come and pick their children up before an investigation has been able to be done. They're having to send these children back with these parents. He said that things are just a mess within the department because they're losing good, qualified people. Some of the people they're hiring don't know how to carry out investigations, and things are serious there.

We've heard from teachers saying that they can't get quick responses from the department. Children are being sent home. Children are being placed at risk. I've got teachers telling me that they've just given up even phoning the department because a lot of times their concerns just aren't heard because of the high caseloads that the child welfare workers have. So I'm wondering, Mr. Speaker, how many children in this province are going without any services or not receiving attention when they really need it.

It's very difficult for these professionals who have been trained in their areas to tolerate working under conditions like these. They have been trained to counsel, to work on a one-to-one with children or with families. They've developed a lot of skills, they've taken a lot of time and expense to go to university to be trained, and then they cannot do their jobs that they're trained to do or, in fact, that they're hired to do.

I think that every MLA in this Assembly through their constituency offices has had dealings with social workers or has had dealings with district offices. I think we can all appreciate the kind of work they're doing, but I'm finding, Mr. Speaker, – and I'm sure that my colleagues will agree with me – that we're doing more and more of the work, as well, in our constituency offices because clients just cannot get the kind of service that they deserve. So we're having to do a lot of the advocacy work that income security workers are trained to do, and that's the kind of work they want to be able to do, and yet they can't do it.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about foster parents, again, I know of foster parents who have said to me that their foster children don't have contact with their workers. Foster parents themselves don't have contact with their workers. These children do not develop a relationship with any workers because they're just not available. Foster parents have had to take on a lot of the responsibilities that should have been done by the department. They themselves in many cases need a lot of support, and they're just not getting it, so they're quitting. I think the minister would agree that the numbers of foster parents have decreased drastically over the last couple of years, and it's just no wonder, because they're just not getting the support they need. They see the kinds of things that are happening to the children in their care. They just can't do it alone, and they're refusing to take on that kind of responsibility. We know that some children moving into foster care have mental health problems; a lot have severe behaviour problems. They need support, and they're not getting it. So I think we must be just extremely concerned about the kinds of things that are happening in this province and the lack of services in this province through the department.

I talked today in question period about wage disparities. Now, why in the world there are such wage disparities between departments is beyond me, Mr. Speaker. When we talk about the kinds of work that these child care workers are doing, that the social workers and the psychologists are doing, why on earth would they be paid less than other workers doing similar type jobs in other departments? It just isn't fair; it doesn't make

sense. No wonder these workers that have been pushed and pushed finally are saying, "Enough is enough; we're not going to take this anymore." How long do we expect them to take this? These have been issues – like I said, Mr. Speaker, they're not new issues. These have been concerns for a long time.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that if we have a system in place that is truly devoted to helping people, we not only have to make sure that those services are available to those people, but we have to ensure that the working conditions for those workers are also very important to us. We have to ensure that those workers can do their jobs properly. Thank goodness they're speaking out and they're saying, "This is what we feel is wrong with the system, and we've got to fix it." Because when I hear from social workers that children are being placed at risk, families aren't getting the services that they deserve, and on and on it goes, all I can say is thank goodness they're prepared to speak up and hopefully force this government to take some action.

This morning when I was talking to some workers at the Yellowhead centre, I talked to one child care worker at that particular jobsite. He said that he quit his job as a chartered accountant because he wanted more than anything in the world to work with children. It was very disheartening, Mr. Speaker, to listen to him talk about the kinds of expectations that were placed on him as a child care worker, expectations that I know MLAs in this particular Assembly would never stand for in a job. You could tell how upset he was, talking about the kinds of working conditions that he was forced to work under and what that meant to him. I could also tell by talking to him that he was very dedicated to his job; he was very dedicated to the kids that he cared for. But he was saying, Mr. Speaker, that, you know, if things continued the way they were going, he would just simply have to quit.

Again I stress the fact that we just can't afford to lose these good people, and they are quitting. I have heard that within the child welfare area tremendous numbers of child welfare workers have quit in the last six months. The turnover is tremendous. I think the minister has to start addressing these issues and saying that it's not just because they're going to better jobs or they're going to other positions. In the case that I know of, this particular individual would have loved to stay with the department. He loved the kind of work that he was doing, but he was not prepared to continue to work under those conditions. Again I say that we are losing just excellent people, very dedicated people, and we just cannot afford to lose them if we want the quality of care to remain high in this province.

I think this government has failed to recognize the value of the kind of work that these people are doing. Not only is it affecting society as a whole in this province, but it's affecting very specifically those people who need services. Again I will say that I feel very strongly that these workers have been forced into a corner because the government has refused to listen to them year after year after year, and conditions have gotten so bad that they are finally saying that they have had enough. So I think now is the time, Mr. Speaker, that the minister could take some action, show some leadership, show us that he values these people.

MR. GIBEAULT: Mr. Speaker, I'm glad to have a chance to contribute to this urgent debate this afternoon because, as my colleagues have said, we are facing a very urgent situation, a crisis situation. But it would be a mistake to think that this is something that has just happened all of a sudden. This has been building for a long time. We have had a situation of excessive

caseloads for a very long time without action from this government. We have had a situation where social workers who are professionals have not been able to provide the service that they are trained to do, as a deliberate policy of this government. It has resulted in all kinds of problems for clients: people in need, people who are least able to protect themselves and defend themselves in our society, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very tragic situation that has been there for a very long time. Clients have become frustrated because they have not been able to reach their social workers when they have so many clients to try to service. So it has built up to a stage that has resulted in the current situation, and it's a very tragic one.

I don't know exactly what's been taking place in terms of the negotiations, but I've heard that there has been an offer, if you can call it that, of zero, another one of 3 percent; maybe it's somewhere in that ballpark. But you know, Mr. Speaker, social workers, among other Albertans, have not forgotten the big pay raise that MLAs got just last year, and it was a lot more than zero to 3 percent. We don't have to remind people about that. I'd have to suggest that the work that social workers do is a lot more valuable than a lot of the deadweight of some of the members of the government. If we can't afford social workers and MLAs, maybe we ought to cut down the number of MLAs, because there's a lot of them that we could get rid of and it wouldn't hurt things a darn bit. [interjections]

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order please. Order in the Assembly.

MR. GIBEAULT: But, Mr. Speaker, you can be sure that the social workers of this province are going to remember what this government has done to them during this particular dispute and the lack of commitment that this government has to social services in general. We don't have to go back very far to when the Member for Three Hills was the Minister of Social Services and had all kinds of insulting comments to make about people who found themselves in the situation of needing to apply for social assistance. You remember that insulting comment she made when she referred to people who needed a little assistance as animals at the edge of the forest who were provided a few crumbs, and then they'd come back for crumbs every day. It was a despicable and shameful kind of a comment. And then just recently she referred to people on social services as a bunch of bums. That was just a couple of weeks back, Mr. Speaker, and that's the attitude of this minister as well. He's one of the most right-wing members of this government caucus, and everybody knows that. He's the kind of . . . [interjections] And look at that: he's being applauded for being one of the most right-wing, callous, hard-nosed, cold-blooded ministers in this cabinet, and I think that is shameful.

MR. PASZKOWSKI: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Smoky River is rising on a point of order?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Mr. Speaker, could I ask just what this dialogue has to do with the urgency of this debate? That's my point of order.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. member, that question . . . The urgency of the debate has been decided. Now we're in the debate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

MR. GIBEAULT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to say that I commend the social workers in this province for saying, finally, enough is enough. We are entitled to quality human services in this province, and this government has got to realize that.

Mr. Speaker, I along with several of my New Democrat colleagues were out with the social workers this afternoon on the steps of the Legislature. It's a darned disgrace that the minister didn't have the guts to come out and talk to them himself. But I want to challenge the Minister of Family and Social Services and his government to start negotiating now in good faith and put a serious offer on the table to come to a mutually respectful resolution of this dispute.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I went out earlier and spoke for a period of time with the social workers that were airing out their frustrations, and it's not the first occasion that I've had to sit down and have some good discussions with social workers and listen to some of their frustrations and some of the difficulties that they do face. In my constituency office in Edmonton-Whitemud – and I'm sure it'll be similar in many, many of the others – the largest number of complaints that we get deal with the WCB, first of all, and that has been reduced somewhat in recent weeks, and second to that, it's social services. I've gotten involved myself with a good number of the complaints or concerns that I've had expressed to me. Some of them I've taken to the minister's office, and in some cases he has responded to the best of his ability, which I do appreciate when that does happen.

In many of the cases I've phoned the social worker involved, and I've always found that at that particular level, phoning the regional office on Argyll Road and talking with the social worker, they've always tried their best to resolve it. They've been very understanding, and I have nothing but kind words to say for them. I find them to be very caring and compassionate people. I believe from my observations, Mr. Speaker, that their main concern . . . Yes, there is a dispute about the remuneration level, but their main concern is the workload, the caseload, the number of clients that they are responsible for and the difficulties they have in trying to live up to those expectations that are placed upon them because of the caseload numbers, and not only the workload and the expectations but also the responsibility they have.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to draw a parallel here. I notice that unfortunately the minister responsible for workers' compensation left a few minutes ago, but . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Order.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order please.

MR. WICKMAN: I'm sorry. The minister responsible for workers' compensation . . . [interjections]

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order please. Hon. member, it's out of order to comment on the presence or absence of members in the Legislative Assembly. Now, the hon. member should know.

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, I'm referring to a situation very similar to what we have here that involves the Workers' Compensation Board. That problem at the Workers' Compensation Board, which has been spelled out in this House on a number of occasions, is the workload or the number of cases that each adjudicator is responsible for. When the Workers' Compensation Board brought in a number of new people, people like Ian Sinclair, one of the first problems they discovered was that the caseload per adjudicator was much too high, which resulted in an impossible situation for them. People were leaving; they simply couldn't endure the frustration. One of the first things that the expertise which was brought in recognized was that problem, and they took steps to correct it. It is being corrected. I draw that parallel because it is very similar to what is happening here. I think that caseload has to be reduced, and once that caseload is reduced to a reasonable number, you're going to have increased staff morale; you're going to have a much happier lot of public employees and much better service to the clientele.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that we're talking in terms of professional people. I know they're professional people. It is very difficult for them to do what they're doing at the present time. I don't believe anybody likes taking the action that has been taken, particularly when you're talking about people that are accustomed to dealing with disadvantaged persons, and they're more sympathetic from that point of view. It's got to be very, very difficult for them to walk away from their offices, walk away from their caseloads, walk away from their clients and take this particular action. That action, I believe, they've taken because they believe in the long run it's going to be of benefit. If the government responds correctly, properly, it will be of benefit in the long run. It may cause some short-term pain, but if the proper steps are taken, there will be long-term gain, and the clients will benefit by that better service.

But the first thing that has to happen is that the government has to recognize that there is a problem there, and the government has to take immediate steps to resolve that problem. None of us is going to sit here and condone an action that is illegal. We may understand why it was taken; we may sympathize with it. However, we can't condone it and say that we support an illegal action. However, again, I sympathize with that action that was taken. I can relate back to the nurses when they were frustrated and they were forced to take the same type of action as well, simply because the legislation was not in place to allow them to go through a process that most workers are allowed to, and that's a fair collective bargaining process which includes the right of legal strike. That is one of the difficulties they're facing at the present time.

I would hope, Mr. Speaker, that the minister and the other members of the cabinet recognize the problems that are there and, rather than allowing them to go on, rather than forcing those workers or placing those professional people in a situation of uncertainty where they feel threatened by the possibility of dismissal or any other type of action that may be taken against them, that the minister instead takes meaningful steps to resolve it, resolve it in a proper fashion, and allows them to get back to what they were trained to do; that is, to provide a service to the more disadvantaged people of Alberta.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Avonmore.

MS M. LAING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I welcome this opportunity to participate in this debate. I have a 15-year involvement with the area of social services, and in that time there's been an Ombudsman's report, the Cavanagh Board of Review, the Thomlison report, the Porter report, and Judge White's report. Justice Michael Porter this January said that in reflecting back on the Cavanagh Board of Review, nothing has changed. That's exactly why we're facing the strike we are now facing. These reports all look to caseloads that are too high for social workers in the area of child welfare to meet the emotional and psychological needs of children in the care of this department. I do not know how this minister can say he cares about children and families if he has in place a system that does not allow social workers to care for the children under the care of the department in an adequate way. Food and clothing and shelter are simply not enough. In the last 10 years we have seen suicides of a number of children on the front page of our papers, never mind the ones that are not reported, and I personally know of two young people that I worked with or the agency worked with and I was involved with who died in a short period of time. I would suggest that the minister might well read the Cavanagh Board of Review, the Thomlison report, Judge Porter's report, and Judge White's report. Nothing but credit can be given to social workers; they work far beyond the call of duty.

We see in this government, then, a failure in the commitment to people relying on social services for income security, child protection, and special needs and a failure to hear the concerns of the professional workers, never mind the consultants called in to see what is going on. Instead of addressing the concerns of the workers, the government brought in regressive legislation that prohibits strikes on the part of what they consider essential services, and this silences workers and robs them of the right to protest.

We hear of a commitment to children and families, but where is the action? Words and rhetoric are cheap. Let us see some action. Let's see real commitment. There is no commitment apart from acts of commitment. We need adequate staffing so the needs of children and families are met. Children need to be protected. The Child Welfare Act says that the department must protect and must act to protect children seen or known or thought to be at risk. We need quality investigations. We need face-to-face contact with the children on a regular basis. We need case planning.

Cavanagh and Thomlison noted that social workers provided only maintenance care. They did not have the time to meet the psychological and emotional needs of children. They did not have the time to do the kind of case planning necessary; they did not have time to have contact with children or either their families or their foster homes. We need to see support for natural and foster parents to deal with children with difficulties. Children that are abused are hard to deal with; they act out their pain, their suffering, their anger, their despair. We need help for these children, and the parents working with these children need help. We see that children are at risk in many placements, and social workers have to be there to assess what is going on. Children may even be abused in foster homes. There has to be a social worker that can go in and see that that match has taken place, that children do not suffer more in foster homes. Or they may still be at risk in their own homes. One of the problems we see is that children are sometimes returned home to an abusive situation too soon and are subject to further abuse, and that's because this minister will not commit to children.

We need enough income security workers so that they have face-to-face contact with their clients, because they are frontline to pick up on emerging difficulties, depression and despair that may lead to suicide, child and spousal abuse. We give to social workers and psychologists, through statute, authority and responsibility to protect children, but in practice we fail to give them the power to carry out the duties we have assigned to them. We overburden them.

AN HON. MEMBER: Control yourself.

MS M. LAING: This is not something to be controlled about. If you had seen a child that had been abused and was returned home, you would know this is something to feel strongly about.

We overburden social workers and do not give them the right to say, "I have enough on my plate; I cannot do my job properly." I would again say: social workers demonstrate great dedication. They work long hours for no compensatory remuneration or real recognition. And what does this government say about them? It won't even bargain with them in good faith. It means that workers have to prioritize their cases, but how does one prioritize without full investigation? Or how does one prioritize if one does not have ongoing contact to assess if there is progress or deterioration? How does one prioritize in a responsible and effective way without full information? So don't tell me you're prioritizing in an effective way if social workers do not have the information. How does the worker assess the appropriateness of placements in foster homes if they're not there, if they can't meet with the child to find out what's going on?

We hear about investigations delay. They must be immediate. It used to be 48 hours. Disclosure of abuse precipitates a crisis in the life of the child and the life of a family that demands immediate intervention; otherwise, the child may recant due to guilt or fear. The child may be silenced through intimidation by the offending parent or may be abused to be silenced, and children may remain at risk to ongoing abuse. But more importantly, the child is told that he or she is not important, and that's the greatest crime.

Adults and children need ongoing contact with social workers, who may be the only consistent relationship in their lives. When I hear of a child having 26 social workers in 10 years, I think: who has provided any consistency, any care of this child in an ongoing way, particularly in view of multiple foster home placements? Children need to be able to develop trust that is not repeatedly betrayed by changes in social workers and foster homes. They need someone who cares for them and can advocate for them.

This is the message social workers and psychologists are giving this government, but the government is not listening. What will it take? The scandals of the late '70s and '80s? Is that what it will take before this minister will listen to his social workers?

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-McKnight.

MRS. GAGNON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly cannot duplicate that very eloquent and impassioned speech we have just heard, that most heartfelt speech by someone who has been involved in the area. I have been involved as an MLA only. In the short time since I have been elected I have received a number of calls at my office from constituents who are having problems with social services. I have often had the opportunity

to call the Kensington office in Calgary, where the workers have been most helpful but sometimes have had to indicate to me that they were somewhat frustrated; they were tired; they simply did not have the time to deal with the situation I was raising in the very short term and would not be able to respond to my concerns for two or three days.

I believe the workers at that level are very compassionate. They are very caring. They are trying very hard to fulfill a much-needed function in our society. However, I do think some of them are suffering from low morale, burnout, and a real concern that they are being ineffective because their hands are tied. They simply have too much work to do, too many people to care about. I think this strike is a result of years of frustration which has built up because this government treats social services as an expense rather than an investment in human lives. I urge the minister to make a new offer. The strike is indicative that the government has failed to negotiate with the public service, and it speaks to the reprehensible state of affairs in this province as regards labour relations between the public service and this government. Again, I urge the minister to act quickly. There are a number of children in treatment centres today, tonight, who will only receive babysitting. They will not receive the care and counseling they must have if they are to be healed and to become productive citizens in our society.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Jasper Place.

MR. McINNIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the Chair for allowing members this opportunity to participate in a debate about a very serious situation that's developed in our province, I guess what on the surface looks to be a labour dispute between members of local 6 of AUPE and the provincial government. But as many members have indicated in the debate today, the nature of the dispute is much, much deeper than a collective bargaining situation. What we're seeing today is a symptom of a long-standing problem. I hope that today will be the day we make a resolution in this Assembly to deal with it, because we have to find a way out of it and we can find a way out of it only by dealing with the root causes. In fact, that puts me in a position as seeking a radical solution. I think a radical solution is required. We have to get to the root of this problem.

You know, there are a great many people in our society who have difficulty from time to time in their lives coping with the rat race that's out there: the competition, the constant pounding of media messages that glorify excessive consumption, the virtues of a certain type of good looks and youth, and all sorts of things that people are taught to aspire to in our society. [interjection] I appreciate that the Member for Red Deer-North doesn't have the depth to understand the point I'm trying to make.

There are people in our society who from time to time suffer the consequences of being involved in the rat race that is our society. Not everybody is the Kens and Barbies of this world that you like to deal with. Not everybody in our society has the opportunity to motor around in a Mercedes-Benz or a Porsche and look down on the rest of the world. From time to time people in our society find themselves where they can no longer cope personally with their situation. That's what we're talking about in this Assembly, hon. member, and that's the system that's broken down today.

The people we've put forward – that have been hired by the taxpayers from funds of this Legislative Assembly – to look after

the casualties of the rat race have said today, "Enough is enough." They can't take the crap. They can't take the workload. They can't take the abuse. They can't take the narrow-minded attitude of people like Red Deer-North. That's what they've said today. They've gone out on a job action, and they've been pushed. They've been pushed pretty hard. Now, where is it written that because you're a marketing genius and good at manipulating people out of their savings, you should be wealthy and should have the right to everything our society has to offer, but if you decide to dedicate your life to helping people who are in trouble, what you get is suffering and more suffering down the road?

MR. MAIN: Oh, come on, John.

MR. McINNIS: Yeah. Well, that's why we've got a strike today. You guys don't believe that's what's going on out there, but that's what's going on. You don't think there's suffering going on. You know, I've had a number of cases that I had to deal with in my community office. [interjections] Well, okay, the hon. Minister of Culture and Multiculturalism doesn't believe that people who are in the social work profession suffer. I just want to relate the circumstances that changed my attitude toward what those people go through on a day-to-day basis.

I had to deal with a constituent who obtained a ruling from social services which was obviously something this individual disagreed with and on the surface may have been a wrong decision. So we took some steps on behalf of our constituent to try to get hold of the social worker. We weren't able to get the calls returned. My constituency assistant felt that the best way to deal with that was to contact the supervisor to try to find out why we couldn't get to the bottom of this situation. Well, the result of that was that the supervisor issued some type of disciplinary proceeding against the social worker who was involved. In the course of dealing with this, I came to appreciate the absolutely phenomenal pressure an individual social worker is under in the course of a regular working day. They literally don't have time to return phone calls which by any standard would have to be considered to be important, because they're spending so much time trying to cope with the enormous amount and volume of material they have to deal with, most of which is filling out bloody forms, you know, from the government.

One of the most persuasive arguments to me for looking at some type of guaranteed income is to get social workers away from filling out forms so they can do what they went into the profession for and what they were trained for, which is to help people, to deal with the problems people have. But they don't have that opportunity on a day-to-day basis. They have the opportunity of extreme stress, of overtime which is not always compensated with time off. I don't think it's difficult even for some of the members opposite to understand why you have such a high turnover in cases like that. People get fed up and quit. Then they find, you know, that the other jobs aren't any better, because the problem we have is one that runs throughout the system. In fact, what people who work in the system spend all their time doing is coping with the demands and needs of the system rather than being able to do what we pay them to do, nominally at least, which is to try to help people get their lives sorted out, get back on the rails, and get to the point where they can cope with things for themselves. I mean, that's the reality of what we're dealing with.

Then you have the people who are at the margins of the situation but nonetheless can be seen clearly as the victims. I'm talking about the children of families who are under stress, who are in a circumstance where they don't have the income necessary to meet their basic needs. Nobody doubts that the children suffer and that there are cases. I've heard of cases where there aren't enough people to respond to incidences of abuse, incidences of hunger and other types of deprivation on the part of children, and they are victims of the system as well. Those things have to be talked about as well in the context of social workers.

Maybe the Minister of Culture and Multiculturalism has no sympathy for social workers. That's too bad; it's his problem. But you should try to realize the people at the [inaudible] at the far end of the pike are the kids, innocent victims in the situation.

MR. MAIN: You encourage people to break the law.

MR. McINNIS: Well, you should talk to the minister of public works about obeying the law. We've been trying to get him to obey a Federal Court of Appeal decision for over a month now, and he won't respond to it.

MR. MAIN: It did not say to shut down construction. [interjections]

MR. McINNIS: They took away his permit.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order please. If we could come back to the subject at hand, it's the matter of the strike.

MR. McINNIS: So why should it be that people who happen to choose to help people rather than market widgets for a living should have to go through this kind of situation to get to where they can negotiate a new contract with their employer? It's been pointed out to me by some of the people I've talked to in the profession that they feel they're being pushed into a situation where they have to violate the child welfare statutes in virtue of the working conditions they face. They're obliged to do certain things under the statute which they are not physically able to do because of the working conditions and the constraints that are there. So the minister of culture can babble on all he likes about obeying the law. The position social workers are in today is: which law do they obey? Do they obey the child welfare laws that they're sworn to uphold, or do they obey labour code legislation which was rammed through this House under closure, under repeated closure? They have to choose which law they're going to obey. Now, it turns out that their . . .

MR. MAIN: They're not under the labour code. Let's get that right.

MR. McINNIS: Well, I thank the minister for his education. The fact is that whichever way they go, they're going to be in violation of some law passed by this government. Now, whether it's the Humpty Dumpty principle that applies here, I don't know, but I think we have to have some sympathy for the fact that carrying on the way they do involves violation of the Child Welfare Act as well.

So I really think today is the day we make a commitment to get to the root of this problem and attempt to deal with it. I don't pretend that the minister goes back to the bargaining table and solves this problem overnight. There are an awful lot of

things that have to be done. But for once I think we need a commitment that that's where we're going to go with this thing: we're going to finally deal with people who spend their lives helping people as if they have the same rights and entitlement as some of the others who are friends of this government.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Westlock-Sturgeon.

MR. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to take a few minutes first of all to thank the Speaker for giving us a chance to debate this very important issue.

I want to maybe backtrack a bit and go to the background and why the government still persists in not allowing employees of the government to strike. By the government moving in that way, they strike at the very heart of individual liberty, because surely the right to withhold one's services should be one of the rights we have in the free world. You'll notice in nearly any autocratic country – it doesn't matter whether it's communist or fascist – one of the first rights they take away is the right to strike. Now, it bothers me that in a free and open society that we've tried to develop in western Canada, we would have a government that would take away the right to strike. There's no reasoning whatsoever in democratic ideals or the development of man or individual liberties that we take away their right to strike. This is the first thing that I think has to be thought through, and the government now has a chance to maybe rethink that position. There can be some argument that maybe some essential services have to have special ways of arbitrating a labour dispute, but by and large the vast majority of government workers should have the right to strike.

We move on from there. One of the sideline effects of taking away a group's right to strike is that when you negotiate with that group, how good is the negotiating? How would you like to negotiate with your neighbour if you knew – whether it's to put up a fence or take down a fence or borrow a car – that after a week or three days or three hours, he could say, "Well, the law's the law, you come in line whether you like it or not." So there is a failure of open and meaningful negotiation if you know you have the law behind you. Likewise, suppose you're on the receiving side. How do you feel negotiating with someone you know can call in the sheriff or call in the policeman to force you to do what they've asked you to do? So the negotiation becomes very hollow very quickly. Either you storm off in anger and do not listen at all and go your way and challenge them to go at what they're doing or you move on to a different jurisdiction. But the whole idea that we can get any kind of negotiation – honest, face-to-face, person-to-person negotiation – when there is a law behind them forcing them *in line* is ridiculous.

Now, I want to talk a little bit about the social workers' work. Probably many of you over there have had as little contact with social workers as I have through the years, and lucky for you. Most of the people in this Legislature are fortunate enough that they haven't had to have a surrogate father, a surrogate brother, a surrogate sister: somebody helping to give advice when somehow or another they've become trapped in modern society. Yet that's what the social worker often has to do. I know the minister himself – whom I find is a warm and compassionate person, and I've enjoyed his company socially; he has a lovely family – has taken on the part and many of the other ministers on the other side have taken on the part of social workers with their own family. But how many families out there do not have people like yourselves to talk to? I know I give you a little hell

now and again as being a little right wing and maybe feather-headed and a few other things like that, but after all, you do give your families good advice, and this is something that a social worker is out to do. Really, a social worker is something we've invented in our modern society because we had to, to take the place of ourselves when we weren't free. We were too busy making money or too busy governing or too busy doing other things to get out and talk to those in our society that are less fortunate than ourselves. So the social worker is really our agent, not somebody out there competing with us, and that social worker, I think, needs our understanding.

When you look at it, lastly, as a cold-hearted businessman without this social end, what better investment do you make than developing the people and the human resources of your society? A social worker comes into that end probably more so than any other in that they try, try, and try – and it must be terrifically hard, the burnout that occurs and the terrific mental strain in their own type of work – always to restore people or bring people back to be useful, if you want to call it useful, or to be integrated parts of our society. And what better investment can you make? Much better than growing more trees, growing more wheat, growing more cattle, digging more coal. All those things fade and disappear fast. If you study the great civilizations, the great works, and the great economies we have today, you'll notice that in most cases they've devoted their attention to developing people and education and fitting them into society. It's not the societies that have the most oil in the ground, the most trees on the surface, or the most gravel in their pits that are leading the world and leading it in thought or actions or wonderful places to live; it's the societies that have developed their people. Here we have our social workers, a very basic part of that co-ordinating and helping bring the members of society that through no fault of their own quite often have been left to the side and don't have the chance to listen to people like yourselves and ourselves and get the day-to-day communication to help them become part of society's mass, you might say – here we're trying to be niggardly and chintzy, and that's something that is very hard to comprehend indeed, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Forest Lawn.

MR. PASHAK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would suppose that in a certain kind of ideal society there'd be no need for social workers; there'd be no undue pressure put on social workers that would cause them to withdraw their services. In that kind of ideal society there'd be no one who would be born with a mental or physical disability, there'd be no parents who abuse their children, there'd be no husbands who abandon their wives and young children, there'd be no one unemployed, and there'd be no one working at inferior wages. In an ideal society, Mr. Speaker, I would suppose everybody would have a reasonably well-paying job and everybody would be equally productive. But unfortunately that's not social reality.

In fact, it's the very policies of governments like the one opposite and their colleagues in Ottawa that produce the bulk of social cases that occur in this country. I mean, consider for a moment just taking a look at what the federal government is doing with the Mulroney trade deal, the part of that deal that requires Canada to have a high value for the Canadian dollar, which means that the government has to have high interest rates

to prop up that dollar, which in turn means that companies have to cut back on investment spending, which means that the unemployment rate skyrockets, which means you put people back on the social welfare system at some point. Those are Tory policies that create much of this extra workload social workers have to deal with, and they're not funded properly, as we've heard from a number of people today, to deal with those caseloads. Here in this province we create economic policies that reduce the number of full-time jobs available to workers in this society. We cause more and more Albertans to fall back on part-time employment that doesn't provide people with sufficient enough income to get by. People are desperate. We break up family life by doing that, which creates social problems that lead to an increasing demand for social services that this government is reluctant to provide.

I might just point out in saying that that most people do not want to be on welfare or receive social assistance. Whenever you look at studies, fewer than 5 percent of people abuse the system. Most people want the dignity that comes with feeling they're equally productive in terms of making a contribution to society. But we take away that dignity for people because of the kind of economic situation we've allowed Tory governments in this country to create.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to suggest that there is plenty of money in the system to pay social workers a decent wage if we went about providing government services in some kind of reasonable way. But we don't do that. We've institutionalized our treatment of individuals rather than treating them as individuals. Consequently, we've created horrendous, unnecessary expenditures within the system.

[Mr. Jonson in the Chair]

I could just cite one or two examples to support that contention. I have a person who lives in my constituency who has multiple sclerosis, for example. Now, he is married, and his wife would dearly love to keep her husband at home. She's a person who's out there in the work force working. She'd dearly love to have her husband at home, but she needs home care assistance in order to do that, because when she's not there, somebody has to be there to look after her husband. Her only alternative is to put him into the Fanning centre, where it costs about four times to keep him in there what it would cost to provide some kind of in-home support service for this particular woman.

I have another woman who came to my attention recently. Her situation was written up in the *Calgary Herald*. This is a woman who has very severe medical problems. She's epileptic, among other things; she has some severe bone deterioration. She really needs 24-hour-a-day service in her home situation. But social services can only afford to provide her with about eight hours of care a day. She has an 11-year-old mentally handicapped child. What was the government's response to her situation? It was to say to this woman, "Your handicapped child should be looking after you in the home; you don't need 24-hour care service." Well, what she's going to have to do is institutionalize both herself and her handicapped child, which will increase the expenses for all taxpayers, which reduces the amount of money that's available to pay social workers a decent wage. I get, I don't know, 15 calls a week in my constituency office about similar kinds of situations. So you know, it's government policies that are creating these unfortunate situations and are putting pressure on social workers to resort to withdrawal of service.

I'd like to make one other point, Mr. Speaker, and I think it's really a critical point. The moral worth or value of any society – and I don't care what your religious background is, whether you're Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or whatever – is ultimately going to be based on how well that society provides service for those people who through no fault of their own are not able to function at the same level as other members of that society are capable of functioning at. I'm talking about people who've lost their jobs through no fault of their own; I'm talking about people with physical and mental disabilities. Our worth and the way in which we're going to be viewed, historically or by any social philosopher or by whoever would make judgments, will depend on how much we're prepared to go out of our way to help people who unfortunately are caught up in these situations.

MR. ACTING DEPUTY SPEAKER: The Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too am highly concerned about the events of today, events which I believe have been precipitated by none other than this government. It is classic Conservative, classic Tory, politics to identify a problem in society and then to blame the victims. We hear it with respect to health care: it is those sick people who are abusing the system. We hear it now today – well, we always hear it with respect to people on welfare, on social assistance: they don't want to work; it's their fault.

Today we hear the same thing in this Legislature: the problem with this strike is the fault of the social workers. Why? Because they won't come to the table. Why else? Because they're breaking the law. "We wouldn't even consider talking to them," this government says, "because, in fact, they are breaking the law." What that statement does, Mr. Speaker, is put these social workers in an extremely untenable position. They are working, have been working, day to day in circumstances in which it is impossible for them to fulfill their responsibility and their mandate. At some point, when they haven't been listened to for as long as they have not been listened to by this government, they are obligated to stand up and take action which communicates very strongly, very rigorously, and very clearly what it is that is at stake here. In fact, I would argue that to work under the circumstances they have been working under, to knowingly work under those circumstances, knowing they have a mandate they cannot fulfill, may well be breaking the law as well.

Whose fault is that? That is the fault of a government which has absolutely no imagination, which cannot for a minute, for a second, put itself in the place of some of those social workers. What are their daily lives like? We take people who are undoubtedly idealistic about their social responsibility, who go into jobs like that because they want to contribute, and what do they find? In this particular social service they find, I believe, a grind, a continual grind, an unrelenting grind, a circumstance in which they can only lose every single day. Workloads continuously increase. They have more calls than they can conceivably return in a day. They have more calls than they can conceivably make in a day. You try to phone some of those offices; you cannot get through. The phones are always busy, because the pressures and the stresses of that particular job are so great and the resources are relatively small to meet those particular pressures.

We don't give them any particular recognition for what they

do. I don't see this minister standing up and saying: "These are great workers. This is a great department. I'm very, very proud of and pleased with those workers." I don't see this minister, I don't hear this minister walking through regional offices encouraging those people, bringing them along. Instead, what we have seen in the past is that when some crisis erupts, something gets out of control, it is the social workers' fault; it is the social workers' problem. Can you imagine – can anyone on that side of the House imagine working in a circumstance where no matter how hard you work, if anything goes right, you don't get any recognition, and if anything goes wrong, the results are a catastrophe for you personally, for your career, for your families, for the responsibilities that you have to fulfill in your daily lives.

MR. DAY: You're out to lunch.

MR. MITCHELL: No recognition of their professional status. For some time, social workers have been seeking recognition in legislation of their professional status. This government has refused to do that. In fact, what they do is hire sometimes underqualified people to fulfill jobs that social workers with the proper professional designation should be fulfilling and performing. They pay social workers who do much the same job in another department more money. So we have social workers in this department, Family and Social Services, who have too much to do, who have too few resources with which to do it, who find out that somebody doing the same job elsewhere is actually paid more, who get no recognition when things go right, who get only negative recognition when things go wrong.

Top that off with the fact that in many cases these people are put into circumstances of physical threat. They deal with people day to day who are in highly stressed circumstances, who can be highly emotional, who are extremely frustrated. They are the frontline workers who must deal with these people. There are many instances of physical threat, of abuse of these workers, and where do they get the support that would make that job in any way, shape, or form bearable? Well, we saw it today. They get told that they're breaking the law: this group of people who have gone out, who have sacrificed their pay, who may be sacrificing their jobs – because we can't get a commitment from this government to say otherwise – to make a statement that has to be made. The circumstances in which they must work, the mandate they feel they must fulfill and which cannot be fulfilled: it's absolutely untenable. These are people who are in a circumstance beyond their control, who lose every single day. There are very few people who can operate and function with any kind of quality of life in that circumstance.

Mr. Speaker, I note today that there is almost a complete lack of communication on this subject in this debate from that side of the House. The only two members we have heard from have been, through snide and cynical heckling, the Member for Edmonton-Parkallen and the Member for Red Deer-North. And I want *Hansard* to see them on the record as being the only two people on the government side who have spoken at all.

MR. DAY: Point of order.

MR. MITCHELL: And what they continue to do . . .

MR. ACTING DEPUTY SPEAKER: A point of order, Red Deer-North.

MR. DAY: Citing Standing Order 30(7)(a), "The matter proposed for discussion must relate to a genuine emergency." Mr. Speaker, I'd like to suggest that much of what we've heard about this very important topic being discussed today – I repeat, very important topic – from the members opposite is, in fact, off-topic. What other members on this side have said has nothing to do with this topic, which is very important today. Frankly, we're getting tired of hearing nothing but ideological drivel from the other side and comments about lack of caring from someone who showed no care in how he took care of Principal investors and widows.

MR. ACTING DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. I believe, hon. members, that at this point in the debate we have a disagreement among members, and I would like to ask Edmonton-Meadowlark to proceed, please.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's interesting that when they're challenged, they don't want to hear any of this. Not only do they not want to speak about it, but they don't want to hear about it either.

Mr. Speaker, it is very important, I believe, in circumstances like this to have an imagination, to imagine what it is like to go into one of those social services offices every day and be put in a circumstance where you can't win. It is very important for this government, in assessing the need to deliver services to the people who require the services of that department, to have an imagination of what it must be like to live in the circumstances in which they live. What we see are people in the Legislature like this, who go home to wonderful homes, who have strong relationships, who can build those strong relationships which provide them support, which make their lives easier, who have a chance, with loving relationships within their families. What they cannot imagine on that side of the House is that the whole world does not operate like that and you don't change people who don't have the opportunities and the good fortune that most of us have had by just telling them to act differently.

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

What you do need in a society that can be measured with any sense of richness, a society that demonstrates some value for other people, that appreciates and values the individual, is a government that can deliver these kinds of services in a caring, consistent way. And you do need people who are hired to do that, who are treated properly at times like these so that they are capable of doing that.

Today, Mr. Speaker, we have seen social workers in this province driven to a strike which by no means they want to have to indulge in, who have been accused of breaking the law, that it is their fault, therefore, that this has occurred. Instead, what we need is some sense of a government that will realize that they have a huge responsibility in why this circumstance has occurred today and that they can take positive action to solve the problem now.

MR. SPEAKER: The Minister of Labour.

MS McCOY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I agree. I agree to this extent: that this *is* a matter of urgency. But it is a matter of urgency for the families and children in Alberta who are at risk, the single mothers and the abused children and the severely

handicapped who are dependent upon government services for their very existence and the very way out of the troubles that they all too unfortunately are having to endure.

When they can't get those services, Mr. Speaker, where else do they go? This isn't a situation in which Shell is on strike, so people can go down to the Esso station to get their gasoline. There is only one place that those people at risk, those abused children and single mothers, can go for the help they need, and that is to the government of Alberta. That is why we have designated our civil servants who are operating in that division as an essential service. And that is why there is no right to strike, because they have a monopoly on the services, and the very people who are the most vulnerable in our society have nowhere to go but to those very people who are now not at work.

Yes, I agree, Mr. Speaker, that we do have a responsibility, as management of the Department of Family and Social Services to deliver that help. That isn't in question here. In fact, the management is still on the job, and they are doing everything they can to continue emergency services and keep the cheques flowing to those families and children at risk. But I do want to point out that it's a shared responsibility. Social workers and management are partners in that responsibility of delivering that help to the families and children at risk in Alberta.

There is no question that there is a dispute here between the management and the employees, but there is a process to resolve that dispute. It's laid out in the Public Service Employee Relations Act, an Act that was passed by this very Legislature. We have mandated a process, and that process includes negotiations at the bargaining table. It allows for mediation. It allows for arbitration. That process is there and has been used many, many, many times for the parties to come to an agreement.

In fact, under that process AUPE, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, has in fact agreed with management to all of the terms and conditions of the master agreement. They settled that last Saturday. It took them three months of hard work, but there was goodwill on both sides. They used the process that is in place, that this Legislature put in place, and they have come to a mutually negotiated agreement. So are we now in this situation to suddenly ignore our laws? Are we now suddenly going to pretend that there is no process and that we never put it in place? Are we suddenly going to say, "Oh, no; we do not believe in the collective bargaining process"? I, for one, will say no.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot solve this dispute in the streets. We cannot solve this dispute in this Assembly. The only place to solve it is at the bargaining table. I have faith in the social workers' bargaining team. I have faith, and I know that if they work hard and muster the will to come to a fair agreement, they will do so. However, we can only negotiate if both sides are at the table. They walked away. They opened the door and walked out. We're still at that table waiting for them to return. We've offered mediation. They've refused. Where's their will to come to a fair agreement? Where is their commitment as partners in responsibility?

I say, Mr. Speaker, that it is urgent that we continue to help the people in need: the single mothers, the abused children, and the severely handicapped. But let's get back to the bargaining table, let the social workers get back to work so they can continue to be partners in that responsibility, and let's get a fair deal for everyone.

REV. ROBERTS: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just have one thing to say to the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Family and Social Services, and that is that they are not at the table because they just don't trust you. They don't trust this government. They don't trust the history of what's happened to the social workers since report after report after report has come down and said: "Do something about caseloads. Do something about child welfare. Do something about the issues which care to social workers in this province." And you've done nothing. The inaction, the lack of serious negotiation until the eleventh hour – and then we sit down at the table; then we have all the rhetoric about the collective bargaining process; then we say how much we care. Well, it's too little and it's too late, and they just don't trust you, and we on this side of the House don't blame them one bit.

Yes, they're at risk. It's about time these ministers and this government learned that single mothers are at risk and abused children are at risk and people on low incomes are at risk. Social workers have known that for a long time. We've gone door to door, knocked on some of the doors and seen the risks that a number of people have been in. But it's not going to be resolved by you coming at the eleventh hour and saying: "Oh, you can't take strike action. You can't take this job action because you're going to put them at further risk." Where, again, have you been? Where's the commitment been to show that, yes, let's do something about people at risk, and let's do it with social workers who have a human caseload and who have a human wage and have human working conditions. That's how you solve the issue, not by trying to lay further guilt on them at the eleventh hour.

Yes, they're breaking the law, Mr. Speaker, and it is an urgent matter. That's why we're here today debating this, that they are breaking the law, *because it is* an urgent matter when Albertans who don't normally engage in lawbreaking activities finally decide collectively to get up and walk away from the table, to say to this government and to the people of Alberta that they have had enough and they're even going to break the law. They're people who are forced by their moral conscience to take that ultimate step.

People just won't live under bad laws and bad working conditions. Yes, it can result in chaos, as it did in the Winnipeg General Strike years ago, or as it did when Trudeau brought in the War Measures Act and tried to put down and quell people who were breaking the law because they felt strongly. Yes, you can take that course to try to quell the chaos that might result, or you can use it as an opportunity for some radical social change, and that radical social change is what we are on the edge of now. Let's really sit down and make a new offer to the social workers. Sit down with some radical new change and departure from the past inaction. Do a new thing, a bold thing, and sit down with them with a serious new offer, because they are breaking the law.

Yes, people have broken the law. Lech Walesa broke the law in Poland not long ago. That great poet Havel broke the law in Czechoslovakia and was imprisoned just last year. This year he's President of Czechoslovakia. How about that type of breaking the law? Maybe we should have some social workers here as MLAs, maybe in the next election after they've had some political education. Martin Luther King broke the law. Desmond Tutu broke the law. Nelson Mandela broke the law. The suffragettes in the early history of our country – and women

still today often break the law. And yes, even the nurses of Alberta here recently have broken the law, not because they are malicious, not because they want to hurt people, not because they're irresponsible, but because they have a moral conviction that what they're doing needs to have radical social change and urgent action taken for their cause.

Yes, you can wait them out and say, "Oh well." As one social worker who called me said, "They're going to just keep us out for two or three weeks and save some money." As the hospital administrators said: "Oh, well, it's okay if the nurses go out on strike. We'll save some money for two or three weeks by not having to pay nurses' salaries." Then, oh well, maybe government will get a bit heavy-handed. You heard the Premier today, the big law and order man, come in with the iron fist and say, "Well, maybe we can't deal with these lawbreakers, and we'll force an injunction, or we'll force them with fines or force them into imprisonment." Okay. You can bring the iron hand of the law down upon these social workers throughout the province, and then what? Then what are you going to do for some replacement workers and some scabs? Are you going to ask people to come in with some replacement workers . . .

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, hon. member. It's the rule of this Chamber that the phrase "scabs" is out of order and unparliamentary. So please can you carry on.

MR. GIBEAULT: What citation is that?

MR. SPEAKER: It's the direction of the Chair. That citation, hon. member.

Carry on.

REV. ROBERTS: Again, Mr. Speaker, that word is a very strong word which calls for strong action, because what happens when people who take a job action withdraw their services, who have had enough? Then what do you do for replacement workers?

Well, do you know what I'd suggest, Mr. Speaker? I'd suggest that maybe this minister and certain members of this government, as is their wont, cross a few picket lines and take the place of some social workers for a few weeks and see what the job is like for them. Try to deal with the inhuman caseloads of social workers for even a week or two. Get your hands dirty with the messy business of what life is like for a lot of people. Try to deal as replacement workers. Go over and be a social worker for a week or two and deal with the increasing responsibilities they have for not only income support and social support and increasing needs assessment and having to look at even the other welfare manual for some help and support on how to get help to some of the people in need. Deal not just with what this government and this Treasury always talk about – the economic deficit, the mighty economic deficit that's facing this province – but look at the human deficit in terms of the lives of people and what needs to be done to meet the scourge of poverty, to meet the scourge of failure which so many people endure. Yet this government, with their capitalistic, greedy, selfish, arrogant, out-of-touch way, says, "Oh, well; just be a successful person, just be a successful individual, and you won't have any problems." That's the Alberta way; that's the Tory way. Well, I say that there is a solution to all of this, Mr. Speaker. It's to put social workers back to work and put all these Tories out of work. That's what's going to be needed for bringing some justice to this province.

So, as I say; when any of our constituents, when any of the people of Alberta – when one of them is diminished, we are all diminished. And it is the case where the diminishment that people have experienced has gone unheeded and unguarded by this government, and the social workers and those in the front lines have had to deal with it day in and day out without the support, without the commitment. They've had one after another report calling for the radical changes that are necessary, yet their cries have gone unheard and unheeded. Well, we on this side of the House in the New Democratic Party are the ones who said we need a preferential option for the poor. We start with the point of how you meet the needs of people when life has been difficult for them, when they've experienced failure, when they've experienced vulnerability, whether the/re children or elderly or women or whatever. They are the people where public policy planning and government initiative begin. It begins with the preferential option for the poor, not, as we've seen from the Member for Redwater-Andrew, the preferential option for . . .

MR. SPEAKER: No, no, no, hon. member. Hon. member, stick to the emergency debate. Comments about Redwater-Andrew are entirely out of order in this discussion.

REV. ROBERTS: Mr. Speaker, the people of Alberta have seen more than one example of this government and their preferential option for their friends, for those powerful, successful, rich, Tory businessmen, whom they see, as my colleagues have pointed out, to be the way in which the world works. And yes it does for many to a large degree. But let that world take care of itself. They don't need extra favours, extra handouts, extra interventions from a government such as this. What they need is to have a preferential option for the poor, for the downtrodden, for those who have felt failure and the sweet bitterness that life's successes have escaped them.

Social workers, nurses, the people in mental health clinics: these are the ones throughout the province who deal day to day with people in this kind of existence. Yet time and time again we are told, "Well, there's not enough money for them." Time and time again they've said: "Well, the caseloads really aren't that high. They're exaggerating." Or "They're walking away from the table; they're being irresponsible; now they're being lawbreakers." I have yet to hear, as my other colleagues have said, more than just rhetoric, but the action of going and walking in their shoes for a while and seeing what it is that is really the issue.

Now, it finally came about with nurses in this province. It finally came about when the Premier and the new Minister of Health finally said: "Okay, let's do something about nurses. We've had enough of two, three, or more nurses' strikes, and we know that if we don't deal with nurses, there's going to be a real crisis in the health care system." So they took some urgent action, and though it's not over yet, there's been, I think, a genuine commitment to say: "Okay, nurses, what are your experiences? What are your frustrations? What can we do about it?"

If that same action by this minister and this Premier and this government is not taken with respect to social workers, then I submit, Mr. Speaker, there'll be an even greater crisis in the whole social welfare field within this province. The people are so marginalized and often so forgotten that many of the people who are caring and thinking will say, "This government is hypocritical in the way it gives lip service but no action when it

really counts." As I say, Mr. Speaker, it's an urgent matter. We need a healthy future for all Albertans, and the way to do that is to put social workers back to work and to put this Tory government out of work.

Thank you very much.

MR. GOGO: Mr. Speaker, I would move that when hon. members reassemble at 8 p.m., they do so in Committee of Supply.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you.

Having heard the motion, those in favour, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no. Motion carries.

[The House recessed at 5:29 p.m.]