

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 17, 1999 8:00 p.m.**

Date: 99/02/17

[The Speaker in the chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

### Point of Order Parliamentary Language

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, before we move to the scheduled business for tonight, there was one matter left over from this afternoon concerning a point of order raised by the hon. Official Opposition House Leader. The point of order related to comments allegedly made by the Premier that the Leader of the Opposition suppressed evidence. I indicated at that time that I would review the Blues and review this. The point of order essentially was that there was a violation of Standing Order 23(h).

In reviewing the Blues, I would quote into the record the statement that was made.

So I would suggest, if the hon. Leader of the Liberal Opposition and her finance critic or anyone else has evidence of political interference, he or she should have provided it to the Auditor General, or he or she should now make it available to the Attorney General, and he or she should not be suppressing evidence as this matter is before the courts.

The remarks in question were qualified with the word "if," and there's also another phrase in there: "or anyone else." So in reviewing it, in order for it to be a legitimate point of order, the allegation would have to be that an hon. member did actually make the statement that, quote, another hon. member was suppressing evidence. In this case, the matter was qualified, and just going through the whole text of it would not suggest to me that this is a point of order.

The hon. Government House Leader for an introduction.

head: Introduction of Guests

MR. HANCOCK: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to revert to Introduction of Guests. This afternoon my colleague from St. Albert raised questions in the House with respect to the matter of untreated pine shakes. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the House a number of people who are very actively involved with the Alberta Pine Shake Homeowners Association, many of whom both fortunately and unfortunately are from my constituency. I'd like to introduce Brian Beebe, Alan Brackett, Barry Hanna, Dave Larson, Steve Mazer, John Read, Dave Sobolewski, Kevin Stewart, John Whitmore, and Fred Hotslag. Fred Hotslag is the president of the newly formed Alberta Pine Shake Homeowners Association. They had a very successful meeting last night in their organization of that association. I'm pleased to have them here with us tonight and to introduce them to the House, and ask for your warm welcome.

head: Consideration of His Honour  
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, to move the speech is an honour of great significance awarded to an individual member in the House. It is now my pleasure to introduce to you the hon. Member for Calgary-Cross to move the speech of His Honour.

Mrs. Fritz moved:

That an humble address be presented to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To His Honour the Honourable H.A. "Bud" Olson, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

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

MRS. FRITZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to rise this evening and reply to the Speech from the Throne on behalf of my constituents in Calgary-Cross, and I'm also very proud to move acceptance of the throne speech opening the Third Session of the 24th Legislature on behalf of our hon. Premier, my caucus colleagues, and our government.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the Speech from the Throne is one of the most important documents that we as Members of the Legislative Assembly can address in this House. This speech details our government's plan for the coming year. It recognizes Albertans' hopes and dreams and leads the way to making those hopes and dreams a reality.

The joy of being able to address the throne speech is that I have the opportunity to take a moment to share with the Assembly about Calgary-Cross and what my constituents have told me over the past year. You must appreciate, Mr. Speaker, that I really believe I have the best constituency in Alberta. I do. My constituents are known throughout Calgary for their strong community spirit and volunteerism. Just two weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, we had a fund-raiser, which was put on by the Properties Sports Association, and many, many hard-working volunteers raised over \$20,000 in one evening for a campaign for youth justice initiatives.

We also have the good fortune of having the Peter Lougheed hospital in my riding, and just three weeks ago my colleague for Calgary-West and I attended the opening of the ERCP unit, which is an acronym for endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography. This highly specialized field means that a procedure which allows for the extraction of a stone from the pancreas or gallbladder will now take place within minutes. As my colleague and I saw on the video with the tour, the unit has an opportunity for research and training to make it a renowned, internationally recognized centre of excellence. I must tell you that this same procedure in the past had a lengthy stay in hospital for patients.

The Lester B. Pearson high school is also located in Calgary-Cross, and it is renowned for student achievement through technology learning. Recently I attended an awards ceremony at the high school, and I am very proud to tell you that the academic achievement of 94 students resulted in \$83,500 of Rutherford scholarships.

We also have a world-class recreational facility at the Village Square Leisure Centre. This highly utilized centre has a wave pool, and you know, Mr. Speaker, that there are only a few wave pools in North America.

So, you see, health, education, justice, and quality of life are important to Calgary-Cross residents, and that is what my constituents have told me at town hall meetings, community events, in letters, and in phone calls. The throne speech is a reflection of the encouragement, advice, and direction that we all receive from our residents. It is the framework for acting on the guidance we receive from all Albertans. Our government, Mr. Speaker, is committed to following the sound advice that we have all heard from constituents.

Albertans told us to balance the budget. We balanced the budget, and we did so ahead of our own schedule. They told us not to raise taxes, and we kept taxes the lowest of anywhere in Canada. Now Albertans are telling us to reinvest in health care, improve services for our children, and further reinvest in education. I believe our commitment to health is one of the most important statements in the

throne speech. Ensuring that the public health system continues to be sustainable and affordable is a point that my constituents have often raised.

We all remember very well when the federal Liberal government unilaterally cut billions -- and I mean billions -- of dollars in health transfer payments to the provinces. This caused tremendous pressure on our health system, yet we continued to spend \$4.2 billion, which is over \$12 million per day, on health services. Our government has continued to maintain and sustain a quality health care system. In fact, it is one of the best systems not only in Canada but in the world. We have increased health funding by 20 percent over the last three years. This year alone we increased health spending in Calgary by close to \$90 million, and we gave the Calgary regional health authority another \$27 million to address emergency room waiting lists and staff pressures.

8:10

Also on the issue of health care, Mr. Speaker, I would like to publicly congratulate our Premier for the leadership role he took in the recent social union talks with the federal government, provincial premiers, and territorial leaders. For five years our Premier has been pushing for an agreement to gain additional support for our health system. He offered to do whatever it took to get additional money for patient care. Our Premier went to Ottawa on behalf of Albertans to press the federal government for reinvestment.

He made a commitment to deliver all federal dollars directly to frontline services and promised to match federal health funding dollar for dollar with provincial funds this year. That means that this year approximately \$400 million, which is about \$192 million from the federal government and \$192 million from our province, will be reinvested in health care. I can tell you that a steady increase in provincial funding as well as the return of federal funds through the social union agreement is very welcome news to the Peter Lougheed hospital in my riding as well as to all hospitals in Alberta.

As a government we will be focusing greater attention on preventative health care, the promotion of healthy living, and the earlier detection of illness. The Health Summit to be held in Calgary next week, Mr. Speaker, will provide a forum for an open and thorough discussion on how we're going to maintain and sustain our quality health care system.

Mr. Speaker, because this throne speech is about people, it is critical that we recognize and highlight the importance of our youngest Albertans. I am very proud of the commitment that we are making to our children. Our young people need our help to achieve their fullest potential. The Alberta children's initiative will enrich the lives of our young people. Departments will work together to ensure that our children grow up in a safe and healthy environment.

Integrated programs will be very effective for our young people who require special assistance. In the past year our government has increased funding for special-needs education, and I am thankful that there is a commitment to increase access to special learning resources for special-needs students. Through the throne speech we are also helping our young people to succeed by reaffirming our commitment that students will have access to a quality education. Our students are already among the best and brightest in Canada. They have the highest high school completion rate in Canada and are competitive with all other countries in the subjects of math and science.

Mr. Speaker, our government recognizes the importance of computer literacy. We now provide one computer for every eight students, but we will work hard to ensure that students have increased access to computers and the Internet. We will also work with educators to implement a new math curriculum and provide appropriate teaching resources.

The announcement by the Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development to double the number of spaces for computer and information technology students is welcome news for our province's universities and colleges. The access fund will inject \$51 million and create 23,000 new spaces for students to have the opportunity to attend a postsecondary institution and obtain a degree in a high-tech field. Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, this initiative will ensure that our workforce will remain one of the most skilled in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, when I think about the throne speech and all that it guarantees for Albertans, I continue to be very, very optimistic about our future. I am proud to move this Speech from the Throne, and as I said earlier in my comments, this throne speech is about striking the right balance between remaining fiscally responsible and maintaining a high quality of life for our province.

In closing, I would like to leave you with this quote from the throne speech.

We are blessed to live in a province which is the pride of a country repeatedly declared by the United Nations to have the highest quality of life in the world. Our government thanks our municipalities, our teachers and school boards, our health care professionals, our police [forces], our volunteers, our community organizations, and everyone else who has worked so hard to serve the people of this magnificent province.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move that this House accept the Speech from the Throne delivered yesterday by His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: To be asked to second the motion in support of the speech of His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor is equally a great honour. May I now call on the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to congratulate His Honour the Lieutenant Governor for the grace and dignity he presented in carrying out his duties as the representative of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. I commend and thank the Lieutenant Governor for his reading of the Speech from the Throne to open the Third Session of the 24th Legislature of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to begin by saying what a sincere honour it is to stand here today representing the West Yellowhead constituency and to second the motion set forth by my hon. colleague from Calgary-Cross to accept the Speech from the Throne. Being asked to respond to the Speech from the Throne is one of the greatest honours in our British parliamentary system of government, the exceptional system that has served Canadians and Albertans so well for many, many years.

As I reflect on the Speech from the Throne, I can think that the theme of this speech is very clear: striking the right balance. This is such an important and valuable message. I know that the balance is something I strive for in my life. I see examples throughout West Yellowhead of individuals, organizations, businesses, really all people and groups in Alberta, looking to strike the balance that meets their needs. Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. member for Banff-Cochrane might argue this point, but West Yellowhead constituency is in the heart of God's country. Jasper national park, Grande Cache, Hinton, Edson, the MD of Greenview, and Yellowhead county are located in a region of our great province of Alberta which contains some of the most beautiful landscape in the world. We are also fortunate to live in an area which is replete with natural resources and wildlife.

The constituents of West Yellowhead are therefore deeply aware that there is a need for balance. Whether it is a balance between the

economy and the environment, between humans and nature, or living well or living within our means, it truly is about maintaining the balance. Mr. Speaker, in 1993 Alberta was fiscally off balance. However, by the time I received the honour of being elected to this Legislature in 1997, the government had the province back on the right track, on sound footing, and had created a more balanced approach to governing than any other province in Canada.

Now our fiscal house is in order. We are no longer spending more than we can afford. In a short time, when the debt is paid, Albertans will no longer owe more than they own. Now that our fiscal finances are more than balanced, it is time to reinvest cautiously and wisely in areas that are important to Albertans. This means targeting priority areas like health, education, advanced education, social services, and infrastructure. I'm excited to know that this reinvestment can be done while making sure that Albertans continue to pay the lowest taxes in all of Canada, while receiving quality services delivered with great efficiency. This is truly something that all Albertans can be proud of.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to briefly comment on an issue that is a concern in my constituency, particularly for the people of Jasper. First off, I'd like to recognize the work of the Jasper Improvement District Council and their efforts to protect Jasperites from intrusion by the federal government. I want to reassure the people of Jasper that this government is in their corner 100 percent. We have strongly encouraged that the people of Jasper be allowed more self-government so that they are not left at the mercy of the federal government's plans to impose massive and abusive increases in land rent costs. Our government will continue to represent the interests of Albertans in all their dealings with the federal government.

8:20

Mr. Speaker, the first point of reinvestment outlined in the Speech from the Throne is the area of health. I'm glad to know that the Premier has renewed his pledge to protect our publicly funded health system. It is good to know that the funding will be made available to target certain areas of the health system which are in need. It is also encouraging to see that there will be more emphasis on preventive measures and health promotion. On this point Ilona Kickbusch writes:

Public health is the science and art of promoting health. It does so based on the understanding that health is a process engaging social, mental, spiritual, and physical well-being. Public health acts on the knowledge that health is a fundamental resource to the individual, to the community and to society as a whole and must be supported by soundly investing in living conditions that create, maintain and protect health.

Mr. Speaker, there are some more very useful points in this quotation. Most of all we must remember that the overall health and well-being of an individual or a society includes many aspects: social, mental, spiritual, and physical. We could pour all the money in the world into health care, but if we do not maintain the living conditions that create, maintain, and protect health, then we will not truly be healthy. For example, if the economy is neglected and people cannot find work, then their spiritual and mental well-being will certainly suffer. Again, it is about finding a balance.

In a democracy the ultimate responsibility of decisions on health policy should lie with the public. Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what our Premier is doing: letting the public lead the way when it comes to making the decisions about the direction our province is taking in health care. During the upcoming Health Summit Albertans will be able to help shape our province's health policy for the future. Again, the Premier is proving that he and this government care, listen, act, and measure and continue to improve upon this great province.

Mr. Speaker, as we approach the millennium, we often think seriously about the future. More than anybody else, children are our future. This makes the children's initiative, which co-ordinates the efforts of several government departments, very encouraging to see. Under the new system of children's services Albertans can look forward to more integrated and preventive services for the most precious and valuable asset we have in Alberta, our children. Children's services will be delivered efficiently and effectively through 18 regional authorities.

The Speech from the Throne also reflects the value our government places on children. With reinvestment in education a high-priority area for Albertans, we can look forward to even more focus on both literacy and computer literacy. These are critical skills in our world today. Literacy is the cornerstone of any education, and it is comforting to know that this government will continue to actively promote literacy. Computer literacy is becoming more and more essential as computers and other technology play a larger role in our daily lives. By committing to teaching computer literacy in our schools, we know that our children will be prepared for the future challenges.

I was also pleased to hear that there'll be more resources available to meet the learning needs of our aboriginal children. It is good to know that the government will be working hard to ensure that aboriginal children have better access to a quality education. Many of these children are in unfortunate conditions, which puts them at a disadvantage. In these situations there's often a need for extra attention and care. This situation is a matter which this government recognizes and is working to improve.

Mr. Speaker, one issue which is a high priority of the constituency of West Yellowhead is accessibility to universities and colleges. I receive many letters and phone calls inquiring about postsecondary education. My constituents will be pleased to know that 23,000 more spaces for postsecondary students will be made available through the access fund. They will also be pleased to know that the number of postsecondary students in the fields of computing, communication technology, physics, and computer-related engineering will double over the next two years. These initiatives, along with the Campus Alberta network for adult learning, are good news for the future for the constituents of West Yellowhead and of course for all Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's population is growing rapidly. Each year thousands of people are moving here to experience the Alberta advantage and to make Alberta their new home. This is exciting and rewarding to see. It means that Alberta's economy is healthy and diverse, and it means that thousands and thousands of people recognize what a terrific province this is. But a growing economy and increased population lead to great pressures on government services, particularly on the province's infrastructure. This is another priority set for reinvestment.

Last year the Premier's Task Force on Infrastructure identified priority areas in Alberta's infrastructure network, and reinvestment will be targeted accordingly. Like so many other things, this is an ongoing process for keeping a balance between creating and maintaining the infrastructure necessary to sustain our growing economy and doing it in a cost-effective manner. I'm glad to hear that he will be continuing commitments to work on the north/south trade corridor, just as my constituents are glad that highway 40 from Grande Prairie south to Hinton is fully paved. Albertans can be confident that the reinvestment dollars for infrastructure will be spent effectively and wisely.

Mr. Speaker, another priority that was referred to in the Speech from the Throne is the commitment that the Premier and this

government have towards caring for Albertans' environment. As I previously noted, this is something which is very important to me and to the people of West Yellowhead. By streamlining the province's environmental legislation and regulations, it will be easier to maintain Alberta's high standard of environmental protection. I am also encouraged that the province will continue to harmonize environmental legislation on a national basis, as some environmental issues have no boundaries. However, in keeping with the pursuit of a balance, Albertans can be confident that all of these priority areas for reinvestment and renewed commitments will not be at the expense of the Alberta economy.

The Alberta advantage is alive and well. This government will work hard to make sure that the Alberta economy will continue to be among the strongest and most prosperous economies in the world, and Alberta will continue to lead the way in Canada in terms of job creation, keeping the lowest taxes of all the provinces, keeping the unemployment rate among the lowest in the country, and maintaining a healthy rate of economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank our Premier for his hard work and dedication to making this province the best in Canada. Further, I thank the Premier on behalf of myself and my constituents for listening and working to satisfy the needs of the people of West Yellowhead.

This throne speech clearly indicates that we are heading into the new millennium. Alberta will be doing it with a balanced approach to governing and to living. This is the approach Albertans have asked this government to take into the next century. Because this government truly listens to its constituents, this is the approach we will be taking.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

8:30

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, might we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

head: Introduction of Guests

(*reversion*)

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to the Members of the Legislative Assembly Mr. Jim Matt, who is seated in the public gallery. Jim is the newly appointed executive director of the Alberta Liberal Party. He comes to us with a wealth of experience as a general manager of Altech in Edmonton, his own consulting company before that. I'm delighted to welcome him to the Legislature and would ask the members to greet him in the customary fashion.

head: Consideration of His Honour  
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech  
(*continued*)

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, to be the first member of the Official Opposition to participate in the Speech from the Throne is also a great honour, and I'd now like to call on the distinguished Leader of Her Majesty's Official and Loyal Opposition.

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour to be privileged to be able to address the Speech from the Throne this evening. It's really my first chance to speak to a Speech from the Throne since returning to the Legislative Assembly and

being elected by the constituents of Edmonton-McClung last June.

I was thinking about this as I was preparing my remarks, because of course one's first speech in the Legislature to the throne speech is usually called the maiden speech, and I can hardly claim that a second time, so I guess what I am doing is speaking, and am delighted to speak, after some years of absence from the Assembly, and I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to do that.

I also want to say thank you to the members of the Liberal Party who chose me as their leader last April of 1998, the Liberal Party very ably represented by the members here who are my colleagues with whom I'm delighted to share this spot in the House and to serve as Her Majesty's Official and Loyal, always, Opposition.

A special thank you to the voters of Edmonton-McClung, some of whom are here this evening as part of the delegation on the pine shakes issue. Of course McClung is an area of the city of Edmonton which has a good deal of new urban growth occurring, very welcome urban growth, but along with that goes the challenges of the growth, and certainly the issue of pine shakes is one that within my own constituency office has been an area that has needed a good deal of attention from the MLA and from the government. I will return to the issue of the pine shakes a little later on in my address, but I just wanted to thank the people of Edmonton-McClung for their trust in me and for voting me to serve as their MLA. I consider it a great honour and am very delighted to be here in that capacity.

Our purpose here this evening is to address the throne speech which was presented yesterday by His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor. In terms of general comments with respect to the throne speech, in many ways it was a very puzzling document. It was puzzling because it was a replay of many of the things already covered in the Premier's television address two weeks before, puzzling because it is normally the Legislative Assembly where the messages and the agenda of the government are presented to the people of Alberta in front of all of their elected representatives rather than on a television address in an environment where there can be no cross-examination or questioning of the Premier when he does that presentation. It's also puzzling because many of the paragraphs in the throne speech read virtually word for word what has been said in previous throne speeches, and perhaps that is an indication of the fact that the government has lost any new, creative kinds of thinking in terms of these public policy issues which face us as legislators as we head into the 21st century and the next millennium.

It's as if in many ways government was reading its own polling results and dropping in the words perhaps which resonate to Albertans because they have polled and found that that is the case. The problem is that after a record of six years in office in this province the government's action does not always follow those glowing words which appear to sound very useful. For example, words like "support for public health care" are words that have been appearing in throne speeches for many years under this government, certainly within the last six or more than a couple of occasions, words of supporting health care publicly, yet the action which followed was the action of Bill 37, a bill that will in the opinion of many Albertans, including the Official Opposition, lead to a further disintegration of our public health care system by giving government an approval mechanism for private, for-profit hospitals. Words versus action. Inconsistency.

Another example of this theme, which I intend to develop throughout my address on the throne speech, of the inconsistency of words and action is the words of the government which actually had a great deal of resonance with the people of this province in 1993 when they went to the electorate and told that electorate that they were out of the business of being in business. That had a very deep

resonance with Albertans. It was a way that the current government could separate itself from its colleagues of the past, and it was a message that certainly, given the experiences of the previous decades, was one where the government could look at its past, at its colleagues of the past, and say: that's over; there's going to be a change. Albertans were very interested in that perspective and I think gave the government a very strong mandate in order to carry that out. The problem is that those words were not backed up by action. If the Auditor General's report says anything, for those members who have read it, it focuses very clearly on the involvement of government in the whole area of West Edmonton Mall. By the Premier's own admission there was involvement. So here is the inconsistency again where government has made the promise to Albertans, addressed the issue which really is top of mind, and then betrayed that trust by consequent action.

What I hope to do, what we will be presenting throughout our questions in the question period, in our addresses, in debate is to show that really the true component of leadership is the consistency between words and action, not an inconsistency, as we are too often seeing from government.

The other general comment I would make on the throne speech is that this appears to be the year of the summit. There have been many, many of them announced in the throne speech. I think six, by my count. You know, I was thinking a bit about the issues of summits. I am someone who loves to do mountain trekking and hiking. I've done a lot of it in fact. As the Member for West Yellowhead was talking, I've done a lot of that trekking in Jasper national park, which he knows, too, is a beautiful part of our province and a place where one can go and get the spiritual connection, and certainly mountain trekking is one way to do that.

I was thinking about this as I was thinking about the whole issue of summits. I've had the experience of climbing up a long, steep, arduous path over an eight-hour hike, working very hard, carrying a 50-pound pack. I've done it, and I've arrived at that summit exhausted but exhilarated and very much connected to the environment in which I found myself.

**8:40**

I've also had the experience, in doing that climb to that kind of a summit, of arriving at the top, sitting around a campfire, and having someone start talking -- you know, as you chat, you join other people that have arrived at that summit as well as you -- and through the course of the conversation around the campfire coming around to this notion of "Well, which route did you come up, because we came up this route and didn't see anybody else on the path" to find out that some of these people had arrived in this particular instance by helicopter. They had gone from the townsites of Jasper, gotten in a helicopter, and been plunked down in the Berg Lake area, where I was, and there they were, having been taken to that summit by a helicopter.

As I thought about this whole issue of summit, I sort of thought: you know, the government is kind of like the people that arrived there in the helicopter because the government likes to drop into summits, likes to call these summits. But really the issue of climbing to a summit is the issue of taking it one step at a time and working through the work, whether that involves managing the fiscal affairs of the province, whether that involves ensuring that our education system is addressed, that our health care needs are being met, and working through them one day at a time, one step at a time as opposed to simply being airlifted to the summit and expecting to find the answers.

In the speech we certainly have these references to summits, to forums, to reviews, and too often these kinds of words, these kinds of stalling tactics can be an excuse for action as opposed to true

leadership and action being taken in the areas that it needs to.

While the government entered its '93 mandate with a very clear sense of where it wanted to go, with the sense that the fiscal affairs of the province, of eliminating the deficit, was a very important priority, it appears in the spring of 1999, certainly judging from the throne speech, that government has lost its way, that government does not know where it is heading. Its first bill on fiscal responsibility is simply more of the same, and really good fiscal management should be a way of operating, should be a responsibility and a choice that a government would make to manage well. Why it needs an act to prevent itself from doing who knows what is beyond many of us in the province. So what I hope to do tonight is talk about some of the issues that are on the minds of Albertans, some of the issues that the throne speech does not address, and to approach it from the basis of words versus action.

Let's lead off with the issue of education. I agree with the members for West Yellowhead and Calgary-Cross that education is probably the most important thing that a government involves itself in. Certainly from the point of view of the Constitution of Canada, where it defines provincial responsibility, education is the key one given to the provinces. You know, it's too easy often to simply mouth these words about the importance of children and the importance of education. In fact, I believe and I think many believe that the most important job, the most important thing government can give to the private sector, which hopefully thrives in its boundaries, is a well-educated, well-adjusted, creative, innovative workforce. How is that workforce developed? That workforce is developed because a province cares enough about its children to take each one of those children and to the very best of its ability develop that child from where it is to where it can go. Education is the launching pad, and too often the rhetoric is not followed up by actions. But let's acknowledge collectively as an Assembly that the issue of ensuring appropriate education for our young people is surely the legacy by which all of us will be judged. The legacy of a good government is surely to address that as a first priority beyond any other.

If we move to the throne speech and what was talked about in the throne speech, it's certainly at least the second time that we have heard announcements of three of the five proposals: on literacy, on math training for teachers, on school building audits, aboriginal curriculum, and young offenders, all of which are important initiatives. However, what doesn't the throne speech talk about? There was a School Facilities Task Force in the past, and for all of us on the opposition side of the House who have been going around the province listening to parent councils, talking to teachers, talking to school boards around the province, clearly the issue of school facilities is one that is very much a concern within our province.

It's so easy when faced with a requirement to cut a budget, which this government, of course, put onto school boards -- it is always an easy out to say, "Well, we just won't do that capital project for this year; we just won't maintain that hallway or paint that classroom for those grade 3 kids or provide this special nursing station or this particular area that we've set aside for special learning needs in our school." Short-term expediency works on the short-term basis, but over a period of time, particularly over a six-year period, those facilities start to deteriorate. Those kinds of things start to affect the ability for education to be delivered in an appropriate way, in an attractive way to make students feel that they're valued, to make teachers feel that they're valued, to make school boards feel that they're valued for the work they have done in addressing those cuts that have been put on them by the province.

The problem is that we had this School Facilities Task Force, and what happened to its work? Where is the report from it? No mention of that in the Speech from the Throne.

There is very little recognition of past management actions in terms of curriculum changes, no acknowledgment of the cuts to the infrastructure, no acknowledgment of cuts to kindergarten funding, no acknowledgment of the general cuts to funding in this throne speech, yet a rather cavalier, offhanded "thanks a lot" at the end is not really what people need. It's not respectful of the work that has been done by the people in the education sector in order to shield our students, our parents, and Albertans generally from the impact of the cuts that have been put upon them. Truly the people in the education sector deserve our very heartfelt thanks as a Legislative Assembly for the work they have done and for the work they continue to do to try to serve the needs of the students of this province.

Interestingly, although it was announced two weeks previously, there's no mention in the throne speech of the fact that charter schools received an extra \$1 million in the last two weeks, a budgetary decision presumably yet not part of the budget, announced outside of the budget again, outside of the Legislative Assembly, an announcement of a million dollar increase to charter schools at the same time that the public system, which educates about 96 percent of our student population, continues to go underfunded and continues to be funded at a level below the national average. I think Albertans are worth more than even just average.

8:50

There's a rather excellent document which has been presented, although it would probably hurt some of the government to read it. I'm one of those people that likes to listen to the radio shows and read the articles that perhaps are critical. I always feel that I can learn from everyone, including those that criticize me.

One of the articles that I would recommend, in fact I'd be pleased to table, is by someone named Dean Neu. It's called *Re-investment Fables: Educational Finances in Alberta*. It's really a thesis on what has happened in Alberta with respect to education. It's one that picks up on this theme of rhetoric on education versus action. It's done by a learned scholar, and it presents some very important issues that if the government was truly concerned about public education, it would address more effectively.

Let me just quote briefly from some of the things that this said.

In this period of fiscal prosperity, the mantra of government ministers is "re-investment." This theme is particularly pervasive in the area of public education. But what does it actually mean to re-invest in public education? Is the amount being re-invested anywhere near the amount that was withdrawn from public education during the first three years of the Klein government's mandate? Furthermore, with all the government's talk about the importance of competing in the global economy, how do the current levels of funding compare with other provinces? After all, it seems naive to assume that we can provide our youth with a superior education given significantly inferior levels of funding support. While the phrase "doing more with less" has a nice ring to it, most economists will tell you that there is a positive association between funding inputs and educational outcomes.

This chapter attempts to answer these questions.

It goes on, Mr. Speaker. It's an excellent document. I would recommend it certainly to the Minister of Education and to all government members to know the kinds of concerns that are coming in forums right across the province as people become more and more concerned with the impact of the cuts in education in Alberta.

The third issue I wanted to discuss with respect to education is some of the concerns about funding and the deficiencies of funding for school boards. The government likes to talk about the importance of being fiscally responsible, yet what those words are starting to mean to Albertans is that government has taken areas that were

under the public sector, like education, health care, social services, and it has downloaded them onto agencies, including our municipalities, and transferred the cuts to municipalities and transferred the deficit over there too. Now, we know that the government likes to pass legislation to say that no one can run a deficit, including themselves. The reality is that we have deficits in many, many of our school boards right across the province, and we will be exploring some of that following-up on our audited statement reviews in question period, in the debate. Clearly, school board deficits is what reinvestment now means to people in the public sector.

Education is off balance because of an abdication of leadership and a promotion of privatization, dismissing the concerns of parents and off-loading costs onto parents, students, and school boards. Even though the government is spending more today on basic education, \$3.03 billion, than in 1992-93, when it was spending \$2.99 billion, Albertans are in fact paying more for less, as is the case in health care.

Education is off balance when classroom size has increased. When the government says that they are going to increase grants by 1 percent in the fiscal year and when school board settlements are already coming in in the 3 to 4 percent range for the next fiscal year, Albertans know what that means. Albertans know exactly what that means. It means their kids that are in big classes are going to get in bigger classes. It means that their students that have special education learning needs are going to be relegated to an even larger group.

One of the questions that keeps being raised as we work across the province and talk to these school councils and to school boards is this looming question that Albertans have on their mind, and it is: was it the government's intention all along to simply squeeze down the public sector in education, in health care, in other areas, squeeze it down and continue to squeeze it down in order to create an incentive to promote the private sector?

I guess really what separates us on this side of the House from what appears to be an agenda on the other side of the House is this whole notion that the public sector doesn't have a role. In fact it does. The most effective use of the public sector is to provide the services that everyone in the province needs. Everyone needs education; everyone needs health care. It's society's responsibility to support within our fiscal ability to do so those who are more vulnerable than the others.

Education is unbalanced when school boards are forced to generate \$119 million in fund-raising revenues from overworked parents and teachers. How many fewer bingos and raffles will students and teachers and parents have to become involved in with any additional spending in education, the 1 percent that we've heard thus far? Albertans really need to know the answer to that.

Let me turn then to advanced education, certainly an area where the government seems to be very proud of what it has done. The problem is that there was no acknowledgment of the level of cuts that have hit the postsecondary level extremely hard in the province. There's expectation of 5,000 in annual student growth in the next few years, yet there was never a public accounting of the past access fund promise to create 10,000 spaces for students. What happened to that promise and what was done? Campus Alberta, although I guess an important dream, is a very far off dream in a system that can't even agree on a common accounting or reporting system within our jurisdiction.

Again there's more picking of winners and losers by choosing technology and physics. Although a very important priority, those are surely not the only issues. The problem is that when government moves into controlling the input on education because of a market,

subsequently a government can get into trouble. Certainly you can see this in the past where government said that there were too many teachers in this province, and therefore they were going to cut back and hold back on the number of spaces for teachers to be taught in our school system, in our postsecondary system. Then, lo and behold, within a three- or four-year period there's a turnaround in the economy, and more teachers are needed.

So one of the questions that rises and looms in the throne speech which was not addressed and perhaps will be at some point is this whole question of the role of a board of a postsecondary education institution in this province. Is that board's role not to in fact look at the programs within its institution and determine what should be the priorities rather than government imposing those priorities on that institution? I think it's a question that needs to be put. Again we have more micromanaging of institutions from Edmonton.

In addition with respect to postsecondary education, all of the announcements, all of the issues that were included within the throne speech have been previously announced, again the whole notion of a certain amount of disrespect for the Legislative Assembly, where the announcement could be made with cross-examination by the people and their elected representatives from across Alberta.

9:00

I think I'm going to move on, then, to the issue of health care, the second most important priority of a government. Why? Having held the portfolio of Education and then subsequently having held the portfolio of Health, I still believe that education is the most important priority, the reason being that if we educate our young people and if they are healthy, most other things can work out well.

So let's then move into health care. Certainly there was discussion in the throne speech about health care. Obviously the promise to bring back legislation, the Bill 37 clone, is one that's looming over people in this province. There's been an incredible amount of work done by Albertans over the last two months since the government pulled again its Bill 37 to try and massage it, get the Public Affairs gurus working on it, the spin doctors, trying to make sure that they got it right this time.

MR. DICKSON: It's only a marketing problem.

MRS. MacBETH: It's only a marketing problem.

In fact, we all know that it's a credibility problem in health care. That's why the government ran into such difficulty in the first place on health care.

Again, the example of government being supportive of the public-sector system yet refusing to accept the Official Opposition's request for the embodiment of the five principles of the Canada Health Act as an overriding, overarching framework within public health care. The refusal, the action of actually refusing to integrate those five principles as a statement of purpose and preamble in the beginning is an action which speaks very loudly to Albertans, because the question again looms: is the government trying to squeeze down the public sector in health care to the point where Albertans will be forced, given the priority they place on health care, to consider private health care?

Now, we know that the polls are changing a bit in this regard, and the reason is that the public sector has been shrunk down. The only time Canadians will consider private health care is when they fear the loss of their public health care system. That's why we see that kind of a blip coming into the polls, a growing blip and, for any of us that are concerned about public health care, a very disturbing trend in health.

The federal government money is welcome. We note that it has been given to the province over a five-year period. The actual numbers of \$192 million over the first and second years and then rising marginally for the next three years is a commitment which the federal government is prepared to make. Unfortunately this government, given the Premier's answers in the question period today, appears reluctant, in fact unwilling, to make the same kind of commitment to the regional health authorities -- appointed regional health authorities, by the way -- that the federal government has given to Alberta. How regional health authorities can plan without a long-term budgeting plan in place is unknown to anybody who thinks for even five seconds about planning in health care.

The other issue that was not mentioned at all in the document on health care. It was again the rehashing of many of the old, so-called pressure points that government tends to want to react to. The problem with the health care system is that to react to it is to not lead it, and the government has chosen to react and not lead. Issues like progressive primary care, instituting primary care as a model by which our health care system can develop, is a reform that is needed in our health care system. There are some models being developed in North America. There are some being developed in Denmark, in Germany. Those are models which it would be useful to see at least some work done on in Alberta.

As well, it's interesting that the province doesn't appear to be trying to learn from some of the other provinces. Our neighbour province to the east of us, Saskatchewan, certainly approached health reform and deficit elimination from a little different point of view than did Alberta. Their deficit was in fact eliminated at the same time if not a little earlier than the Alberta government's deficit. The province moved in with a plan.

Actually there's an interesting historic note here on Saskatchewan. The Progressive Conservative government of Saskatchewan was the one that called a royal commission in the early 1990s very similar to The Rainbow Report in Alberta. They called it, and they came out with a plan in Saskatchewan which in fact was very close to the recommendations -- an immense parallel between the recommendations in Saskatchewan and their royal commission and those in Alberta. The Progressive Conservative government took that report and saw that what in fact it recommended was some issues that were going to be tough to do from a political point of view but were very important from the restructuring of health point of view in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan was the only province at the time that had more hospitals than Alberta did. Certainly Alberta had a lot, but Saskatchewan had even more.

The Progressive Conservative government refused to take action on its Rainbow Report. It was defeated in the next election. Then the New Democrat government was elected in Saskatchewan, and it in fact instituted the very recommendations that the Progressive Conservative government had ignored and in fact was re-elected subsequently. So if we look at what has been done in Saskatchewan, it's certainly not perfect, but they have approached the issue of health reform and trying to move to some kind of a model of primary care from which this government could learn a good deal.

In the area of health care let's talk as well about the issue of fiscal responsibility. Perhaps at some point in this Legislative Assembly session the government will answer the question that we've put to them for about the last four and a half months. That question is: how come they're spending more on health care today, in fact \$300 million more, than they were in 1992, when their cuts began? Why is that? You know, why would Albertans want to spend more for less service? In fact, there's less service; they're spending more for less. Four thousand -- 4,000 -- fewer hospital beds and 8,000 fewer nurses, fewer employed nurses with part-time work but nurses in permanent positions.

So 4,000 fewer hospital beds, 8,000 fewer nurses, and fewer hospital facilities. Go figure, Mr. Speaker. They're spending more for less service, and they don't want to answer it, because they don't know the answer. They don't know the answer. But you know what? Albertans deserve an answer to that question, particularly when they are poised to yet again react to their so-called pressure points which, if they start to examine that \$300 million, they will find is exactly where the money went.

9:10

If there is to be an accountability in the health care system, Albertans need to know what this government intends to achieve by the new dollars being put into health care. The health care sector certainly doesn't need money dropped in in 1999-2000 only to have it yanked out in the subsequent year. That will disturb our support services, it will disturb our employment patterns, and it will not serve the long-term need to in fact reform and restructure the health care system, an agenda that has been lost and forgotten in the last six years while the government preoccupied itself and patted itself on the back for its cuts.

In the area of health care a couple of other points as well. While the issue of children has been addressed in the throne speech in a rather superficial way, it certainly, however, did mention the issue of children's mental health, and people of course are pleased that the government is looking at the issue of children's mental health. It doesn't mean everything is good in that area by any means. However, just in the area of health care I think it's important to mention the whole area of mental health when it comes to adults. Adults with mental health care needs are some of the people who account for the homeless in our province, some of the people who are in our remand centres, and some of the people who are in our hospitals. However, many of our mentally ill adults have been discharged from hospital and do not have a place to go, and it is that population which needs to be reflected upon by this Assembly. We look forward to doing it in the coming months.

Another question is: why does the government persist in claiming that the purpose of its new legislation will be "to protect information related to Albertans' personal health"? These are the words, Mr. Speaker, yet we know full well that the purpose of the health information act is to facilitate a broader sharing of personal health information, the exact antithesis of its throne speech promise.

Another issue which I want to raise. And you were right, Mr. Speaker: if we didn't get a chance to raise it in the Standing Order 30 today, we were going to raise it this evening. That is the whole issue of acute care beds in Calgary and Edmonton. The target for acute care beds that was set by the government when they began cutting health care funding was 2.4 beds per 1,000 population. Currently Edmonton is at 1.59 per 1,000 population, and Calgary is at 1.65 per 1,000. This represents a difference of approximately 650 beds for Edmonton and 665 for Calgary. In 1992-93 there were 1,230 more beds in Edmonton and 629 more in Calgary, yet our population has grown. One of the government's performance measures in Health that it touts in its own annual report was the number of acute care beds per 1,000 population in the province. It's interesting to note that the department no longer uses this as a measure of performance in its own annual report.

So let's look at Calgary. Probably one of the biggest surprises since I've come back into public office was to recall that in 1997, when the government was trying to elect more MLAs in the Edmonton area, the promise -- I guess it was more of a threat -- to the people of Edmonton was to say: elect a government MLA and get a voice at the table, the caucus table, the cabinet table. And

when you think about it for a moment, you realize that that's a threat. That's a threat because what that's really saying, Mr. Speaker, is that if you don't elect a government MLA, you will be punished. Well, it's interesting to note how the Edmonton electorate responded to that. The biggest surprise that's hit me since I've come into public office is to now be spending a good deal of my time outside of Edmonton and, in particular, in Calgary over the last little while and to find out that despite the fact that they have 20 out of 21 MLAs on the government benches, Calgarians feel they've lost their voice with government.

Certainly the government enjoys the revenue that comes out of Calgary, enjoys the economic growth that the city of Calgary is generating for our province, yet the government in its obsession to pay down the debt has forgotten that the cost coming of growth is something that they must address. So it's a message that just doesn't apply to Calgary; it's a message right across the province. The government has taken money out of the pockets of Albertans in the form of economic growth, which is usually passed back, redistributed back in terms of services on education, on health, on social infrastructure, and on municipal support. But they forgot to do it. They said: "Oh, we've got all this money. We're just going to throw it all into the debt, and we're going to squeeze this public sector and squeeze it and squeeze it rather than pass back a proportionate and appropriate share to the taxpayers."

There is a way to pay down the debt in this province at a reasonable rate. Obviously the government has picked up some of our suggestions in its new Fiscal Responsibility Act, but the issue is to ensure that the people of this province are getting value from the government. Right now they don't feel they are.

So let's look at the issue of Calgary and the acute care beds. The total number of individuals who had to wait for admission to an acute care bed in Calgary between December 21, 1998, and January 4 was 102. Admissions in Calgary were up by 143 over the same period, and this is a direct result of the booming population in Calgary. It does not take rocket science to understand that when you have growth in your population, you're going to have it in your health care system too. Ambulances had to be diverted to other hospitals, increasing the amount of time to receive necessary medical attention for emergency patients. These diversions put individuals' lives at unnecessary risk. The 8th and 8th clinic was expected to see approximately 17,000 individuals last year. It saw nearly 34,000, twice the amount.

Alberta Children's hospital has asked government to contribute \$70 million to required renovations in order to increase the number of acute care beds. They are funding mental health beds out of their foundation rather than a budget provided by Alberta Health. They're simply coping with the reality of cuts and the impact of cuts, which this government refuses to acknowledge.

The Calgary regional health authority is looking at an operating deficit of approximately \$20 million this year and considering further reductions to services in Calgary hospitals. There's a demonstrated need for another hospital in Calgary in the southeast, but the facility has yet to be approved and will take years to plan and build.

Thirty percent of acute care beds in Calgary are taken up by individuals requiring long-term care. The government committee on long-term care submitted its report to the Minister of Health in August, but he's not released it. Actually, in the throne speech we were really glad to see that the long-term care committee will finally report in 1999. It's interesting that it started its exercise in 1996. For people waiting in those acute care beds with long-term care needs, three years is kind of a long time.

Seniors have been sent home by themselves in taxis in the middle of the night -- it's clearly documented -- because there was no acute care bed to accommodate them. Seventeen percent of Calgary's acute care beds are occupied by out-of-region patients. This is a very important point, because when the acute care hospitals, the tertiary centres in the metrocentres which accommodate the higher level surgeries, the intensive care work, get plugged, that means that someone living in Strathmore or Drumheller or Pincher Creek or Brooks that needs that level of care can't get into that tertiary care in the city of Calgary.

9:20

So this isn't an urban/rural issue, as the government likes to paint it. This isn't an issue of Calgary versus Edmonton, as the government likes to paint it. This is an issue of need of health care, of access to health care, and it's one that the province is not serving today.

So then let's look at Edmonton, because the same thing exists in Edmonton. The number of individuals waiting for acute care beds in Edmonton for January and February was as low as 16 and as high as 55. The Capital health authority had to cancel an average of 182 surgeries per month over the past four months. The majority of these cancellations were because there was no bed available for the patient to recover in.

Now, you know, it's interesting that the joint surgery waiting list in Edmonton is for 942 individuals. The problem isn't lack of specialists to perform the operations but rather that the surgeries are considered elective, and therefore they're often canceled in order for an emergency surgical patient to take over an acute care bed to recover in. Some individuals have waited well over a year in intense pain because of their, quote, elective surgery. I think that sometimes legislators forget that elective doesn't mean that people don't need it. It is a matter of people needing a surgery but it is not an emergency in the strictest sense of the definition within the hospital structure. These are people waiting for important surgeries: cancer surgeries, biopsies, hip replacement, and cardiac, but not just that. Elective surgeries are issues that need to be addressed, and the waiting list is very long.

Talk to some of the people who have been admitted, who have done the preparatory work, who are on the gurney waiting to go into the operating room and have been pulled from the list and told: sorry, you're not on today; we'll call you. I had an example within my own constituency of an individual to whom that happened on three occasions. Now, you know, it's not just that day. It's reorganizing her life so that her children could get to school on time because she wasn't going to be there. It's reorganizing the care for an older person who might have to go in and do that preparatory work and not be there. It's not just a number. These are human beings that are trying to get care, and they have every right to need it and demand it.

I could go on. The number of ambulance diversions in Edmonton remains high despite a new protocol used to indicate that an emergency room cannot accept more patients. Some individuals have waited for over a week on a gurney in a hospital hallway for an acute care bed. Thirty percent of acute care patient days provided in Edmonton are for individuals from other regions, and Edmonton has over 31,000 patients admitted to hospital through emergency each fiscal year.

Let's look at why emergencies are being increased. One of the main reasons is that physicians unable to get a bed are telling their patients, naturally, to go to the hospital emergency department, that maybe they'll get a bed that way. They're simply trying to cope.

They have a professional responsibility to care for their patient, and if that's what they have to do to get that patient in, then they'll do it. People out in our rural communities that Edmonton serves -- the north, the Northwest Territories, that whole arch all around Edmonton, people from the northern border right down to Red Deer -- are looking for adequate care in Edmonton, for a higher level of care than is provided within their own communities. Again, when Edmonton gets plugged up, Redwater, Barrhead, Fort McMurray get plugged up. They cannot cope. They can't get their patients in.

You know, the issue of health care is one which pervades our whole province. The need to manage it well is something that the people on the opposition side believe is possible, is necessary. Government has left our health care system over the last six years in disarray through the cuts and through mismanagement.

I just want to look at some of the results of government choices in health care over the past six years. Albertans' overall rating of the health care system has declined to 56 percent in 1998. The government's own target is 75 percent. The percentage of Albertans who failed to receive needed care increased to 8 percent in 1997-98. The government's own target is 3 percent. Because this government has no answers for sustaining the quality of the public health care system other than its very destructive pattern of taking money out and then throwing money back in, they clearly are trying to promote Bill 37 as their savior in order to cut back on health care costs in the public sector and support them in the private sector.

Between '92 and '98 private health care expenditures per person in Alberta increased from \$605 a person to \$762, an increase of 26 percent. That is the third highest rate of growth amongst the provinces. This is a government that has devoted significant resources and time to find ways to get around the principles of the Canada Health Act. Albertans understand that, and Albertans are disturbed.

How much longer do I have?

MR. DICKSON: You've got another 40 minutes.

MRS. MacBETH: Okay. I didn't think I could . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: But then the issues are important.

MRS. MacBETH: Yeah. When the issues are important, the words come. Absolutely.

Let's move on to the issue of vulnerable Albertans, a pretty important group of people. We know that government likes to talk about the business community, which they like to support, and certainly the business community needs to be listened to. However, so do vulnerable people need to be listened to. The problem is that the business sector has a voice. The business sector is a strong part of our economic growth in this province. It is used to setting its sights on a goal and going for that goal, as it should, as it absolutely should, Mr. Speaker.

The problem is that vulnerable people don't have that kind of a voice. That's why they need someone to be that voice for them, and certainly being that voice is something that the Liberal opposition has been and will continue to be. We will always advocate for those who are vulnerable within a sound fiscal framework, and we will take action on those when the voters of this province decide it's time for a change.

So let's look at what the throne speech didn't say about vulnerable Albertans. First of all, our seniors. Other than, again, a summit on seniors -- the year of the summit -- there was no relief for those vulnerable Albertans who are senior, who are living on fixed

incomes, who have seen the costs of rent, of health care premiums, of programs that used to be in the government's rhetoric for the people that contributed the most to the building of our province. There was no relief for those people in that throne speech.

An issue obviously of concern is the long-term care, and we do thank the government for finally saying that they are going to respond on the long-term care committee. The problem is that seniors worry about access to health care. It's why they got so concerned about Bill 37. They know that if they're on a fixed income, they can't afford to pay for the insurance that would come if they had to be going into private-sector facilities. They know too, unfortunately, that no insurance company would insure people who had vulnerabilities and long-term chronic disabilities. Seniors know that, and seniors feel vulnerable. We believe that there are actions that could be taken, need to be taken. We will be proposing some of those in the form of legislation to this Assembly and look forward to the debate and to listening to the government defend their point of view against ours, which is to support seniors.

9:30

The next group of vulnerable Albertans I want to touch upon is people on AISH. Mr. Speaker, I attended the opening and the Speech from the Throne yesterday and was glad to be inside this warm building and glad to go out into the rotunda following the Speech from the Throne by His Honour, glad to meet lots of Albertans and work around the fountain and meet many, many people, some of whom were guests of the government but who wanted to just have a chat. It was a great day. I talked to the media. I went back to my office and did several media interviews subsequent to when I got back to my office.

Then I was going home because I wanted to get to the pine shakes meeting last night. As I was driving out of the building, I noticed the people at the front steps of the Legislature, and I remembered that the AISH people were coming to the Legislature. It had slipped my mind until I saw them outside in front of the Legislature. So I stopped my car and went over and talked to some of them. Here they were freezing, Mr. Speaker. It was cold out there yesterday. There was a very harsh north wind blowing, and those people were cold. They were outside. There was increased security on the Legislature steps. They were told they had to stay eight feet away from the steps of this building, the building for the people of Alberta. They were told that they could not be in the pedway because there was a fire hazard if they went there with their demonstration. Here they were, Alberta's most vulnerable, shut out of the Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, it was such a symbolic picture to me of when a government loses touch with the very people they need to be acting for. They asked me if there had been any mention of AISH in the throne speech, and I told them the truth, that it wasn't mentioned. Here were people that had come to support what they believe the minister is trying to do. What we couldn't figure out is why no government MLAs went out to talk to them, why the minister wouldn't go out and talk to them. Apparently the minister's executive assistant went out to speak to them but didn't invite them in.

As a matter of fact, one of them gave me -- well, it's actually a golden broom, and it has a whole bunch of labels on it that the woman gave me and said: we wondered if you would present this to the Provincial Treasurer; we tried to give it to the security guard, but he said that we couldn't give it to him, and he would not take it to the Provincial Treasurer. So knowing that we're not allowed to bring props into the Assembly, I have it in the back of my car. Tomorrow I will bring it into the building, and I'll make sure that it

gets couriered over to the Provincial Treasurer to keep my promise.

So the AISH people have been put through a lot by this government. Certainly one of the more progressive programs that was instituted in the Lougheed years was the AISH program, the assisted income for the severely handicapped. People on the AISH program have a real sense of pride of being on AISH. It's something that is a recognition of them, and to find out through a leaked memo that their program was being changed without their knowledge, behind their backs, is rather heartless and rather heavy-handed on the part of government.

Next let's look at the issue of the vulnerable in terms of poverty. The word wasn't in the throne speech either. The number of Albertans in poverty in 1996 was 436,000, or 15.8 percent, the fifth highest among Canadian provinces. That's the number of Albertans living in poverty in Alberta, Mr. Speaker.

Let's look at the issue of child poverty. It's pretty hard to think of a child living in poverty without thinking of that child's family living in poverty, but let's look at the child poverty statistics. The number of children living in poverty in Alberta in 1996 was 148,000, or 20.3 percent, sixth highest amongst the Canadian provinces. There was no mention of that in the throne speech, Mr. Speaker. While it's very difficult and probably an impossibility to eradicate poverty altogether, at least some acknowledgment by government of the reality that 1 in 5 children in this province live with it would have been a strong message to people who take a different point of view than some do in the government, even those that yell when I'm giving the statistics.

In the case of youth unemployment the gap between the level of youth unemployment and the level of general unemployment in Alberta has increased from 4.6 to 5.4 percent in '97 versus '92. These are issues that we need to be aware of, Mr. Speaker. It would be nice to have some discussion in our Legislature about the reality of some of these people's lives. However, let's just leave it at that, that vulnerable Albertans were not mentioned in the throne speech.

The other one that was very interesting as I went through the throne speech was that volunteers were not mentioned in the throne speech. I listened to the Member for Calgary-Cross talk about the importance of volunteers. We hear the words but, you know, not even a mention. How about the nonprofit and the church groups that have been working very, very hard to support the social safety net in this province because government has abdicated it? Not one mention of those people, of the families that work in those areas.

Finally, let's look at children -- yes, children -- a little bit further than I did earlier. In terms of the issues of children within our province, there were no new initiatives for children in the throne speech other than a summit, another summit. While the importance of mental health for children was there, in fact the waiting lists for children with mental health concerns continue to grow, and there is no planning in place to slow that growth.

Finally, in the area of the child and family social services authorities there are 18 of them beginning operation on April 1 of this year. Yet the Calgary Rockyview authority is already running a deficit after less than one year of operation, and others are already expressing that their business plans and budgets will not allow for efficient operations. There's very real concern that while there may have been a plan of some kind for family and child services in the regional authorities being created, there will not be the resources to go along with the job that needs to be done. Many people who gave countless hours across this province to address the issue of regional authorities are really wondering whether their services are being used as opposed to their services being valued by government.

Let's move into the area of municipal infrastructure and municipal

downloading, clearly a very important issue within our province, certainly as we look at the whole issue of downloading in Alberta. Our municipalities over the last six years have seen a reduction in their support from the province of over \$390 million, almost half as much support for municipalities as was the case six years ago when the province started in. Really the issue in the municipalities is that municipalities have been downloaded with responsibility but have not been given the corresponding resources to provide for the services that they need to give their citizens. A clear example of that is in Calgary, where the mayor of Calgary is saying to the province, "We cannot continue in this way," and the mayor of Calgary is calling for some form of revenue sharing to be addressed by the province. Calgary is not alone.

9:40

Other municipalities, certainly as represented by their Urban Municipalities Association, have been wanting to address the need for revenue sharing in our province for some time, and the time has come. If we look at, for example, the report by KPMG, it shows that the provincial revenues grew by one third between the years of 1994 and '98, far outstripping the sharply cut provincial grants to cities. Remember that in the same period municipal grants were cut by \$390 million. The KPMG report that was commissioned by the cities of Edmonton and Calgary noted that Edmonton and Calgary contribute more than their share to the provincial economy. Together they make up half the provincial population while contributing more than 60 percent of Alberta's overall personal income taxes, yet they don't get it returned to them.

The same story goes for municipalities far outside the large metro centres. Areas in our province, for example, that have experienced tremendous growth over the last five or six years, growth which is an aid to the province's coffers, are not allowed to have the funds returned to them so that they can invest that growth in the important infrastructure, which really is the infrastructure that we all need each day as we drive from our home to our place of work on the roads, with the sewers, with the police forces within our own municipalities. Again, it's the whole issue of shortsighted fiscal quick fixes, and it's the cities and municipalities that have been shortchanged by this province, that have not been allowed to participate in the growth that the province enjoys.

It was interesting that the throne speech did not talk about a commitment to help municipalities, particularly given the issues that they are all facing in terms of the downloading that's gone on in this province.

The other area that I would like to talk about is the area that the government really prides itself on, I guess, and that's the whole area of fiscal responsibility. In so many ways, Mr. Speaker, this too is about words. We will continue to raise questions with respect to the Auditor General's report on the West Edmonton Mall. The government seems very determined to not accept any responsibility for the fact that taxpayers are on the hook in this province for \$414 million. That's a liability. That's the one that's there at the moment. By the Auditor General's own report he says that it's not just a liability. In fact, there are operating losses on the loan to date of his report of \$152 million and growing. The amazing thing is that the government seems to be almost falling over itself in order to say, "Everything's okay; everything's okay; nothing's wrong," when in fact Alberta taxpayers certainly don't feel exonerated. Alberta taxpayers are left holding that debt, and Alberta taxpayers know they're going to be carrying it for a long time, yet the government only seems to be concerned about the answers that come back that affect it in its own self-interest. That's where government's concern lies, yet

government's responsibility is to serve the taxpayers of the province. So fiscal responsibility is not just words, Mr. Speaker; it is action.

As the reality of the fact that the government broke its promise of being out of the business of being in business, that government put the taxpayers on the hook, and the fact that the government denies any responsibility for it, that message was slowly sinking in, and Albertans are angry too, kind of like the Provincial Treasurer said he was angry. The question is: what do you do about it? What did he do about it? Nobody seems to know. I guess he just got mad.

On the area of fiscal responsibility, Alberta liberals have always acknowledged that getting our fiscal house in order and balancing the budget and achieving sustainable and structural surpluses are important to Albertans' future, but the issue has always been to develop a plan that achieves a balanced budget and a sustainable surplus within a framework of preserving our essential human infrastructure and delivering core programs and services that meet the needs. In other words, it isn't just about a bottom line. The bottom line and the intent of ensuring that the bottom line is in surplus is a way of governing. It's an important part of the way that government operates, but is it the purpose of governing? I don't think so. I think the purpose of governing is in fact to provide the services that Albertans need within a sustainable fiscal framework.

Let's also be clear about how the turnaround in our finances has been accomplished in Alberta. Between 1992-93 and 1997-98 the province of Alberta experienced a \$6.054 billion fiscal improvement, going from a \$3.415 billion deficit to a \$2.6 billion surplus. Revenue flowed. Thank goodness, Mr. Speaker, revenue flowed. The problem is that Albertans wonder why, when this government had so much of a revenue increase, the province had to be so stingy with its public sector and why, despite the government's rhetoric, the only way taxes have gone in Alberta under Ralph Klein is up.

Let's look at them: \$276 million from over 400 new or increased user fees and premiums, \$359 million in revenue in VLT taxes, \$260 million from a tax bracket creep on personal income taxes. That's \$895 million in new taxes, or \$309 for every Albertan over the past six years. There's the taxes, folks. That's where they've come from at the same time the government increased its revenue because of the growth in the Alberta economy.

You know, fiscal responsibility is not just about words. Fiscal responsibility is about actions, and there's an inconsistency between words and actions with this government in terms of its own work.

The other issue that I think needs to be pointed out over the last while -- of course it wasn't addressed in the throne speech -- is the fact that the government missed 122 of its own performance benchmarks in core programs over the past two years.

MR. DICKSON: How many?

9:50

MRS. MacBETH: One hundred and twenty-two of its own benchmarks.

More Alberta children and families live below the poverty line than when the government was formed in '93. The gap on general unemployment I've already talked about. Albertans' overall rating of the health care system of good or excellent has declined to 56 percent. Failure to receive needed health care has increased to 8 percent. The percentage of parents and the public who believe that high school graduates are prepared to enter postsecondary education has declined to 49 percent and 52 percent respectively, and the number of person-days lost to work stoppages per 10,000 person-days has increased to 15.6. The monthly child welfare caseload has increased by 48 percent over the past four years. All the while that

the government boasts of the fact that it doesn't have a deficit. Well, what's happened is it's passed it on to others, and there is a way to manage the province's finances, to pay down the debt at a reasonable pace, and to meet the needs of Albertans, and we're looking forward to the opportunity to show Albertans how to do it.

I would like to go to just a few closing remarks. First of all on the issue of the environment, clearly an important and a disturbing issue for Albertans these days. In the throne speech it talked about strengthening further "the protection of our natural heritage by consolidating legislation." Albertans know what that means. It means that the natural heritage act will move currently protected areas out of their legislative protected framework into an area by regulation or by the whim of the current government. Any degree of access of economic development is possible. This could have very serious implications for sustainable protection in the province.

It was interesting to hear the Premier confirm, when he answered the question today, his commitment when he was minister of the environment that in fact he would allow a special independent panel of experts to adjudicate the special areas placement in this province and the land that needed to be used for special areas. That's an important commitment, Mr. Speaker. It certainly doesn't seem to be consistent with what the minister of the environment has been saying, and despite the Premier's contention that not everything goes to cabinet, I certainly hope he doesn't give free reign to his minister of the environment, because in fact special areas is something that Albertans feel very, very strongly about.

There is a reason why Albertans love this province. They love the land, they love the clean water, they love those mountains to go trekking in or even just to look at, and they love the notion of leaving protected special areas in this province there for future generations, there for a unique wildlife that would not go anywhere but that special area. And you know what? They think of special areas and the preservation of that land as something that doesn't need economic development. It just doesn't need it. It has a value in its pristine state, and that value can't be measured in dollars, but it certainly can be destroyed with unthoughtful policies, policies that don't care about the future of the province. So we were very pleased to hear the Premier confirm that in fact special areas would be adjudicated by an independent team of experts, and we'll look forward to seeing what action follows those words in the question period today.

The pine shakes people are still here. Thank you for your patience. It's great they're here. The issue of pine shakes is a very interesting one, Mr. Speaker, and it's really an issue of the role of government and government's responsibility to the people. You know, sitting in that room last night with 2,000 Albertans, it was amazing to hear the kinds of questions that are most frequently asked of the association and to talk to some of those Albertans after that meeting and find that they didn't feel they were getting an audience with the province. The basic, most fundamental question on the pine shakes is: if the government has a Building Code and certain criteria need to be met before those products are allowed on to the Building Code, then why are consumers not protected accordingly when they build according to that Building Code and later find out that inappropriate means were used to test the products that were added to that Building Code? Doesn't government have some kind of responsibility to answer to that question? That's what 2,000 people wanted to know last night, and they didn't get an answer.

The Minister of Labour is very, very quick to jump to his feet and say: it wasn't me that didn't answer those phone calls; it wasn't me that didn't respond to those faxes. He clearly states that he will meet

with them, but he won't talk about the issues that are on their minds. There you go, Mr. Speaker. I guess that's what not voting for a government and not having a voice around the table means.

Untreated pine shakes were listed under the approved products of the Building Code in 1990 and prior to the implementation of the new safety code. Pine shakes are only one example of the failure of the safety codes. Much more serious for public health and safety is the state of Alberta's inspection system for things like plumbing and electricity and asbestos removal. This responsibility has been downloaded to municipalities, to agencies, and to individual businesses and to individual homeowners and families across this province who are using a building product approved for the Building Code in Alberta. All they want is an opportunity to look at the issue, to discuss it with the minister. Sure they're going to court. Sure they're trying to get financial compensation. Who wouldn't when the government refuses to talk to them?

Mr. Speaker, I can't believe it, but my time is running out. Let me simply close by saying that this whole issue of leadership in Alberta, the issue of ensuring that words and actions are consistent is the means by which a government speaks to its citizens, and judging whether our words and our actions are consistent matters whether we're parents or legislators. Doing the things that we say we will do is a very important part of the way we choose to operate in this opposition, and we will continue to do so.

With respect to the throne speech, Mr. Speaker, the government has apparently lost its sense of where it wants to go. It created a shopping list. It created a lot of nice words, but I think Albertans are looking for more than that. That's really what a democracy is all about. That's why we have an opposition, an opposition that can question government when it makes decisions, an opposition that can call the government to account for the decisions that it makes but at the same time an opposition that is working to earn the trust of Albertans. That's what we're doing. That's why we're out listening to Albertans, finding out what's on their minds instead of going out and lecturing to them. That's the way we will continue to operate. We would be happy to work together with the government on some of the issues facing Albertans, but if the government chooses to go down its own path and respond the way it does without consulting or without bringing to this Legislature a true forum for debate, I guess the government will deal with the consequences of that.

We in the opposition believe that the Legislature is a wonderful opportunity for us as legislated members of the House representing the people that elected us. We feel there is a very important roll for opposition. We look forward to doing it. I'm delighted to be back in the Legislature, and I thank you very much for your time and your patience.

10:00

DR. PANNU: Mr. Speaker, I would very much like to have the privilege to speak in reply to the throne speech, but because of this late hour I would like to adjourn the debate at this point.

THE SPEAKER: Having heard the motion as put forward by the hon. acting leader of the NDP opposition, all members agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

[At 10:02 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday afternoon at 1:30 p.m.]