

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, February 22, 2000**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 00/02/22

[The Speaker in the chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

head: **Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**

Ms Haley moved:

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

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, 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.

[Adjourned debate February 22: Mrs. MacBeth]

MRS. MacBETH: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had just completed talking about the issue of cataract costs in Calgary with the private-sector model that is employed there and the fact that the wait lists there are three to four times that in the public sector and the costs are less. Those are important issues which are identified by the Consumers' Association of Canada, Alberta branch, and I think they are very good issues for this government to address as it talks about some of the reports that are available. Here, of course, is a homegrown example which needs to be examined, studied, and I was frankly surprised that the minister of health stood in his place today and didn't even acknowledge the study.

Moving from that, Mr. Speaker, onto another study which has come out using the Alberta example, and that is the one from the University of Alberta, Private Profit or Public Good: The Economics and Politics of the Privatization of Health Care in Alberta, written by Kevin Taft and Gillian Steward, an excellent review, an excellent case study of Alberta, and frankly a pretty excellent review of some of the literature. In fact, I know the government put out its list of eight studies today which have been questioned, all of them, in terms of their accuracy, in terms of their relevance. Certainly data from the '70s and '80s, while it may be helpful from a historical perspective, certainly doesn't help us as we look to 2000 and beyond and how we might build our health care system. I would simply recommend that the minister look at the bibliography if nothing else in the Private Profit or Public Good document and see the level and study of documents that are available on this issue of privatization.

Let me highlight just a couple. In a 1999 review *The New England Journal of Medicine* said: "For decades . . . no peer-reviewed study has found that for-profit hospitals are less expensive than" not-for-profit hospitals. Secondly, in 1997 from *Health Affairs* magazine, a very accepted journal of health economics, in North America at least, said: "Neither the historical data nor the limited current data suggest that for-profit hospitals can use the assets more efficiently than nonprofit hospitals." Thirdly, a 1986 study from the Institute of Medicine, American National Academy of Sciences, said:

Studies of hospitals provide no evidence to support the common belief that investor-owned organizations are less costly or more efficient than are not-for-profit organizations. With one exception all available studies that have controlled for many confounding factors . . . show the opposite to be true.

Very important information and studies, Mr. Speaker, which clearly point us in the direction of enhancing and sustaining our public health care system, not falling off the wagon and going onto the private health care system.

Mr. Speaker, just to close off this whole discussion on health care, I think it would be important to talk about the issues facing health care today. It was shocking to many of us who care a lot about mental health within our province to find that the words weren't even mentioned in this throne speech, a very, very big omission. We've seen in this province in the last week an alliance come together of mental health professionals, mental health caseworkers, community advocacy groups, in fact the largest coalition ever formed on the mental health front in Alberta, called Alliance Alberta, the Alliance for Mental Illness and Mental Health. This organization presented an excellent review and some major questions in terms of this government's directions when it comes to mental health.

I think it is very fitting to quote a physician, a psychiatrist, an acting president of the Medical Staff Association and Medical Advisory Committee of Alberta Hospital Edmonton, when he writes – and this was a letter to the editor, and one that I think is important to read into the record. Mr. Speaker, he says:

On behalf of 44 physicians at the Alberta Hospital Edmonton I must applaud the . . . coverage of the poorly thought-out use of taxpayers' money in the mental-health area.

He says:

I have worked with my patients in mental hospital "back wards" for most of my career and it is time that some money was spent in providing decent, humane, safe living conditions for severely ill patients. The expenditure of \$95 million in one location – the health minister's riding – is, however, obscene.

I go on.

This is another example of the poor management and judgment that has plagued what passes for mental-health reform in this province. Last year this board managed to generate a deficit of \$3.8 million as well.

It's about time the mental health system healed itself. This, the third board in five years, appears to be going the sorry way of its predecessors – failing to meet the real needs of the mentally ill in Alberta.

Agencies and health care staff on the front lines are becoming tired of covering for their mistakes, and families and patients are becoming tired of the constant fight for service.

The press coverage indicates Alberta Hospital Edmonton has also been allocated some money: \$55 million? If so, it's news to me.

Of course I only work here and am only a doctor. Our medical staff has recently formally indicated their lack of confidence in the board and Alberta Hospital administration because of issues such as this, so I am not surprised.

Mr. Speaker, an indictment, an indictment of mental health issues, a model that is going to return to an institutional model as opposed to building the community model in mental health which is so feverishly needed in this province.

If you look at the mental health issue, you can find a model for improving health care in this province, and that is to reinforce the community side with some institutional care absolutely but to make sure that we have the supports built into the community side, which is exactly the same issue which needs to be addressed on the acute care side for physical health as well. Let's get on with the job.

Mr. Speaker, let me go on to the issue of education. I mentioned at the outset that the people of the Edmonton-McClung constituency were very concerned, and usually top of mind was the issue of education. My constituency represents a lot of people who have kids in schools. In fact, we have a lot of schools in our constituency, as

I had mentioned, and if there's one issue that they talk about even more than health care, it's the issue of education.

Many of the ideas that were identified in the throne speech on basic education such as literacy, class size, reducing reliance on fund-raising by parents and students came in fact from this Official Opposition, and we are pleased that the government has at least acknowledged in their most recent throne speech the constructive recommendations that we have put forward. However, we are somewhat skeptical about whether the government's words will actually translate into good deeds in the area of basic education. The legacy of this government's actions in education over the past seven years is in fact an abdication of leadership, a promotion of privatization – again that theme – dismissing the concerns of parents and teachers and off-loading of costs onto parents through fund-raising.

So let's look at some of the results of this government's choices in education over the past few years. These are the targets, the goals that the government has identified. The percentage of parents who believe that their children have the knowledge and skills to get a job is 46 percent, Mr. Speaker. Less than half of our parents are confident that their children can get a job. If that's not disturbing, perhaps the government's target of 55 percent is even more disturbing. You know, if the goal of education is to build good citizens, which I think it is, part of that is to have those young people prepared to join the workforce, to advance their own education, to go beyond their capabilities, and to support them in that. The target is unacceptable, and government's missing the target is even more unacceptable.

Secondly, the number of parents who believe that their children are prepared to enter postsecondary education and training is 52 percent, just over half. The government's target is 75 percent. Mr. Speaker, that's a 23 percent difference between the target and the actual, an indictment of this government's performance.

8:10

Next, the rate of high school completion within six years of entering grade 9 is 70 percent. The government is setting a target of 75 percent, but in the seven years of this government's performance that measure has been in place, and the target of 75 percent has never, ever been reached. This government talks about Alberta being the leader in education in Canada, and that's just not good enough. We in the Official Opposition believe that a first priority of any provincial government has to be the improvement of public education, and their record is not acceptable.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans know that our class sizes are amongst the highest in the country, that classrooms with 30 children are not uncommon even in the early grades of K to 3, where the education level that is deemed to be the most appropriate is 17 kids per class. Our Official Opposition class survey found that of the total of 5,012 teachers in 245 communities who responded to our survey, only 19 percent of the kindergarten classes met or bettered the recommended target of 17 or fewer students. That's not good enough for our kids. This is simply not manageable, and with the integration of students with special education needs and the vast variances between children in terms of their background and life experiences, it just isn't good enough.

Mr. Speaker, obviously fund-raising and user-fee levels are too high. That's something the government has identified. However, we would like to see a major review done of the basic funding and the per pupil grants in this province, not just a review of fund-raising. Parents are fully aware of the kind of fund-raising that's going on, but what they want to see is the cause of that fund-raising, and a review of the basic grant per student is what needs to follow. This government missed it in its throne speech.

Mr. Speaker, we need a new vision. We need a new vision for basic education in a new century, and that's why we in the Official Opposition will be proposing the establishment of an Alberta citizens' commission on the future of education in our province. It hasn't been done since the late '60s, when the Social Credit actually put together a plan called the Worth report to look at the furtherance of education. We think it's a very important idea. We'll be bringing forward a motion, and we'll look forward to support from the government benches in terms of creating that commission.

This isn't a summit. This isn't the usual take a weekend off and go lock away with cabinet ministers and do a poll and do a focus group and do all those kinds of things. This is about involving professionals in education, educators, parents, superintendents, and Albertans in looking at the future of education and in looking at the overlie of how we will look at education into the future. We think it's a very excellent suggestion and one which we will look forward to hearing the government's response to.

I would be remiss if I forgot that area of education which seems to have been lost in the shuffle, the shuffle of the Ministry of Learning, and that is the whole issue of advanced education. Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of students that go to postsecondary education from the constituency of Edmonton-McClung, as there are from constituencies right across this province. From Fort McMurray to Taber, from Manning to Brooks, right across the province we have students in postsecondary education. But it's interesting to note that while the government did build the \$3 million academic scholarship program and increase student financial assistance levels, they are really rather a mere tinkering on the margins and do little to address the fundamental issues of the rising tuition load and high debt load that our students are carrying.

Between 1995-96 and 1998-99 the average student loan debt has increased from \$15,518 to \$17,360, an increase of 12 percent, Mr. Speaker. Tuition fee revenues as a percentage of funding for credit institutions at the postsecondary level have increased from 14.9 percent in '93-94 to 21.3 percent, a 50 percent increase. In other words, the load for the cost of postsecondary education is being shifted onto our students and away from the provincial government that used to fund it in a different way. The average tuition fee in Alberta is now over \$3,100 per student, one of the highest levels in Canada, unacceptable with a government that has a \$4 billion surplus. In constant '98 dollars government grants per full-time equivalent student have fallen from nearly \$2,500 in '92 to less than \$2,000 in '99. Meanwhile, tuitions and fees per student have increased from about \$1,800 per student in '92 to \$3,000 per student in '99.

We believe that it's time for this government to implement a tuition freeze policy on all postsecondary institutions rather than continuing to off-load more of the costs onto our students. If this government truly believed in education, Mr. Speaker, they'd take our suggestion.

Let me move on, then, to another group, another issue, and that is the whole issue of municipal governments. I think it's interesting, Mr. Speaker, that in the throne speech there was a brief, brief reference to municipal governments and the repeat announcement of the infrastructure dollars that came in the springtime, and those were certainly welcome dollars, dollars that are needed within the municipal infrastructure area. However, again there's no plan, and what the throne speech did not mention was the need to find a new relationship between the province and the municipalities.

You know, as we become more global, as we are able to buy anything from financial services to a pair of new running shoes on the Internet, it's important to people that the communities in which they live are the communities where they relate with their families,

their neighbourhoods. Those are the areas where we need to look at a new relationship between the province and the municipalities.

You know, this government since the early '70s, when it first took office in this province, has always had the view that the municipalities were the children of the province. In fact, a former deputy Premier of that government said back in the mid-70s that the municipalities are the children of the provincial government. Well, you know what? That wasn't just a slip of the tongue. That in fact is the policy of this government, and it's very evident by the way they have treated municipalities for the last almost 30 years, as a matter of fact, since they've been in power.

Our municipalities have been subjected to a financial squeeze by the provincial government. Not only were the grants to municipalities reduced, in fact cut in half, but the province has also taken over access to a major portion of the local property tax base. Let me simply say that between '92 and '98 the general and specific purpose grants from the Alberta government to municipalities declined by 48 percent, the second-highest level of decline of any province in this country. Meanwhile, the provincial education property tax burden on residential properties in Alberta has increased by 13 percent, or over \$87 million, between '95 and '99. In case they missed it, Mr. Speaker, that's a tax increase. That means that property tax payers are paying more of the provincial education tax. They're gouging property taxpayers. So let's just make sure that the truth is out there.

Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General of Alberta made the following comments on the issue of infrastructure planning:

I believe the quality of the government's capital planning initiative is critical to managing these expenditures in a way that establishes an equilibrium between legitimate program requirements and funding provided. Proper planning will make the difference between a reactive mode . . .

which I think we can argue this province is in,

. . . which merely distributes allocated funds, and a predictive mode, which anticipates and justifies funding required.

What we believe is that we need a plan. We need to look at the role of municipalities, which has increased over the last decade, a role which now sees them involved in a major way in housing issues, issues for the homeless, off-loading of the property tax base, off-loading of the load on the welfare side. All of that off-loading has to be quantified. We have to look at a new relationship with our municipalities, and that's why we'll be bringing forward a bill in this session which uses, as an example, a sharing of the revenue between the provinces and the municipal governments.

It's not the only model that could be used, Mr. Speaker, but it is an option. At least it will get the discussion going. Instead of treating our municipalities like children, we will respect and regard the maturing of those municipalities and have a corresponding relationship with the provincial government.

MRS. NELSON: Corporate pooling. Right back to the old way.

8:20

MRS. MacBETH: We can have a great discussion on corporate pooling actually and the way these guys muffed it, but we'll just go on. It's resulted in a tax increase, pure and simple.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, I would like to give colleagues on the other side of the House some opportunity to speak to this Speech from the Throne. Let me close by saying that we in the Official Opposition are going to be fighting for Alberta's working families, the people who are going to be affected by a flat tax, which of course shifts the burden of taxation onto that middle-income group. We're going to be fighting for those small businesses, which are a major, major part of the economic engine within our province, not even mentioned in this government's throne speech. We're going to be fighting for

those people who believe in and need health care and public health care and always will. Finally, we're going to be fighting for those parents who worry whether or not their kids are going to be able to afford postsecondary education because tuition and debt load just keep going up.

Mr. Speaker, we believe in supporting Alberta's working families. We believe that there are major policy decisions that are benefiting the well-to-do in this province and which are having an impact on many, many people in Alberta. We look forward to the debate on this Speech from the Throne. We look forward to the budget. We look forward to reviewing the legislative program of this government.

Thank you very much.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you. It is an honour to rise this evening in response to the Speech from the Throne marking the commencement of the Fourth Session of the 24th Legislature of Alberta. At the outset, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to tell the constituents of St. Albert how proud and honoured I am to represent them in this Assembly. I wish to thank them once again for their confidence and their endorsement, and in this new millennium I renew my commitment to do my best on their behalf.

I would also like to congratulate personally my dear friend and outstanding constituent the Hon. Lois Hole on her recent appointment as Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. I am very pleased to be able to say that the first Lieutenant Governor of this province for the 21st century is from St. Albert.

As I reflect on the Speech from the Throne, it occurs to me that one of the prevailing themes is the importance of innovation. Throughout the speech I heard a willingness on the part of this government to adjust and respond to the changes facing us in the 21st century. I see a bold new plan for the future of Alberta, a plan that recognizes that a new century holds new challenges and requires new ideas to meet those challenges.

Albertans have always been a confident, self-reliant, adaptable people. These characteristics and values have shaped this government, its principles, and now its plans for the coming century. We have recognized that the status quo is not an option, and I believe that we are a government that is willing to make effective changes that will benefit this province.

The necessity of being a society that is willing to innovate and adapt echoes throughout the throne speech. In agriculture, for example, we have recognized that these are challenging times, and we will not stand by without doing everything possible to ensure the long-term sustainability of this strong and diversifying industry. Our plan to address and respond to the inevitable changes facing the family farm will culminate in Ag Summit 2000 in the month of June.

With respect to Albertans' jobs in the 21st century we know that it's inevitable that the workplace and indeed the workers must change and evolve if we are to remain competitive in the increasingly global economy. To that end we have an updated economic strategy for our province. I was especially pleased to hear that we will focus on maximizing the human talent and ingenuity of all Albertans. I strongly believe that Albertans, with their intelligence, respect for each other and the planet, their resourcefulness and dedication, are our economy's most valuable resource.

This government has also recognized that we have the chance to create a legacy of excellence in the areas of information and communication technology and leading-edge research. Initiatives such as connecting communities across Alberta with high-speed Internet access and programs like the Alberta foundation for science

and engineering research ensure that we as a province are in a position to take the lead in an area that will be a significant part of every Albertan's future. We must be able to respond effectively to changing market demands and industry needs, and this government is clearly willing to be flexible and adapt to challenges in this new century.

Mr. Speaker, I am very excited about the creation of the Alberta heritage foundation for science and engineering research. This is an historic development that will commit \$500 million to provide stable, long-term funding for research and development. We will be able to attract investment to our province and top researchers to our universities. Providing our young Albertan students with the chance to train with the best minds while using the best technology is the greatest gift we can give them and give our province's future.

If provincial finances permit, the endowment fund could reach \$1 billion by our province's centennial in 2005. The fund is an investment in Alberta's strong science and engineering base at our universities and in the industrial sector. It is a vital part of the province's strategy to build our knowledge-based economy. This is a milestone. It's a testament to the fiscal accomplishments that this government has made during its mandate and is yet another example of the prosperity we enjoy as Albertans. It's also a recognition of how important research and innovation are to the future of this province.

Mr. Speaker, this government has also created the informatics circle of research excellence program, that provides grants of up to \$1 million to fund researchers in information and communications technology at Alberta universities. This program aims both to attract other international talent and to retain Alberta's best. The Alberta science and research fund awarded Alberta universities and research institutions \$22.3 million in 1999-2000. The fund will have an immediate impact on researchers and students, and they are long-term benefits for Albertans that are great causes for excitement. We will be a force to be reckoned with in the 21st century.

Alberta is already well positioned and Albertans are already working in the IT, or the information technology, world. This government is committed to creating an environment that supports and nurtures world-class research. Alberta has the best fibre optics and wireless communication network in Canada. We have the highest concentration of personal computers per capita in Canada. Alberta is a world-class centre for wireless research and development and production and is home to world-class research institutes including TRILabs and the Alberta Research Council.

Stable funding for research and development is critical for sustaining our prosperity in the new millennium. The global economy is increasingly knowledge based. It is very farsighted of this government to invest now in what will surely be the future of Alberta. This is a long-term investment in Alberta's future, in all of our futures.

Another example of our government's willingness to innovate and forge ahead as a leader in Canada is the reform of our provincial tax system. Of course, low taxes and a competitive regime are nothing new to this province, but the new 11 percent provincial income tax represents an unprecedented innovation for Canada. We will not be satisfied with the status quo. We will continue to strive to improve, and we will not be complacent.

Under this new tax system 132,000 Albertans will be removed from the provincial tax roll. There will be a significant increase in personal exemptions, and there will be equal spousal exemptions. Something I've always felt: unequal exemptions to be very unfair.

8:30

Our government has also had the largesse of interpretation stemming from the Eurig decision to request a full review of the

government's direct fees and charges. The Speech from the Throne indicated that Albertans will benefit from this review.

In the area of education the Speech from the Throne tells us that we must have "a collaborative, flexible, and responsive learning system" that encourages continuous lifelong learning. We are constantly working to make Alberta's education system a leader in Canada, and we are constantly alert to the potential of each and every student in Alberta. We are prepared to tackle issues such as class size, literacy for all ages, fund-raising, second-language programs, and access to technology in our schools.

As a former educator, this government's education policies are particularly important to me. They are also very important to my constituents. I'm proud to say that St. Albert has a very well-educated population. Fifty four percent of our citizens have some form of postsecondary education, and half of those have attended university. Alberta as a whole is highly educated, with over 42 percent holding postsecondary degrees, diplomas, or certificates. A well-educated population is vital to our future success, and this government is committed to ensuring that we have the best education possible.

Another area of government responsibility that is of particular importance to my constituents is health. The Speech from the Throne illustrated this government's willingness to implement strategic initiatives in health and wellness. We have created a six-point plan to keep our health care sustainable, accessible, and effective in the face of mounting pressures. Alberta is willing to play a leadership role across Canada in working to strengthen the public health care system. Legislation will be introduced that will not only reaffirm and put our commitment to the principles of the Canada Health Act into provincial law, but it will also enable health authorities to pursue new, innovative ways of delivering publicly funded health services.

As we begin the 21st century, the ability to adjust to new demands on our existing system is one of the most important attributes of this government. Throughout the Speech from the Throne it was made quite clear that this government is willing and able to make the changes necessary to ensure long-term sustainability of everything from agriculture to health care.

As the Member of the Legislative Assembly for St. Albert, I would like to conclude by once again congratulating the Hon. Lois Hole on her appointment as Alberta's Lieutenant Governor and wish her much strength and success as well as peace and joy in her role, from all in her community.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and respond to the Speech from the Throne. When I was elected in March 1997, I identified four priorities that would improve the lives of people living in Edmonton-Norwood, and I'd like to review these four priorities and issues in the context of this throne speech.

First of all, I know that school funding, Mr. Speaker, is an issue of importance for anyone living or teaching in my community. The Conservative government has refused to admit that class size was linked to student achievement. We Liberals made the case based on well-founded research. It seems now that the government at last is willing to change this picture for elementary schools. They've decided finally that the Liberals, educators, and parents were right: there just might be a link. But some things have not changed; any increase in school funding has strings attached. This is an issue, I might add, where school needs differ.

Let's talk about speech therapy. This issue has been brought up to me in my constituency. Some of my schools desperately need a

speech therapist. Others don't. They have other needs they should be addressing, but because of the strings attached to the funding, that won't happen, Mr. Speaker. Whatever happened to board autonomy? We have democratically elected school boards, but they have no control over expenditures. They don't even have control over appointing their own superintendent.

Let's address another issue in education. Funding for public schools has only increased by about 6.5 percent overall from '94-95, but, Mr. Speaker, increases for private schools stand about 61.5 percent.

Let's revisit the democratically elected school boards. When I first began my career in the Legislature, I was only sure of one thing: I was elected by the constituents of Edmonton-Norwood to represent them in this Legislature. When public school trustees are elected, their constituents expect the trustee will be able to do the same. Not so. What we saw was a government who had the gall to fire a democratically elected school board in Calgary. Why, Mr. Speaker? I suspect it was because they didn't buy this government's mantra about education. I know the constituents of Edmonton-Norwood disapprove of this heavy-handed, antidemocratic muscle flexing by Mr. Klein and his truth squad.

Mr. Speaker, I know many of my constituents whose level of assistance is tied to the safety and security of their family. This should be an important issue for all of us, not just for me, not just for Alberta Liberals, but for everybody. I believe that cuts to welfare are one of the single most responsible causes for the increase in child welfare files. A 40 percent increase has occurred in these files while I have been in office. The government consistently denied and denies that their cuts are tied to the number of child welfare cases, but data from organizations such as the Edmonton Social Planning Council show otherwise. We understand now that the government has sheepishly retreated on this issue and has decided to, well, study it. This, friends, is not the Alberta advantage.

Another issue I want to talk about and that I brought up in 1997 was law enforcement. This is a serious concern for people who live in my neighbourhood. Policing across this province is woefully underfunded. The executive of the Edmonton Police Service and their counterparts in other cities are forever trying to balance the budget. The RCMP are running a deficit, and this forces them to pick and choose what crimes are more important than others to investigate. The provincial government has literally stolen, Mr. Speaker, stolen \$33 million from police agencies in Alberta since 1993. Small communities like Fairview that were unlucky enough to have a murder occur in their own backyard can't even afford to conduct a proper investigation. This is from a government that has a surplus of about \$3 billion. Law and order clearly is not a priority for this government. I would go so far as to state that Mr. Klein and his Conservatives are soft on crime.

Finally, health care. This is a big priority not just for the residents of Edmonton-Norwood but for all Albertans. I stated on April 21, 1997, that the community health model I see this government introducing calls forth images of a system that creeps noticeably closer to a private health care system. Today we as citizens of Alberta have the biggest battle in front of us. The Conservative government has said yes to private hospitals. In fact, this government doesn't care what Albertans want. You see, Mr. Speaker, it was by design that the Premier ensured that his friend and past Provincial Treasurer, Jim Dinning, was appointed as the chair of the Calgary health authority and that his friend and past adviser, Rod Love, was appointed to oversee communications with the Calgary health authority and that his friend and past deputy minister of the Premier's office, Jack Davis, was hired as CEO of the Calgary health authority.

The Wong brothers, otherwise known as a private corporation –

who incidently, Mr. Speaker, are snuggled up with the Minister of Gaming in an online constituency picture. They're all kind of cozy there. They've purchased the Holy Cross hospital, and they purchased it at a fire sale price: \$4.5 million. This was after this government renovated this with the use of taxpayers' money, and that cost over \$30 million.

8:40

Now, why is all this such a big deal? Simple. These friends of Ralph Klein support private hospitals. Over 70 percent of Albertans stated that they did not have enough information to decide whether or not they could support private hospitals, but do you think Mr. Klein and his band of truth squad participants listened or care? No, and we'd all be fooling ourselves if we thought they did. See, Mr. Klein wants to tear apart the single most valued social program in this country in the same way Mr. Bouchard wants to tear apart Canada. We must ask ourselves why. Why would the Premier of the richest province in this country want to do this? Why would he want to endorse private hospitals? Who asked for private hospitals? Well, it wasn't the seniors, it wasn't the sick, it wasn't health care workers, and it wasn't the constituents of Edmonton-Norwood, nor was it the citizens of Alberta, Mr. Speaker.

This then begs the question of who will benefit. Well, it's not me, and it's not the residents of Edmonton-Norwood. It will be the private insurance companies, a few elite doctors, and quite likely a few friends of the Premier. The Premier is trying to pick a fight with Ottawa over this issue. This is the same Premier and government that fired nurses, closed hospitals, and blew up buildings, and now he wants to blame the federal government. This privatization concept is a home-grown issue created by Premier Klein. The Premier is on his own, however. He's like the groom left at the altar. No other Premier in this nation is prepared to walk down the aisle holding his hand.

The private hospital fight is not just about whether the Premier is breaking the law or not. It's not just about whether a titanium hip is better than a stainless steel hip. It's about what's good for all Albertans and what citizens of Alberta want, and they don't want private hospital facilities, Mr. Speaker.

The government's truth squad or propaganda machine will not be able to restore this government's vast credibility gaps with Albertans on public health care or education. I find it interesting, Mr. Speaker, when we talk about – and the Premier stated that he's got a bold new plan for a new century, yet he uses language that should never be used in this day and age. Let's not forget about the Canadians who fought for democracy in this country when language like "truth squads" was commonplace in Nazi Germany. Let's not forget about that.

As the MLA for Edmonton-Norwood I have promised my constituents to be their voice in the Legislature, and what they have asked me to ask the Premier is: what part of no, Mr. Premier, don't you understand?

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to be able to speak in this House today in support of the Speech from the Throne, to represent the views and priorities of my constituents. Along with the other members of the Legislature I would like to pay tribute to the Lieutenant Governor for her articulate delivery of the throne speech which opened the Fourth Session of the 24th Legislature of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, the constituency I serve, Calgary-Fort, is a wonderful, diverse area of Calgary both in geography and demographics.

It is home to proud Calgarians of many different ages, ethnic ancestries, religions, and economic backgrounds. Indeed, I think Calgary-Fort is a true reflection of the diversity, spirit, and energy that exists in this province. The people of Calgary-Fort represent the high standards and sensible choices that are typical of the people of Alberta. We live in the best province in Canada and are determined that it should remain the best in the future.

There are many families in my constituency in which husband and wife are working hard in the workforce and others in which one parent has chosen to stay at home to raise the children. These families are hardworking and hold high standards and expectations for themselves, their children, and the officials they elect to represent them well. They demand government which listens to them and does not erect unnecessary barriers to individual pursuit and choices.

Mr. Speaker, I would like at the outset to express my full support for the themes and principles espoused in the Speech from the Throne. It is important that we work to strike the right balance. This emphasis on balance shows a responsible approach on the part of our government to properly manage and support all of our resources: economic, natural, and human. In planning for the next year and further into the future, we must ensure that we do not lose sight of either our fiscal responsibilities or the importance of Alberta's quality of life. I believe this government has kept both these fundamentals in mind by emphasizing careful reinvestment alongside lower taxes as we maintain a balanced budget.

In my remaining time I would like to touch on those areas discussed in the throne speech which have been of the greatest importance for my constituents: education, health care, services to seniors, and jobs and the economy. The throne speech emphasized the importance of our responsibility as a society to our children. Part of this fundamental goal is a continuing focus on providing the best education possible for our children and youth. The future of this province depends on having a well-trained and educated workforce. We must also allow our current workforce to adapt and learn throughout their careers. In this ever changing economy lifelong learning is a necessity, not a luxury.

Health care is the number one issue of importance to all Albertans. We must ensure an in-depth debate and discussion on the recent initiatives for surgical services. Albertans need to understand why this legislation is needed and that this government is dedicated to the principles of the Canada Health Act and the maintenance of a single tier, publicly paid health system that is accessible to all Albertans.

We need innovative approaches in delivering public services. The private sector can and does play an important role in complementing our publicly operated system. However, we have to make sure that any facility set up in Alberta is in the best interests of Albertans. I urge the government to ensure that any private surgical facility be closely monitored and that any contract with public health authorities be kept in line with the rate of return from the low-risk investment.

I believe one of the key functions of government is to get the most services out of the tax dollar. What I mean is effectiveness and efficiency. To me, Mr. Speaker, profit is a good thing. It is the energy that drives our social locomotive. What's bad is greed, the excessive monopoly profit enjoyed by individuals or professional groups at the expense of the general public.

On services to seniors, with the aging population and new medical advances that are creating more demands, we must prepare for the future and embrace new ideas. Our seniors are on fixed incomes, and with the cost of living rising, we need to look into the seniors benefits programs. I'm encouraged that the government initiative in this area has been proclaimed.

Alberta's ability to maintain quality education, health care, and other services depends on a strong, diversified, and growing

economy. This is a practical reality as we look at the world. It is clear that Canada is moving away from its traditional resource and manufacturing economy, and we must embrace a new future, a future where the scarce resources are human talent and other intangibles such as entrepreneurialism and intellectual capital. I'm glad to see that this government is embracing this future.

A well-educated workforce will go a long way to helping to maintain Alberta's standard of living, but our workforce must be welcomed and embraced at home and not be slowly drained away to better opportunities in other locales. The entrepreneurial spirit that built this province must be maintained in this province for all Alberta to benefit.

The foundation for booming economic development is a strong physical infrastructure as well as a strong human resource. My constituency is a part of the fast-growing city of Calgary. There is a real need for infrastructure development to meet the growth of Calgary. In the Calgary-Fort constituency I can say that we have a beautiful park and river valley. We also have an expansive industrial park. Industrial development and the natural environment stay side by side in my constituency. Along with economic development, I'm encouraged with the government's commitment to preserving and protecting our natural environment beyond our generation.

Mr. Speaker, those are the thoughts and views representing my constituents. I will continue to represent my constituents' views and opinions in the coming months in our legislative session. I believe that the government has set the course leading Alberta into a bright future. Our children, our parents will have the best place to live, called Alberta.

Thank you.

8:50

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to respond to the Speech from the Throne. When I was thinking about what I would say tonight – you know, it was in 1993 that I first got to respond to the Speech from the Throne, and I was nervous and thoughtful about some of the things that I hoped for Alberta. Some of those changes have happened, and some have not. So I intend to talk a bit about that tonight.

I would like to start, as well, by praising our new Lieutenant Governor. You know, such a woman with such a charitable heart, she must be a Liberal. Oh, some people don't like that, but it's the truth. We all, I think, respect our Lieutenant Governor for what she has given to our province and to our communities, and I think we all share that pride that she will be a wonderful Lieutenant Governor for our province.

The good people of my riding – St. Albert, Sturgeon, and Spruce Grove – are great people, and they feel free to call me on all kinds of issues. It was interesting that Friday in my office the phone never stopped ringing. All the concerns, with the exception of probably three phone calls, were about health care, a real concern that it's going to be privatized and that it will cost people money out of pocket aside from their tax dollars, aside from their extra health fees. This is going to be very expensive for people. A lot of calls from seniors. They said, "You know, my cataracts didn't bother me when I was 45, but I'm 70 now. My hips didn't bother me back then either, but they do now." So if you tie seniors and health care together, you've got quite an issue there. They're very, very concerned about the privatization that this government is going on.

It says: a bold, new step. Well, Franklin's expedition was bold too, and he got stranded and died in northern Canada. So we'd better watch how bold we get in our exploration of private health

care, because that may well be the Achilles' heel that brings down this government. Certainly the way it's going, it will be. [interjection] "Aha," says someone. Are you even running again? Well, you're too afraid to run.

Mr. Speaker, I was also thinking about the first speech to the throne. At the time Laurence Decore was the leader of the Liberal Party, and he had a great vision for this province. Part of it was a strong public education system, and this government has undermined a strong public education. When I look at the class sizes around this province, they're far too large.

It was interesting. I was in a grade 1 classroom the other day, and I gained once again an amazing respect for certainly teachers of grade 1 students. When I thought of how they bring those little people to such a level in such a short time, it's amazing the work they do. It's amazing. If you have 16 children in that class or if you have 28, you get half as far with 28 as you do with 16. I'm looking forward to seeing what the budget's going to say about that and how it's going to address that, because that has been one of our platforms for a long time, that we have to reduce the class size in this province. Hopefully, they'll have listened.

You know, Laurence Decore also had a vision of parliamentary reform. Regretfully, that is not even mentioned in the Speech from the Throne. Does that happen when a government's been in for so long, that they don't think they need to have parliamentary reform? Does that happen? I remember one of the things that Laurence said: you know, when we're government . . . And it was a pity that he didn't make government. But he said: when we're government, we will accept ideas from the opposition; they have good bills and good ideas too. That's never happened in here. Parliamentary reform, free votes: I haven't seen it on that side of the House. [interjections] Woke them up. You know, Mr. Speaker, we have a long way to go when it comes to parliamentary reform.

One of the things I wanted to talk about is equity. One has to do with health care, and the other has to do with education. When you talk about equity in health care, it is not equitable across this province. Maybe that's the reality of living outside of Edmonton and Calgary, but I'm very concerned about the lack of equity in this province. I know of an example of a young man who was flown in from Fort McMurray to Edmonton for health care needs. As it ended up, he needed to be on IV therapy for six weeks, but he wasn't allowed to take the portable IV from the capital health authority up to Fort McMurray. Why not? Wonderful question. Because – you know what? – that piece of equipment would be crossing that boundary. That's why. [interjection] If you want me to document it for you, Member for St. Albert, I'll gladly give it to you.

Scott MacGregor is his name. He's a teacher in Fort McMurray, and he is my nephew. That's why I know that story. They didn't have one for him in Fort McMurray because somebody else was using it, somebody who probably needed it more than Scott. That's the reality of lack of equity across health boundaries.

You know, it's interesting. We talk about funding and fund-raising for education. Are we now going to ask parents to fund-raise for the DARE program? In St. Albert and Spruce Grove they are talking about not having the DARE program because there isn't enough funding. Now, we talk about prevention. We talk about police enforcement. We talk about jails. Here's a program that is educational and preventive. And what have we done? Underfunded it, and it's going to die. One of the best preventive programs that I've ever seen, that works wonderfully in our schools. We have policemen across the province giving this program. The students buy into it. I think every person in here has gone to a DARE grad and has praised the program and the kids, and here we sit, and there's no money for it. We are losing it in parts of St. Albert and parts of Spruce Grove and all around the province. So I'm very

disappointed in that, and I'm hoping that can be addressed.

A couple of other things I just wanted to mention as I was going through the Speech from the Throne. I mentioned seniors. They're very worried. I think this cash benefit that has been talked about may work out to 10 bucks extra a month for them. Well, I'm sure they'll be grateful for 10 bucks more, but I don't know if that will give them a level of security.

9:00

Deregulation was mentioned in here, and you know that's going to be an interesting one, because we've once again put the cart before the horse here. We don't know if this is going to work, and we don't know if it's going to cost you and I more. This all got deregulated and changed without knowing that. Is there no way of doing that homework, or do we just boldly go without any homework? That seems to be the reality of that.

I see the infrastructure dollars, and of course I'm always supportive of that. Of course, a third of highway 794 is done in my riding. There are two-thirds more to go, which I'm sure will be part of the big plan. That's exciting for me.

Maybe I missed it – I don't know – but you know what? I don't think I saw the word "integrity" in here. Maybe that's because that's what's lacking right now in the way this province is governed. I don't see integrity in health care. I don't. If we had integrity in health care, there wouldn't be issues about boundaries. If we had integrity in education, there wouldn't be issues of fund-raising for essentials like books. [interjections] People are upset with the truth. Well, that's too bad. Maybe they'll have to send a truth squad out to Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to check it out. You know what else? I found the truth squad comment very offensive too, and so did people in my riding. No wonder they couldn't put integrity in this speech, because it didn't apply to this government.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know if I've hit on everything I really wanted to tonight, but I think there are big concerns about health care and education.

The other thing is the hidden dollars in health care. You know, we talked about Bovar, MagCan, NovAtel, all those boondoggles this government got us into debt over, and here we go. In a couple of years we're going to discover what contracts were given out and what money we lost and that was mismanaged by private companies we subsidized with taxpayer dollars to provide health care. We can't get that information. It should bother the minister of energy that that information about where our tax dollars are going is not available. Maybe he knows about it. Maybe he knows, but certainly the general public doesn't, and that's one of the things they deserve to know. It's their money. I want to know where my tax dollars are being spent, and I think we deserve to know that with these health contracts.

DR. WEST: That's what we're asking the federal Liberals.

MRS. SOETAERT: Absolutely, absolutely. I was tempted to compare that same situation with the federal government to our health care contracts. The same analogy: can't get the information as to where and who they're giving our money to. So you know what? The same analogy. Thank you for giving me that comparison.

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak. [interjections] They're comparing some of the ministers across the way to the Jane Stewarts of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, seriously, I have never had so many phone calls lately about health care concerns. Honestly, when I'm in schools, I hear lots of education concerns from parents but never such a cross-section of people concerned about what is happening in health care,

what those private contracts are doing, and what is implied by truth squads going around the province. That's terribly, terribly offensive, and I would hope that we can get some truthful answers in this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

MR. FISCHER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to rise today to respond to the throne speech. On behalf of my Wainwright constituents, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate our new Lieutenant Governor and wish her all the best in her new post. The Hon. Lois Hole brings warmth and friendliness along with her great knowledge of our country to this historic position, and Albertans will be well served by her talents and her dedication.

Mr. Speaker, I have listened, I believe, to 18 throne speeches. Each speech has laid out a plan, and for the most part those plans have been followed. When I look back at those plans and the direction that our Progressive Conservative government has taken us, then I feel very proud and honoured to be part of it. Each year we have made huge improvements. Today we have a beautiful province that offers one of the highest if not the highest standard of living in the world, and that is for us, for our kids, and for our grandkids. That was the direct result of 29 years of very strong leadership and planning by our Conservative government. There is not one province in Canada that can match that success. So I think we should all remember that Alberta is the envy of many countries of the world, maybe all of them.

As the MLA for Wainwright, I am privileged to represent the views and the concerns of my constituents in this Assembly. My constituents have told me that our government is on the right path of balancing economic and social issues and continuing to set the standard for knowledge, quality, and excellence in Canada.

Coming from a mainly rural constituency, I feel that it is my job to represent the views of many families involved in farming and agriculture. As we strive to become leaders in the emerging information and knowledge-based global economy, we must remember that agriculture has been for a hundred years and still is the foundation of this province. I liked the government's commitment to agriculture in the throne speech. The agriculture summit is very positive.

In our fast-changing world we must continually change with new ideas. Our new technology and computerization are really changing the way that agriculture is doing business. The biggest change that computers and the Internet have given us is going to be in marketing, and I dearly hope it will open up the marketplace, allow more small businesses and mid-size businesses to compete against large companies and monopolies. Many have heard me say before that marketing is the very weak link in the production chain of agriculture.

We continually improve our genetics with new seed through research and development, at a big cost I might add. I know that sometimes today you can pay \$6 or \$7 for one pound of canola seed. For those of you that aren't farmers, you've got to have at least five, usually six or seven pounds per acre in order to put your seed in. We have new and better farming equipment and new and better practices, and certainly the machines and the new equipment are also very, very costly.

We also are very hopeful that our transportation and delivery system is improving, and it also is very costly. I think everyone notices that the elevators are disappearing around the country. Almost all of them will be gone in another year or two. Yes, we're replacing them with some throughput fast-flow loading systems, but most of the storage cost is back on the farmers, and that is a very

substantial cost as well. So, then, what does happen to us? When we go to market our grain, we get less now than we got 40 years ago with all these costs. We have to have more competition in the marketplace to make it work properly. We don't have an aggressive enough marketplace anymore. Big business markets our mainstream products, and they do it now really without the fear of competition. Certainly you can say that about the grain and about the Wheat Board.

I was talking to a farmer the other day that had started out with two B train loads of grain to an elevator which was about 75 miles away. He sold \$10,000 worth of grain, and by the time he got it from his throughput elevator out to the coast and loaded onto the boat, his cost was \$2,950. It was a \$10,000 value in the grain, so about a third or close to a third of it now goes for the cost of moving the grain.

9:10

One other thing that I see happening that I would like to see our government move into is with the total integration of some of these major companies now that are working with – I use meat for an example, where they've got hog farms. In the U.S. they've got some hog farms that are as big as all the production here in Alberta. They slaughter them and market them and do it all and control the price that way. I think we have to do something in this country to offset that, because it really is ripping apart our once free-flowing competitive system.

I think you can look at machine dealerships, the chemical and seed companies, for instance, with the monopolies that they have. They have those monopolies simply because we as governments – and I don't say that it's we as the Alberta government – give them patent protection and different protection through legislation that allows them to do this. I really believe that our government in the future is going to have to study this issue a lot. I know they're doing a lot of work with it now in the U.S., and I think we need to do that here. I hope the ag summit that is mentioned in the throne speech will bring out some of these issues.

We must get small business back into marketing, and we've got to find the niche markets so that we can move into the new things that are happening all the time. We're very slow at getting into that. I have to say that the [inaudible] harvesting is one of those markets that we need to get into. I'm sure our government will be looking at some of those types of marketing strategies for us.

The Speech from the Throne makes several references to the need for innovation, and I believe this government and this province are committed to making changes when needed. As Albertans we pride ourselves on the fact that we are not afraid of change. We've always been the most self-reliant yet forward-thinking province in Canada. Mr. Speaker, I was happy to see that in the new century we have not forgotten this. We are about to undertake a bold new tax strategy that will truly give the province the economic environment primed for prosperity. The new 11 percent single-rate income tax will be the envy of the country and maybe even the world when we get finished with that. It may be a little bit too early yet to tell, but I think that might help solve some of the problems I was talking about before.

As well, we are investing heavily in the area of research and high-tech. Initiatives like the heritage foundation for science and engineering research will ensure that Alberta remains one of the most information and knowledge based provinces in the country. This will also present us with the chance to leave a lasting legacy for our children who will be tomorrow's scientists and doctors.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to mention health care for just a minute. It does relate to not being afraid of change. I want to say to the many people that want to fear monger and talk about health care in such a negative way that every one of us in this House, including our

opposition, dearly cherish our health care system. There isn't anyone in here that is trying to hurt it and upset it. All of us know that we're going to get old and we're going to use this system ourselves, so I think we need to work together on this health care and make it work for the betterment of all our people in this province.

With education I'm glad to hear that the throne speech is still keying in heavily on education. I know that in the Wainwright constituency we are doing some great, innovative things in education today, and I'm sure that you are in all the other areas as well. I'm very proud of some of our school divisions there who have upgraded our computer systems. We have a 5 to 1 ratio now and some of the latest technology. It's wonderful to go into those rooms and see how the students can adjust to that and to go into the shop classes, the industrial arts classes, and watch them use some of their equipment that is all computerized, whether it be sewing machines or routers or any kind of carpentry equipment that's computerized. It's just absolutely amazing, and we are going to be turning out some very, very excellent specialists in the near future.

I wanted to mention one other thing that this government believes strongly in, and that is our seniors. I know that there has been a shortage of long-term care beds. We've had a big influx of seniors from other provinces. We have a lot of people that are reaching that age, and we're keeping people alive a lot longer. We can be proud of those figures when you compare them to any other country in the world.

I would like to mention that our seniors in the Daysland community are putting in a beautiful new aging-in-place complex. People can buy their units. They can rent the units. Part of it is going to be assisted living, and it is going to be community owned and operated. They've got it more than half built already, and we are very proud of what they're doing there. They're going to keep their seniors in the community, where they would like to be.

The other thing that I wanted to mention – and the throne speech does mention this – is challenges facing children. To do this, our government has created many excellent programs aimed at improving children's health, education, and safety. I would like to comment that along with the great programs what our children really need are strong, strong families. It seems that we are seeing a rise in violence among young people and in many cases a lack of responsibility in these children. Mr. Speaker, accountability for your actions starts with the family. Parents need to be willing to take the responsibility of being a parent and instill in their children this basic concept.

9:20

I had the opportunity to be on the lifelong learning committee that the minister appointed us to and went to Fort McMurray. One of the things that came out loud and clear was that there was a big need to have some parenting courses to help parents advise kids and bring kids up so they are able to cope with the way things are today. With that comes respect and responsibility, and we as government can help in a big way if we can create the proper programs and give them the proper tools to work with.

To end, I would like to say that our government was elected for the past 29 years because we were not afraid to act against the status quo when the status quo wasn't working, and I'm happy we are embracing the change that is needed to ensure the long-term prosperity of Alberta. This throne speech and plan is the right one. This plan creates the blueprint for a century of unlimited success.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure this evening to get up and respond to the Speech from the Throne. [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: I recognized the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

MRS. NELSON: He adjourned debate before the other speaker.

THE SPEAKER: No, he did not. He said thank you and sat down.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's quite an opportunity to review the things that were said in the context of the intention of the next year, the next millennium for Alberta, and it was quite appropriate, I think, that the government kind of couched this year's Speech from the Throne in the format and the theme that was presented in Alberta's original Speech from the Throne in March of 1906, when they talked about the prosperity and the bountiful resources of the province that we live in.

Mr. Speaker, we see that as we look across the province and look at the coming hundred years of our province. The homesteaders, the rural pioneers that established and moved in and settled most of rural Alberta, the wildcatters and roughnecks that went out and brought into the province our oil industry and our gas industry have really created that kind of province, along with all the entrepreneurs that started the businesses that are providing us with the support services to provide the opportunity for these agriculture- and mineral-based industries to really expand.

The focus that the Speech from the Throne takes is to look at: where do we go in the next hundred years, the next millennium? The idea is that the government is recognizing the fact that transition is accelerating. Change is becoming a greater part of what we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, and they're providing some really good focus in this Speech from the Throne in the context of the need we have as a province to move into a knowledge-based, technologically driven economy away from the resource economies, and we have to look at that in the context of some of the programs that were suggested in terms of the initiatives the government is going to undertake.

On that basis, Mr. Speaker, I really wanted to compliment the government on the Alberta heritage foundation for science and engineering research. This is a real opportunity for our province over the next probably 10 or 15 or 20 years to achieve the status in the research area in science and engineering that the heritage medical research endowment fund has created and provided for us. Our medical research facilities in Calgary and Edmonton now are world renowned, providing some very, very exciting results in terms of new treatments and diagnostic procedures for medical needs and support for the medical community. So if we look at the opportunities now that we'll have with this science and engineering research endowment, what we'll have is a future that we can look to, you know, probably in 10, 15, 20 years, as I said.

I hope that no Albertan expects to see great things from this in the next two or three years, Mr. Speaker. These kinds of endowments and to develop that critical mass of research is a time-consuming, ongoing process, and we have to start thinking about this as being something that's going to be 10, 15, or 20 years down the road, when we'll achieve the worldwide reputation that we have in the areas of agriculture research and medical research. So that's the comment and the kind of focus I wanted to take on the transition that's implied in this Speech from the Throne.

The other issues that we want to deal with are more in the area of: how are we going to deal with the people part of it and how are we going to take Albertans and build them into that plan? As we look

at it, I see that the government is committing now to provide more dollars in support of students, that what they'll be doing is trying to make sure students have some additional support with scholarships for second-year students in the advanced education areas. Identifying it as being important for the second-year students brings it out so that the college students that are in two-year programs also have access to this, but when you put it to the rest of that paragraph, there are implications there that they're going to "also increase student financial assistance levels and . . . continue to improve the student loan application process."

I think everybody will applaud the idea that they're going to try and improve the student loan application process, but when they're going to try and increase the financial assistance levels, what this does, even given the \$3 million that's going into the scholarship program, is effectively recognize, by the government, that students as they go through their education process are going to get more and more in debt.

Mr. Speaker, that creates a real economic barrier to advanced education and to the possible participation of young Albertans in the future of our province in a way that would contribute to their potential, because they're looking at it and saying: our family doesn't have the resources to provide some assistance or full assistance to get an advanced education degree or diploma. So they have to make a decision based on can they or do they want to undertake a debt load that would give them the opportunity to get that education.

What we're seeing is that the government is creating essentially a different opportunity, and it kind of goes against one of the principles they talked about at the beginning of the speech when they were talking about one of the things that they wanted was equity, including fairness for all citizens in Alberta. Well, what they're doing is in essence creating an economic barrier for some of our young people to really get in and achieve their potential. So those are the comments that I wanted to make on that part of it.

We've heard a lot of discussion about the health care agenda, the proposals in health care, the privatization, the contracting out, the transition in our health care system. Mr. Speaker, I just want to put it on record that when the people in southern Alberta come to me and want explanations of what the government is proposing, their concerns boil down to two things. First of all, there's the philosophy of how our health care system should be run, the public system or private. This is the debate that they see. But the real issue and the real concern that most Albertans have, at least most of the constituents that approach me, is about the potential for these changes that are being talked about to create a two-tiered health care system in the province, where they don't see the equity of access being there for each of them, for their families or for their friends when they need the health care service. They're seeing again an economic issue developing where those with the economic opportunity can afford and will get a different level of health care in this province than the person who doesn't have the economic resources to access that private health care system.

9:30

So that's the real concern that they're expressing to me, and I guess what I can say on behalf of those constituents is that that's the issue we'll be looking for when the government introduces their legislation on the potential for contracting out, private hospitals, private health care. Whatever we want to call it and whatever the title the government's going to put to that bill, those are the kinds of criteria that we'll be looking at and judging that piece of legislation on. Does it maintain the equity of access and the economic opportunity and the prevention of that two-tiered system?

We go from there and look at the impact the proposals are going

to have on the education system and on children, and we see that really again we're going to have to wait and see when the budget comes out exactly how these promises are going to be carried out so that we'll be able to say: yes, this is going to assist children; this is going to assist in the education system so that these children can reach that potential they have and have an opportunity to be part of the equitable treatment of all Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, one thing I want to talk about in a little more depth, mostly because it falls into my critic area but also because from southern Alberta's perspective it's really an important issue, is the government's plan and proposals for agriculture. Again, as I said at the start, the whole Speech from the Throne is built around this area of, you know, the role of agriculture, the growing of our province. They try to make it appear that they're talking in the context of a farming focus.

There's a reference in there to the family farm as the basis of Alberta at the turn of the century, the last century when our province was getting started, but they also say that that family farm has to undergo change, and when we look at what the government has been trying to do in the agriculture community in the last five or six years, it's really difficult to focus on what the government perceives as that change.

Even when we talked to people who attended the initial planning session for the process that will lead up to the ag summit in the period of the 7th and 8th of June, there was a lot of discussion and a lot of hypothesizing about how we create – and the term that they're using on a number of occasions was an industrial agriculture, a commercial agriculture. So, in essence, that phrase that comes out from the people who were attending that planning workshop for the ag summit tends to give some indication that the concept of family farm, the community that's built around the family farm concept is not as integral to the government's vision for rural Alberta as a lot of Albertans and a lot of rural Albertans would like to see.

One of the things that we have to recognize is that the transition that goes on in rural Alberta is quite different from the transition we see in an urban area or some of our major centres in Alberta. You know, in rural Alberta when a farm family either decides to quit farming or is forced to quit farming for economic reasons, in most cases, unless they're retiring and intend to stay in the community, they pack up and move out of the community. Their land base is amalgamated into a joint farm or another farm operation in the community, and that community loses a family.

Now, in an urban area – Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge – when we see a small business fail or a small business owner decide, "I want out," and they leave with their equity, if there is any, they usually stay in the community. They either go into another business or they take employment. So they stay there. The community doesn't lose that family unit. In rural Alberta when that family unit leaves, that's one less family unit to support all the other services that are in that community: the school, church, service clubs, sports teams, all the other things that make a community.

As three or four or five of those families start to leave a community, we see a domino effect in the sense that those are families and incomes that are taken out of that community, and that causes the loss of a local grocery store, maybe a local service station, later on a farm machinery dealership, because the larger farms that have amalgamated with the small ones spend their dollars in a different way. As a larger farm they are still usually one family, so there's no more human resource to participate in the community even though they're farming and having the same turnover of agriculture expenditures and income.

So essentially the community has lost that core human component, the family component, not necessarily the turnaround dollars. The turnaround dollars are spent differently. They go into agriculture

inputs. If there's a profit at the end of the year with that farm, it goes into reinvestment rather than into the expenditures families make in supporting that community. So what we see, then, is that this domino effect is essentially going to create a depopulation in rural Alberta unless we can support rural Alberta with some of the other initiatives that are necessary to facilitate the transition.

Mr. Speaker, one of the interesting things that was noted in here was the intent of the government to try and put high-speed, high-bandwidth Internet access across the province. Now, how are they going to make the decisions as to which communities get it and which don't? Is it going to be based on the viability of the community? If people are leaving that community in a rush, then what we're going to see is a situation where the community is collapsing on itself, and there won't be a core left that would make it a viable community to even justify the expenditure that would be necessary to kind of revitalize it, give it an alternative means of growth by having access to this high-speed Internet system.

So it's important that we look at some of the things that are going on. The government's talking about a review of crop insurance, sustaining the farm income disaster program, the income support program, and what we've got is kind of a piecemeal approach here. A lot of the farmers that I'm talking to are saying to me: "Ken, we don't find a crop insurance program works for us. We don't find the FIDP program works for us. Yet we seem to be in a cash flow crisis. We're having trouble making our payments." Mr. Speaker, it's quite easy to think about options where a combined crop insurance/farm income disaster program can be created where it rolls together and effectively becomes a farmer participatory program focusing around sustaining and maintaining income levels in a crisis situation, when there's a hailstorm, when there's a drought, when there's a world decline in prices.

Mr. Speaker, there wasn't very much in the Speech from the Throne indicating the government's direction they want to go in terms of trying to help create an environment for international trade in agriculture. They talk about going over and participating in the European World Expo, and here they want to focus on technology innovation. I don't know very much about that, but I know that

Europe has a lot of opportunity for us to market some of our high quality, value-added food products, our agriculture technologies. Why are they not included in this list of things that we want to take to the World Expo? Now, maybe the agriculture component is not part of that. That's a question that we can search down later. But when you see that and we look at trying to promote the value-added components from our agriculture community, why isn't it included in that list?

9:40

Mr. Speaker, this is kind of the direction that I think we want to see the government going in more in terms of: let's have a comprehensive policy that recognizes where we're going to go in rural Alberta over the next 10 years. Are we going to be able to facilitate the transition from a smaller farm to a viable economic agriculture unit and create other opportunities for rural citizens to be there as well at a point when we don't have that loss of the human component in the community?

Mr. Speaker, I think that covers the issues that I wanted to address. There's a number of others that we'll be looking for. On that basis, I'd like to adjourn debate if it's possible.

THE SPEAKER: Actually, hon. member, your time for debate had expired, so I'll recognize the hon. Minister of Government Services.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will follow the lead of the hon. member opposite and ask to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd better make sure I do this right. I don't want to be ruled out of order. I move that the House do now stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[At 9:42 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

