

Title: Estimates of Government Services, Wednesday, March 1, 2000

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8:01 p.m.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Subcommittee C – Government Services

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MacDonald, Hugh
McFarland, Barry
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Yankowski, Julius

THE CHAIRMAN: In subcommittee C this evening for our consideration we have the estimates for the Department of Government Services, and I would invite the hon. minister to begin this evening's deliberations on Government Services.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to present to you the first business plan and estimates for the Ministry of Government Services. As you know, Government Services is a new ministry formed during last May's government reorganization. At that time we were given a mandate to streamline and simplify Albertans' access to government.

The ministry assumed the responsibility for Alberta registries and consumer services, and we also took on the responsibility for the Regulatory Review Secretariat. In the past 10 months since the reorganization we have been busy mapping out where we want to take this new department and how we intend to get there. The three-year business plan and estimates before you tonight will serve as our guide.

The key focus of this business plan is on service excellence. This area holds significant challenges and opportunities to provide better, more streamlined, and more unified services to Albertans. To this end we have begun working with government, stakeholders, and businesses to "provide a secure, high-quality, and innovative gateway to a wide range of . . . services," including registry, licensing, consumer, and other related services.

As you can see from our mission statement, the ministry's government and program development roles will also remain important in ongoing activities throughout the business planning period. That means we will continue to "facilitate, support, and . . . regulate and strictly enforce high standards of consumer protection and business practice," as we have in the past. We will also "support the Regulatory Review Secretariat in its mandate to reduce regulatory red tape and complexity."

Shortly we will be implementing a new departmental structure that is in keeping with our mandate to provide a simple, streamlined point of access to service. As an example, we will combine our registry's call centre and our new consumer information call centre into one so that citizens wanting information on either of these two programs will only have to make one call. This new structure will ensure greater co-ordination within the ministry in how we provide services to Albertans, respond to issues, and plan for the future.

When he created the Ministry of Government Services, Premier Klein gave it a mandate to improve Albertans' access through one window to services of government. That has become our first goal, as identified in the ministry business plan: "a common portal ('gateway') so Albertans receive the services they [actually] deserve." Together with the Department of Innovation and Science

we have already set out to accomplish this goal. Over the past few months our two ministries have been working with seven other departments to examine how we can better serve Albertans by making it easier to access government information, services, and products.

The purpose of this exercise is to come up with a business plan for delivering all the various services of all these distinct departments through one entry point or window. That way, Mr. Chairman, Albertans will not have to know which department is responsible for which service in order to get access to that service. Instead, they will be able to go to one web site or to one service counter or to one call centre to get everything they need. You will be hearing more about this initiative as the project progresses over the next few months.

You will note in the estimates that the budget for Government Services has been increased over last year's budget by about \$2.2 million, to \$49.8 million. Approximately \$500,000 of this increase is for our operating expenditures dedicated to the one-window project. Another \$500,000 is for the capital investment to support the next phase in the development of the one-window project. The rest of the increase, about \$1.2 million, is to cover an increase in the salary component of the budget due to an increase in our employee compensation plan.

Mr. Chairman, our second goal, as identified in the business plan, is also related to service: "excellence in service development, delivery and accessibility." Registry services are perhaps the most familiar part of our ministry to all Albertans, as all Albertans at some time or another require them. Through our network of registry agents people can obtain drivers' licences and vehicle registrations, conduct land title searches, register births and deaths or security interests on personal property, or form corporations. Altogether Albertans conducted more than 12 million registry transactions last year, about half of them through the registry agent network. Generally speaking, they like the service they're getting, with more than 90 percent saying they're satisfied or very satisfied. That's a vote of confidence for this system.

Yet we want to build on that success in the years to come. One of the biggest challenges facing us in this regard is the need to redevelop three of our five registry systems. These three systems – the motor vehicle registry, the land titles registry, and the personal property registry – were developed using 1980s technology. Today they're tired and old and slow. They've served us well, but they're reaching full capacity. All three systems must be redeveloped if we are going to be able to continue to provide Albertans with the superior services they have come to expect, so we must start now.

We will plan and reinvest to restructure our IT systems, pursuing partnerships with the public and private sectors to help defray what will be rather significant costs. We also want to continue to provide better and more accessible registry and consumer information services to our clients through our call centres. The strategy for this, as I mentioned earlier, will include combining the various call centres we operate in a single, more efficient call centre.

The budget required for service delivery is estimated to be about \$32 million. This is identified in the estimates as program 3, registries and services to consumers. From this budget we will provide support for the registry agent network and to our Alberta on-line customers. We will maintain our registry databases and equipment. We will provide land titles registration, the one service that is still delivered directly by the ministry, and we will respond to inquiries related to our registry services and inquiries and complaints respecting business and consumer issues.

Mr. Chairman, our third goal is “a fair and effective marketplace in Alberta with a high standard of business conduct.” Over the next year we will build on the momentum of the Fair Trading Act, which came into effect last September 1. It’s one of the toughest consumer protection laws in Canada, and I have given instructions that it will be strictly enforced. We will also continue to work and consult with stakeholders to develop new and amend existing legislation or regulations to respond to emerging issues.

One in particular I wish to focus on is the creation in the very near future of a regulation that will govern direct marketers of electricity. This will help ensure consumer protection and a level playing field for business when the electrical industry is deregulated next January 1. The estimates show a budget of \$11.3 million for this division. This is the estimated amount required to support not only our regulatory and enforcement activities but also our planning, strategic, and business support activities. These expenses are broken down in the estimates under program 2, regulatory and strategic services.

Our fourth goal, Mr. Chairman, as identified in the business plan, is “a streamlined, effective, and relevant regulatory environment.” This goal speaks primarily to the work of the Regulatory Review Secretariat, which is chaired by Wayne Jacques, the MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti. The secretariat will continue to work with government departments on the governmentwide initiative to reduce, simplify, and eliminate regulations.

Program 1 outlines our budget estimates for ministry supports, which includes our Regulatory Review Secretariat. In addition to the secretariat, the \$6.3 million budgeted for this area also supports my office and that of the deputy minister as well as our portion of the various support services we share with Municipal Affairs. These shared services include human resources, finance and administration, information technology, legal services, and communications.

8:11

You will notice under program 1 estimates that there has been an increase in the budgets of both the deputy minister’s office and the Regulatory Review Secretariat. The original budget for the deputy minister’s office, transferred from the former department of public works, supply, and services, was barely enough to cover the salaries of the three staff. So an additional \$32,000 has been made available to cover supplies and services and to support the operations of this office as well as anticipated increases in salaries to be paid to the public service employees. Likewise, the modest \$16,000 increase in the budget of the Regulatory Review Secretariat was added to allow for the payment for the staff and anticipated salary increases in that secretariat.

On the revenue side of the equation I’d like to draw your attention to one figure, the bottom line. We are estimating revenue to drop dramatically over last year’s estimates, from \$283 million to \$236 million. Normally, Mr. Chairman, this might be considered bad news, but in this context it is not. This reduction is due to our government’s decision to reduce fees so that they are more in line with the cost of delivering the service, and that’s good news. It’s good news for Albertans because they are the benefactors of the reduction.

As detailed in the budget documents tabled by the Treasurer, we have reduced and in some cases eliminated fees related to land titles, personal property, and corporate registry services. For example . . .

MS OLSEN: Don’t forget to say why it happened, that it was because the Supreme Court said so. [interjections]

MRS. NELSON: Have you finished now?

Mr. Chairman, before I was so rudely interrupted by the members opposite, I was in the final stages of my deliberation here, so I will just complete it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Not only was there interruption on the one side; there was equal interruption on the other side. We would hope that both sides could refrain from adding comments until you’re recognized and able to stand and speak.

Madam Minister, if you could continue.

MRS. NELSON: An example of the reduction of fees, Mr. Chairman, is that the filing of a corporate annual return now has no costs attached to it, and another example would be the reduction from \$365 to \$133 in the case of registering land title transactions in the purchase of a home.

These reductions were made in response to the recommendations of an interim report on fees and charges by the review committee chaired by Mary O’Neill, the MLA for St. Albert. This was a result of the Eurig case from Ontario that was tested in the courts. Alberta, I might say, is the only province in this country to have followed through on the review of fees and charges. All other jurisdictions . . . [interjections] If the hon. member opposite would just for five seconds button it, I could finish this off.

All other provinces have moved their own legislation to ratify the fees and the overcharging that they had. This government is the only one to make the reductions, and this is from the interim report.

The total cost of this reduction in revenue for my ministry alone is \$55 million, which will go back to Albertans. In fact, Mr. Chairman, most of these are fees that are collected through our registry system, and I’m able to report that as of the day after the budget most of our registries had already started the process of reducing the fee structure at the local level. We will be monitoring that to ensure that these dollars do go back to Albertans. So we are clearly giving back.

This next year, Mr. Chairman, will be a challenging year for this ministry. Not only will we continue to strive to provide Albertans with the services that they deserve and the protection that they need, but we will be looking at better ways to connect Albertans to government services using technology and any other tool that we can find. Our gateway project will be the first in this country to allow Albertans to actually phone one place and get answers to their questions. In fact, they’ll actually have someone that will pick up the phone and say, “How may I help you?” instead of getting a number to push or voice mail that doesn’t provide any service whatsoever. I’m looking forward to this project because I think it’s long overdue, and I hope all hon. members in this Legislature will be supportive of it.

The revamping also, Mr. Chairman, of our systems that are quite old. I hope that hon. members will be supportive of our project to revamp our three systems that desperately need it. If we are going to continue to provide the service level that we have been providing to Albertans, we are going to have to revamp these systems because they have reached capacity. If we don’t do something with them, we will not be able to offer that service, so we must do it. We must get started now so that we can prepare for the day when they no longer

can do the job and we will be able to say that we have a new system in place.

Those are my opening comments, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to questions from the members in the Assembly. I will make the commitment that if I don't have all of the answers tonight or don't get them to you, I will do as I have done in the past. I will make sure I have them back to the members of the Assembly, to the committee very quickly, and I think I've shown in the past that that has been usually within a 10-day time frame to answer questions, depending on the volume. So I welcome questions.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's interesting going through the budget of the Ministry of Government Services, considering that this is the first budget out and the first ministry of its kind. I go through the goals. I'm going to start with a different number and read goal 3, "a fair and effective marketplace in Alberta with a high standard." Then I hear the minister say that it's one window, working with seven different departments to make things better for Alberta.

I'd just like to start off by saying that I remember my first bill in this House, an omnibus bill on registries, and that was back in the spring of 1997. Then there was Bill 16 and bills 9 and 10. Of the things that we pointed out at that particular time, a couple of cases have come back and haunted the department. One was an employee that wanted to find out about a Suburban car to buy, a few things like that. So we have to be careful. As you say, things have to be monitored.

The major announcement this year was the reduction in a number of service fees. This is really in response to a Supreme Court case in Ontario and a decision that required user fees to be in line with the cost of services being provided. As I started to go through all these different things and looked at \$60 million in reductions in the user fees and charges announced in the budget, it proves once and for all that the Premier and his government broke the promise. And it isn't just this Premier. That goes back to 1964. It is a broken promise not to increase the tax burden on Albertans, and it is about 73 times that it actually happened.

Now, for the minister's information, on one of the questions she can go back and check with the department. When we FOIPed to get some information on registries and so on, I got 12 pages of this: the figures on one side blanked out all the way through. This is another item. You know, we get slammed in here about FOIPing, but the fact is that this is the only way we can actually find out information. I believe that even with the study being done or being looked at by the Member for St. Albert, I probably would ask the question to the new minister: how many of these are taxes versus user fees? In one of your answers tonight you can state probably yes or no: will you give any information back to us except for what has been FOIPed and whited out on these particular sheets?

Looking at user fees and registries since 1964, under land titles in 1964 and 1965 – and I know that was a Socred government – they collected \$2,465,772 versus \$49,993,000 in 1997-98 under this present government, one heck of a big jump. Personal properties went from \$104,686 in '74-75 up to \$11,198,000 last year. Motor vehicles: same thing; \$36 million in 1974 versus almost \$185 million this past year. You know, these figures are astronomical.

8:21

As I read through, under goal 4 it states: "a streamlined, effective, and relevant regulatory environment." It also states, as I'm reading the mission statement, that there's going to be lots of follow-up,

yearly follow-up and so on. I wonder if people that would actually be going in to register for something are going to realize that there is going to be this follow-up. Are they going to give their permission? Are they going to be blindsided if they get a phone call two weeks later, a month later on this follow-up? What is the follow-up actually for? If it's for the ministry, if it's following up on whether there is any wrongdoing, I totally agree with it.

Regarding performance measures for customer satisfaction, how will the consumer be selected for contact? This is going back to what I'm asking. Are most people going to be called back after two weeks or a month, or is it going to be random? Will they be advised that they may be contacted at a later date for follow-up on this initial point of contact? If the survey is contracted out, how will the minister deal with a consumer who does not want a private contractor to know they have contacted the ministry with a particular question? What if many of the consumers do not give their names and numbers? How will these be followed up? Will the yearly survey only look at consumers who contact the minister's office? Will there be an information campaign encouraging people to contact the ministry for advice and information? Which point of contact will be included in this survey?

One that's really striking is: what would the minister consider an effective measure to replace the ineffective status reports and three-year achievement statistics? Will the minister consider establishing a new measure?

Going through the highlights for 2000-2001: "development of a 'one window to government services' initiative." That is fine and dandy, but how many people actually own electronic systems in Alberta? That is, how many are on the Net, and how many of those actually know how to do it? I'm noticing that there are lots of references here to electronics and electronic systems. Will more resources be added in areas if the 95 percent target is not reached?

Madam Minister, the only way user fees and charges have gone in Alberta over the past seven years is up. Between '92-93 and the present, 1999-2000, user fees and premiums and charges increased by \$290 million, or 28 percent. You say that you're reducing that by \$60 million. In referring to the \$290 million that it has gone up, I'm still wondering whether it's going down.

I look at some of the figures in here and how greatly they have fallen, and that's anywhere from 33 percent in some cases to 90 percent in other cases. There are some cases where you're having it for life. That hasn't changed, and I understand that totally. You take a look at this, and it's not hard to see where you can come up with savings all the way through. I'm wondering why it can't be higher than the \$60 million in just looking at the way these ratios have changed.

You get a lot of cases. You've got the certificate of incorporation and the certificate of continuance under section 181 of the Business Corporations Act. They have dropped from \$300 to \$100. Those are the old government fees and the new government fees. The certificate of revival: \$300 to \$100. The certificate of continuance under section 261 of the Business Corporations Act: \$300 to \$100. Under a search for each corporation, you have areas like \$10 plus \$1 per page down to \$5 for the whole file, if I understand the whole file by the word "file." A printed search for each corporation: \$10 to \$1. That's astronomical. We've got a 90 percent change in that particular item.

Will the minister please provide actual costs of services prior to the reduction in fees and since the reduction in fees for the following fees under the Alberta companies regulations: certificate of incorporation, certificate of amendment, certificate of restoration? In most cases there's a 50 percent difference, in other cases 60 percent. The printed search for each corporation: \$10 to \$1.

Will the minister please provide an actual cost of service prior to the reduction of fees and since reduction in fees for the following fee reductions under the Co-operative Associations Act? Here are cases where we're falling: certificate of amalgamation, from \$300 to \$100; certificate of revival, from \$300 to \$100; certificate of status, from \$25 to \$5. These are nice figure changes for Alberta's economy and for people's money to stay in their own pockets. When they are dealing with a provincial government, these should show Albertans that there is a major change in take-home money or money that has stayed in their pockets.

Will the minister please provide the actual costs of service prior to reduction in fees and since the reduction in fees for the following fee reductions under the Partnership Act? This particular one is a major case of dropping: filing a certificate of limited partnership, from \$150 down to \$50; filing a notice of amendment certificate, from \$50 to \$15. In most cases I can go on. As I went through and put this together, there was a considerable difference, and I'm appreciative of that.

Can the minister please provide an actual cost of service prior to the reduction of fees and since the reduction of fees for the following reductions under the Cemetery Companies Act: the certificate of incorporation, from \$50 in the old government fees down to \$10 in the new? This goes back to another bill that I believe we had last spring. This is very reasonable and timely to help people in the case of death and so on.

How many user fees in the Alberta registries are direct or indirect taxes? That is my number one question.

What about the DAOs? Where's the preliminary report from Treasury that the Treasurer promised? This goes back to the fact that if there is a study by the Member for St. Albert, we also hear rumours that it'll be buried in the Treasury Board and not actually see the light of day.

MRS. NELSON: Wrong.

MR. GIBBONS: Wrong? Good. I'll wait for the minister's answer on that one, but these are rumours that have been coming out from different sources we do have.

Mandatory preparation of impact analysis statements on all proposed new or increased user fees and charges. This is right around tax cuts.

[Mr. Fischer in the chair]

Mr. Chairman, I could be going on for quite a while, but I'll just sit down and let some of my other members jump up and ask a few questions. I know that one particular question wants to be asked around these particular fees.

8:31

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Madam Minister.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I thought I'd respond to the hon. member's questions as much as I can, and it may help some of the others. He talked about comparing costs of 1964 and 1965 to 1997 and 1998. A lot of us were still in early school, so things have changed dramatically in that time frame. In fact, some of us were really in early school. Earnings and costs were substantially different in 1964 and '65 compared to 1997-98, so there is an anticipation that costs would go up. I mean, I think that back then you could probably still buy a decent house for about \$30,000 in Calgary, a really nice house, and today you're looking at

\$150,000 or more. Things become relative, so the relationship between 30 some odd years or 40 years back is a little bit different, and things would anticipate it.

Now, insofar as the hon. member asking about customer satisfaction and surveying and trying to see if in fact the services that are being presented through the various outlets are meeting the satisfaction levels that are expected by the consumers, i.e. Albertans. There are a number of ways you can do that, through card surveying at the outlet site itself or through random telephone surveys, which are quite often used. But one thing that's kind of unique about registries is that almost every Albertan visits them at some time or another throughout the year for one type of application or another.

You get people who visit those on a regular basis – and one is shaking her head. You never get a driver's licence or a licence plate, ticket, or anything like that? You have no reason to go there? A lot of people do go in. So we can do surveying, and actually the surveying that we've had, quite frankly, has been extremely successful. It's important for us to know that there's customer satisfaction, because if changes have to be made through our agreement with the registry agents, we would move forward to do that.

The other thing is we keep track, and for the hon. member's own riding of Edmonton-Manning we have a log on all of the calls that come in, for everybody, so he gets an idea. Through our call centre we keep track of this so that we can see if there are trends and complaints, and from September 1 of 1999 we had people from the constituency of Edmonton-Manning phoning and talking to us about the natural gas direct marketers, concerns with that, and we dealt with those. We had a lot of people from that riding talk about how they can access courts and other agencies, so we were able to give direction and send people to the right places to get the right information. We had people that were having contractual disputes that phoned in and wanted to know how they could deal with those things. We had people that talked to us about time-shares. We had people that talked about evictions. We keep track of this, and we do this on a geographical basis.

This tracking system is fairly well perfected now. I think it's an interesting thing for members of this Assembly to be able to call and ask: what kind of calls are coming in from my constituency? Now, we probably won't do this more than once or twice a year because it's quite time consuming to run it off, but it's interesting. It gives you an idea of some of the different issues that are in different jurisdictions and different locations, and then we as an Assembly can deal with those issues. So the tracking system is working because we're able to identify some of the areas.

Housing inquiries were another concern that came out of that riding, along with residential tenancy issues. They all come through the information call centre, and we're able to deal with them with a real live person answering a question and giving information. They deserve to have that information, and they need to know it right now. These are issue-based calls that they want information on. Most of it is probably straight information, and they're not too sure where to go to get it.

I'd say to hon. members that if you ever want to have a frustration, go to the telephone book. In Calgary it's the blue pages and I think it's probably the blue pages in Edmonton as well that list government offices, the three levels of government. None of them are different.

We did a little test. We weren't picking on anybody. We truly were not. We went off-site, and we made 50 random phone calls to numbers that are listed there for various and sundry delivery points. Most of them had the voice-activated response. You phone in. You have a question; you want an answer. It says: if you want this, push 1; if you want that, push 2. You go all the way up to 9, and you

can't remember what 1 to 5 were, and you're frustrated. And then you get another one where actually you get voice mail: "I'm sorry; I'm not in the office right now," or "I'm on the phone. Please leave your number, and I'll get back to you," or "Push zero and somebody will come on," and you maybe then get their voice mail, "I'm sorry; I'm not at my desk now," and it goes on and on. We had calls that were transferred five times and no voice. No voice at all. Or it says, "Leave your name and number, and I'll get back to you." Well, when? In an hour? Four hours? Three days later? Are you supposed to stand by your phone and wait for that call to come? That to me is not service.

By having this call centre and the ability for Albertans to be able to phone and actually have someone pick up the phone and our being able to track that – I think Albertans deserve that. I think it's rude to have these voice mails on. I think it's inconsistent with offering a service. To me that's a disservice. I'd rather no one answer the phone than to have one of those things come on, quite frankly.

The hon. member also talked about the fees and the changes to them. I'm going to go back again. Alberta is the only province that reacted to the Supreme Court challenge from the Ontario Eurig case. We're the only one that did. I have to say, as much as the hon. member opposite is giggling her little head off over there, that my department worked like slaves last summer and fall to go through the fees that are attached. They went through 94 different fee structures, in fact more than that. But they found that 94 of the fees that were charged through to Albertans were beyond the cost recovery amount. That's what prompted the reduction. Alberta voluntarily agreed to follow the process. Nobody was forced to do that, but Alberta said: let's set the trend; let's do this. Other jurisdictions have swept it under the carpet and run it into their legislation. We did not. We chose to look at them, to look and see what was cost recovery, what in fact were the costs attached to charging those fees and those services, and that's what came out in this budget.

Now, when you're going to provide a service, naturally there's a cost attached to that, Mr. Chairman. While this was a budget document, I think it's important. This may be trivial to the members opposite, but in our office it is not. People worked to do this and to back up the costs that were justifiable for all of these different fees and charges. There are not very many governments that actually have a process or a service that they provide where there's no charge at all – no charge at all – not even a nickel.

8:41

When you look under the Business Corporations Act, filing an annual return prior to this review cost \$10. Today there is no charge. A certificate of dissolution was \$50. Today there is no charge. Appointment of a receiver was \$20. Today there is no charge. Printing and searching each corporation used to be \$10. Now it is \$1. We brought these costs down to the bare minimum to recover our costs, and that's what's in this report. If you go to the Alberta companies regulations, again filing an annual return was \$8. Now it's no charge.

I would challenge the members opposite to find another government that has come forward with a plan like this that has actually taken the cost out. Most governments will try to justify why they don't have to do it. They'll build some fictitious amount to put in there. We actually followed through on the commitment that the Premier and the Treasurer made last spring that we would do this job and we would go forward.

I think it's frivolous and unacceptable to myself after I know how hard this department worked with this committee chaired by the Member for St. Albert to do the job, and I think it's unfair for the members opposite to make fun of this and to belittle something that

is actually quite serious. I know that Albertans will receive the benefit of \$55 million going back to them. Most governments increase costs. This one is reducing them.

Those are my comments, Mr. Chairman.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Edmonton-Manning, please.

MR. GIBBONS: I was already there.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I'm sorry.
Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. Well, there's an enthusiastic crowd waiting to respond to the minister. We're having to arm wrestle each other for the opportunity to get up.

You know, I have to admire this minister's absolutely rock-solid, unshakable belief in what she is doing. It is an admirable quality.

MRS. NELSON: I'm a believer.

MS BLAKEMAN: You are.

Now, the system of faith and belief is based on different things, and sometimes there's a factual variance in them. While I admire the minister's unshakable belief that this government has out of the goodness of their heart done something of great benefit to the population, the truth is that the Eurig decision said that you must reduce these fees or be able to justify that this is the cost of the service. I know that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood is positively chafing at the bit to address that particular section of the minister's comments, so having stated that very briefly, I will go on to my questions.

This is an interesting portfolio, and despite the best efforts of the minister to explain it, I have a couple of questions about the goals and the setup for this. The first goal is "a common portal ('gateway') so Albertans receive the services they deserve." The minister was talking about best practices, and I notice that's part of one of the strategies that's in here. My questions are: can the minister provide examples of other systems like this, even close to this, even partly what they're trying to do, that exist in other places? I'm just wondering how well this idea in fact works and if there were any examples the government was able to look at to see what worked and what didn't.

One of my concerns about this system – and I have seen this sort of kick in in some other similar but also different systems – is the idea of homogenization. When you were able to phone, let's say, a government department in the old days, you got someone who worked in that department every day. They knew the ins and outs of what was going on. They knew the specifics of the problem. They may have even heard of a similar issue or problem that had been raised before. They knew how to work their way through the system and who to phone in their own department and go, "You know, I've got somebody on the phone, and they're asking about this thing," and it's not very common or perhaps there's a slightly different twist on it that isn't that usual.

One of my concerns about this one-stop shopping is that it gets so generic that you are unable to get the specifics of the information you're looking for. You've got a call centre; you've got a great big barn of a place with 100 or 200 or 300 people sitting in there with their little StarSet telephones on answering the questions, and they don't actually work in the department. They don't know all the ins and outs of this. They've been given a sort of manual that says: if they're asking about this, give them this information. That's why I'm asking you: has the minister been able to find examples of a

system like this that is working well or even parts of a system like this that is working well? That's my concern.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

I'll give you a related example, for instance. It's about phoning for pension information. They've now got a cross-Canada system federally, and the strangest things happen here because it's hooked up so that wherever you phone – and this works geographically. If you phone from a certain area of the country, you automatically get sent to a certain call centre in a given region. So if by some reason, and in this case bad luck, you initiated or had your pension or worked most of your life in Winnipeg and you're now retired to Vancouver or Victoria – that's more likely – when you phone Canada pension, you get directed or channeled to the B.C. version of it. Well, I'm sorry; they don't have your file, they don't know how to find your file, and in fact they cannot phone nor can you phone the Winnipeg version of things. So everything gets homogenized and put into this great big melting pot that comes down to some kind of brown goo. You don't get any specific information and any substance.

So I'm not criticizing the system. I'm asking here for what kind of research you did, and can you pull examples for me? Did they do it in New Zealand or India or anyplace else where they've been able to address some of these problems and conquer some of the problems we know happen already?

The minister spoke about testing, and I'm wondering. Many years ago I had a job as a 411 operator in Calgary, and our calls used to be monitored. They were automatically pulled out of the lineup, and someone would be listening in. Now I notice – I phoned something the other day, and as I waited, listening to the Muzak and tapping my foot, there was a little electronic voice that came on and said, "Your call may be monitored to ensure quality service," which I think is the same system. The calls get pulled out of the electronic lineup and drop into the monitoring cycle, and someone listens in, one presumes to make sure that the service provider is answering the problems accurately and has treated the customer with respect and that sort of thing.

So I'm just wondering: what's the testing system that you're looking at? Is it one of those electronic pull-offs that I'm describing here? I know that with the telephone company, they actually used to post the results. They would post a transcript of a telephone conversation once a week, I think, and you sort of had to pass by this bulletin board in the coffee room and look and see. It didn't identify who the operator was, but you could read the conversation and figure out if it was your call and you'd made the mistake. It was almost like the way they do baseball games. There's an error, and there's a mistake. No, I'm using the wrong terms. In baseball you can make a small mistake and a big mistake, and that's how they were doing it there. One of them's an error and the other's a . . . Okay; no baseball fans here. Right. Anyway, I'm wondering about that.

The second goal, "excellence in service development, delivery and accessibility." Now, the minister and I had worked together to address concerns that were raised by a small business operator in my constituency, and I'm looking at "consult with the survey community and other key stakeholders to identify improvements for the digital plan registration process." I'm hoping this is still going to be happy news for my small business operator.

8:51

MRS. NELSON: It's still going to be.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. Good. The minister can respond to me about that.

The minister had said something about this goal being "excellence," and then in describing it at a later point the minister had talked about, you know, number one here was the bottom line. I often find that there is in fact a conflict or there's a competition; you can end up with competing factors between excellence and the bottom line. Those two things don't always work hand in hand in partnership very well. So how is the minister planning on addressing this? Because if you're going to shoot for excellence, in many cases that's excellence at any cost. You deliver absolutely the best service, but that does cost money. On the other hand, if you're going for bottom line, you don't usually get excellence. You have competing factors here, and I'm wondering how the minister foresees overcoming that conflict, the almost polarities in those two objectives.

Once again I'm wondering about the privacy issues around the registries. I know that the minister is interested in doing surveys, and in our never ending struggle to protect the personal privacy of people, we know we've had issues around the registries. I'm assuming that the department has continued the work started when the registry section was under Municipal Affairs to try and address those privacy problems that showed up and where people's privacy was being contravened.

I guess the other question is how has that survey, you know, when people walk in – the minister was talking about how lots of people or most people go into the registries to renew their driver's licence or their registration. I try really hard not to, to renew my registration. They do send me a little notice in the mail, and if I get right on it, I can send my cheque and all it costs me is 46 cents. I never have to go anywhere. To me, if I end up in a registry, it means that I haven't done my bookkeeping or my bill paying very well, and I'm now behind and I'm late. The thought of running into a registry to get my snowmobiles and my car reregistered or renewed and then getting nailed for a survey by some helpful young person standing there . . . I don't know about the time allotment that's really been required there. So I'm wondering: what is the minister foreseeing around these surveys?

I get so excited when I make my notes, Madam Minister, that I have trouble later reading them. [interjection] No. It's just that my handwriting is so bad. Okay. On to the next one.

It's really interesting when I look at the number of ministries that have now been sort of torn apart and then put back together in different configurations in this government. I have noted a couple of times that in some instances we're now dealing with superministries. I don't know that that's appropriate to say about Government Services. I don't know that it's become a superministry, but it certainly has taken a number of very clear divisions or branches that were in other places and pulled them together here. I have to say, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, that it's getting hard to follow an audit trail on this. I believe, from what I've seen in the way the numbers are presented in this ministry's budget, that there is a recognition that these entities existed before somewhere else and that that is reflecting itself.

I'm just underlining that, I guess, more than anything else because in some of the other departments that's not true. The way the statements are presented, it's as though everything was always there, but it wasn't. And if you're trying to follow an audit trail, if you're trying to follow comparisons on behalf of the public, that gets really difficult when things have come from other places and there's no reckoning of that. So as a general observation to government, I think that should be followed to be better reflecting that things have come from somewhere else or have gone to somewhere else and have been pulled out of a department.

Around the user fees, when does that kick in, Madam Minister? I just did the renewal on my two snowmobiles and my car. Once

again, how is the administrative fee different if it's an administrative fee on renewing registration on vehicles? Why is there a difference? I think I paid 40 bucks a snowmobile and 50-something dollars, \$58, for the car. If this is an administrative service, there should be no difference between the snowmobile and the car. Yeah, they're bigger vehicles, sure, but as far as administrative processing there shouldn't be a difference there. I just renewed this. My renewal date is the end of March, and like a good citizen I of course have already renewed and paid for that well in advance. So I'm just wondering when that is going to kick in, because it sure didn't affect me this year.

Under goal 3, "a fair and effective marketplace . . . with a high standard of business conduct," I notice there's a strategy to

- continue to work and consult with key stakeholders to review and amend current legislation [under the]
 - Co-operative Associations Act
 - Charitable Fund-Raising Act and Regulations
 - Residential Tenancies Act and Regulations.

Now, the last two were of great interest to me, of course, because I come from the charitable sector and I still represent a number of them in my shadow portfolio of Community Development. So I'm asking what changes are anticipated by the minister to the Charitable Fund-raising Act and also what changes are anticipated to the regulations. Of course, being a representative of the downtown area, I have an extraordinary number of people that live in rental apartments, and the Residential Tenancies Act is an oft-used piece of legislation in my office. So I'm looking again for what sorts of changes are being contemplated there.

The person on the phone. You know, the minister spoke passionately of her belief in having a live person answer the phone. I just find it interesting that we've gone from always having a live person answering the phone to, in cost cutting and supposed efficiencies, electronic systems where almost everybody is on some sort of electronic voice mail. Now we're going back to having real people answer the phone again. I remember that Toffler, I think it was, in a futuristic book coined the phrase high tech, high touch, in which when the world got high tech enough, people would really crave the high touch, which is much more of the human contact and kind of warm, fuzzy feelings. So I'm interested that we've sort of come back to that again.

I don't think it's a bad thing in this particular department to have a human being answering the phone, but I loop back to the point I was making earlier. Is this person really going to know all the ins and outs and intricacies of everything that's happening in all the things they're covering? I suspect there's going to be a problem there, so how do you handle it? Do you end up with sort of experts that are there, and the intake worker can send them over to your expert on the Residential Tenancies Act that's sitting in the call centre and that person takes over the phone call? Or what's anticipated there?

Key performance measures. I've become a convert to these key performance measurements, and I'm really interested in the development of strong key performance measures and measuring the outcomes and the development of all that because I think if used well it can be a very valuable process. But I've seen a number of times in this government where I think I could fairly and rightly accuse them of tailoring the performance measurement to fit whatever the department was doing at the time.

9:01

I have some questions about what's being set out here. In the first performance measure/indicator "three separate groups of Registry customers are surveyed for customer satisfaction." Could we get a bit more specific on that? What are we measuring here: satisfaction

with the time in which they were served, or how long it took to answer the phone or someone to come to the counter? Are we measuring how long it took to process their application? What's the satisfaction? Is it with the efficiency of how it was handled? Because things can be handled instantly but they can be done wrong, you know. So are we balancing that? Are we looking for customer satisfaction in the cost? Now, those are three very different areas, so what is the key performance measurement here?

Then we've got the "percentage of investigations which are successful." Successful how? Successful in that they were accurate, or successful in that they were completed? Isn't what is of more interest in better service for the department dealing with the ones that weren't successful? Why weren't they as successful? What went wrong? If these are the key performance measures, I would ask the minister to review this again, because I don't think they're going to be very helpful in actually giving the ministry information on how to analyze and evaluate what they're doing. Because, again, investigation . . .

Oh, I can't be finished with my time.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

MRS. NELSON: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very pleased that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre raised the gateway project, because this is my pet project right now. I'm really excited about the project, because I think it's long overdue. It came as a result of a number of frustrations, quite frankly, that I experienced and constituents experienced in getting information from government. You're quite right with some of the cautions that you brought forward as to not having it - you used the term homogenized, and you're quite right. People don't want to have the handoff. If they take the effort and they take the time to make the phone call, they want the answer to the question, and they want information that is usable. They don't want something they can pick up off a newsstand. They want accurate information, or why would they make the call in the first place? It's quite often, I've found, that when you phone not necessarily government offices but someone and ask for information, they treat you like an idiot for asking the question in the first place. That's not acceptable. That's not service. To me that is pushing someone off to the side as if they should never have made the call in the first place.

So when we started looking at this - and my deputy will know - when I was in my other ministry, I banned the use of voice mail during the day. I thought it was unacceptable for the shareholder, Albertans, to phone a government office and not get someone answering the phone. After hours that's fair game, but if you're going to work for the shareholder who is the voter, who pays the bills, pays the taxes, then you darn well work for them during office hours or you call forward to someone else, if you have to leave your office, to pick up the phone. But to phone an office and have someone say, "I'm sorry, I'm not at my desk right now" or "I'm on the phone," well, couldn't the phone just have been busy? Or don't answer it; do nothing. But to have something like that come on during office hours I think is inconsiderate, it's rude, and it's lack of service.

I find the same with the banking system. I get fed up with never getting any information. They treat you as if you're an idiot. If you don't deposit with them, they don't exist, but all of a sudden it's reversed.

So service to me has been something that has been lacking and we've let slip. In a number of areas we've let service slip and we've forgotten who the customer is or who the client is or who the

shareholder is or who's paying the bills. We've taken a different approach.

Now, you're right. We're back to recognizing what is important, what must be delivered. Naturally, you have a very valid point. The Department of Government Services cannot be the expert for all ministries. We would never expect to be nor do we want to be; (a) we don't have the background, and (b) we don't have the staff to do it. So the way you link this, the key to this, is that you have each department – it's like a spoke – provide the person who answers the questions that would have done it all along but on a direct basis.

My ministry cannot possibly answer questions in health or over in Infrastructure. We don't have the depth of the policy background for that ministry to give the answer to the call coming in. So instead of the call going to that department, they're linked into the central call centre and the person from their ministry will answer the call. The backup of the detail, if it's more personal, detailed, and long-term, if that person can't take the call, flips immediately to their policy person, not to my department person. We're not in a position to take those calls, but through the central call centre we have that link in. It's like a spoke of the person from that department and that department and that department is tied right in. I don't even have to physically move them into the department location. I can link them electronically into the call centre so that when the call comes in, if it's general information, it can be answered. If it's Infrastructure, boom, the person is on the phone. If it's detailed, on a personal basis, which needs long-term attention, then it goes to the policy person where it should go the first time, and that department person would say which one will handle it. You can't expect my department to be able to do that, but we can have that link with a voice right now, and it's fast.

Through CD disc with data information on: where do I get a health care card? A lot of the calls are general information: how do I get this form; where do I go for that? That can all be put on our CDs.

In fact, our call centre that we opened in the summertime to start this off – now, they'll never let me do this again. I went over and manned the phones one afternoon, and they pretty much fired me. Calls came in from all over, and I got to answer some of the calls. I know at one point I had a call come in that was from one of the northern communities and had to do with a rent-to-purchase situation. This young lady had gone into a rent-to-purchase situation in a mobile home park, and I took the call. I thought, well, that sounds great. But after three days she had been evicted. So, of course, I said: "Well, what did you do in three days? You can't do something that bad in three days," which wasn't what I was supposed to say. Anyway, she told me she'd moved the boyfriend in, and I said, "Oh, well, is there a rule that says he can't be there?" Well, apparently he'd been kicked out. I simply said, "Is he worth it?" She said no. I said: "Then you've answered your own question. Throw him out and stay in the park and that's it." I got accused of being Dr. Laura, so they don't let me answer the phones anymore, which is probably a wise choice. Anyway, she was delighted with the answer, because she came up with it herself. But it works. Now they don't let me on the phones anymore, and I was only allowed on for one day.

But it was the ability of these people to call from all over the province to one number and have somebody pick the phone up, somebody to help them with that information. Now, we had a couple of calls come in that required a lot of in-depth work with them because there was a legal consideration there, so they had to go to the next person behind me that had that kind of information.

9:11

You asked us: where did we dream this up? Well, we looked at

other systems, quite frankly. We looked at the centre link system from Australia that had some components that worked well, but it really didn't do the job that I thought we should be looking at. The whole job. I mean, the components are great. We looked at the Ontario system. We looked at the New Brunswick system and Manitoba's, and they had parts, but this new concept we are putting in in Alberta is a concept that's coming from here that is combining a whole lot of ideas into one component.

Now, we've had a research project going on for the last few months in co-operation with Innovation and Science to see – because one of the things you want to do is: you have to find out what you have already. What kind of hardware do we have, what do we have for availability of resources, et cetera, in departments. You don't want to run out and spend a gazillion dollars on a bunch of hardware on a system that may or may not work. We had to find out: what do we have? Where can we go? What's the cost factor? Can this link occur? Is there a willingness and a readiness within ministries to in fact do that? And sometimes the answer is no. Turf protection.

So you're breaking down barriers. You're breaking through tradition and trying to break those walls down. Some don't like it; others think it's great. You're going through those stages which are sometimes like running the bases and dragging a hairy to get it done, but it is coming together. I think we will have this project in place this next while, and our research project should be complete this month, my deputy says. It'd better, now you're committed, Roger. It'd better be done this month. That will give us the hard core on what the links are and the capabilities of doing that.

I think, quite frankly, that in talking to people, people don't like being treated as if they don't count. They want to have service. I know I do. I get fed up with the idea that I don't matter to these groups when you phone some place. I've phoned all three levels of government, and I think, quite frankly, that it's an abysmal effort. I don't know why people would bother because they don't get anywhere. I've phoned banks, stores – I get so fed up. I refuse to work with answering machines. I just think they're absolutely rude.

MR. DICKSON: Now you know how the opposition feels.

MRS. NELSON: Well, phone your own office. Actually take the time and phone your own office. Find out if anybody answers your constituency office. Find out. It's a rude awakening, folks. People deserve better than that, so hopefully this project will do it, and I think you'll be pleased with the results. I'm quite excited about it because it's something different, and it's not a copy. The others didn't quite do the job.

I wanted to say that the hon. member mentioned also some of the things . . . [interjection] You're right. This department is a linkage between a whole bunch of things that have come together, and we've tried to provide a tracking system as to where they came from. Sometimes it's a little overwhelming with the number of statutes that are in the ministry or under our jurisdiction. Some of them were a little difficult to understand.

I just thought very quickly, Mr. Chairman, that I'd just read these names in so people know what we have, because under Alberta Registries there's the Agricultural and Recreational Land Ownership Act. We've dealt with that today. There's the Business Corporations Act, the Cemeteries Act, the Change of Name Act, the Dower Act, the Companies Act, the Garagemen's Lien Act, the Land Titles Act, the Law of Property Act, the Marriage Act, the Partnership Act, the Personal Property Security Act, the Possessory Liens Act, the Religious Societies' Land Act, the Societies Act, the Vital Statistics Act, the Warehousemen's Lien Act, the Woodmen's Lien Act.

Under consumer services there's the Cemeteries Act, the Charita-

ble Fund-raising Act, the Condominium Property Act, the Co-operative Associations Act, the Debtors' Assistance Act, the Fair Trading Act, which is the new one that combines seven acts into one, the Franchises Act, the Funeral Services Act, the Mobile Home Sites Tenancies Act, the Real Estate Act, and the Residential Tenancies Act. So, Mr. Chairman, there's a lot. There are 29 statutes in this ministry, which is a lot of variety in one ministry. It is busy, and it has drawn things from all over.

The other thing the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre commented on was the protection of privacy with registries. You're bang on. Under our Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy legislation we are obligated as a government to ensure that certain elements of privacy protection are there for Albertans. Now, since being in this ministry, I've had people phone and say: oh, well, just print me everything you have. Yeah, in a pig's eye. Not is the answer; you're not going to get it. There is a law in this province that says no, so we have to make sure. That's why we're still involved with our registries and our vital statistics and our land titles information. There's information in there that is just not going to be made available, and there's no debate or discussion.

We often get people phoning saying: well, give it to us and we'll look after it for you. Well, that's great. Thanks for the offer, but it's not happening because it would be against the law. We are not allowed to give that information out, so it's not going to happen. In our arrangement with our registries it's very clear. It's very clear in the partnership agreement we have with registry agents what can or cannot occur.

So your comments are very well taken, and I appreciate them, because you're on the same path and agree with what it is we are doing, and . . .

MS BLAKEMAN: Careful. That's a bit of a leap.

MRS. NELSON: I beg your pardon. [interjection] Well, I think what you've said is actually the way we – I look at your riding with the calls that have come in, and you're right. You have some keen interest.

Residential tenancy acts are important to you, and hopefully as we track calls, we'll be able with this new system – we've been testing a lot of stuff on this – to say to you: "Member for Edmonton-Centre, here are some of the issues in your area. Let's compare them to the next riding, not to pick or choose or anything else, and see if there's a trend developing." Lets try and use that information effectively.

You know, when I looked at my own riding, I found that the people that had called in from Calgary-Foothills had different concerns, and that's probably because of the location of the riding and the demographics within that riding. So it's an interesting trend.

See, we try to track by postal code, and as we get more information, it will be, I think, something we can all use. My intention would be, then, to send these to everyone so you can have an idea of what's there, not just this side of the House or that side but everyone. We haven't quite got it down to a science yet, but I think this information could be valuable. If you want to use it, go ahead. If you don't, that's up to you. Our system is allowing us to do that, and we're tracking it.

Now, I have a note here from my deputy on the Charitable Fund-raising Act, but if I could read his writing I'd be absolutely dangerous. So could somebody else tell me what we're doing with that act right now, because I can't read his writing. I'll get back to you on that one.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. DICKSON: Thanks Mr. Chairman. I have a number of questions for the minister, and I'm going to be going back and forth between the business plan and the budget.

The first item I'd draw the minister's attention to is on page 132 in the business plan, bullet three: "Adapt and implement new information access standards for all services provided by AGS so that they reflect fair business practices." Mr. Chairman, I know what fair information practices are that have their genesis in the OECD privacy guidelines. I don't know what "fair business practices" have to do with information access standards. I don't know if that's a misnomer. What I'd like is an explanation. I don't know what this means. There is huge interest worldwide, Europe and Quebec and other Canadian provinces, about fair information practices that underlie Bill C-6 at the federal level and other things, so I'm really not clear where the minister is going.

9:21

It then leads me into the second question I have for the minister. Mr. Samoil may have moved on, but he ran a thing called the chief information council. This was a very high-powered group of men, some of the most senior men in the government of the province of Alberta, that looked at information management, at how to sell information, at how to be able to take advantage of technology and market information that was within the possession of the government of the province of Alberta.

To me there's a really puzzling thing, and maybe my question should be directed to Mr. Elzinga or whoever was responsible for the creation of the new departments. What I need from the minister is an understanding of what protocols, formal or informal, what understandings, formal or informal, exist to differentiate what the FOIP office in the Department of Municipal Affairs does, what the information management component of Government Services does, and what the chief information officer and the chief information council do. Madam Minister, through the chair, there are huge areas of overlap just looking at the plan here.

I've looked through the material from the chief information council, and I certainly study the material that comes through the FOIP section of the Department of Municipal Affairs, and I can tell you that there's lots of overlap. I know that you don't want duplication. So I'd like to see what the protocols are, what the boundaries, divisions, what those lines are to ensure that we don't have three different government offices falling over each other, all busying themselves dealing with government information. That would undermine the very thesis the minister is putting forward in terms of why her department exists and what its purpose is.

Related to that, I refer the minister to the budget, page 198. We have a number of things there. The first bullet under Mission: "Provide a secure, high-quality, and innovative gateway to a wide range of government services, including consumer information." Then if you look under Business Plan Goals and Major Strategies, page 198, second bullet: "Continue to streamline . . . access to government information through 'one-window access.'" I mean, one-window access always sounds great, but if we look at what's going on here, what's clear is that we're once again duplicating services.

You see, if I were designing department organization – and I'm not. But if I were in Mr. Elzinga's position or whoever came up with the plan, I would have moved FOIP. I would have moved FOIP into Government Services, because it's absolutely consistent with all these other things you're doing. The minister feigns cardiac arrest. She doesn't know how much fun FOIP is.

The point I'm making, Mr. Chairman, is that I would think we'd cluster activities where they appropriately fit together, and the

division, Madam Minister – well, you asked for it; you’ve got it. You want information management; you want one-stop shopping, Madam Minister through the chair, then take it all. Take it all. Don’t take components 1, 3, and 5 and leave 2 and 4 for somebody else to deal with. That undermines the whole thesis of your department’s mission.

I’m looking for some clarification in terms of why FOIP is orphaned. We’re doing all these other things with information management and government information and access and one-stop shopping. There’s a basic lack of logic in that. This minister can’t reorganize the departments, but she can certainly tell me how she’s worked out an efficient way to be able to ensure that there isn’t a gap between the different services and how that fits together.

Let me bridge to the next item. It’s one of privacy issues, an issue that’s a keen concern of mine. I refer the minister to her business plan. On page 128, the second bullet from the bottom, Madam Minister, you talk about one of your challenges being dealing with “consumer and privacy protection.” On page 129, the fourth bullet from the top, there’s “the need to respect both the right to access . . . records and the protection of privacy in the execution of the Ministry’s activities.” Then we go to the budget book, page 198, and lo and behold, there we see reference again in the last bullet to “current consumer issues.”

Well, one big consumer issue is privacy protection. The minister must have heard that. Everybody I know who’s worked at the consumer affairs department, in whatever incarnation it’s been, will tell you that one of the things people raise as a concern is privacy issues. So what I have to understand is what’s being done in that respect.

Then that takes me to a pet issue of mine, and that is: why is it, Madam Minister, that when it comes to Bill C-6 in the federal Parliament, which is going to regulate electronic commerce in this province for every business in this province, the government in this province hasn’t done what Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Ontario and, I think, Manitoba have all done? They’ve had public hearings to allow business people, to allow consumers to find out what the heck is going on in terms of legislation around protecting consumer information, privacy information, and what the impact is going to be of Bill C-6.

I remember telling her, although this minister may not, when she was doing, I think, Economic Development, about the European Union privacy code. You weren’t familiar with it, but to your credit you had checked up on it, and you got some information on it. Well, it surfaces again, Madam Minister, in your new portfolio.

I have to say that there’s been an abject lack of leadership on the part of your government in terms of informing and involving Albertans in this issue and in this debate. I want to challenge the minister. What is this minister going to do in terms of providing leadership, in terms of alerting Albertans and Alberta businesses and Alberta consumers about some of the trends and some of the issues and the impact of that federal legislation and what the Alberta response is going to be to that?

Madam Minister, you haven’t addressed that in your comments. You haven’t addressed it in your business plan or in the budget, but I’d sure like to know. I’ll challenge her to undertake those same public hearings that other provinces have so people find out what’s going on. We have legislation that only deals with the public sector, and that’s a gap that’s got to be remedied.

Now, the minister has teased us tonight by talking about what’s going on in the constituency of Edmonton-Manning. She’s talked about what’s going on in the constituency there. I hope she’s going to share with me the range of concerns in Calgary-*Buffalo*. My guess is that residential tenancies, safe, affordable housing, is the

number one issue in my constituency. That’s what I determine from my constituency office. I’d like to know if the minister has something different.

I’m going to ask you specifically. Madam Minister, you’ve told us that you’ve gone to a lot of trouble to prepare the information on a constituency basis. Would you tell me why you have done that? We’ve just finished watching Jane Stewart being grilled for two weeks in the House of Commons . . .

MS HALEY: A loss of millions.

MR. DICKSON: No, no. It’s not about the loss of money. [interjections] If you’d let me finish developing . . . [interjections] Okay. Well, don’t jump to conclusion, then, before you have all the information.

9:37

Madam Chairman, the issue is this. What the federal government has been asked is: why do you collect information on a constituency basis? I mean, why wouldn’t you do it on a city basis or on a region basis or northwest Calgary, northeast Calgary, southwest or southeast Calgary? Would the minister share with us on what basis she’s decided to collect information about calls on a constituency basis. I’d be interested in that.

I’d like to ask the minister not just what concerns have been raised in my constituency, but I’m interested in knowing about all 21 Calgary constituencies. I expect my colleagues would like to see what’s going on in terms of Edmonton. I would think, Madam Minister, that you would want to share that information, particularly because it’s been such a big project in your department. So I’ll speak for my colleagues; I can’t speak for the government members. I think my colleagues would like to see that information broken down on a constituency basis. I think we’d also like to see, Madam Minister, your protocols for how you respect sections 37 and 38 of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. There are some strictures, some constraints in terms of the use of personal information, and perhaps the minister could just tell us what protocols have been developed to deal with that.

Moving on. The other item, page 133 in the business plan, has to do with residential tenancies, and I come back and say that the number one issue in Calgary-*Buffalo* is finding safe, affordable housing, a huge, huge issue. Even though there’s a little relaxation in terms of the vacancy situation, it’s still really tight. Now, I remember when the forerunner of your department, the Department of Municipal Affairs I think it was, had undertaken a review of the Residential Tenancies Act with a view to legislative change. There were public hearings, Madam Minister, in Calgary. I went to a couple of them. There were proposals to make some changes. And then it died. It absolutely died. Whether it’s the Calgary Apartment Association, whether it’s tenants in Calgary-*Buffalo*, whether it’s people in any other part of the province, I think they’d like to know what’s going on with residential tenancies.

We have, arguably, the weakest tenancy protection of any jurisdiction in Canada. I challenge you to tell me what province has a weaker piece of legislation. I’d like to know in terms of rent increases, in terms of condominiumization. Madam Minister, you know Calgary as well as I do. You know that conversions of apartments to condominiums is widespread. Nobody is building low-cost housing, multiple-family housing.

We’re talking about displaced seniors. We’re talking about displaced new Canadians. We’re talking about displaced low-income people. This issue of homelessness may not be your task and your agenda, but residential tenancies plays a huge part. We’re

doing a better job in Alberta looking after people who are absolutely on the street. We're not doing a very good job – in fact, I'd say that in the high-rent areas like Calgary, Brooks, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, we're doing a lousy job in terms of allowing people to stay in apartments. There are a lot of people in this province who are that one rent cheque or one rent increase away from the street. I've not seen very much leadership from the provincial government on this issue, Madam Minister.

You tease us by saying on page 199 of the budget book: "Continue to work and consult with key stakeholders to review and amend current legislation," and part of that is the "Residential Tenancies Act and Regulations." Madam Minister, I'm a key stakeholder. I represent the constituency that has the highest density of any of the 83 constituencies in Alberta. My colleague for Edmonton-Centre challenges me and talks about the number of renters she represents. Something like 92 percent of my constituents are renters. Nobody has asked me to be involved in changes to the Residential Tenancies Act. More importantly, nobody has asked my constituents. So maybe it's time. The key stakeholders here, Madam Minister, are those seniors' organizations, groups of tenants, consumer associations. It isn't just the apartment owners; it's not just the apartment managers.

So you might particularize for me: who are the key stakeholders that you're working with now? What changes are you contemplating to the Residential Tenancies Act? Are you going back to the proposal that had been proposed I think it was four years ago, and that was to abolish the Landlord and Tenant Advisory Board in the city of Calgary, its Edmonton counterpart, and replace it with an industry-run thing? Now, that was torpedoed. That was stillborn. But when I see this vague note here with no backup particulars, I wonder whether that issue has been resurrected and whether we're going to see some change there.

Madam Minister, there is lots of concern in terms of speedy access. The provision is now for people to go to the small claims division of Provincial Court when they want to sue their landlord or a landlord wants to sue their tenant. We've got some major delays here. It's not just the statute; it's the processes available to tenants and landlords. I'd like to know what initiative you're taking, what leadership you're providing in terms of trying to find solutions, how you're working with the Minister of Justice, maybe the Minister of Municipal Affairs to co-ordinate those things. I haven't heard you address any of those things, and I hope I'll get some response before it comes time to vote on this.

Finally, let me turn to my other favourite issue: regulations. You talk about the regulations secretariat. Lord knows, my friend from Peace River is a hardworking MLA, and he's been, you know, slaving away trying to reduce the number of regulations. Full kudos to him. But if you want to aggressively reduce those 700 to 800 regulations that each year are proclaimed in this province, you're never going to do it until you have a body strong enough to challenge ministers and deputy ministers who trot out all the regulations, all the laws that they'd like to make in their empires, until you embrace what virtually every other jurisdiction in North America does, which is some all-party oversight of subordinate lawmaking.

I'm going to challenge you, Madam Minister, because you're a minister with a reputation for not being intimidated by departments and bureaucrats and past precedent. I like to challenge any minister who's as bold as you have been and as fearless as you have been to have a look at . . . [interjections] Well, I'm quite genuine. I've watched this minister in the eight years I've been an MLA, and she's brought that approach to every department she's been responsible for.

I'm going to challenge her to take some of the good suggestions

she's heard from the opposition in terms of regulation management. We can do, you know, as good a job as the Member for Peace River has done. We have the evidence that we can do much better. You don't have to look any further than the FOIP regulation that came in in August, September of 1997 that took a whole bunch of statutes and just by regulation took them out of FOIP for a couple of years, and then another regulation came along. You know, there were weak claims. The Information and Privacy Commissioner was consulted about that. He was critical about some of the decisions that had been made. So we can do a lot better in that respect.

I look forward to working with the minister on those matters, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Again I'll try and answer some of the questions. I was quite pleased with the inquiry from the Member for Calgary-Buffalo as to the co-ordination of the IT projects. His comments are quite valid. In the past you saw departments operating as silos, or in isolation, without co-ordinated planning on IT development. That's been a flaw, I think, of most large bureaucracies, that there isn't a co-ordinated planning process to make sure there isn't duplication, overlap, all the things we've all talked about. But when push comes to shove, it's how you eliminate that kind of duplication from continuing to occur and from actually being enhanced. Because when we talk about high tech, it's always easy to say, "We're off to the races, and we're going to replace everything" in isolation as a department instead of as the whole.

9:41

That's why the chief information officer's position becomes absolutely critical in the whole scheme of things. IT plans by department under this restructured program all have to be flowed through the IT chief information officer and through Innovation and Science as the co-ordinating department to make sure that in fact you don't have that duplication and overlap, so that you have co-ordination, so that actually equipment or programs that are purchased today might even be compatible between departments so that they can actually communicate with each other instead of being islands on their own, or in isolation or silos, or whatever the acronym may be for the various departments.

That's not easy, because you know that anytime you make a change, you cause stress and aggression within the system, but as a government we've said that that is the way it's going to be. I sit on the Treasury Board, as you know. I've been there since 1992. When a department comes forward with an IT plan, which everybody has – everybody has an IT plan – the first question that comes up is: what has the chief information officer's program done in review and approval and co-ordination on it? If you haven't hit that, go back to square one, start over, and come through the process, because as you've pointed out, these systems are expensive, and if they're not co-ordinated, you'll never accomplish your goal or your mission.

It's a difficult task, and it's quite amazing how they can go off and create almost lives of their own if left in isolation. A department of a government is no more than a division of a large corporation. There has to be the overall upper-level plan, but the divisions or departments have to fit into that schematic, and they have to be co-ordinated and all going forward.

That's a difficult task. It's a change of attitude, a change of thought, and quite frankly that's not always an easy sell. You talked about me being, I guess, bold in some ways, and that's right, but the expectation of justification is there, because – again, I'll go back to

the comments from Edmonton-Centre—the shareholder is paying the bill, so there has to be an accountability level back to that shareholder, whether it's through IT development, new schematics, regulatory review.

I was most impressed with your comments on regulations. Governments have a tendency to take the book and add, but they don't take anything out. When you put the new one in, you don't take the old one out, and it just goes on and on. That's why, through the regulatory review process that we have, for a new regulation to go into place, it must go through the secretariat, and there's a template that tells you whether it's acceptable or not.

But the key in there is that there has to be a sunset clause. On most regulations coming forward there has to be a sunset clause, which forces review of the existing regulation or it drops off the table and dies. That helps keep the regulation current so that the book doesn't keep building, as happens. I love all my department people and bureaucracy, but sometimes you think people stay up nights thinking of regulations to put in place for the sake of having regulations, and you don't want that. So you've got to put this in place so that that drop-dead date occurs for everything that you possibly can. It drops off the table; it's gone.

Review process is difficult, and it's been a bugbear of mine from the time I was elected that governments put regulation on regulation on regulation, which nobody half the time can understand or interpret anyway. It's costly, it's time-consuming, it's cumbersome, and it's frustrating. So the process of regulatory review through the secretariat is quite fierce, quite frankly, and I think you'll see this year that the hon. member will have more ability on that.

I was a little disappointed. I am not looking at logs for any purpose other than information. I don't have to do this. I mean, I can trash this tomorrow. If you guys don't want the information, say so, and that's the end of that, and it's an exercise we won't be doing. If you'd like the information and if you find it helpful, great; we'll produce it. If not, say so, and our people can do other things. They've got lots of things they can do with their time. They don't need to do this. This isn't an exercise that does anything politically other than provide information. It's data. That's all. [interjection] Well, I'll you what. We just trashed it. It won't be done again, so the instruction is now that we won't be providing that. It's all gone. You don't need that. But if you want it by northern, if you want it by southern, we can do that. We can provide that information. In Calgary we have different issues than in Edmonton, and it's reasonable to look at that. I like to see where information data is going.

MR. DICKSON: We would too.

MRS. NELSON: Well, I offered it, but if you don't want it, that's fine. You don't have to have it.

Now, you asked me what the best business practices and fair information practices are. I think that under the Fair Trading Act there are elements there that are pretty self-explanatory. I think that act is working well. I think that with the co-operation of the number of entities that feed into that Fair Trading Act that is giving us best practices within the province. Where needed there has to be disclosure of information. Sometimes it's voluntary; sometimes it's legislated. There has to be enough information so people know what they're getting into.

The hon. member talked about—what was the other thing? Just a minute. I was just looking for the last one that you asked me about. Oh, I know. I wanted to go back to Edmonton-Centre on performance measures, and I didn't get to you on those. This is a new ministry. We were trying to develop some base performance

measures. I believe in exact performance measures. I don't believe in taking the global or what I call external performance measures and saying that they're my ministry's performance measures, because they're not.

MS BLAKEMAN: It's not useful.

MRS. NELSON: Well, you can include that as an external indicator of successes and how we might fit into that, but we certainly don't create that, so I look at exact ones within our ministry. I call them internal performance measures, what we in fact can exactly do and perform to reach goals, not the external side. We've struggled with that somewhat. We haven't maybe got them as specific as we will, but I think next year's process will give us an ability as to how we can have more specific internal measures. So they aren't as specific as they might be in this business plan, but I think we need that year on the reorganization and on our system development to be able to provide you with more specifics on the performance measures. We're trying to come back with that, and we know there have to be some improvement areas there. I think, Mr. Chairman, one of the hon. members wants to speak.

We will keep you going on that. As we go through this next year in building our business plan and enhancing that, we should have more specific measures in there. It was a good comment, but I don't believe in fabricating performance measures and relying upon external factors as a measurement of performance of a government department. That to me is not reality, so we will be dealing with reality throughout this year's planning process and restructuring model. So I think next year you'll see a little tighter set of performance measures in our business plan.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'd rather see them now.

9:51

MRS. NELSON: I don't blame you. I would too, but because of the restructuring model we're going through, they are a little more general than any of us would probably really want, but they'll get tighter as we go on. Our main objective was to have customer satisfaction, and that was the one thing we would be able to measure through surveying, but we'll come up with some more key performance measures.

Oh, Bill C-6. That was another thing. That's an important bill, and you were right. You did mention that to me. When I chaired the ministers of consumer affairs meeting in the fall, in November I believe it was, in Banff, we raised the issue of Bill C-6 with Minister Manley from the federal government. Well, we all know electronic commerce is going to occur and going to be one of the key methods of doing business and trading in communications for the future. There are some concerns there from the consumer protection side and from the business protection side as to what safeguards are going to be coming into play prior to the full indoctrination of the e-commerce.

MR. DICKSON: We could do our own.

MRS. NELSON: You're quite right.

There was an example in the United States about three weeks ago where actually the FBI got involved with intrusion into the e-mail system, and that sends a signal and the signal is: people be careful. Be careful what you're doing until you know about the safeguards that are in place.

As ministers from across Canada—we compared notes from coast to coast with the other ministers—we said that the message is: what can we put in place to build in those safeguards now?

MR. DICKSON: Provincial legislation.

MRS. NELSON: Well, provincial legislation saying thou shalt be a good person and not do bad things on e-commerce doesn't quite frankly cut it. There has to be more than that. There has to be some concrete protection built in the system. I mean, I can send a message out and say: everybody be nice and friendly and good. Well, fine, but that isn't necessarily going to provide the concrete protection that needs to go into the system to make sure those safeguards are in place.

Some of the things I've found from this ministry quite frankly are shocking. Individuals will go on a system and put their Visa number on a system without any protection on it and then wonder when something goes wrong. Well, you go: "Hello. Wake up." You're putting your credit card number on a system that's going all over to a gazillion people, and you have no ability to know where it's going.

People buying off a system. I had a friend of mine who bought their truck off the Internet. Did he even see it? No. "Well, how do you know it's even going to run?" "I bought it off the Internet." Well, hello. Wake up. A little bit of common sense has to come into this as well.

But how do you put some of those connections in place or the consumer protection that we've had manually into now an automated system? There's been such a promotion of this, but where are the safeguards? Those concerns are very valid, and C-6 is an issue for us. I say that e-commerce is the way of the future, but what are the consumer protection issues? That's what we asked Mr. Manley to work with the provinces on so that we could have a coast-to-coast mechanism of doing consumer protection. We have an ability through the CanShare program to be able to compare bad actions or bad business practices coast to coast. Why would we not be able to put in place a consumer protection process so we could protect consumers coast to coast?

MR. DICKSON: You could do public hearings too.

MRS. NELSON: Well, public hearings might be one way of doing it, Member for Calgary-Buffalo, but I think we need to have something technologywise that we can present at that hearing to provide that kind of protection for the system. I heard people say that at one point you could block some of the information on the Internet, like pornographic information, from your children. Well, that lasts about 20 minutes. The kids are too smart today. They can go in and break the code, and they're into it like right now. We can't because our generation didn't learn how to do that, but the younger generation can sure do it, in about 20 minutes, because they're experts at it.

We have to be ahead of the game here and build some of those tools in place and make sure we also make consumers aware of some of the pitfalls of getting involved in this because it's the thing to do. Well, the thing to do can be a very costly venture, so we have to put warnings out, consumer alerts out, and make sure that when we move forward on this, we do it the right way.

I have to say that the response from the federal government to our suggestion on C-6 was not that warm. It was not that inviting for the provinces to have an ability to join together. In fact, they were a little annoyed that we shied on the side of caution, but I do think we have to stand firm, and we as Alberta were able to get the other provinces onside and alert them to the caution, and they agreed with our position. We didn't get the feds onside, but that's not unusual, so we will have to work in spite of it to come up with some kind of plan. It's a good caution, and I appreciate you being onside with the

concern that's there, because I do share that with you.

Again, on Bill C-6. We have worked actually with the other ministries – federal and intergovernmental affairs, Municipal Affairs, Treasury, Economic Development, and Justice – on the concept of Bill C-6, and we have all taken a message to our counterparts with the federal government and other provinces to say that we have to work on this. So there is cross-government support to err on the side of caution to make sure we don't go out in front on this bill and leave people in jeopardy, because it would be very easy to do. So we have to be careful as to what we do, but I think it's incumbent upon all of us, quite frankly, to also get the message out to people: please, don't just jump on there and give every bit of information you have. There has to be almost a consumer watch. You know, we can put all kinds of rules and regulations in place, but you can't protect people from themselves. You can only give the best advice and the best framework possible, but they have to exercise their own caution and their own restraint from getting involved in some of these things.

Again on the regulatory process. We need to review these regulations and make sure they're co-ordinated. Our secretariat is working. This is a full secretariat now, and they do a very good job looking at every regulation that comes forward. We will keep pushing that, because the objective is to reduce regulations, cut the cost of compliance for people coming to do business with government, and to streamline the process. Your points are well taken. I appreciate them, and if there's a better methodology or process, we're open to some suggestions and we can look at doing that.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I guess I've answered all the questions I can tonight.

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to bring a couple of things to the attention of the minister. I wanted to just maybe make the comment that if she's got some people who are really good at regulations in her department, they're going to need those people when they bring in the health bill tomorrow. They're going to need lots of regulations, good regulations. So you keep those people working, Madam Minister, and I'm sure we'll come up with some good regulations for tomorrow.

I wanted to draw the minister back to this whole user fee argument. I'm glad user fees are down, but I guess I'm surprised at the minister and her comments. There's an awful lot of chest thumping in relation to this. I sit back and I want to, if I can, just remind the minister that although there is a reduction in these user fees, some 73 user fees I believe . . .

10:01

MRS. NELSON: Ninety-four.

MS OLSEN: Ninety-four. Let's just reflect back on some of the comments made by the Premier, and let's think about why we're here.

First of all, Madam Minister, you can pound your chest and say: yeah, we did it; Alberta was the first. But you know what? I have a factum here that's been tabled in the Legislature in fact a couple of times. It's the factum of the intervenor, the Attorney General of Alberta, and really what the Attorney General of Alberta was doing was intervening and supporting the position of the Ontario government that user fees should be allowed. Right?

What the questions were – and I'm doing this in relation to this user fee discussion, because I think it's an important part of it.

There were two points of issue, and one was:

Is the probate fee, which was imposed by Ontario Regulation 293/92, which was made under s.5 of the Administration of Justice Act, R.S.O. 1990 . . . invalid on the ground that it is an indirect tax that is outside the legislative authority of the province of Ontario under s.92(2) of the Constitution Act, 1867?

The second issue, Madam Minister, that this whole user fee notion was constructed on was:

Is the probate fee, which was imposed by Ontario Regulation 293/92, which was made under s.5 of the Administration of Justice Act . . . invalid on the ground that it was imposed by a body other than the Legislature of Ontario in contravention of s.90 (incorporating by reference ss.53 and 54) of the Constitution Act, 1867?

I want to draw the minister's attention to what the factum says and what it supports. So really what the government's position was:

On the first question, The Attorney General of Alberta, Intervenor, submits that the probate fee is not invalid as it is a charge in relation to a valid regulatory scheme and as such, is not an indirect tax. In the alternative, it is a fee for service and not an indirect tax.

That's the Alberta factum, Madam Minister.

On the second question the province of Alberta suggested that there has been no contravention of section 90 of the Constitution Act. So it's great to thump your chest, but let's not try to fool everybody and say that you guys were here and this government brought in and reduced these taxes for the sake of Albertans.

Let's talk about that tax reduction. It's somewhere in the area of a 6 cents per day tax cut for the average Albertan, so let's not cloud this issue. Yes, user fees had to go down. You guys put them up, and they had to go down, and you were forced to put them down. In fact, Madam Minister, on the user fee issue the Premier said in *Hansard* on February 14, 1995, that

quite simply these adjustments are to bring user fees in line with the cost of providing the services.

. . . I would say that user fees have been brought in line with the cost of providing the services.

That's from the Premier in 1995. So your government, Madam Minister, has said: hey, you know, this is the cost of service. Wrong, wrong, definitely wrong, and we see that in these charts that you've put out.

The Premier also said again in *Hansard*, on February 15, 1995, that "a fee for service . . . is not a tax. It is not a tax." Guess what the Supreme Court of Canada said? If you don't bring it down to cover cost of service, then you need to bring it to the floor of the Legislature and call it a tax. But this government couldn't do that because they've been telling Albertans that the user fees are not a tax, and in fact the courts ruled differently.

The Premier says again, on March 4, 1996, in *Hansard*, that "fees were adjusted . . . to reflect the cost of providing the services." So, Madam Minister, we're getting a lot of chest thumping, and maybe what the government should have done is put their tail between their legs and run the other way.

The other thing I find interesting, Madam Minister, is that between the time of the Eurig estate decision and February 24, 2000, the Klein government collected \$80 million in additional user fees and charges from Albertans. Instead of freezing those charges, you still collected \$80 million knowing – knowing – that they were taxes or that those fees exceeded the cost of service.

So, Madam Minister, don't pound that chest too hard, because it's just not the way it is. What you say, Madam Minister, and what has been done are two different things. I think that's very important to

bring to this debate, because there are a lot of things that aren't quite true.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to get in two more questions to the minister. Madam Minister, how is the phone system, the one phone call, one-stop shopping – I'm going to deal with the fact that people are human. You will have noticed this in your constituency office. When people phone up, they usually don't have the analysis to go: my problem is X, and I want to know Y. They phone up and start this story about how the cat ate their canary because the birdcage was on the windowsill, and it fell off because the window was open because the landlord had the heat up too high. It's a 20-minute story before you can dig out the fact that they didn't get their pension cheque that week and they're unhappy with their accommodations as a result. So how is the system set up to deal with human frailty? Question number one.

Question number two. As an MLA in this Assembly I would assume that I would be aware of the phone number, the wonderful, magical phone number that will get me access to your new system here, and I don't. Is there some sort of publicity campaign that's going to go around about this? Will the new number be coming out in bold print in the blue pages in the front of the major phone books? How are people supposed to know about this? I mean, I'm glad that I'm in the Assembly tonight and I heard of this. You know how often I have hoped that people would read the *Hansard*, and that way citizens in Alberta would be able to find out about this wonderful new program, but how else are they supposed to hear about that?

So that's the two questions I had. I understand that the minister doesn't have time to respond, and I'm happy to receive the response in writing. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Question. Question.

10:11

THE CHAIRMAN: There is no question in subcommittee. What you can do is rise and report progress to the committee.

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Chairman, I move that we rise and report progress.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. The hon. Minister of Government Services has moved that subcommittee C rise and report progress to the committee. All those in support of the motion to rise and report progress, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE CHAIRMAN: Those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: Carried.

[The subcommittee adjourned at 10:12 p.m.]