

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, November 14, 2000**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 00/11/14

[The Speaker in the chair]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

head: Government Motions

Referral of Supplementary Supply Estimates

23. Dr. West moved:

Be it resolved that the message of Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, the 2000-01 supplementary supply estimates for the general revenue fund, and all matters connected therewith, be referred to the Committee of Supply.

[Debate adjourned November 14: Ms Blakeman speaking]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to make a few comments about Motion 23 and the request in that motion to consider the supplementary estimates that are before us and then to move on with them to Committee of Supply.

When you look through *Beauchesne*, *Beauchesne* outlines the conditions under which supplementary estimates are to be presented, and the conditions there laid out are five. One is "for a further grant to an existing service, in addition to the sum already appropriated." So the intent is that a program has for some reason or other expanded or the moneys originally voted for were insufficient, and there's need for adjustment. One would hope, Mr. Speaker, that given the kind of assurance we've had from the government in terms of the development of the business plans and the kind of attention that has been supposedly devoted to the budgeting process, the instances of this first condition occurring would be rare, that with the kind of planning we're assured goes on, there would be few instances where the government had to come back to the Assembly or had to make additional expenditures because of not being able to plan adequately in the first place.

The second condition that *Beauchesne* lists is "for a new expenditure on behalf of a newly-enacted statute," and if you look through these supplementary estimates that are before us, I don't believe any of the requests that we see meet that condition. Now, I may be wrong, but from a cursory glance through them, I haven't seen that reason given for any of the supplementary estimates that we find before us.

Beauchesne 946(3) indicates that supplementary estimates are appropriate "to meet the cost created by an unexpected emergency," and I think that in at least one case the increase in money required for fire fighting in the province under the Department of Environment is a legitimate sum that comes before this Assembly for ratification. It is something that is very difficult to predict, and one would expect that there would be occasions when that kind of contingency arises and has to be accommodated in budgeting through supplementary requisitions. So the odd instances in the estimates where this happens, I think, are worthy of support and one can understand, and I'm sure that ratepayers would understand.

The fourth condition that *Beauchesne* puts on supplementary estimates is that they may be used "to transfer funds from one Vote to another." Again, given the kind of planning that we expect goes on through the business plans, one would expect that we wouldn't find those kinds of adjustments in the supplementary estimates before us this evening.

The fifth condition that *Beauchesne* lists for supplementary estimates is "to extend the purposes of a Vote."

The reasons for supplementary estimates are laid out fairly carefully in *Beauchesne*. They do give a fair amount of latitude, but in general you get the feeling in reading *Beauchesne* that they are there and designed to cover the unexpected and to cover unexpected housekeeping difficulties that arise during the budgeting year, Mr. Speaker, and not for major program expansion.

It's for that reason I find it quite incredible that, for instance, in Infrastructure we find a request for almost half a billion dollars, an extraordinary amount of money being asked for in terms of Infrastructure. When you read the reasons, the need seems to be more than justified. Who could argue against money for health care facilities? Who could argue against money for school facilities? But the government had that information when the budget was made up. This is a no-brainer. They didn't have to come with this estimate. They had audited school facilities across the province. They'd sent out an MLA committee across the province. They had been told that there was a backlog of \$750 million worth of expenditures needed in the area. They ignored that advice at budget time and, lo and behold, came back with a supplementary estimate for \$419,000.

I think, Mr. Speaker, that really tests the outline in *Beauchesne* for supplementary estimates and really makes a bit of a mockery of the budgeting process itself. What sense does it make for this Assembly to spend the amount of time that we do examining the budget at budget time to have sums of this amount excluded from those budgeting plans and then to appear at this time as a supplementary requisition? It just does not seem to make sense or to be prudent planning when you come this late in the game with this kind of request.

As we go through the estimates – and we will in the next couple of days – I think that will be repeated again and again. We're going to find money included in these estimates that should have been part of the regular budgeting process, and I think that the government in many instances is going to be hard pressed to explain why that money appears now as a supplementary estimate and wasn't part of the original budget.

I go back to Infrastructure again, because the way that has unfolded over the past number of months has been rather disconcerting. We've had a series of announcements. In the last year there have been \$237 million in school infrastructure announcements alone, and the distribution of those amounts, I think, is open to question, not only the distribution but the priorities that were followed in allocating those amounts. I've heard from school jurisdictions across the province that their priorities have been ignored and that in some cases they're hard pressed to understand why they've received the money that they did and also hard pressed to explain why projects that they and their local communities have deemed very important have been ignored by the Department of Infrastructure. So there are problems in this particular area with the amounts and the distribution of those amounts.

8:10

For instance, of the \$237 million announced, Edmonton Catholic schools and Edmonton public schools, which educate about 19 percent of the children in this province, received \$6 million, or a little less than 3 percent of the moneys that were distributed. So one starts to look at this supplementary estimate with a bit of a jaundiced eye, raising some questions about whether it's good planning that has brought these estimates before us or if there aren't some other factors that are playing high in the government's mind that are responsible for the decisions that are being made.

In the end, Mr. Speaker, of course, we'll end up supporting the

motion, because the money that is being put in place is money that we argued for at budget time and prior to budget time, is money that was required, and we're glad to see it here. But the bottom line is that it makes a mockery of the business plans and the kind of long-range planning that this government pretends to reflect in that budget they present to us in the spring. [interjection] I hear the minister from somewhere over there saying, "Not true," and I'll be delighted when he joins in debate and explains half a billion dollars worth of infrastructure money that they just neglected to include in budgets.

I think that with those comments, Mr. Speaker, I'll conclude and look forward to the debate on the individual department budgets. Thank you.

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

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise to speak in favour of Motion 23, although I have a number of remarks before giving up the floor, having this opportunity to chide the government for their budget practices or lack thereof. Any government that has more spending in a supplementary budget in any particular area than they have in the original budget is doing something wrong somewhere.

Certainly it is difficult in this province that has to rely on indeterminate estimates of income to lay out a total and complete plan to decide what has to be spent in any one area, but it does not mean to say that the expenditures could not be expanded and could not be laid out properly so that all those that rely on public funding would know from whence it came, and it wouldn't be a big surprise to them that suddenly there's money available for infrastructure that is so sorely needed. There has been many a proposal to spread that income, which I'll get to a little later.

If you listen to the Auditor General year after year after year, he would much prefer that a budget be laid out in increments such that it could be easily understood by those of the public that are interested to find where the government intends to spend the income at various levels of income. That does not seem to be the case in this government. This government is a seat-of-the-pants expenditures government, and it's quite obvious. There's been more money spent in supplementary estimates . . . [interjections] There seems to be a great deal of chirping from a minister or two on the other side. If the other members are so willing to engage in debate, I wonder if perhaps they'd stand in their places and do so and defend this supplementary estimates package either in its entirety or even in part, but of course they will not do so, because chirping is so much easier to do from the sidelines as opposed to engaging in debate that they're not very good at.

Speaker's Ruling Relevance

THE SPEAKER: Please remember that the matter under discussion before the House now is a committal motion to put it before a committee. This is not a time to defend anybody's estimates. We haven't got to the point yet where the Assembly would even deal with them.

MR. WHITE: That's true, sir. The admonishment comes from both sides. Thank you, sir.

Debate Continued

MR. WHITE: It is true that it matters little what the debate is if the chirping from the other side is unfocused, and of course it always is, because it's never on record. It matters little what they say, and they just interrupt debate.

A budget should be open for review and scrutiny by the public and should be understood to be a document that they can rely upon. Certainly last spring's budget could not be relied upon, and some X billions of dollars are readjusted in this supplementary estimate package, which will be more fully debated in detail in each element. Suffice to say that this is not a document that could and should be looked at with any great deal of joy by those who would like to know that a government is dealing with their funds in a competent manner. To spend as you go may do well if you are running a paper route, but this is a province of some note and distinction and deserves the consideration of some expenditures.

This government doesn't seem to believe that any amount of debate on any subject is worth while, notably the number of sitting days that we sit – actually, I think P.E.I. sits marginally less than the province of Alberta – to hear about the estimates. We double up on the estimates debate, which is in many cases hardly a debate in any event at all. The opposition or any members of the public are excluded from the decisions as they relate to individual expenditures. I wonder why the people of Alberta don't express themselves in the way of votes now and again and say: look; we'd like to have a little more information than this. But I suppose we will be doing that early next year to find out whether in fact they do want to know more or not.

The income in this province and its fluctuation from year to year is the point of difficulty, and this member certainly recognizes that and knows that it cannot be accurately predicted. But it can be predicted as to the various levels of expenditures that could move up with the income level, and certainly a better estimate could be made of the income if the government didn't lowball the income estimate, as it has done for the last six years.

Then when dealing with the income, it might be a little creative to share that income with the municipal levels of government and perhaps the school boards such that there would be some elasticity in all of their budgets and being able to budget and plan for some capital expenditures, perhaps, that might be on a wish list that each and every one of those levels of government is quite capable of preparing and debating in their own circles. One would think that might be an answer to deal with this stop-and-go budgeting that seems to be prevalent in this Legislature. Of course, there's one debate that would be good to have in a budget debate, not a supplementary budget debate but a full and open debate – if it had to be in a supplementary debate, so be it – and it is the rate at which the extraction of natural resources takes place in this province. The resources are finite, particularly the resources that relate to oil and gas and conventional and synthetic crude. Certainly there's a learning curve that members of the public could and would like to go through. After all, the Legislature is, in the government's own words, a mere steward of the resources, and the ownership rests with all Albertans.

8:20

Quite frankly, the debate is long overdue. It should in fact start in schools, in junior high schools and high schools, and should continue with the public, because the resource runs out at some point, and whether it runs out in the lifetime of those members that are here, in the lifetime of the children of those that are here or their children's children, it will run out. Some kind of planning and knowledge in that area by the owners of the resource – the knowledge base should be up there such that proper budgeting can take place so that there is something left over for them in their pursuit of life and happiness.

The other area that could and should be explored is the ramifications of further development of renewable resources. I'm

thinking of a wide-ranging debate on the forestry industry and how the longevity of that business should be debated fully and to what extent tourism and ecotourism and the like can supplant some of that income and to the extent at which there should be a much longer horizon on the cropping of those resources. Currently, as members will know, management agreements on Crown land, owned by all the members present as well as all the members of the province of Alberta – it is their resource – are being managed but on a very short-term basis, when long-term considerations for the leaseholder should be in the works. Quite frankly, that debate does not occur in this Legislature. You'd think it would, because it is fundamental to the foundation of a budget, and it certainly isn't something that can be structured quickly. It has to be an ongoing debate such that all Albertans would understand.

There is, of course, the other consideration on income. As the income level of the general revenue fund through the various forms of royalties rises, the owners of that resource end up paying more for it. To explain that simply for natural gas, a year ago natural gas was at A rate, and with the advent of the Chicago price being applied to Alberta with the increased take-away capacity, or the capacity of taking the gas out of the province – without any debate we might end up with volumes on that, but that being said, at the rate at which that's going out, the income level is substantially higher. Of course, the price is substantially higher, too, so that the average citizen – while their government pocket is being filled up with all the extra revenue, their individual pocket is being depleted rapidly. There is no offsetting compensation there, and this member would think that it would only be reasonable that every time the price of a resource that is owned by the citizens of Alberta went up, then the price they paid for that resource through their rate would be commensurately reduced or at least held in check so that particularly those who are on fixed incomes don't end up lesser for the experience of owning a resource that has an increased value.

Likewise, it happens in pumped gasoline too. Every time the price of conventional crude goes up, the provincial coffers get filled to the brim, and the average soul out there gets told: oh, no, no; that's a good thing for you because your government is making money at it. Unfortunately, it hits the old pocketbook every time you have to put some money in that tank, particularly if you're living out of the cities, where you have to do a lot of driving just to live. I mean, it's a fact of life that one has to put money in the tank just to survive. That is a deterrent from being a good citizen of Alberta, when you cannot rely on your government to give back some of that money that they're putting in the provincial coffers at your expense.

Now, there are a number of areas on this that I could and should cover, but those are the ones that I wanted to cover most importantly now in supplementary estimates. It is simply not reasonable to come to the Legislature and in two days or less decide that the expenditures are in order simply by putting through a buffed blue book or – what colour do you call that? – a bad buffed book and describe it as good spending and is certainly not the way this member would like to see estimates and the expenditures in the province of Alberta. Certainly the citizenry should be able to count on a little better method of determining what expenditures are reasonable in a province of this magnitude without having to wait till the very last minute to figure out what it's going to be expended upon.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, the only other major comment and complaint one has is that these expenditures, while being presented in the Legislature, are being presented on an ad hoc basis throughout the calendar year and don't seem to take any form of measure and any

forethought at all. It just seems to be governing by the seat of their pants and doing the best you can with the dollars that flow in at any moment and in the time that you can get a caucus meeting together in order to expend those funds.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the members for their time and leave some more time on this matter for others. Thank you, sir.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to respond to the committee motion we see before us this evening that will bring in, once again, more supplementary estimates by this particular government, a government that tries to, it apparently appears, outdo itself each time new supplementary estimates come in to see how much money they can spend in that particular manner.

Earlier this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, I believe it was, the Member for Medicine Hat complaining that we were debating what is in fact a debatable motion in this House. He didn't think it was necessary to do so. In fact, it's very necessary to do so, and it would be frivolous and irresponsible on behalf of the Official Opposition if they did not seriously undertake their role as the watchdog of government in terms of watching what comes forward from this government, reporting it to the people of the province, and then responding back to the government in terms of the kinds of responses we get, and that is what we're doing this evening. If this government didn't try to rush through agendas in a fashion that gets them in and out of the Legislature as soon as possible, we would have much more opportunity to gather feedback from Albertans and be able to share that with the government. My understanding is that government doesn't necessarily want to hear that feedback because it isn't always positive, and it certainly isn't positive when we talk about supplementary estimates and that particular process.

Mr. Speaker, here we have a government who has, since my stay in this Assembly, which is more than seven years now, prided themselves on their ability to copy or model business models in terms of the way that they process information and the way they assemble their budgets and spend their money. They like to brag about that all the time, and we hear about it constantly, but in fact when you take the time to examine the processes, it isn't the case at all. What they've taken is an abridged form of business practices and manipulated them to a point where they can say that this is what they're doing, but they don't follow any best practices at all that I've been able to discern over these particular years.

In fact, I have paid close scrutiny to this because it is my area of expertise, Mr. Speaker. Long-term strategic planning, budgeting, management budgeting are areas that I do have some knowledge of. This government does not follow any of those processes and in that case are not responsible in the management practices that they do follow.

8:30

I would like to say that this is definitely something that has to be promoted by political agenda as opposed to expertise within government departments, because it is my experience that the government employees working in the various departments are very competent people. They certainly know how to benchmark, how to do strategic planning, how to meet budgetary line items, how to manage within the systems they have. They know best practices, and they honour those practices when they are allowed to do so, Mr. Speaker. So we have what should be an excellent business model that this government could follow in terms of estimates, revenue projections, and spending given the kind of competence there is

available within the various departments. On one side we have that, and on the other side we have the political agenda that drives this government and at the final end those decision-makers who decide how the money will be spent, when it will be spent, and how it will be accounted for.

Well, there is a deep valley between these two thought processes and management practices, Mr. Speaker, because what the government actually does is not in fact a competent business model that they have the capabilities to perform by. You would think that they would be able to bridge that big valley and be able to marry their political agenda with a best practices kind of mandate and go forward in a very responsible manner, but they don't.

It does take real vision to be able to do that, and we don't see that kind of vision from this government. We don't see a five-year, 10-year, 15-year, 20-year kind of profile from this government where we are looking forward to a future that really benefits Albertans. What we see here is the kind of planning that gets us from election to election. This is gerrymandering of a type that is absolutely appalling to witness every year. You take the money and you adapt it to the kind of manner that you wish, which meets a political agenda, Mr. Speaker, rather than management practices. It isn't the Liberal way in this province. That's for sure. This is the Tory way that we have seen certainly in practice for all of the years that I have been in this Legislature. What that means is that several times a year we get supplementary estimates in here that are asking for huge amounts of dollars, millions and millions, billions over the course of the years, that we see being asked for in a practice that rewards and punishes groups in areas in this province.

Why would they do that, Mr. Speaker? Well, we can easily see why if you take a look at it from a political agenda perspective. People know that they can be rewarded. Areas know that they will be rewarded for a variety of activities, for the performance of certain kinds of criteria, and that they will not be rewarded if they don't follow through with the kind of performance that the government is expecting. We hear that from municipalities all the time. I was out not that long ago a couple of hundred miles west of Edmonton visiting a few towns, who said that they would never again elect an opposition member because the flow of funds stopped to their counties and to their municipalities.

Well, those are grave concerns that these areas have. Why is that? Because what we see happening here – and we see it in this supplementary estimates when you take a look at it on a page-by-page basis. If you take a look at Infrastructure, if you take a look at some of the other areas that we see in here, Health and Wellness particularly, we see spending coming forward that easily could have been incorporated into any kind of minimal long-term strategic planning, and it didn't happen. You can't tell me that overnight you know that you need another road or another bridge or another hospital or another form of infrastructure, Mr. Speaker. Those needs don't occur overnight. They don't occur in six months. They build up over a series of years, and if you're doing strategic planning in any kind of responsible fashion, you know that, you work it into your budget, and you project the need, not like what happens here where the money just gets dumped to address whatever particular pressure point, to use the Premier's phrase, that happens to pop up in that particular quarter of that particular year.

MRS. NELSON: The forest fires are kind of important.

MS CARLSON: Well, one of the hon. members is talking about forest fires, Mr. Speaker, and I was waiting to address that particular issue until we get to the Environment estimates, because while on occasion you will have the requirement that we see in *Beauchesne*,

which says, "to meet the cost created by an unexpected emergency," which can be forest fires, for the most part the dollars spent on forest fires this year could have been projected and could have been planned for.

AN HON. MEMBER: That is not correct.

MS CARLSON: That is correct, Mr. Speaker, and I would direct that particular minister's attention to the estimates where they talk about the dollars that were spent. This particular time I believe it was "to support forestry companies' efforts to improve forest management practices related to fire risk."

Now, fire risk didn't occur overnight. Companies have known for years and have been requesting and wanting to have improved forest management practices. Many of them have undertaken improved management practices on their own. It's commendable that the government would support . . . [interjection]

AN HON. MEMBER: Why don't you join in the debate? [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. members, hon. minister. The tradition is that we have one person, one hon. member, speaking at a time. Right now we've got two or three engaging in lively debate back and forth, and neither of those two or more individuals was recognized. Hon. Minister of Gaming, we only have one member recognized, and that is the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

While I'm on my feet, just if you could engage the chair as opposed to addressing several of the ministers who are inappropriately making comments, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll try not to allow them to further provoke me, although I have to tell you that it's a little tough.

Debate Continued

MS CARLSON: Just to settle the fire question, which seems to be a highly contentious issue – and I understand that the former Minister of Environment is particularly touchy about this because he happened to be the minister at the time. I am not saying that you can 100 percent predict what the forest costs are going to be in any given year in terms of fires. However, Mr. Speaker, what I am saying is that the department does have models they follow that give them a range within the forest fires, and certainly in bad years, like we've had for the past couple of years, they are going to have to come back in here, undoubtedly, and ask for supplementary moneys. I have no problem with that. What I have problems with on the fire side is that they didn't do enough planning to understand that the best thing they could be doing in this province is helping forest companies' efforts to improve forest management practices and budget for that.

Why do they have to come back for more money for that? We're talking a lot of money here. We're talking \$2 million that they've asked particularly for that. That exactly can be budgeted. There's no way you can tell me that it's impossible to project what they might have put in the budget in terms of that area, a very necessary area. Perhaps if they had spent those dollars in previous years instead of gutting this department, like they have in the past, we wouldn't be having all of the kinds of problems we have right now with fires. So that is something that I think could be addressed.

In addition to that, when we take a particular look at forest dollars

this year, they talk about \$1.2 million “to fund higher than budgeted cost of improvements made to forest airstrips used in fire fighting.” Well, why are we waiting to upgrade those strips until we’re in the middle of a fire? Once again, Mr. Speaker, a little forethought, a little strategic planning on the government’s side and we could be addressing those issues.

Now, you and I both know that when you’re spending infrastructure dollars, it’s a lot more to spend when you have to react on the spot than when you can step back from the situation and do some planning. Weather conditions, availability of suppliers and supplies, all of those conditions create additional costs when you have to spend the money right now rather than being able to plan for it.

So what I’m saying is: why isn’t this government responsible in that kind of manner? When they talk about following best practices, as industries do, then why aren’t they following best practices themselves, Mr. Speaker? Those are exactly the kinds of reasons why we need to be able to debate the introduction of supplementary estimates into this Assembly, because this government mismanages the dollars of this province, and it is appalling that it happens. People need to know that it happens, and people need to know that when they come in with a thick book like this asking for more dollars at this time of the year, what they’re doing, I say and many people in this province say, is buying votes. That is not a responsible way to govern.

Almost to the dollar everything that they’re asking for in these supplementary estimates could have been forecasted and budgeted for properly. If they were in fact any kind of a company, particularly a publicly traded company, the whole front bench would have been fired this year, Mr. Speaker, because nobody in private industry would allow the kinds of cost overruns that we’re seeing in here or the lack of strategic planning. [interjections]

8:40

You know, Mr. Speaker, I hear more chirping from the other side from people who are refusing to engage in debate in a legitimate fashion in this House, but I’m happy to respond to those requests for information. They want to know: what about revenues?

Well, in fact, they have windfall revenues. This government is hardly responsible for windfall revenues. They cannot take the credit for what drops right out of the sky into their lap, no matter how much they try to. So what should they be doing with that money? I say they should be following their own legislation, which would be demanding them to pay down the debt, because that’s the legislation they brought in. Rather than coming back for supplementary estimates like this, put it all back. Put your money where your mouth was. That’s not what this government does, and it’s once again irresponsible on their side not to do that.

Another thing that we have talked about time and time again in this Legislature when we talk about supplementary estimates is bringing in adjusted budgets every quarter. Industry does that. If industry sees windfall profits falling in their lap, they adjust their budgets. Does this government do that? No, because they want to have these windfall dollars that they can dump back on areas within the province that people are complaining about or where they created a need where there was not one before because of chronic underspending or improper spending in the past.

So, Mr. Speaker, if we had a government that was responsible in those kinds of areas, we would have no need for supplementary estimates like this. There was a time in this province when supplementary estimates were one page long, where really, truly the only dollars they came back for were emergency kinds of situations like floods or fires or what we’re seeing here, some extra dollars going to farm income programs. Those were the only kinds of

dollars that were asked for. What we have now are new budgets being brought in, budgets that haven’t been debated in this Legislature, budgets that do not give any kind of thought to the long-term kind of planning that is sustainable in this province.

These are election-to-election spending dollars that we’re seeing here. This does not do the people of the province any good at all. It may ensure that this government continues to get re-elected, because people know how they have to play the game to get what they want in this province, but it isn’t responsible government. It isn’t a government that works for the best efforts of the people.

We are very lucky in this province that we have experienced several years now of windfall profits from oil and gas, but those days will be over in another 25 or 30 years. What are our children going to do then? If this government continues or if any government follows the kinds of practices that we’ve seen occur in these years in terms of budgeting, this is going to be a very sorry province.

You know, some of the ministers don’t care because they say they’re going to be dead. No one could complain about that. But in fact many of us will have children and grandchildren who will still be around, and I care about what happens to this province. This is a great place to live. I want to ensure that it’s a great place for my children and my grandchildren to live in and that they want to stay in this province because the jobs are here, that the environment is conducive to them living good, happy lives here. It’s not going to happen if we see governments continue to mismanage in the way that this one has, and supplementary estimates is the prime example of how this mismanagement occurs.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that those ministers that we’ve heard from will get up and defend their actions at this particular point in time. They certainly had a lot to say to what I have said so far. Let them respond. Let them respond on the record in a manner where we can send their speeches out to people who are concerned about how this government spends their dollars and when this government spends their dollars and see what they have to say.

I want the hon. Treasurer to stand up in this Legislature and tell us exactly why he doesn’t bring in adjusted budgets when the revenues of this province change. Why doesn’t he do that? That is a best practice done by every successful company in this country and in fact around the globe in this particular environment that we’re working in. They bring in adjusted budgets all the time as conditions change. We have conditions changing dramatically in this province from month to month, week to week, sometimes day to day, but this government just absolutely ignores that so that they can build up these huge slush funds and dump money where they want to when they want to do it.

You know, the day is going to come when the people of this province understand completely what it is that they are doing. They won’t tolerate it anymore, because it isn’t a responsible way to spend the dollars that we see. Let’s see the Treasurer stand up and defend that particular provision. Let’s see the rest of these ministers, who have been so critical of what I’ve had to say here tonight, stand up and defend the reasons why they need to be spending millions and millions of dollars at this particular point in time. How is it that they don’t have the vision to be able to plan what they need just for 12 months? Let’s not talk about three years or five years or 10 or 15; let’s talk about the next 12 months. How is it that they cannot manage their own budgets to project what it is they’re going to need for those months? Give us the reasons for this. Let us examine them. Let us see where the shortfalls are. What we’re going to find in some of those areas, Mr. Speaker, is that where there has been chronic underfunding, we are now seeing increased pressure.

Particularly, I would like people to take a look at child welfare in that particular instance. Even in the descriptions that they put here

in Children's Services, we see absolutely critical problems occurring in this particular department. Why? Because in their rush to the bottom, to be able to bring in huge surpluses, they haven't properly funded areas that are critical to the future of this province. A critical area, Mr. Speaker, I would put to you, is children: the lives of children, their ability to cope, to grow, to be educated, to be the best that they can be. We have a responsibility to those children.

When we take a look at this page and the list of reasons why this government is saying they need supplementary estimates in this particular department, we know that this government has forgotten about children and has refused to make them a priority. What we are seeing here are areas of funding that are particularly required because this department is in crisis, Mr. Speaker. I certainly intend to take my full 20 minutes, when that particular program comes up, to speak about the issues that I've seen in my constituency and that we're seeing falling through for children in that particular area.

This is one department where this government seriously needs to sit down and think through what it is they are trying to accomplish, what it is they need to accomplish, and how they're going to fund that. We have critical problems in this particular area. You know, if you don't maintain a building properly, it'll eventually crumble and deteriorate. Well, when you don't maintain children properly, we pay a much higher price, Mr. Speaker.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Your 20 minutes are up, hon. member.
The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

MR. BONNER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise this evening to speak to Motion 23 as well, the supplementary estimates. As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods had outlined, in *Beauchesne* there are a number of conditions that we must follow in dealing with supplementary estimates.

Now then, as well, when I look at this – and I see that today the government announced that our surplus is in excess of \$5 billion, yet here we are, just after a budget was presented in this House six or seven months ago, asking for \$1 billion extra in supplementary estimates – something tells me that something here is wrong. Have there been extraordinary circumstances that have arisen since that budget? I think not. Could it be that the plan that was presented to us back in the spring session was not very good? I think that is a distinct possibility.

I also want to say that it is no secret to any of us that an election is fast approaching in the spring. We have a tremendous mess on our hands with electricity and the price of electricity in this province, and this government has to do something to look good to the people. So in many areas here I realize, as do all my colleagues, that money is required, but it would seem to me that after that announcement today, Mr. Speaker, that we do have a surplus in excess of \$5 billion, our problem in this province right now is certainly not in the generation of wealth but in the distribution of that wealth and making sure that wealth gets down to the levels where it affects everyday Albertans, not only everyday Albertans but Albertans that need it most.

8:50

So what we have here is a very embarrassing situation. I looked at the city of Edmonton when they were doing their budgeting for the 2001 World Championships. They were \$2 million over budget in one particular area. There was a public outcry. But here we are in this rich province, where we are coming back asking for 1 billion extra dollars, and there's no public outcry. All I can say is that the people of this province certainly cannot be aware of the shoddy budgeting practices that occur. I think that we do have to have more

input from more people here. If this was a onetime event, Mr. Speaker, it would also allow us to say that this is an abnormality, but this is something that happens each and every year when we get to this time of the year.

When we look at the supplementary estimates, yes, we do need new schools in this province, we do need health care, and we have to shorten waiting lists. We do have upkeep on our schools, but it's also a little strange to me that we have public school boards in this province and part of their job is to set a priority list of what they need in the way of new schools, which schools have to have maintenance and whatever. Yet far too often, when moneys are allotted to these school boards, those priority lists are thrown out the window, so we get schools being built where there isn't a priority.

I think that we do have to look very, very seriously here at this whole process and say: let's give Albertans a very clear picture of where their dollars are being spent. It certainly isn't too hard. I know that this government here is in touch with many focus groups. They have direct dealings with our regional health authorities. I know that the constituents of Edmonton-Glengarry certainly don't have any problem in phoning me or stopping me in the street or sending me e-mails or whatever and giving me their views on these types of things.

I also think that when we are looking at the supplementary estimates and we do require more money in certain areas, then it should be imperative that we see those dollars going where we are going to be able to deliver a much better service to Albertans. I look at the case of us having hospital wards now that cannot be opened because we don't have enough trained nurses in this province. We see a situation where we've had many teachers leave the province because of opportunity in the United States, and I say: why are we not making those opportunities for our people here in this rich province? Why are we not stopping the brain drain by keeping our best educated, by keeping our talented people here at home?

I had the opportunity to talk to an oncologist from the Cross cancer clinic, and he indicated that for him to work here in Alberta, he took a \$40,000 cut in pay. He could make \$40,000 more if he was working in British Columbia, \$40,000 more if he was working in Saskatchewan. So here we are with a \$5 billion surplus here, and we can't even afford to pay oncologists over at the Cross cancer clinic the same rate of pay that they would get if they were in Saskatchewan or if they were in British Columbia.

So we have a three-year business plan, yet are the goals of those business plans being met? Obviously not. When we don't get it right here, what do we do? Well, we come back for supplementary estimates. It reminds me a little bit of the Speaker's golf tournament. There, Mr. Speaker, you can buy mulligans. So if you hit your golf shot and you don't hit a good golf shot, well, you can take out your mulligan and you can try it again. That's exactly what this process seems to be. When you don't get it right the first time, well, we'll try again. We'll throw more money at it. So the process is flawed. Do these people need the money? Do these different departments need the money? They certainly do, yes.

In looking at this and looking at all of those conditions that are set out here under Supplementary Estimates in *Beauchesne*, section 946, I would have to say that many of these five conditions are not met here today.

Certainly we can see a need for supplementary estimates for those issues that we can't predict, and it seems that the favourite term tonight is fire fighting. Certainly some years are going to be worse than others, and some fires are going to be bigger than others, but we certainly know that the trend with our weather pattern over the last few years has been for drier and drier summers and certainly conditions that would enhance the number of forest fires and the

expanse of those fires. So, yes, let's make that budgetary request in the spring to cover those conditions. If we do need more, yes, but let's not lowball that figure so that we have to be back in here time after time asking for this amount of money. Certainly these funds are justified for such things as health care, for education, but the whole idea of us coming back here for a billion dollars in supplementary estimates makes a whole mockery of this budgetary process.

So with those few words, Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude my remarks on Motion 23. I would have to say that I do support this because there are many of these departments that do require money. Hopefully this money will get down to the service level where each and every Albertan can see an improvement in their life.

Thank you very much.

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for letting us stand up and talk about this, but you know, it just seems like a short few months ago that we were in here and a short few months ago that we were talking about the normal budget. I think it's leading up to an election coming up pretty soon.

When we look at the number of missed performance measures that this province has actually had over the last few months, this government has missed 62 performance targets in 1999-2000, bringing an accumulated total of missed government performance measures up to 264 in just four years.

If we go through this, under health: Albertans' overall rating of health care systems as good or excellent was 63 percent, below the target of 75 percent established by this government. Now we see money going in. You know, it sounds good, the money going back in, but actually without a plan, Mr. Speaker, it does bring a lot to mind.

As the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods talked about, what is the purpose of supplementary estimates? "Supplementary Estimates may be presented . . . for a further grant to an existing service, in addition to the sum already appropriated."

Well, when the past Treasurer came out with the budget this spring – why are we underestimating budgets year after year and coming back in the fall to bring these forward? In some cases the only reason we ever come back into fall session in this province is to come for the supplementary, because the bills that were left on the table sure weren't big enough that they were going to force this government to come back in.

9:00

We look at what has happened since 1993 in the dismantling of health, education, transportation, infrastructure, and especially human infrastructure in this great province we have. It goes back to: why do we actually have supplementary estimates?

Another one was "for a new expenditure on behalf of a newly-enacted statute." Well, have we had very many of those? Or have we just had ones that have been put on the back shelf, like all the studies we have and all the different symposiums we have that just go back on the shelves and collect dust until you want to bring one or two items out and talk about them and make it sound good to all Albertans that you've actually done a study?

Another one is "to transfer funds from one Vote to another" – well, that's probably the truest extent of the whole thing – and "to extend the purposes of a Vote."

Mr. Speaker, going back to the failed performances in health, ease of access to health services was 64 percent below the targeted 75 percent estimated by this government. The percentage of Albertans

reporting failures to receive needed care was 10 percent above the targeted 7 percent established by this government. Under education, high school completion rates within six years of entering grade 9 remained at 70 percent below the targeted 75 percent estimated by this government. Parents' satisfaction that students are learning what they need to know declined by 77 percent in 1999-2000. Parents' satisfaction with the value for money spent on the ECS to 12 schools in their communities was 71 percent in 1999-2000, below the 80 percent target estimated by this government. We've also already heard about Children's Services, and there are many others.

Yesterday, as the AAMDC convention started, they came out with a slogan, and the Minister of Municipal Affairs actually started off in his speech yesterday, Facing the Future, talking about everybody tightening their belts over the last few years and looking at the future. Well, talking to many members coming in from all over the province, infrastructure is still the largest. It doesn't matter how much you put in there. The big push on today was the fact of how many dollars went back in, and now we're going into dollars and cents going out to all the 420 municipalities throughout Alberta. Well, with that, it sounds great. You know, we talk about telephones coming in in the 1900s; now we're getting fibre going out all over the province in the 21st century.

The actual dollars that are going out are very needed. The timing of it stinks. The planning could have been over the last three years, after the debt was actually taken care of, but the thing is, it's coming out now. Now we're talking about all the money going out in supplementary estimates. Why are we in here? The \$8 million that was announced by the Treasurer this morning is about all that's left that you can actually spend at this present time leading up to the next election. To supplement, if you don't regain more money by more oil royalties and so on, is something you have to maybe – you know, are we going to gain more money? Are we going spend the full \$8 million over the next few months?

Mr. Speaker, I feel that education, agriculture, the infrastructure, and municipal transfers and all that are fine and dandy, but the fact is that we have to work with the three levels of government. We have to look at what we brought out as a bill this past spring as revenue sharing. Instead of bashing it and bashing what the feds did or didn't do, the fact is that we've got three levels of government that should be working together. I hope that as the years come, we're not looking at supplementaries with this amount of dollars coming forward every time we come back in the fall session.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Government Motion 23 carried]

24. Mr. Hancock moved on behalf of Dr. West:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 58(6) the number of days that Committee of Supply will be called to consider the 2000-01 supplementary supply estimates for the general revenue fund shall be two days.

[Government Motion 24 carried]

Adjournment of Session

25. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that when the Assembly adjourns to recess the current sitting of the Fourth Session of the 24th Legislature, it shall stand adjourned until a time and date as determined by the Speaker after consultation with the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, this is the normal procedural

motion, which we introduce very early on the first opportunity in each session, which provides for the normal process of arriving at an adjournment when the business of the session has been achieved. We will probably be subjected to the usual discussion and argument from members opposite that we're coming into session and already wanting to adjourn it. That, of course, is balderdash. It's not the case. This is simply a procedural motion. We have every full intent of spending the full amount of time allotted to Committee of Supply and to passing the appropriation bills and to dealing with the remaining legislative agenda of the government in this fall session.

So it would be remiss of me if I did as I have on other occasions: just simply introduce the motion and then let others say that we were trying to stop a session before it was started. That, Mr. Speaker, is not the case. This is simply a procedural motion which allows us to do an orderly conduct of government business in the Legislature, and when the business agenda is completed and the members have been satisfied with their opportunity to speak to bills, we can adjourn the session at that time.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, methinks the Government House Leader protests too much. It's interesting he should be so defensive in introducing this motion. If indeed the motion were as innocuous as the hon. minister would have us believe, then . . . [interjection]

Mr. Speaker, this is, in fact, a serious motion. When we saw the government introduce electrical deregulation and costs started to soar for consumers, I'm sure one of the things that crossed the minds of many Albertans was: ah, another excuse for our provincial government to turn the lights off in the Legislative Assembly sooner than ever, yet another excuse to abridge the legislative session. [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. members, we have a Government House Leader who suggested that perhaps we not debate this too long, yet we have a whole bunch of people on the front bench who are prepared to debate. It remains a perplexity.

In any event, we still have the convention that goes that only one member is standing and speaking at a time, and the only person that has been recognized by the chair at this moment is the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Debate Continued

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, it may just be that it's tougher for a lame duck legislator to gain any respect, but I'm going to try harder. I'm absolutely going to try harder in the few moments I have left.

It seems to me again that if this government focused half as much energy on trying to deal with the top-of-mind issues for our constituents, wherever they may live in this province, as they do with closing the doors, winding up the session, and hightailing it back to their diverse constituency offices, we would have a vastly more responsive scheme of government, Mr. Speaker. It strikes me that if this Legislature were to sit for a little longer than two or three weeks, you know what the bonus would be for the 3 million men, women, and children that live in this province? What it would mean is that in this Legislature we would be dealing not with the unimaginative list of bills that the Government House Leader has proffered on the Order Paper; we would be dealing with the top-of-mind issues of the people that live in this province. What might those be? Well, I can only reflect what from the perspective of downtown Calgary seems to be important, and other members can supplement.

9:10

I particularly welcome new members in the Assembly who may wish to follow up and perhaps talk about some of the issues that may be particularly important to their constituency. The Member for Calgary-Mountain View I can see is poised because he's going to join this debate as well. I look forward with great anticipation to what those members are going to add to the debate.

If we were in fact to sit not a matter of a few days and a couple of weeks but a long enough time, here's the bonus to Albertans. Number one, we'd be able to address an absolutely abysmal shortage of mental health beds in this province. We'd be able to identify why it is that the Calgary regional health authority has been talking about somewhere in the order of 30 to 40 new mental health beds and they've been talking about that for over a year. Do you know what's happened? Because we can't get nurses to staff those beds, we're not opening the beds that the CRHA had promised six months ago, four months ago, two months ago. People come into my constituency office in downtown Calgary, and the last was a fellow who ended up assaulting an individual specifically because it was the only way he could access a psychiatric bed in a city hospital in the city of Calgary. That's what's happening.

You know, I think the government's plan is that we're going to go through two or three weeks in this Assembly and they don't want to talk about those things. We'll deal with miscellaneous statutes, we'll tinker a little bit with the justice system, and we'll try to fix up some of the problems in the child prostitution bill, but you're not going to see a response to those top-of-mind issues.

What other kinds of issues? Well, I went to get my teeth cleaned the other week, and the dental hygienist and I were busy chatting. You know what she talked about? She has two children, one in grade 8 and one in grade 10, and she's taken both those children out of public education, out of public schools. This was of interest to me because she lives in the same community I do, and I know those schools to be excellent schools. My daughter was a product of those, and I was involved in the parent advisory councils. I queried: "Why would you take your children out? These are excellent schools; lots of parental involvement." You know what her response to me was, Mr. Speaker? She said: "My children are not getting the quality of education that my husband and I think is important when there are 34 children in one classroom and 28 in the other. I don't think that's a learning experience. I've taken my children out, and they're currently in a private school."

You know, I would be interested to hear the comments of the Minister of Learning if we had a chance to be able to address this in this all too brief legislative session. I'd like to hear what his solution is, because what's happening – and I find this continually – is that we have more and more parents voting with their feet for an alternative to the public education system. The reason is because they feel there are too many pressures, too few resources in the public education system, and they do what all parents do. We all are motivated to advantage our children, philosophy aside. I mean, I don't blame parents for seeking to advantage their children if they're able to put their children in an alternative or a private school, but I certainly fault the people responsible for public education for creating that situation.

I remember being in a debate with Ted Byfield at a forum with a bunch of independent school principals, not what you might think would be a crowd naturally sympathetic to somebody promoting public education. We spent some time talking. They were saying that they have huge enrollments; they have waiting lists for their private schools. We went around and we polled most of the principals who were there. You know, what they said in most cases is that parents are coming to seek out a private school because of

their frustration at classroom sizes and impaired access. Whether it's speech pathologists, language specialists, behavioural specialists, they can't find a lot of those resources in the public system. You, Mr. Speaker, with a long history in public education, know better than anybody how important it is to be able to make sure that system is able to deal with that wide variety of needs. The Minister of Learning, I think, knows that. Why aren't we talking about that in this fall legislative session?

You know, the SPEAK group, Support Public Education – Act for Kids, held a meeting in Calgary last week at Central memorial high school, and I had a chance to go and listen to parents from I'd say probably 30, 35 different school councils scattered throughout the city, all four quadrants. They came, and they made presentations. I don't think there were any members of the government caucus there. There may have been. I didn't see any. I don't know whether there was anybody there from the Department of Learning listening to those parents. But you know what they talked about? As parent after parent got up, they talked about their frustration with a public education system that doesn't meet their needs, and they talked about the disconnect.

We have a Minister of Innovation and Science that travels around the province. I mean, he's clearly found religion. He speaks with a passion.

MR. SMITH: He found it before he got elected.

MR. DICKSON: It's a metaphor, Mr. Minister.

He speaks with a passion about innovation and science, and that is wonderful, and it is exciting to see, and I love to see that kind of enthusiasm. But when he talks about this information age and the glorious opportunity that's in front of Albertans, the disconnect is that we're not doing the job in K to 12. We're not doing the job in basic education to be able to train those young people, to be able to provide them with the kinds of supports to be able to realize that rosy, exciting dream that the Minister of Innovation and Science paints for us. I want that dream to materialize. I think all of us want that dream to materialize, but we're not getting the job done in ECS to grade 12.

We still have an abysmal situation with ESL instruction in the city of Calgary. We still have a high school dropout rate for ESL students which is in excess of 60 percent, and that's not acceptable to me. I don't think it's acceptable to the Minister of Learning. Should we not be talking about that, and is this not the forum and the time to do it?

Mr. Speaker, the University of Calgary is supposed to be one of the foremost learning institutions in the country. It's something we're all very proud of in Calgary, but what continues to happen is that we are not competitive in terms of the salaries we pay our professors. The University of Calgary has gone from – I think it used to be about 23rd of the top 25 universities in Canada in terms of staff salaries. I stand to be corrected by the Minister of Learning if he disagrees. My understanding is that some additional money has gone in. We've now inched our way up, so I think we're now about 20th at the University of Calgary. Well, Mr. Minister, in my respectful opinion and, I suggest, in the opinion of many Calgarians it's not good enough. That's the sort of thing we should be talking about, and where else do we do it? In what more appropriate place do we do it than this forum, and we do it here in November or December of 2000.

If we were sitting longer, one of the things we might talk about is Rotary House. This is at the Kerby Centre. This is a unique shelter. I suspect some ministers have visited this facility. Maybe the Minister of Community Development has been there. This is a

facility for seniors who have been abused, and since it opened on June 1, 1999, there have been 76 seniors that have been able to seek shelter in this place away from places where they were being abused. They have a funding crunch now. They have a serious funding crunch. [interjection] Well, maybe it's been resolved by the intervention of the Minister of Community Development. If that's the case, I thank him. But the last time I spoke to the folks at the Kerby Centre, there was a shortage of funds.

VLTs. The Minister of Gaming is with us tonight, and you know, we have so many questions we could put to this minister that in itself could occupy two weeks. Six thousand machines in a province that were never approved, never sanctioned, never asked for by Albertans, brought in by our government and the current Provincial Treasurer, who was interested in generating some – well, for whatever reason he brought them in. We've got 6,000 machines, and you know what my constituents would like to debate? Not raising the limit as the Minister of Gaming had suggested a couple of months ago . . .

9:20

MR. SMITH: I never suggested that. No, I didn't.

MR. DICKSON: Well, inaccurately reported in the media then in terms of speculating on an increase in the 6,000 machine limit.

You know, I think most Albertans and most Calgarians – in that so-called referendum a couple of years ago the question was: do they go, or do they stay? What was missing was the question that I put on my www.garydickson.ab.ca web site. We gave people an option there. You know what they told us, Mr. Speaker, about that? What they told us was in fact so prophetic that I can't put my finger on it right at the moment, but I want you to know that I'm going to get that, and I'm going to table it like I have all the other web site question responses.

AN HON. MEMBER: You've tabled half the world already.

MR. DICKSON: Well, I want to share it. People in Calgary-Buffalo are animated, and they're engaged in debate. They deserve to have their views reflected in this Assembly, and I'm trying hard to do that.

MR. SMITH: It'll be better next April.

MR. DICKSON: Well, your hope may be that the next MLA for Calgary-Buffalo may be a little quieter.

AN HON. MEMBER: It's going to be a cop. It'll be a cop.

MR. DICKSON: Well, we'll see about that.

Electrical deregulation. You know, Don Getty got beat up and tossed out of office because he cost Albertans over \$1.2 billion in failed, misguided, stupid adventures in terms of MagCan, trying to build a magnesium plant in High River, NovAtel, and the list goes on and on.

This minister of natural resources said yes to a power auction where we took an asset valued by a professional independent at over \$4 billion and participated in an auction, and we got a little more than \$1 billion. And instead of doing what he had the power to do, which was say: no, unacceptable, I will not preside over kissing off, passing off over \$2 billion in taxpayer value; I'm not going to just let that go up into the ether – he didn't do that. Do you know what he said? Because he had to shore up a government's misguided, mismanaged electrical deregulation system, he said: we will accept the bids.

Let's realize what's happened here. We have taken \$2 billion in assets in this province, and they have gone up in smoke. This

government thinks that by giving the citizens of this province \$20 a month off their electricity bills for one year – that doesn't help 70 percent of my constituents who are tenants, by the way – by giving that kind of refund and by giving a couple of \$150 cheques, people will forgive and forget. Mr. Speaker, wrong. Wrong because Albertans are not that foolish. They're not that short-sighted. They're a darn sight smarter, I'd like to think, than the people that designed this electrical deregulation system.

I want to be able to talk about that. My constituents want that discussed, and I suspect there are some people in Calgary, whether in Calgary-North or in Calgary-Foothills – there are constituents who also have concerns, and they want to see those things expressed, and this is the place to do it.

We haven't even got to the flat tax yet. You know, I think we need to give Mr. Day a DNA test. The putative father of the flat tax in this province is denying paternity. The man who was here to vote once for closure on the flat tax and the second time to jam through the flat tax bill has now gone to Ottawa, and it's like he never heard of it before. He wants nothing to do with the flat tax. It was good enough for Albertans, but apparently it's not good enough in terms of the next step in trying to sell this to Canadians.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pretty concerned about that. My constituents are pretty concerned. Most of my constituents fall in that middle-income range, and those are the people who want to demand some accountability from these ministers opposite. How is that going to happen?

I can see that there has to be some supporting information here. At www.garydickson.ab.ca over three weeks we had 12,712 hits, and this is what they said. Sixty-two percent felt that Alberta should freeze the deregulation process until January 1, 2002, and take steps to better protect the consumer. Thirty-eight percent of those people wanted to return to the regulated electrical utility system. How many out of 12,712 wanted to proceed with deregulation of electrical power? Zero.

Now, it is fair to say . . . [interjection] The Minister of Justice, always on the bit, immediately realizes I have no idea that those 12,712 people actually reside in Calgary-Buffalo, and it's true. I have found out that there is a prolific writing professor at the University of Arkansas with the same name as this member, and there are probably people visiting my site thinking they're going to find out something about archeology.

MR. SMITH: Well, they are.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, you can't keep up with the Minister of Gaming when he's on a roll, and he's hot tonight.

Mr. Speaker, when I asked my constituents about Bill 18, I had 2,013 hits over three weeks. Fifty-nine percent, or 1,187, said that they supported a progressive tax system with high-income earners paying at a higher rate. Forty-one percent, 825 people, supported a flat tax system with taxpayers paying the same rate.

[Mr. Herard in the chair]

There are so many good questions here. I asked people about what they thought of HRDC and the Alberta version, which is the Department of Government Services. You know, we have the Minister of Government Services here. With all this focus on Jane Stewart what we didn't realize is that right here in the front row in this Chamber we have a minister who is collating personal information on eight different government departments.

Ah, it's gone so quickly. I'll leave it to others to carry on.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was interested in the comments by the Government House Leader when he introduced Motion 25 and indicated that this is a housekeeping motion and one that appears at this time during the proceedings at least twice a year. That's true, but that in no way, I think, makes unnecessary or unneeded comments about that motion because of the context, the short period that has been allotted for this session, calling it as late in the fall as it has been called and running up against the holiday season. So whether we like it or not, there is a limit on the debate time, and that's unfortunate because I think there are things going on in the province that won't be addressed during this session and that need to be addressed.

My colleague from Calgary-Buffalo has talked about one that is first and foremost on many constituents' minds, and that's energy deregulation. No matter how the problem is explained to people, they still feel that the increased power costs they are facing are a direct result, first, of government's inaction over five years in creating a climate of uncertainty in the market and that it's going to be a long time – I think the Premier said earlier today that it would be at least three years – before there could be more power on-line. Constituents are holding the government directly responsible for it. The attempt to have an emergency debate on it today that failed I think was unfortunate. Certainly there are opportunities in question period to raise the issue, but the kind of thorough discussion, wide-ranging discussion that's needed on that particular matter is not scheduled to happen unless it happens as it's dragged into debates on other issues. So energy deregulation I think is one reason not to limit this session and not to be looking at adjournment.

I think that if you look at schools – I've held a couple of town hall meetings where parents with children with special needs came to express their concerns. They're having great difficulty. They're having difficulty accessing the kind of speech pathology services they need. They're having difficulty accessing the occupational therapy they need. I guess the underlying problem that they're having is accessing the programs that they need for their children. Nowhere do I see on the Order Paper or in the plans for this contracted session an opportunity where that problem can be addressed in but a cursory or perfunctory manner, and that's unfortunate, because it's a group of parents and their children who deserve better.

9:30

I think the climate that many seniors in this province find themselves in right now is more than unfortunate. I had a senior call me several weeks ago when she received the third notice of increases for power from her condominium association. Those increases had gone from \$43 a month to \$65 a month to \$103.50 a month. Her comment at that time, Mr. Speaker, was: it's becoming a choice for me because I'm on a limited income; I either heat or I eat. In a province that is as rich as this province is at this particular moment in history, that seems to be almost tragic.

I think seniors are living in a climate of uncertainty brought on by costs in the health care system. I was working with a senior with a parent in a long-term care facility in another jurisdiction and trying to help her get her parents together. They were informed that it would take at least two years before there could be a transfer from one of the health regions to another. Those kinds of fears about health care, about long-term care, about costs rising out of their control I think are causing seniors to really be worried, and again I think it's an opportunity and an obligation of this Assembly to stand

back and to address those kinds of problems. Again, given the kind of Order Paper that we have and the kind of business before us, I don't see that opportunity in a session that is scheduled to adjourn within two or three weeks.

I think the impact of school closures, the whole infrastructure concerns that are being faced by communities and school boards across the province and the way they're being resolved certainly should be open for debate. There'll be an opportunity to do that when we look at the budget estimates, fortunately, but not the in-depth kind of examination of that problem and the concerns about priorities for projects, how those priorities are arrived at, the concern about the impact of school closures on rural communities and on urban communities. The position that the Department of Infrastructure puts school boards and communities in I think is really very, very unfortunate, to say the least. Again, it's something that this Legislature should be addressing.

The previous speaker mentioned mental health, and there are huge, huge questions surrounding the provision of mental health care in this province. The kind of advice that has come from professionals in the field and the kind of direction that the province has taken seem to be exactly opposite. We have yet to have that kind of a debate in this Legislature: the whole notion of community-based treatment versus centralized treatment. The uses that are being made of the facility in Ponoka I think really have raised a number of questions in people's minds. Again, it's unfortunate that they won't be the subject of a wide-ranging debate, at least not in this session.

Health care, of course, still remains the number one concern in people's minds. In the door-knocking that I've done in the last number of weeks, the same question comes up time and time again, the same topic. Bill 11 has now become code for all of the ills of the health care system in this province. People are still concerned about the directions we're taking, the lack of care when care is needed, and the long waiting lists that they are faced with when they do indeed need care. So the health care debate rages in the province. Again, I don't see the opportunity in this short legislative session for those very serious questions to be addressed or plans by the government to do anything but what they have done so far, and that's to try to defend the indefensible.

The deferred maintenance at postsecondary institutions. The Auditor General has commented about the health and safety concerns, the risks that that deferred maintenance may possibly raise, and the need for a long-term plan to make sure that those risks are mitigated. Again, that won't be part and parcel of this session.

There is the whole Swan Hills fiasco and the details around the winding down or the continued operation of that plant. Again, the opportunities for public airing of those concerns are going to be limited in a short two-week or two-and-a-half-week session.

We have thousands of students across the province protesting tuition and the rising costs, the rising fees at postsecondary institutions. We have the eighth lowest student funding for postsecondary education in the country. One of the richest if not the richest province decides that we could be number 8 in terms of funding young people into postsecondary institutions. We have the fastest growing tuition rates in all of the 10 provinces: 208 percent, 210 percent over the last 10 years. Again, the kind of serious discussion that the students who will appear here tomorrow from the University of Alberta and the students that will appear here later in the session think this Legislature should be dealing with regarding those concerns are not likely to be addressed in a short two-week or a two-and-a-half-week period.

There are many reasons, Mr. Speaker, why this adjournment is a bit of an affront appearing on the Order Paper, housekeeping or not. With Albertans concerned with everything from health care to

school closures to the state of the Swan Hills facility, I think that people will see this motion for what it is, not merely a housekeeping motion but a motion that allows the government to escape the kind of scrutiny that the issues that I've just outlined deserve.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I conclude. Thank you very much.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to get a few words in this evening in debate regarding Government Motion 25.

We seem to have at the least, Mr. Speaker, not enough respect for democracy in this province. We seem to think that all activities should happen outside this Assembly. My hon. colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods was discussing issues that I believe cannot be discussed in the time that we have allocated to us.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

When you think of issues such as electrical deregulation, the impact of that, the impact it's going to have on residential users, light industrial users, hospitals, schools, and the impact it's going to have on heavy industry in this province, which uses the majority of electric power, when this whole idea came forward – and all hon. members of the Assembly know the haste in which Bill 27 was debated. Closure was used. We didn't have time in the Assembly to debate that issue. Look at the cost of this now, Mr. Speaker.

9:40

I have to think to myself that we need to have a more thorough examination of all the initiatives that are being proposed by this government in this Assembly. By cutting short the time, we are doing a disservice to Albertans. I know there are people in this Assembly that say – and I disagree with them – that the less time this Legislative Assembly is in session, the less time there is to make laws and therefore there are less restrictions on Albertans. But when Albertans go to bed at night, they want to know that when they wake up, they can flick a switch and there's going to be electricity. They want to know that there's going to be a source of natural gas for their furnaces. Industrial leaders in this province want to know that there's a reliable and cheap source of feedstock for their industrial processes.

Now, I know there are some members of the general public who approach me and talk about the sugar-daddy politics of the current government and how they resent that. There are other people who come forward and say to me: this is crony capitalism in this province. There are the winners and the losers. We have a major lawsuit happening in this province where citizens – Mr. Speaker, it's incredible – have rallied together and are suing their very own provincial government for compensation for untreated pine shakes. Now, it's always a serious matter when citizens band together to sue their government, and this type of lawsuit involving thousands of consumers from across the province is very, very unusual in this province. What are we doing? Are we going to have time to discuss this, discuss what happened? Certainly not, and I think we should. At least we can prevent this from happening again. We can find out what went wrong and when it went wrong.

Mr. Speaker, political careers are at stake here. My gosh, the leaders of the government are going to have to wonder about this individual or that individual. Exactly how able are they with all this going on? Thousands of documents, I'm proud to say, have been

released or obtained by the Official Opposition through freedom of information. Now, freedom of information is one of the very, very best tools that the opposition has to keep the government accountable. We're just trying to do our job, but if this session is only going to last a few days, I have a lot of questions to ask. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, the hon. Minister of Justice, is as interested in this issue as I am.

We have untreated pine shakes all over the province. We have the issue of treated pine shakes now coming up. There were tests done on this product. Everyone was assured that Alberta taxpayers, who were financing the tests, were not receiving the information in a timely fashion. We have to get to the bottom of this issue. Albertans paid for these tests, yet they were denied the information. I'm sure many of them, as they went to the lumber store, would have been very grateful if they could have been provided this information. By closing the doors on this Assembly, Albertans are going to be denied a chance to question their very own government. We have letters flying between this company and that company and going to the government suggesting that perhaps this is going to reflect on the product, that it is not a good reflection on this product. Consumers, if they get this information, are going to lose confidence in the product. Now, what we're looking at, as a result of that, is probably another lawsuit by Albertans against their government. A person can stand up in question period, and the slogan can be: it's before the courts; I can't answer that.

Another fight that has come to light is the whole issue, Mr. Speaker, of timber permits in the province. Incredibly I have only so much time, and I have so many questions to ask regarding that issue. Am I going to get the chance? No, not with this motion. I will not. We have a lot of questions. Now, I believe that in the time between now and 1993 whenever this government tried to convince Albertans that there were limited funds, very limited funds for core programs like health care, education, in some areas of the province we were giving away wood fibre at fire sale prices. We put a new definition of free in the words "free enterprise." And here we go; we're not going to get a chance to hold the government accountable on this. I found out all of this with a FOIP request, that the government wants to ask for \$624,000 to allow me and a researcher to obtain this information. Will I get a chance to question the government on this? I don't think so.

I have other questions, Mr. Speaker, that I regretfully will probably not get an opportunity to ask, and they relate to another FOIP request. The government wanted to charge me \$54,000 for information relating to the Canada-Alberta labour agreement. I got a list here just the other day. I was astonished to find out that \$3.5 million of this money had gone to the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce, of all things. [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Hon. members, again we just have one hon. member who's been recognized, and we can certainly hear a number of people over on this side wanting to enter debate. If you could wait until the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar concludes his remarks, then you are free to enter into debate, Minister of Gaming, but right now we have the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Debate Continued

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Now the FOIP request. There was \$300 million provided to this province from the federal government, and we all hear how there has

to be this devolution of power from the federal government and the provinces can look after themselves. They can look after themselves, and they want all this power. They want an increase of power. So I thought: let's find out how prudently this money was spent. I didn't have to wait too long before the Auditor General wrote about this. The Auditor General in his last report talked about overpayments, sloppy accounting, and I thought that in order to do my job, I'd better check into this, and I did.

9:50

Now, we have over a three-year period roughly \$100 million coming into this province for programs to train citizens of this province to enter or re-enter the workforce. Let's have a good, thorough examination of this program to see if it should be expanded, because what we're doing, Mr. Speaker, is talking about increasing provincial control over programs, but at the same time we are not monitoring to see if they're working, if this money is being well spent. Will this be a topic that will be debated in this Assembly? I think not. We won't have time.

Mr. Speaker, I mentioned Red Deer a little earlier, the city of Red Deer and the Chamber of Commerce and the money that they are receiving and will receive in the future relating to this Canada-Alberta labour agreement. I visited the city of Red Deer in September. Yes. I found a lot of houses down there where people were very upset with these pine shakes. Wow. There were a lot of pine shakes. I was in Red Deer-North, the north end of the constituency. As my honourable colleague from Lethbridge-East would say: they were as mad as hornets.

At this time I would like to congratulate the new Member for Red Deer-North. I understand, of course, that this is her first evening session, and I wish her well in her job as representative from Red Deer-North. The former member certainly had a lot to say in this Assembly, and I'm anxious to hear how she is going to represent her constituents.

However, Mr. Speaker, I also hear from the hon. minister of community services here. I doubt if I will get the chance in question period to find out if the building that's going to be named after this individual has pine shakes on its roof, because I'm sure it's going to need to be repaired. That's going to be a problem. In Spruce Grove, I believe it is. You know, the government will have to pay for a new roof for that place as well. They'll probably try to convince the public that they put the wrong kind of nails on, like what occurred at Grant MacEwan.

There are lots and lots of issues that, unfortunately, we do not get to discuss in this Assembly. We look, Mr. Speaker, and we listen to the comments from the other side of the House. We go to classrooms in our constituency, and students ask about government, they ask about the role of opposition, they ask about the role of government members. They ask me about the confrontational nature of this Assembly. I tell them that it is part of question period. The most vital part of the opposition's role is question period and holding the government accountable. I think this is one of the most effective oppositions in Canada. The reason I can say that with confidence is because the government wants to keep the number of days down to the bare minimum where they can sit there and have us hold them accountable. They can run and they can hide, but we have so few sitting days in this Assembly that it is a tribute to our diligence in holding them accountable. They simply do not want to be here. They simply do not want to be in this Assembly, because they know they cannot answer the questions.

We are looking at an economic boom here. We're looking at large surpluses. But we have a health care system that doesn't work. We have elementary schools where the rain is pouring in on the blackboard.

AN HON. MEMBER: The sky is falling.

MR. MacDONALD: They can say: the roof is falling in; the roof is falling in. You bet the roof is falling in.

It is incredible that we have such a narrow focus. We have resources that are dwindling. We have a problem with our electrical system. As I said before, health care: we have people waiting far too long, and we have a shortage of health care professionals. And as I said, we have schools that are simply not adequate. Yet I'll turn on the evening news some night after the session is over, and I'll hear one of the hon. members from the government side talking about how we have to have a well-educated workforce to compete in the global economy. I have to question their sincerity in that statement, because it is simply not being provided adequately.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I would like to remind all hon. members of this Assembly that we cannot take for granted this Legislature. We all stood somewhere in this province in the last week with our heads bowed for those who were willing to sacrifice their lives so we could stand in here and have the protection that comes with freedom of speech. I feel that I'm being denied my rights as a Member of this Legislative Assembly by this government not providing adequate time to debate many, many important issues.

Thank you.

[Government Motion 25 carried]

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request unanimous consent of the Assembly to waive Standing Order 38 regarding notice to allow for Official Opposition and third-party opposition changes to standing committees of the House.

[Unanimous consent granted]

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to move Government Motion 26 as follows:

Be it resolved that the following changes to the following committees be approved by the Assembly: on the Select Standing Committee on Public Accounts that Mr. Mason replace Dr. Pannu and that Dr. Massey be appointed, on the Select Standing C o m m i t t e e e on Legislative Offices that Mr. Sapers be appointed, and on the Select Standing Committee on Law and Regulations that Mrs. Soetaert be appointed.

[Government Motion 26 carried]

[At 10:01 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

