

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, May 17, 2001**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 01/05/17

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. O God, grant that we the members of our province's Legislature may fulfill our office with honesty and integrity. May our first concern be for the good of all our people. Guide our deliberations this day. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Legislature two delegations in your gallery today. First a delegation of three members from West Africa, who are here to learn about Alberta, including our justice system. They are members of a Rotary professional exchange. The delegation is led by Ali Badara Tall, a justice of the first level court in the capital of Burkina Faso. He's joined by Adama Soro, lead partner in an Ivory Coast law firm, and Fatouma Kone, a legal adviser to the government in Mali. They are accompanied by Chris Gowers, president of the Riverview Rotary Club in Edmonton and a member of our civil claims mediation team – I should say essentially a volunteer member, because members of that mediation team get paid an honorarium for the mediation they do – and of note, of course, also a member of the new Super 8 on Calgary Trail. These guests are seated in your gallery. They're here and they've visited our courthouse and they've looked at some of our judicial dispute resolution sessions. I've met with them and talked generally about the benefits of arbitration and mediation. I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

It's also my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some special visitors from France. Paul Guiguen is the mayor of a town of 1,900 people, the mayor of Plessala in the province of Brittany. Like our Premier he's serving his third term. Paul Guiguen is here, of course, because his daughter Aurelie Guiguen is a grade 12 student visiting Edmonton and will have three more months with us as another Rotary International exchange student. She has been here providing volunteer services, working in our community, and will be here to work on the world games. She participated in the Success by Six golf tournament, which I hosted last fall. She's done other volunteer activities with the Rotary club that is sponsoring her, and she has devoted lots of energy to working as a volunteer with Grey Nuns and in many other ways. Her family from France is fortunate to be able to come and visit her while she's here: her father, Paul Guiguen, her mother, Gisele, and her sister, Catherine. All of them of course are accompanied by Dave Dorcas, a member of the Gateway Rotary Club in south Edmonton, which is sponsoring her visit. I'd like them all to rise while we wish them bienvenue and bonjour.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

MR. DANYLUK: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some very special guests seated in your gallery today.

From Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency we have Louise Knox, founder of the Lakeland chapter of Mothers Against Drinking Drivers, who, I would say, was recently elected national president of MADD Canada. She is accompanied by her husband, Ed Knox, who will take over her responsibility as president of Lakeland chapter of MADD. Mr. and Mrs. Knox's introduction to Mothers Against Drinking Drivers came about after the tragic loss of their 16-year-old son, Mike Knox, to a drunk driver on October 2, 1999. It is our sincere hope that no other families experience the loss of a loved one to a drunk driver. Accompanying them today from MADD Canada are Andrew Murie, national director from Mississauga, and Chris George, national director of communications and public policy from Ottawa. The ribbon that the Assembly has before them is in recognition of today's ceremony that took place in the rotunda, which was the joining of the Edmonton PAID chapter and MADD. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I rise to present a petition, which was originally presented to the Minister of Seniors and MLA for Stony Plain, on behalf of the Youth Coalition against Poverty, which was signed by approximately 2,650 residents of Edmonton and the surrounding area.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

MR. CARDINAL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table copies of my responses to questions raised during the Committee of Supply estimates for Sustainable Resource Development.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

MR. STEVENS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. The first is a response to a question posed by the hon. interim Leader of the Official Opposition on May 9, 2001. The second is a response to questions raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on May 9, 2001.

MR. DANYLUK: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to table five copies of a letter from the Aspen View board of trustees regarding Bill 16.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

REV. ABBOTT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have two tablings today. They're both from school boards in my riding. There are five copies each of some letters regarding the School Amendment Act, Bill 16. These letters outline the things that they support in the act and some of the things they'd like to see changed.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

MR. GOUDREAU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have one tabling today. It's five copies of a letter from the board of trustees of the Peace River school division. The school board has concerns regarding some of the sections of the School Amendment Act.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the required five copies of a letter from Chinook's Edge school division that I'd like to table at this time.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I would like to make two tablings today. The first is an Alberta Environment memorandum from the deputy minister to the minister dated January 12, 1987, and the subject is used lubricating oil. It says: "find an analysis of the used lubricating oil problem in Alberta."

The second is the required number of copies from Hub Oil Company. This is a response to an emission control order "as requested by the Emission Control Order issued on May 25, 1988."

Thank you.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon I would like to table for the Assembly an incident summary put together by Alberta environmental protection, environmental management system. It is dated July 22, 1998.

Thank you.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'd like to table three different letters in the House. The first two deal with the Spray Lakes sawmill forest management agreement issue. The first one is from Hal Retzer of Calgary, opposing that agreement. The second one is from Mr. Bob Hinman of Turner Valley, also calling on the Premier to turn down the Spray Lakes sawmill proposed agreement.

The third letter, Mr. Speaker, is a letter written exactly four months ago today by the Premier to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General asking him to undertake a legal review of the eligibility criteria for MLAs seeking support from the Alberta risk management fund.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

1:40

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

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling today. I'm tabling a letter which is addressed to me with attachments of letters sent to the Premier and to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment from Mr. Lance Lamond, a board member of Poverty in Action. The letter highlights the plight of the poor in Edmonton and urges the Alberta government to increase the SFI benefit rates by 11 percent.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't believe my guests are in until 2:45 today, so if I could defer that to later.

MR. OUELLETTE: Mr. Speaker, I'm honoured to rise in the House today to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a wonderful lady from the Innisfail-Sylvan Lake constitu-

ency. She has worked for this Assembly for the past four years as an assistant to your former colleague Mr. Gary Severtson and now continues her hard work as my constituency assistant, and she does a super job. She is accompanied today by her husband, who is a horticultural colleague and friend of the hon. Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. He also has a radio show on 95.5 FM called *Gardening with Pete*. I would ask Jan and Pete Wasylyshyn to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

MS HALEY: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's not often that I have guests from my constituency, so it's a real privilege for me today to be able to introduce to you and through you two members from my constituency. They're from Crossfield: Mr. Iver Storseth and Ms Joanne Penner. They just happen to be the family of a young man working in your office, Brian Storseth, who is your summer temporary employment program student. I know that he's in good hands in your office and he comes from a good area. It's a real honour to ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

THE SPEAKER: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Agricultural Waste

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In southern Alberta a livestock truck wash has been overflowing its lagoon this winter. Under a special permit it has been surface spreading the water on agricultural land. This week the sledge from the bottom of the lagoon was spread on a reclaimed gravel pit on the floodplain of the Oldman River. This operation is zoned commercial but handles agriculture waste. I raise this in the open, recognizing that this operation is only a few miles from my farm, but I raise it on behalf of the public and on behalf of the immediate neighbours who have been calling me. My first question is to the minister of agriculture. Is it true that because this is zoned commercial and handles an agriculture waste your department is not responsible for the actions?

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I'll try and clarify as best I can the areas of responsibility. First, the truck wash was permitted by the county of Lethbridge. I should make that point. Secondly, I will say that the county used recommendations from Alberta Agriculture regarding manure nutrient utilization in its permit. So I should say that. Thirdly, the other departments that would be involved in this, of course, are Alberta Environment and Alberta Health through public health. So they also have a role in determining the safety of handling wastes. Primarily, Alberta Agriculture is used on the technical advice portion of these types of permits, or in fact if there is a call of a possible infraction or a concern, they would be called, again by either the county or Alberta Environment or public health, to offer that type of technical advice as to how to handle the complaint. That is what has occurred in this case.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is to the Minister of Environment. Is it true that because this is a livestock waste handling operation, even though it's zoned commercial, your department is not responsible?

DR. TAYLOR: At the present time, Mr. Speaker, Alberta Environment does not have legislation regarding agricultural truck washes, as this one particularly is, but we are working with the county and I believe it's the Chinook health region down there. In the particular case in question, the gentleman or the business has been given until June 30 of this year to develop adequate ponds or adequate lagoons – that would be the right word – to handle his wastewater. These lagoons have to be in place by June 30, and that will be enforced by both the county and the regional health authority.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you. My next question is to the Premier. Mr. Premier, who should the neighbours and the southern Alberta environment group that has taken this up appeal to for help in determining the appropriate actions on this case?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would suspect there are a number of areas and jurisdictions where the residents can appeal. Obviously, there are a number of departments involved. As the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development pointed out, this is a matter that involves the county, involves Environment, involves Health, involves Agriculture. So I'm not saying that I'm the appeal body, but if the residents want to send a letter or if the hon. member wants to communicate on behalf of the residents with my office, I'd be more than happy to undertake a process to co-ordinate the efforts to address this particular issue.

THE SPEAKER: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Continuing on this issue, Mr. Premier, who should have controlled this week's spreading of the sludge from the bottom of those lagoons on the Oldman River floodplain?

MR. KLEIN: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development pointed out, there are three government jurisdictions involved in this particular matter, and of course there is the county. I sense from the hon. minister's answer to the first question that Agriculture seems to be the lead agency on this, so I'll have her respond.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, the county would probably be the first response. Alberta Environment would be involved in this, as would the health unit or the public health portion of the Chinook health region. Again, I do know that in this instance Alberta Agriculture was requested to be a part of this to give technical advice on the use of manure nutrient. I believe that this is being done as part of a reclamation project, so the Minister of Environment may want to expand on that area.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're getting conflicting information from this. Is the code of practice law in these cases? Alberta Environment says no, yet fish and wildlife, in the same department, say yes, and Alberta Agriculture says: if it's in the bylaws for the county. How do we get a consistent set of guidelines to control livestock waste?

MR. KLEIN: Well, it's an interesting question, and if there appears to be or if there is in fact a lack of co-ordination, I would like the

hon. leader of the Liberal opposition to bring this to my attention in perhaps a more formal way, in a written form, so that we can get to the bottom of the problem and correct whatever deficiencies may be identified.

1:50

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister of agriculture: is the Klapstein report covering this issue where there seems to be a hole between Agriculture and Environment, commercial zoning, agriculture zoning, livestock wastes, other pollutant wastes? There's a real hole here, and this operation seems to be fitting right into it nicely.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, the responsibility of the Klapstein report, as it's known, or the report on intensive livestock operations, will contain some rather broad-based recommendations in this whole area. However, there are issues around zoning, and that's why this consultation in this report was necessary. Whether it's a commercial zoning for an agricultural industry or whether it's on a farm, I think all members in this Assembly recognize that the environmental side of this or the health side of it is incredibly important. I think the hon. member has identified an area, and I sense from the Premier that there are three ministries that had better be sitting down and ensuring that there is an avenue and a venue for these matters to be dealt with expeditiously.

THE SPEAKER: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Calgary Regional Health Authority

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A long-standing member of the CRHA board served on the CRHA's finance committee at the same time that a company in which he was a director and shareholder reneged on a \$650,000 loan from Alberta Treasury Branches. This individual still sits on the CRHA board. To the minister of health: can the minister of health explain how someone who was a director of a company that reneged on a \$650,000 government-backed loan is an appropriate candidate for an RHA board?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I should say at the outset that the immunity from civil litigation arising from slander or libel which is conferred upon members of this Assembly and comments that they make here ought not to provide a basis for attacking individuals who are not here themselves to respond to such allegations.

Mr. Speaker, there are good people who serve on our regional health authorities. They do have conflict of interest bylaws, which are extremely strong. They are the same bylaws that form the basis of that which applies to Members of the Legislative Assembly who sit in this House. Our Health Care Protection Act ensures that there's full ownership disclosure that members may have with respect to private facilities. Contracts are reviewed through a very lengthy and complete process. We do scrutinize the individuals that are appointed to regional health authorities.

I need not remind the hon. member that we are going to two-thirds elected members on our authorities this fall. I expect that not only will good people continue to be appointed, but good people will also come forward to be elected.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions were on the policy with which government appoints RHA members.

Can the minister explain how the government's policy on appointments to RHAs would allow a person to lead an RHA's finance committee at the same time his company is defaulting on a \$650,000 government-backed loan?

MR. MAR: Well, I can say this categorically, Mr. Speaker: our policy is certainly not to besmirch the good reputation of individuals.

DR. TAFT: Is the fact that this same individual has family connections to three for-profit nursing homes that contract with the CRHA of any concern to the minister?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, as I raised this the other day in this Assembly, this is a well-worn path that leads exactly to nowhere. All of these contracts are scrupulously examined, and I stand by the good work that is done by the regional health authority and its members.

Mr. Speaker, it is not for me here today to make any kind of response to the kinds of allegations that are being made here. If the individual has such an allegation to make outside of this Assembly about an individual, as the Premier said, he should do so and stand by the consequences.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the third party.

Risk Management Fund Review

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Exactly four months ago today the Premier asked the Minister of Justice to undertake a legal review of the eligibility criteria for MLAs seeking support from the risk management fund. The Premier took this action, clearly before the election, in the context of the \$800,000 legal bill racked up by Stockwell Day, which the Premier himself described as obscene. My question is to the Premier. Mr. Premier, did the review ever take place, and if so, what are the results?

MR. KLEIN: I will have the hon. Justice minister and Attorney General supplement my answer. Indeed I asked the hon. minister to undertake a review of the risk management fund and how that fund is administered. Mr. Speaker, I think I also sent a memo to yourself relative to the duties and the functions of Members' Services to adjudicate these particular matters. I must remind the Legislature that Members' Services is a committee of all members of the House, including members of the opposition.

I would like to see this matter resolved, Mr. Speaker, indeed. I talked about the \$800,000 cost associated with this particular action, including the judgment and the fees that were charged by the lawyers in particular as being obscene. In my mind they are too, and I think the hon. leader of the third party agrees with me on that particular point.

Relative to the question, I will have the hon. minister respond.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, we have of course started and conducted some internal reviews with respect to the conduct of the risk management fund and how it's handled, but in the intervening period an application was brought before the court by the former Speaker of the House. We're awaiting a decision on that application, and we took a considered viewpoint that we should wait for that decision before we conclude the review on the chance that something coming out with respect to that decision might be appropriate to be considered as part of the review and also on the

basis that as we go outside the department for advice on issues relative to insurance and insurance coverage, those sorts of issues, it would be prudent to do so after the decision comes down from the court, which we expect anytime.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier is looking for agreement where it doesn't exist. I don't agree with his assessment of the obscenity of the charges.

But let me ask the question now. Would the Premier or the Minister of Justice give some reasons for the prudence that they're using to delay conducting this review?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, if I heard the hon. member correctly, he said that he doesn't agree with the obscenity of the target. Well, the obscenity of the target was a judgment of I believe \$60,000 compared to a combined bill for both the plaintiff and the defence of \$800,000 less \$60,000, \$740,000. If he doesn't see anything obscene in that, then his sense of money value is a lot different than mine.

DR. PANNU: Mr. Speaker, my final question. If the Premier really wants me to make a judgment on whether or not that bill is obscene, I think he owes it to this Assembly to release that bill so that we could all look at it and then make a decision whether we agree with it or not. Just \$800,000 in itself is neither obscene nor not obscene.

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know what there is to release that hasn't already been made public. As a matter of fact, I think the lawyers for both sides released the costs associated with this particular action, both the plaintiff costs and the costs associated with the action on the part of the defence to defend the particular lawsuit.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

2:00

Home Schooling

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Home schooling has become a popular choice of learning in the last decade. During the election campaign I had several of my constituents ask questions on funding. My question is to the Minister of Learning. What is the increase in funding in home schooling in Budget 2001?

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Very briefly, the amount of money that was before Budget 2001 was \$1,051. This has increased to \$1,088, which is an increase of 3 and a half percent, the same as the school boards received.

The other component of this which is extremely important, as well, is that a parent is eligible to apply for up to 50 percent for curriculum courses and curriculum books if they show receipts to the school board. So the parent can be reimbursed directly for their expenses on the home schooling side.

MR. BRODA: My first supplemental to the same minister: do home schools receive funding for computers or other educational technology?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, no, they do not. However, I would add a proviso here, and that is that if 50 percent of their course is taken through a distance learning centre, through a school board, they

could possibly be eligible for things such as computers, Internet access, all of this, through the school board.

To the hon. member, I would encourage your home schoolers to take a very close look at some of the virtual schools that we have, because I really feel that that would accomplish a lot of what the home schoolers are attempting to do.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again. He briefly touched on the Internet. I was just wondering: with the Supernet, the high-speed Internet, that's going to be coming throughout the province, will the individuals that do home schooling have access to line charges to be paid by Alberta Learning?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, the very quick answer to that is no. Obviously, what is involved with Supernet is that we will be connecting Supernet to schools, hospitals, and libraries as well as, potentially, municipal buildings. If the home schooler wants to access Supernet, I'm sure what they can do is go to the school libraries and utilize it there or the libraries within their communities. That's probably the best way, but we are not going to get into the business of paying line charges for every house to be hooked up to the Supernet.

Oil and Gas Reserves

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, yesterday Alberta's Energy minister made a trip to Washington, D.C., to talk about Alberta's energy sector. At the same time, the U.S. is planning to unveil its continental energy plan today in Washington. My questions are to the Premier. Has the government examined the effect that increased demand would have on oil and gas reserves in Alberta over the next 20 years?

MR. KLEIN: Have we done an examination? I don't know, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure that the Department of Energy keeps current on these particular matters along with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers. I don't know if the hon. member is talking about the pressure on oil and gas or the pressure down the road on a by-product of gas in particular, and that's electricity. Perhaps she can clarify that particular remark.

We're there, Mr. Speaker, because we understand that the continental energy policy involves pricing for a commodity or commodities, ostensibly oil and gas. The reasons our minister is there – and they're valid reasons – are to participate with CAPP in a series of seminars to outline Alberta's position relative to investment in the oil and gas industry and also to familiarize, I guess, those in the United States who might be interested about the rules and regulations and especially the constitutional authority of the province as it relates to the ownership of those resources.

Mr. Speaker, we've often said that as the Prime Minister and the President talk about a continental energy policy, they're talking about commodities or they're talking about setting a price for a commodity that in the case of Canada the country doesn't own. The province of Alberta owns the majority of those commodities, and we want to make sure they're protected.

MS CARLSON: Then perhaps the Premier can answer this question. Will the Premier commit to examine the longevity and sustainability of Alberta's oil and natural gas reserves before entering into any continental energy plan with the United States and making that available to Albertans?

MR. KLEIN: Well, first of all, it's not up to the province to enter into a continental energy plan. It's a responsibility of the province to protect as vigorously as we possibly can our constitutional authority over the ownership of natural resources, including oil and gas. We're talking about a significant resource – a significant resource – some 300 billion barrels of oil sands product alone today, and that's outside of conventional oil and gas, 200 trillion cubic feet of proven reserves and 260 trillion cubic feet of proven reserves for gas, Mr. Speaker. That is very substantial indeed, and we want to make sure that we protect it, because it is our resource.

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, will the Premier answer this? How can he be certain that an increase in resource sales to the States won't mean increased costs for Albertans in the long run? Large volumes, you're talking about, but not a large number of years of sustainability for this province.

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, there is the ability to export natural gas right now. As I understand it, we're providing the United States with something in the neighbourhood of I've heard as high as 19 percent and as low as 12 percent of their total energy needs relative to natural gas and natural gas in turn generating electricity. That is huge. But while those exports take place, there are rules and regulations in place to ensure that the needs of Albertans and the needs of Canadians are met. You simply can't take and suck all the gas and the oil out of this province and send it south or anywhere else. [interjections]

Mr. Speaker, I heard this absurd comment from across the way that that is what is happening. I'm wondering today how this hon. member is heating her home or running her automobile. She's doing it through the resources, and the resources of this province are providing that. So obviously it's absurd to say that it's all going to the United States and it's all being exported. It's not. We will make sure that Albertans are protected and that Canadians are protected, but we'll make sure that we have the opportunity to earn a reasonable amount off our resource and at the same time ensure that there's an adequate supply of energy for the nation and for the province.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

School Board Trustees

MR. LORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The job of school trustee requires a great deal of skill, hard work, long hours, and dedication, and they also often have to endure a great deal of public criticism. There are concerns being expressed that we will have difficulty in continuing to attract highly qualified candidates to take on this important role in future particularly because of very low salaries. A few weeks ago a Calgary school board trustee resigned her position with only a few months to go until the next election, and I understand an Edmonton trustee also recently resigned. My questions are to the hon. Minister of Learning. What kinds of remuneration are made available for the position of school board trustee?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What I will say at the outset is that the majority of the school trustees are very dedicated people and are people that definitely are not there purely because of the salary, purely because of the remuneration. They're there for what they can do for kids and are very active in the school system. In general, across the province what we have is a wide

range. Probably on the low side it's around \$3,000, and on the high side it's around \$25,000. For the hon. member's information the average salary that was paid in Calgary, which is where the hon. member is from, was around \$11,700.

2:10

MR. LORD: To the same minister: are there any specific actions being taken by your department to attract and retain school board trustees who have the necessary experience and qualifications required to excel at the job?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. OBERG: Thank you. First of all, the elections are coming up in the third week of October, and I would encourage everyone in this Assembly and everyone who is listening to think very seriously about running for a school trustee position. It's a very rewarding task, and indeed it was something that I performed before coming into the Legislative Assembly.

In direct answer to the hon. member's question, the Alberta School Boards Association is undertaking a very intensive communication campaign right now to educate the public about what a school trustee does and the rewards of the job in the hope of getting a whole group of candidates to run for the upcoming election, because reasonably, hon. member, it is democracy that will determine who our next school boards will be, and the more that we get to run the better.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. LORD: Thank you. My final question: since voter turnout historically has been very low for school board elections, are there any actions under way to increase voter interest and awareness and encourage more people to get involved and come out and vote in the elections?

DR. OBERG: Again, Mr. Speaker, as I've stated in the previous two answers, a school trustee position is an extremely important position. It affects the lives of each and every one of our children, and it's something that we cannot take for granted.

Prior to the election in the third week of October, we will be putting out a very generic advertising campaign to say: please run; make sure you get out and vote. Historically, as you stated, the turnout for these elections is extremely low, and we would like to see that changed. I think it is very important for people to get out and vote, very important for them to exercise their democratic right and vote for the school trustee that they believe will do the best job for their particular circumstance.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Gasoline Prices

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year at this time the price of oil was \$29.33 per barrel and the price for gasoline was around 65 cents per litre. This year the price of oil has dropped to \$28.86 per barrel, yet gas prices have risen, in some cases above 75 cents. My first question this afternoon is to the Premier. Will the Premier commit to striking an all-party committee to immediately study gasoline retail pump prices in this province?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I don't mean to sound facetious, but by

the time we strike the committee, get it up and running, it's very likely the price of gas will be down to about 65 cents. You know, these things are cyclical, comparatively speaking, and related to the earning power.

I can recall back in the '70s when the price of gasoline at the pumps went through the roof. As a matter of fact, there was an extreme shortage, and there were pictures on television of miles and miles of cars lined up to get gasoline because basically someone started the rumour that we were going to run out of gasoline and there was going to be a tremendous shortage. The price went up. There was indeed a shortage at that particular time. It had nothing to do with the oil in the ground. It had something to do with world politics and the supply of oil particularly from the Middle East.

Nonetheless, there are a number of factors that reflect the price of gasoline at the pumps, and relative to the specifics – oh, I don't have the hon. minister here.

I was going to have the hon. former minister reply, but she can't. So I will take the matter under advisement. I will.

MRS. McCLELLAN: The Finance minister could.

MR. KLEIN: Well, I could have the hon. Minister of Finance reply because it does relate to money.

THE SPEAKER: Well, we're going to move on to the next supplementary here. The hon. member.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I said: immediately strike a committee.

How can the Premier stand in this Assembly and tell us that gas prices are based on oil prices when clearly today we have higher prices for gasoline and lower prices for oil?

Thank you.

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I understand that the hon. Minister of Energy answered this question – I believe it was on Monday – in response to a question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, I believe. He explained that there are a number of factors that lead to the pricing of gasoline. One of those factors, I think I heard him say, was how much they bought the product for some months previously; in other words, how much hedging was going on, and how much did they pay for future oil that was, in turn, turned into gasoline? That may be one of the factors.

MR. MacDONALD: Again to the Premier. Yesterday at the Petro-Canada at 90th Avenue and Ottewell the price of gasoline per litre was 70 cents. Today at the Esso at 99th Street and 82nd Avenue the price is 75 cents a litre. In Calgary at Centex Gas on Elbow Drive and 95th Avenue the price of gas is 72.9 cents a litre. It goes even higher in other neighbourhoods in Calgary. This is an issue that is very, very important.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, please. We've all agreed that there would be no preambles. What is the question?

MR. MacDONALD: Will the Premier, please, for the sake of consumers in this province strike a committee of members from different parties in this Assembly to study the retail price of gasoline in this province? Immediately strike a committee.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, we can strike all the committees we want. But what can be done other than to get into the marketplace? And I don't think we want to do that. I know we don't want to do that, and I'm sure the Liberals don't want to do that.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Oh, yes, they do.

MR. KLEIN: Well, perhaps they do.

Mr. Speaker, there is an agency that looks into prices for all commodities called the Competition Bureau of Canada. It's a federal agency. Whether it's gasoline or bread or anything else that is a consumer product, if it's deemed there is unfair competition, the bureau of course has the authority to look into these matters.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I said before, as I said at the beginning, by the time we strike a committee, by the time we get into a process – and I don't know what the end of the process is going to be, because I don't know what authority this Legislative Assembly or an all-party committee would have; probably none whatsoever – by that time the price of gas could very well be down in the mid-60s, where it was a couple of weeks ago.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Opticians' Scope of Practice

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Concerns have been raised in my constituency that optician associations in several provinces have initiated discussions regarding legislative amendments which would allow opticians to prescribe eyewear. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Have similar discussions occurred in Alberta?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I am aware that this is an issue in the eye care community. In this province the professional association, the Alberta Opticians Association, has proposed that opticians be authorized to perform simple sight testing. This is something that would be properly discussed with respect to the regulations that are being developed under the Health Professions Act.

MR. JOHNSON: My second question is to the same minister. Is it likely that when regulations are developed under the Health Professions Act, the scope of practice for opticians will be expanded in any way?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I can't speculate on exactly which regulations will be developed under the Health Professions Act. I can say, however, that this is an appropriate avenue to review the proposal by the Opticians Association. All affected stakeholders, including the opticians, would have several opportunities to give input into the development of the regulations under the HPA.

There is a Health Professions Advisory Board under that particular act, that is composed of members of the public as well as health professionals. This board will provide advice to me with respect to matters under the act, and it would be my intention to ask this board for its recommendations regarding the scope of practice for opticians.

MR. JOHNSON: I have no further questions.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

2:20

Hub Oil Company Ltd.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under the terms of approval from Alberta environmental protection due to expire on February 1, 2006, there is a requirement for the plant operation of Hub Oil Company to carry out groundwater monitoring on a semi-

annual frequency and submit an annual report. To the Minister of Environment: given that crucial information such as the amount of any of PCBs, arsenic, cadmium, and lead would appear in this report, will the minister provide to the Assembly the reports from 1999 and 2000?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have an appropriate process to go through. It's the FOIP process, the freedom of information and protection of privacy, and certainly the member has access to that process.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Transportation, then, please. Given that Hub Oil Company has sold blended fuel oil to asphalt companies in this province for years, has the Department of Transportation analyzed the level of PCBs, arsenic, cadmium, and lead shipped from Hub Oil to the province's asphalt plants to ensure that the levels of these toxic substances are below maximum allowable levels?

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, I don't know specifically of any products shipped from Hub Oil to any paving project in this province. However, I can assure the hon. member that we don't allow any kind of material to be incorporated in asphalt unless it meets the very strict guidelines and regulations that are monitored by the Minister of Environment.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Environment: what are the bases on which groundwater monitoring reports are reviewed by the chemicals assessment and management division's groundwater protection branch of Alberta environmental protection?

DR. TAYLOR: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously when we're doing tests and monitoring, they are reviewed by our professional scientific staff. We have a number of scientists there. When we do monitoring, whether it's air quality monitoring or soil testing or groundwater or drinking water monitoring, our professional scientific staff in the particular area – if they're water staff, then they monitor scientifically the tests. The air staff monitors the air quality tests. If it's soil testing, then our soil experts monitor that. The water sample monitoring will be handled in the same way as any monitoring is handled.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Petro-Canada Labour Dispute

MR. MASON: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are on the strike-bound Petro-Canada refinery, which last Saturday sent a thick plume of black smoke across Edmonton's east side. A spokesperson for Petro-Canada described the incident as very serious, yet the company has announced its intention to resume refinery production today despite the current strike. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. In light of the tentative agreement reached yesterday, which will be voted on tomorrow, will the minister order Petro-Canada to hold off resuming

production at least until the vote results are known so that the health and safety of metro-Edmonton residents are not further compromised?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, it's not quite a mixed metaphor in terms of the question, but the hon. member, I think, is trying to bring two different aspects of our department into play. If there is any sort of health and safety hazard that currently exists, then our workplace health and safety people will be on the job and will be looking at that. That will have no impact and no effect over the collective bargaining process. Employees in this province have the legitimate right to go on strike. Employers have a legitimate right to try to carry on their operation as best they can during that strike. So one does not necessarily lead to the other.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How can the minister justify allowing unskilled replacement workers with less than two weeks' training to handle extremely dangerous substances in large quantities, such as hydrogen sulfide and hydrochloric acid?

MR. DUNFORD: Under our workplace health and safety guidelines, Mr. Speaker, there are ample legislation and regulations in place to cover that. Certainly in the sense of compliance, then, with those regulations, it's a matter of workplace health and safety. Unlike the hon. member, I have full confidence in our staff.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister, then, share with us what information he is relying upon that makes him so certain that the use of untrained or partially trained replacement workers in a highly complex oil refinery is not compromising either workplace safety or public safety?

MR. DUNFORD: Mr. Speaker, the standards are in place. We have workplace health and safety officials that monitor such standards. The allegation about a worker's ability to deal with it is simply a matter of the company's obligation to meet the standards that are in place. If those standards are not met, then of course we have all manner of ways in which we can take action.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Alberta Trailnet

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning Alberta Trailnet announced two programs: the Trans Canada Trail discovery program, which involves the development and installation of interpretive panels along the Trans Canada Trail, and the Bridges for Canada initiative, which involves building bridges along the Trans Canada Trail, involving the military forces. To date eight bridges have already been completed. My first question today is to the hon. Minister of Community Development. Can the minister tell me if Trans Canada Trail or Alberta Trailnet has obtained or plans to obtain all the necessary municipal development permits prior to the construction of these bridges?

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are no bridges on the trail in Alberta at this point, but I should point out that one has been proposed for the Athabasca area. It is neither the responsibility of

the Trans Canada Trail Foundation nor of Alberta Trailnet to obtain any local approvals. Any of those approvals for any type of construction or for the trail itself, for that matter, are totally the responsibility of the local trail operator. The local trail operators, I'm sure, will be working with the municipalities for any of those proposed projects. That's my understanding of what's going on there in the Athabasca area, and that has to be done prior to the commencement of any of that trail development or bridge development.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the minister was so thorough in answering my first question and also answering my second, it leaves me with my last supplementary. Could the Minister of Community Development tell this member if this government has any financial involvement whatsoever in the construction of this bridge program?

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Well, no, Mr. Speaker, we don't have any direct involvement, but I think the House would be reminded that we did give a start-up onetime grant of about \$1.1 million awhile back. Those moneys undoubtedly have been used for a variety of purposes.

I would say specific to the issue of bridge construction along this trail, that will unite all of Canada eventually, that that particular project is being funded largely by the Canadian military, the Military Engineers. I understand that they're covering the costs of development as well as production and implementation and materials. The one spec'd for Athabasca, assuming approvals are had and all of that, would be entirely covered by the Canadian forces. We should thank them and the Bronfman Foundation, by the way, for their work on this trail to date.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Use of Outside Counsel

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In his last annual report the Auditor General recommended that "the Department of Justice enhance its systems for managing and reporting on the cost-effectiveness of legal services, including contracted services." The Auditor General stated that "Justice's accountability systems for contracting outside counsel do not include measurable performance expectations, or monitoring and evaluation of performance" and that "public disclosure would improve Justice's accountability." My questions are for the Minister of Justice. Since the Department of Justice did not provide a response to this recommendation, what is the minister doing to improve the accountability of outside counsel?

2:30

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're following the recommendation of the Auditor General in developing a process to better monitor outside counsel, the effectiveness of services provided by outside counsel, and the efficacy of using outside counsel.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. Has the minister completed his review of the bill for outside counsel in the recent defamation action relating to the former Minister of Finance? Did the department get value for money?

MR. HANCOCK: A very interesting question, Mr. Speaker, and I think a very good question. The department has reviewed the account in question. The account was rather large, and I would be offering an opinion, I guess, if I were to say whether we viewed it that we got value for money. Suffice it to say that the case in question was quite complex, notwithstanding that the result and the amount of damages claimed was not significant. The problem with that particular case was that it involved an individual member of the Assembly, it involved defences to a defamation action, and it involved a law firm providing advice with respect to that particular lawsuit, which involved numerous avenues of research.

What I can assure the member is that department counsel followed the various bills that came in on that particular incident – it wasn't just one bill; it was a monthly bill that came in – followed up on the bill as it came in and ensured that every avenue that was being researched with respect to that case was considered to be if not an appropriate avenue at least one that we couldn't, in our judgment, complain about at that particular time.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. member.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. The minister spoke of following every avenue of review, but did the minister – and if he didn't, is he willing to? – send this particular bill to the taxing officer of the court so that it can be impartially reviewed by an independent officer of the court?

MR. HANCOCK: As I responded with respect to an earlier question in the House today with respect to the matter about the review of the risk management process and how we handle it, we have deferred making a decision with respect to taxation as well until after we receive the decision from the court, because I think both of those avenues of review should be done in the full context of the court decision.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

School Board Boundary Changes

REV. ABBOTT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A recent letter from the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta outlines its concerns related to the proposed changes to the 4 by 4 separate school formation process. Two of the school boards in my riding have also written me to say that they do not support the changes outlined in Bill 16 regarding this specific issue. My questions today are to the Minister of Learning. How do you respond to the association when it says that this process will be more cumbersome and less democratic than the current process?

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister.

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess the best way to respond to this question is to explain what we have now and what Bill 16 will provide. What we have right now is called the 4 by 4 process. Essentially what happens is that the minority religion within a four-mile by four-mile square has the ability to petition for a school board. First of all, they have to ensure that they are the minority religion. There has to be a poll taken to show that they are the minority religion. Second of all, a vote has to be held. The vote has to be tabulated by the separate school board, and then the vote is sent on to me, at which point I either approve or disapprove the formation of that school jurisdiction.

Mr. Speaker, what is being proposed in this legislation is two

ways that this can occur. First of all, if the separate school board sits down and combines with the public school board, where both school boards come forward to me and say, "We want the separate school board expanded to be coterminous," it will occur. The second way is that if a separate school board wants to expand within the area of a map that is predetermined, it will be petitioned by its petitioners, of which there must be three electors. It must be then a public process to listen and to talk to both the public side and the separate side, mediated by an independent facilitator. It will then occur. You be the decider or whoever be the decider whether that's more cumbersome. Personally I don't think it is, and even more importantly I think it's a lot fairer.

REV. ABBOTT: Again to the same minister: will the proposed changes, as the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta says, promote the separation of students and contribute to the decline in enrollments in rural communities?

THE SPEAKER: The purpose of question period is not to have a debate on a bill before the Assembly.

The hon. minister.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Speaker. Well, first of all, the 4 by 4 process is available right now, today, to every Catholic elector, to every minority religion elector within the province of Alberta. So if the concern is whether or not Small Town, Alberta, will receive a Catholic school jurisdiction, that chance is out there right now. What we are trying to do under Bill 16 is we are attempting to put some rationality to this process. We are attempting to have everyone in the community, not just the minority religion, sit down and have a good discussion about whether or not there should be a separate school district in that particular small town.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that this is the fairest way possible. The 4 by 4 system did not allow for any public consultation. I will give an example of my own community, in which case there are 13,000 people: 175 people voted to have a separate school district in Brooks, and with those 175 people there was a separate school jurisdiction brought to Brooks. There was no way for the other 12,000 and some people to even get into the discussion.

REV. ABBOTT: So my final question then: will these changes result in one minority faith being favoured over the other?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, the quick and short answer to that is absolutely not. The minority rights are still there. The minority rights, whether they be Catholic or whether they be Protestant, are still existing. The constitutional rights are still there under this law. What this bill does is provide a better, more rational alternative to formation of separate school districts.

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

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

(*reversion*)

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

MR. MARZ: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's not often I get the privilege of introducing guests from my constituency. Today I

have quite a number of them, 130 very studious and well-disciplined students, and I know because I was visiting with them on the lawn. They're here today to see how well disciplined their members of the Assembly are, and I'm sure we won't disappoint them.

Accompanying the students is a group of very hardworking and dedicated teachers: Mr. Bob Worsfold, who is also the ATA local president; Ms. Cindy Patterson; Mrs. Jane Flexhaug, a teacher's assistant; Kelvin Beaudry; Ms. Kara McDonald; Mrs. Sharon Collin; Mrs. Jolene Burgeson. As well, a group of parents: Mrs. Cindy Lodder, Mr. Lyle Blatz, Mrs. Debbie Rockwell, Mrs. Laura Olson, Mrs. Carolyn Leeuwenburgh, Mrs. Tami Gardner, Mrs. Tammy Cotton, Mrs. Cheryl Corsiatto. They were delivered very safely to us today by bus drivers Don Irwin, Mike Irwin, and Bill Moore, who preferred the sunshine on the lawn. I'm sure the group will take our best greetings back with them. I'd ask them all to rise today, in both galleries I believe, and accept the warm welcome of our Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Theresa Nelsen

MR. VANDERBURG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it's my privilege to acknowledge and extend congratulations to Miss Theresa Nelsen. Miss Nelsen, a grade 12 student from Whitecourt, was named a member of the 4-H Alberta-Northwest Territories agriculture development tour during the annual Alberta 4-H selections program in Olds. Miss Nelsen is 18 and a member of the Roydale 4-H Multiclub, where she's specializing in beef production. As a member of the Alberta-Northwest Territories agriculture development tour Miss Nelsen and 25 other 4-H members will participate in activities designed to increase the awareness of the diversity of our agriculture industry.

Miss Nelsen will have the opportunity to travel to Yellowknife this summer and explore the diversity of culture and lifestyle in Canada's north. Mr. Speaker, this is a great honour and an important education experience for Miss Nelsen and the 25 other participants. It's a chance for them to see part of our great country that they may not have otherwise had a chance to see and to experience the rich culture of the north and to find out more about the depth and significance of our own agricultural industry. This is important not only in developing the skills and knowledge of the participants who may follow a career in agriculture but also in developing the citizens and leaders of Alberta. This is something the 4-H program is designed to do.

To close, Mr. Speaker, I would like to again offer my congratulations to Miss Nelsen on receiving this honour and to wish her a wonderful experience on this trip and a very bright future. Thank you.

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

2:40

National Missing Children's Day

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May 25 is National Missing Children's Day, a day to reflect upon the appalling tragedy of missing children, a day to join together to offer hope to those families who are still searching, and a day to remember with sadness those children who will never return.

In the past week we've all lived the anguish of parents faced with a missing child, and when we learned that that missing child would never return, we were devastated. The Jessica Koopmans of the world shatter us. How could she have been protected? How do we

prevent children from meeting such an end? We can be overwhelmed by our grief and our helplessness, cowed by the feeling that we have no control, but we dare not and we must not. We can take control, all of us: our families, our society, our schools, our child care agencies, our government, and our courts. We must all redouble our efforts to create a safe environment for children, an environment where our children are allowed to be children, to grow, to learn, to dream, to play, and to love, free from drugs, violence, poverty, and fear.

While we are doing that, we can support groups like Child Find Alberta, Missing Children Society of Canada, Missing Children's Network Canada, and Our Missing Children. We can acquaint ourselves with strategies that will prevent our children from going missing. We can work with children themselves, arming them with the knowledge that may prevent them from becoming victims.

A week Friday, on National Missing Children's Day, we will be asked to leave our porch lights on to help light the way home for missing children. Let those same porch lights remind each of us of our responsibilities to children. Let those porch lights remind us that we can take control, and this year let those porch lights shine across the province in memory of Jessica Koopmans.

Thank you.

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

Crime Prevention Week

MR. LORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While door-knocking in my constituency during the recent election, I was very surprised at the great increase in the number of large, barking dogs I was encountering, even just over the last couple of years. It was pretty clear to me that concern about crime has become one of the very biggest issues on my constituents' minds, and my conversations at the doorstep confirmed this. That is why I am so pleased today to rise before this Assembly to speak to an important awareness initiative in this regard, important not just to my constituents but to all Albertans.

May 11 to May 18 is Alberta's 10th annual Crime Prevention Week. Led by Alberta's Solicitor General, this week is intended to raise awareness about crime prevention initiatives across the province and to encourage Albertans to help make our communities safer. The theme this year is the Many Faces of Crime Prevention, and it is intended to remind us that we can all play a role and should play a role in helping prevent crime in our communities. I would encourage all members of this Assembly, if you aren't doing so already, to work with your constituency organizations to help identify and bring some well-deserved recognition to any individuals who have gone above and beyond to help prevent crime in your communities.

The province is helping to do this. Two weeks ago Alberta's Solicitor General announced more than \$580,000 in community crime prevention grants to assist various community organizations across the province. On May 12 in Calgary a ceremony was held to honour some of the businesses, organizations, and individuals who have put their heart and soul into making a difference through crime prevention in their communities.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to encourage all members of this Assembly to play an even bigger part in building safer and stronger communities by getting more involved. Let's all just get out in our communities, not only this week but year-round, and support crime prevention initiatives in our neighbourhoods.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Inland Cement Limited

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is recklessly fast-tracking the approval process for Inland Cement's conversion to coal operations. Doing so is needlessly endangering the environment as well as the health and well-being of tens of thousands of Edmontonians. By Inland Cement's own account arsenic, mercury, sulphur dioxide, and chromium emissions will all increase. In addition, converting to coal will increase greenhouse gas emissions by more than 400 tonnes per day.

This proposal has raised widespread concerns among the residents of this city. At a recent public meeting over 200 local residents came out on a beautiful spring evening to express their concerns and their frustrations at a government that appears to be doing only the company's bidding. In addition, a petition calling for a full environmental impact assessment has gathered 1,300 signatures and is still being circulated. Finally, there are major concerns about the risk of setting a precedent for future coal operations. The government has been talking about streamlining approval of coal-burning power plants for some time now, and I fear that if the Inland Cement conversion is fast-tracked, other coal projects will be as well.

In this case, the Minister of Environment has the authority to order a full environmental impact assessment. This would include public hearings where intervenors could obtain legal funding, witnesses could be cross-examined, and alternative evidence presented. I strongly urge the government to order such an assessment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: Projected Government Business

MS CARLSON: I would ask the government to please share the orders of business for next week with us.

THE SPEAKER: The Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Victoria Day being Monday, government business on Tuesday at 4:30 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders, second reading of bills 17, 15, 11, 16, and Committee of the Whole if time permits as per the Order Paper.

Tuesday at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply, day 13, estimates for the departments of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Innovation and Science, and as per the Order Paper.

Wednesday, May 23, at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply, the estimates for the departments of Revenue and the Solicitor General and as per the Order Paper.

Thursday, May 24, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply, the main estimates of the Department of Environment. Time permitting we would request reversion to Introduction of Bills for the introduction of the main estimates appropriation bill, which I believe will be Bill 20, and then second reading of bills 17 and 18 and as per the Order Paper.

THE SPEAKER: The Official Opposition House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against Members

Imputing Falsehoods against a Member

MS CARLSON: Yes, Mr. Speaker, thank you. I rise under 23(h) and (i): making allegations and imputing false motives, in reference to a response from the Minister of Health and Wellness earlier this afternoon in the exchange during question period.

This is a continuation, Mr. Speaker, of an exchange between this

minister and the Member for Edmonton-Riverview since Monday of this week on issues that the Member for Edmonton-Riverview has been asking with regards to conflict of interest policy. The minister has been making some allegations and urging – as well as some private members in the Assembly in heckles – to name names and that the questions being asked are not based on policy.

I would suggest that the Member for Edmonton-Riverview is well within his rights within the terms of the questions he has and the rights he has under the terms of qualified privilege of a member where he has an obligation to ask questions, and the minister has an obligation to hear those questions and respond accordingly.

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has not made any case under 23(h) or (i) with respect to the exchange in question period today. Clearly, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview was, in phrasing the question, referring to a specific individual. It was clear to myself and to all other members of the House in the detail that was provided that there was a specific individual being referenced.

A question could have been brought on a policy question as to what qualifications a member might have before being appointed or what type of a review is in the appointment process, but by raising the question in the manner that it was, there was a clear allegation being made in the question, and the hon. minister, in responding, indicated exactly that: there was an allegation being made which could be a clearly identifiable person. If someone were to raise questions of that nature in the House, where the individual in question could not defend themselves and where the details of the incidents being brought forward could not be properly explored, that was improper. I agree with the hon. minister, quite frankly, that it is improper to bring questions forward of that nature.

2:50

Issues with respect to ethical questions of that nature have to be phrased very, very carefully, Mr. Speaker. If you want to raise a question of policy, which is most appropriate in this House – to raise issues of policy – then phrasing the question in a policy framework is appropriate. But phrasing a question in a manner which anybody can tell is an allegation about an individual who's not here to defend themselves, in a situation where the specifics could not be brought forward and dealt with is inappropriate. Therefore, the minister's response was entirely appropriate.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on this point of order.

DR. TAFT: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've taken great care and I take great care with every question I ask not to impute or raise allegations. It was a question of policy and how a policy was implemented, and I raised an example to illustrate it. If you read the question, you will realize that there was no allegation there.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on this point of order?

MR. MASON: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Please proceed.

MR. MASON: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Government House Leader indicated that questions on policy alone should be brought before the Assembly during question period. In fact, it is fundamental that accountability of the government is also a fundamental principle for question period. The appointment of individual

members by the government, if there is a serious problem that could affect the performance of their duties, is perfectly within the scope of question period.

[Mr. Hancock rose]

THE SPEAKER: No, you've already participated once; that's it.

Hon. members, the citation provided by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie had to do with Standing Orders 23(h) and (i) of the Alberta Legislative Assembly. Let me at the outset make it very, very clear that sections 23(h) and (i) have nothing to do with the arguments put forward here or the questions this afternoon. Sections 23(h) and (i) have to deal with allegations made against another member, or "imputes false or unavowed motives to another member." That's what the protection of that particular standing order is all about.

Now with respect to what we have here this afternoon, here's the text of what happened. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview:

Can the minister explain how the government's policy on appointments to RHAs would allow a person would allow a person to lead an RHA's finance committee at the same time his company is defaulting on a \$650,000 government-backed loan?

The word "his" is included in the question.

The hon. minister, "Well, I can say this categorically, Mr. Speaker: our policy is certainly not to besmirch the good reputation of individuals."

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview: "Is the fact that this same individual has family connections to three for-profit nursing homes that contract with the CRHA of any concern to the minister?"

The minister:

Mr. Speaker, as I raised this the other day in this Assembly, this is a well-worn path that leads exactly to nowhere. All of these contracts are scrupulously examined, and I stand by the good work that is done by the regional health authority and its members.

It is not for me here today to make any kind of response to the kinds of allegations that are being made here.

Now, with respect to allegations, 23(h) and (i) have to do with allegations with respect to another member. There was no allegation made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview with respect to another member in the Assembly. Neither was there any allegation made by the Minister of Health and Wellness with respect to another member in the Assembly from my reading of the text and my observing of this particular matter this afternoon.

Now, there is a concern, though – policy issues: yes, absolutely; no doubt at all about it. That's what this Assembly's all about, and that's what question period's all about. Question period is not about debate. It's about seeking information and holding the government accountable. There are situations that do happen periodically when hon. members sometimes name individuals who are not in this Assembly who cannot be protected or sometimes have allegations that may be made about members whose names are not there or suggestions.

The difficulty the chair has is that the chair never knows if an hon. member raising the question is, quote, seeking something with a shotgun approach; i.e. you fire a shotgun bullet and the 57 pellets are going out, hoping that one of the 57 will hit a mark. That's a pretty dangerous form of questioning. That's a very, very dangerous form of questioning, because it also leads to another member rising on a point of privilege with respect to that kind of an approach. So one has to be very, very careful.

These questions today do not suggest the existence of a known individual to the chair, never raised in this Assembly before, but it can lead to some implications that all hon. members can deal with if they want to rise on a point of privilege at any time or a point of order that can be dealt with in the question period.

In terms of a point of order today dealing with allegations, the rules speak very clearly about allegations about other members in this particular Assembly. There's nothing in the text that the chair reads with respect to this that would cause concern about that.

There are, however, a whole series of violations today with respect to the Standing Orders. Let's just remind ourselves of what some of these are. We have a clear understanding that when we stand in this Assembly, we deal with another hon. member with the greatest degree of concern and courtesy that we should have. That means addressing the hon. member by the constituency and the correct name of their constituency, and if they happen to be the Opposition House Leader, that's the courteous title that's given to the Opposition House Leader. If it's the Leader of the Official Opposition, that's the courteous title that's given to the Leader of the Official Opposition.

It's also courteous to deal with ministers in much the same way, and the correct title for ministers are what they are listed as. It is not the minister of agriculture; it's actually the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. It's not the minister of health; it's the Minister of Health and Wellness. We had two violations with respect to that today. The Leader of the Official Opposition incorrectly referred to one minister with the incorrect title, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview incorrectly referred to a minister with the incorrect title.

Now, preambles are also an agreed-upon procedure, agreed to in this Assembly, and the chair has a signed document with leaders from three parties agreeing what the rule on preambles is. They've been signed. Their name is etched on the piece of paper. It's there. I endorsed it.

So let's see now. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, in your second question you had a preamble. The leader of the third party, in your second question you had a preamble. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, in your second question you had a preamble. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, in your third question you had a preamble, and there was an interjection from the chair with respect to that matter. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, on your third question that you had today, you violated *Beauchesne* 408(e) and (f), and you violated 409(1). The minister of education and the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor, you received an admonition from the chair with respect to enticing debate in the Assembly.

So we have a four-day weekend coming up . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: That's Minister of Learning.

THE SPEAKER: Minister of Learning, yeah.

We have a four-day weekend coming up, and the first thing that will happen with the chair is that he will spend much of Friday reading the rules, getting the titles correct. I would encourage all members to take the Standing Orders, *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules & Forms*, *Erskine May Parliamentary Practice*, the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* and do a quick overview just so that we're really going to be in shape on Tuesday next.

3:00

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: We'll call the committee to order. For the those sitting in the gallery, just so you're aware, this is a portion of the procedure of the Legislature where there is some

informality. Members are allowed to remove their jackets and move around from their seats, and they are also able to have a coffee or a juice in the Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2001-02**

Seniors

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: This is a designated department. I'll invite the hon. Minister of Seniors to open debate.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I am very pleased to be here today to discuss the first three-year business plan for the new Ministry of Seniors. Alberta is the only province in Canada that has a ministry devoted to seniors. This demonstrates the government's strong commitment to enhancing the quality of life for Alberta's seniors. It also enables the government to provide a greater focus on the current and future needs of seniors in our province, particularly those most in need. As the Minister of Seniors I'm looking forward to working with Alberta seniors and being an advocate on their behalf.

Responsibility for housing is also part of the new Ministry of Seniors. This includes housing for seniors, for lower income families, for individuals with special needs, and for the homeless. It is incumbent on us to help those members of our society who are unable to find adequate accommodation and to support them in becoming healthier and more self-reliant, contributing members of our communities.

The Ministry of Seniors' business plan is closely aligned with the priorities of the government of Alberta's 2001 to 2004 business plan. Of particular importance to this ministry is the government's priority of caring for children and supporting seniors and families. As the ministry responsible for seniors and housing our three-year business plan is developed around two core businesses:

1. supporting the independence and well-being of seniors; and
2. supporting family and special purpose housing needs.

Our 2001-04 business plan takes a different approach from previous years. Instead of identifying a list of actions that relate to each goal, we have taken a broader approach and identified corporate initiatives. You will see these listed under each of five success factors.

Regarding our performance measures, a number of improvements have been made, retaining a link between measures and performance assessments in each core business. We wanted our performance measures to be more meaningful to our stakeholders and partners as well. The measures will address what we have heard people want us to deal with.

Our first goal is to ensure that seniors have "access to the supports they need to live as independently as possible in a secure and dignified way." One of the most effective ways to do this is to actively communicate with seniors on a daily basis. We accomplish this through our toll-free Alberta seniors' information line: 1-800-642-3853 or, if you're in Edmonton, 427-7876. Since its introduction in 1994 the line has received over 989,000 calls, and we expect to take our one millionth call early next month.

My ministry is always looking for ways to enhance the communication and/or delivery of our services and programs to seniors throughout the province. One way that's being considered is through existing seniors' centres. Late last year I gave the go-ahead to the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta, the Alberta Council on Aging, and my ministry to conduct a study on the role, services, and funding of seniors' centres. I look forward to the results of the study as it may offer some good opportunities to further our support to seniors. I should explain that a key component of successful aging

is for seniors to have opportunities to be active and involved in events, programs, and the life of their communities. Seniors' centres offer such opportunities.

I'm proud to say that Alberta offers one of the most comprehensive packages of benefits for lower income seniors in Canada. The Alberta seniors' benefit program provides a cash benefit and is used to calculate a partial or full subsidy of Alberta health insurance premiums for seniors that are most in need. As of March 2001 over 181,000 Alberta seniors, or roughly 59 percent, were receiving benefits from the program. More than 166,000 seniors pay no health insurance premiums whatsoever.

Budget 2001 provides an additional \$2.1 million over the 2000 budget for the Alberta seniors' benefit program to assist lower income seniors with increased living expenses. The special-needs assistance for seniors' program is an income-tested program that provides lump sum cash payments to help seniors who can demonstrate that they are unable to meet their basic needs. It is the only such program in Canada. Last year the program helped more than 7,000 low-income seniors who were experiencing extreme financial difficulty.

Budget 2001 provides an increase of \$2.2 million over last year's budget for the special-needs assistance for seniors' program. These increases bring the budget for these two programs to \$166.3 million. Seniors eligible for benefits will see the increases starting this July, as this is the start of the new benefit year. Most seniors will receive approximately a 4 percent increase, but as in the past we are looking at fine-tuning the program, so it is possible that some seniors will receive a higher amount.

Seniors' housing is another important program in our ministry. Between the shelter component of the Alberta seniors' benefit program and our seniors' housing program, over 1 in 3 seniors in Alberta receives some form of assistance with their housing costs. The government is committed to working with our community partners to determine how best to meet seniors' future housing needs. We support the development of community resources for seniors to allow them to age in place. By this I mean ensuring that personal and health services that seniors want are available to them within their own community whether they choose to live in their own home or live in a supportive housing facility.

In 1999 the government introduced the healthy aging partnership initiative, a \$10 million fund to encourage the development of appropriate supportive housing accommodation so that seniors can live in a place in their own communities. Last fall the government committed an additional \$10 million and targeted onetime funding for the seniors' supportive housing incentive program. This program aims to provide additional supportive housing projects that are comfortable, residential, and safe for low- and moderate-income senior citizens.

This year the budget saw an increase of \$33.8 million to support seniors' housing. This includes \$31.7 million to develop more community-based supportive housing for seniors to age in place, an additional \$1.6 million to address the maintenance and operation of publicly owned seniors' housing units, and an increase of \$500,000 to support 300 new lodge units for Alberta seniors.

The government of Alberta has made seniors one of its top four cross-ministry policy priorities for 2001-02. Led by the Ministry of Seniors and co-championed by Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta will lead the country with seniors' policy initiatives that will see 19 ministries and government entities develop a strategic framework with a 10-year outlook. The initiative will build upon a solid base of current programs and services and set the course for the well-being of seniors in future years.

The second goal in our business plan is to support "family and

special purpose housing needs.” Alberta Seniors is committed to facilitating the provision of social housing while adhering to the fiscal responsibilities of the government. This government has in place a family and special purpose housing policy framework that establishes the strategic cornerstones needed to ensure that affordable housing alternatives are available to those in need. The framework sets a new direction for the continuum of housing needs of the homeless, transitional housing, supportive housing, social housing, and affordable housing based on flexibility and local decision-making.

As part of our business plan my ministry is committed to working with communities to address housing needs, recognizing that every community has different housing needs and circumstances that are best resolved by local planning and decision-making. My ministry will continue to develop its partnerships to meet the housing needs of low-income families and special-needs clients.

The ministry offers family and special purpose programs to help low-income families and persons with physical disabilities and hard-to-house and Metis families. Our plan is to recognize the needs of remote, rural, and off-reserve aboriginal housing, and we look at the feasibility of this program being self-supporting. We will also pursue co-operative commitments for funding from the federal government in this regard.

3:10

Mr. Chairman, I see that I’m running out of time, so I will just close by saying that there are quite a few more housing initiatives that I was going to bring forward at this moment. We’ll wait for the questions to come and then deal with the homeless and programs that we have in place and so on.

What I’d like to say in conclusion is that my staff, who are up in the gallery working so hard this afternoon, will attempt to answer the relevant questions after they hear the comments here and they have the opportunity to review *Hansard*.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I’m glad to have the opportunity to have the Ministry of Seniors as a designated ministry under our budget process, which allows us to spend two and a half hours looking at the budget and the policy, performance measurements, and plans of the government regarding seniors. As the minister mentioned, this is a new stand-alone ministry. It was previously under the Department of Community Development, and as the critic for Community Development I had seniors under my critic portfolio in the past.

I’d like to start today, at least in my first opportunity to debate, by just going through some of the concerns that have been raised with me by seniors. They fall broadly into three categories: health, housing, and other issues around money that are placing seniors into strained financial circumstances.

Just before I start, I do have a couple of inquiries from seniors who at times feel frustrated that what they’re trying to say through to the ministry is not being heard. I’m wondering if the minister can please detail for me and for all seniors in Alberta: what is the process when a senior phones into the seniors’ line expressing a concern? What is the process that that message follows to get through to the minister, if indeed it does get through to the minister? What kind of follow-up monitoring and evaluation is involved in that?

Now, issues under health care. The one that comes up I would have to say the most often is the question: why did the government

choose not to eliminate health care premiums for seniors? This was talked about a lot during the election. I think it was mused aloud by the Premier at one point, but in fact this budget has come down . . . [interjection] Yes. I think there were Conservative candidates that talked about it in their election.

MR. MacDONALD: Promised it.

MS BLAKEMAN: I’m sorry. Promised it. [interjections] Not the one I was working with.

So we would like an explanation from the minister as to why the choice was made not to eliminate health care premiums for seniors. Certainly when we look at the fact that seniors have a fixed income and are not in a position where they can readily earn more money or get more money through investments, if they’re fortunate to have them, the strain of paying health care premiums can really put a dent in their pocketbooks, and when we talk about trying to assist seniors, it has always struck me that this was a very immediate and straight-through line to putting dollars back into the pockets of seniors. As the previous Minister of Finance used to say: putting those sweat-soaked loonies back into people’s pockets.

MR. MacDONALD: What’s he saying now?

MS BLAKEMAN: Not much.

Along with that question of course goes a question about reducing the amount of money that seniors are having to pay for their Blue Cross, another issue that has been raised with me.

The next issue is around dental support or payments for dentistry. I had raised this with the minister in the previous year, written to both him and the Minister of Health and Wellness, I believe, asking why there couldn’t be more assistance for dental care for seniors. I’d been hearing both from seniors and from dentists, in fact, pointing out that the range of programs that are available is very confusing to seniors as to whether they will qualify for subsidy or they won’t qualify for subsidy. What we’re finding is that they’re just not going, and as one senior pointed out to me, seniors need good dental care if they’re going to be able to eat a nutritious and healthy diet.

The present dental assistance program which comes under the seniors’ benefit program is totally inadequate. Somewhere else someone points out that the government manages to support children’s teeth, and why aren’t they paying a bit more attention to the teeth of seniors which, when they fall out, don’t grow back? I thought that was a solid point.

I think it is a concern for us, and this is ongoing now. I’m looking to the ministry as to why they chose not to give additional support here. What I was asking for was a fund of money that would essentially ensure that seniors who wanted it would be able to at least get a dental checkup. Certainly on the campaign trail I heard from specific individuals who required extensive dental work and simply couldn’t afford it even through the programs that were available through the ministry. This was really affecting their health and their quality of life, for obvious reasons.

Next on the list of concerns under health is home care, and this is an ongoing, chronic area of concern for those working with seniors, those who are seniors, and the people who are family members of seniors. There is not enough funding in this area. What has the minister done to work cross-departmentally with the Minister of Health and Wellness around ensuring that there is adequate funding for home care? Is there some formula that the government is working on that they just don’t want to spend more than X amount of money? Is that connected to the demand for the program? Because we have a situation where the government is saying, “We

want seniors to stay at home; we want seniors to age in place," but seniors, in order to be able to do that, need home care services, and they can't get them. I mean, there are waiting lists for them. One woman from an agency here in Edmonton wrote to me that there's a three-month wait for in-home occupational therapy assistance, difficulty with the waiting list for home care.

Also, we have split home care into a number of different areas, because we've got home care, we've got housekeeping, and in some cases we seem to have this personal care, which is yet another area. When we look at the housekeeping, the point being made is that it's not very well done, that they're not there very long, and it makes it really difficult for seniors to keep going on their own when they can't get that kind of assistance. It has to be pretty specific to cover what they're looking for.

So what is the budget? Can you break it out for us, please, for housekeeping services and exactly how that works and how much the ministry is putting toward it? And if it is a cross-jurisdictional funding, then what is the other funding coming towards it? Are there any plans to increase the amounts of funds in here? What is the formula by which the minister is determining how much money is in that fund? Is it based on need, or is it based on some arbitrary amount that the minister decides is enough?

3:20

I have notes here that with extended care there needs to be more respite beds and access to respite beds, more in-home follow-up and community resources for people. There's a special note from Fran Matthews about mental health, that we're lacking in community resources including – and I've certainly experienced this one – a need for home visits and assessments. It's very difficult to line that up. We know something's wrong, and we can't find anybody to go into the home, have a look around, make sure that the person is all right, that there's some food in the fridge and that everything seems to be moving along on an even keel. It's quite frightening to know that there's a senior in trouble there and you can't get a mental health professional to go in and make sure that everything's okay. I am very cognizant here of not contravening someone's privacy, but I think we're much in need of mental health professionals that are specializing in seniors. Also under the mental health banner we're looking for better day programs, social programs, and low-cost counseling.

A number of people have raised the issue of transportation as far as health care. They get taken to the hospital in an ambulance, but they may not need an ambulance to go home. A taxi fare is quite a strain on their pocketbook, or they have to phone and wake up a friend or a relative in the middle of the night to come and get them. If they are visiting doctors' offices, they can go to a doctor's office in one place, get sent for lab tests in another place, and get sent somewhere else to pick up some sort of prescription. This really adds up if we're looking at taxi fares. I know of one organization for seniors where they will drive people around, but that agency is constantly struggling for funds, and I only know of the one available in Edmonton. So transportation for seniors for that is an issue that's being raised to me.

I've had this same issue raised somewhere else. Yes, here it is. They can't get around without expensive taxi fares, especially if they're frail and unable to drive. Health services are scattered: an appointment with a physician in one place, another place for lab tests, and another place for prescriptions. This is especially difficult if they're having to get in and out of these cabs and release the cab and make it across an icy sidewalk. So what is the minister doing about this? Are there any plans? Is there any funding that's available to assist community groups to deliver this kind of service?

What's out there to help people on this one? Yeah, this is the same person that raised the issue of being stranded at the hospital as well.

Back to home care. This is from Wanda Cree: there needs to be considerably more money invested in home care services, especially services which are of a personal care nature. I agree with her that more seniors are needing personal care than nursing care. They may need help getting dressed in the morning, are having trouble buttoning things or combing their hair or fixing their hair in some way. They are capable of living in their own home, but they need some assistance. The frustration that's out there is that when they go looking for that little bit of assistance or even a little bit more of assistance, it's very hard to access it, and the cutoffs for where the assistance is provided for a nominal charge or no charge seem very, very low to people. Wanda points out that staying at home is a laudable goal, but it is not feasible unless personal care can be provided where needed.

What's the government doing to work with seniors, with municipalities around the issue of building codes so that it's possible there could be more of what are sometimes called garden suites or granny flats or smaller facilities where a senior could be living on the same lot or very near to or in the basement of a family member but still have a separate life? That's mostly around bylaw and zoning changes with the municipalities. Is any work being done on that?

A couple of issues are being raised under health care around continuity of care and training of doctors. Wanda is making the point that for older people with chronic conditions, they need to be able to consult a physician who knows and understands their case and is making sure that the medication and the advice is consistent. We do certainly see that, where seniors are having three and four and five different doctors and nobody seems to be in control here or in charge of a sort of totality of care to make sure that they're not being overprescribed. One doctor doesn't seem to talk to another doctor. Again, probably a cross-departmental initiative here, but it still – and I've raised this issue before – needs to be worked out.

I'm having a couple of concerns raised around the amount of support that's given to seniors for hearing aids and for glasses. It's minimal; that's certainly true. There is something there, and that's better than nothing. But I'm sort of curious. As we're trying to encourage independence, for things that for a fairly small amount of money make life much better for seniors, like hearing and sight, which enables them to travel and move about and be much more a part of our society, which is so hearing and sight based, I'm just wondering why the amounts allowed here are so low and so infrequent.

The other issue around doctors is the need to encourage more graduates with a specialty in geriatric medicine or gerontology and also look at the way they're paid. Right now there's no incentive for a doctor to spend additional time with a senior because they're paid per visit regardless of what the visit is for or who the visit is with. There's no incentive to spend a longer period of time with a senior going over all the different kinds of medication that they've been prescribed or explaining what a condition means or explaining what other kinds of lifestyle changes a senior could take that didn't involve pharmaceuticals. There's no incentive for them to spend that time because they're making their money by having people pass through at a certain rate per hour. Sorry; that's not fair. That sounds very mechanical. Nonetheless, for an amount of time that would prove productive for us here, there's very little incentive for doctors to do that. The first area there was incentive programs to have more people going into gerontology.

Another issue raised around health care was that there are qualifying times for provincial health care programs, and we're seeing a situation now where seniors may be moving to a different

province to be closer to their children. I think the statistics tell us that most parents try to live within 100 kilometres of one of their adult children. When that's happening, they're moving across provincial lines, and then they're into a situation where they can be into a qualifying period of time in order to get assisted accommodation. So it's less about health care and more about housing and access to programs there. I'm wondering if the minister has been working with any of his colleagues that are responsible for seniors' issues in other provinces around making this more transportable so that seniors are not as restricted by mobility and could more easily join their children in another province.

3:30

Once again I raise the issue of women and osteoporosis funding for pharmaceuticals but also for research and for health and wellness alternatives. I continue to have a concern around this area. Osteoporosis is 100 percent preventable. What are we doing to make it nonexistent here? I'm not seeing much of an improvement in the rates. So I hold the minister accountable and ask him to please respond about what initiatives they're looking at. Is there anything happening right now? What kind of encouragement are they giving the Minister of Innovation and Science to look into that?

Thank you. I'll resume my questions again shortly.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's indeed a pleasure for me to rise to speak about seniors' issues. I have a great deal of personal experience working with seniors, working on policy areas and working on service delivery, and I have a large number of seniors in my constituency. It's delightful that there is once again a Department of Seniors. It's not the first time there's been a Department of Seniors in Alberta. There was 10 years ago or so a Department of Seniors, and when the current regime came to power, it quickly ended that department. So it's good to see it coming back to life. It is an area to which we all should be paying careful attention.

I do receive many comments from my constituents on seniors' issues. In fact, I certainly have one of the largest concentrations in terms of percentage of seniors in my constituency of all the constituencies in the province. I sense two sorts of populations of seniors. One group, who are perhaps better educated and have a higher income, are enjoying their retirement or enjoying their older age, have sufficient money to stay in their own homes, to enjoy their lives, to do some traveling. I also know that there's a large number of seniors whose incomes are actually very low, sometimes appallingly low, and I think we too often don't pay enough attention to these seniors. Their numbers are growing, and they are dominated to a large degree by women who through their earlier lives have not had the opportunity to build up pension reserves or other sources of income and find themselves often as widows in very vulnerable positions.

With that sort of framework I would mention a couple of specifics that I hear routinely from constituents. One is a call for the restoration of seniors' benefits to a level that was available up until 1992 or so. Seniors' benefits peaked in Alberta in about 1986. They were tightened and tightened through the later '80s and early '90s. Seniors would like to at least return to the levels of the early '90s. They look at other areas of the province where resources were reduced: wages for public servants, wages for MLAs, support for health care and education and transportation, and so on. They now see the funding to those areas returning to levels of 10 years ago and in some cases even exceeding the levels of 10 years ago, yet seniors

consistently feel that they are not enjoying those benefits. They have not had resources restored to them that so many of the rest of us have had restored, and that feels to them and frankly to me like unfairness and injustice.

The seniors' property tax benefit comes up frequently in my constituency. Seniors feel like they did enjoy a property tax benefit some years ago that offset the cost of the education tax to a substantial degree and allowed them, especially if they're in a lower income area, to stay home longer. That benefit has been eliminated, and I'm not at all aware that there are any plans to restore it. I certainly would encourage some kind of renewal of that program or a program similar to it.

Also, in general I hear a lot of concern that those support services to keep seniors in their homes – whether it's homemaking, home nursing, home care services – are not what they need to be. As a result, seniors' health and independence deteriorate sometimes more rapidly than they ought to, and seniors actually end up requiring more help by being forced into institutions. As a point of human dignity and as a point of good management of resources, I would encourage the Seniors minister to advocate as much as he can for stronger services to keep seniors in their homes and in their communities. With those general comments, I'll move to some specifics.

Line item 1.0.1, to be very specific, for operating expense and capital investment for the minister's office, is \$308,000. Being a brand-new department, of course there's no previous figure, but considering that the figure from last year for Community Development for the minister's office was \$307,000, given that this is a smaller department by a considerable amount, I'm wondering how the minister justifies this new amount for a department that has less combined responsibility than when it was but one component of a bigger department.

I also notice the budget for the deputy minister's office, item 1.0.2, will be \$260,000. It was only \$216,000 for the Community Development department last year. Again, considering that Seniors is a smaller department than the old Community Development department, why do we see this increase? What is the justification for this rise? What in fact accounts for the over \$200,000 increase for finance and administration in this department?

Getting to the issue of communications, which is always so important to this government, how does the minister compare the budget for communications at \$363,000 with that for the old Department of Community Development's budget of \$367,000? In other words, we are spending virtually the same amount on communications for a much smaller department. I'd appreciate a rationale for that.

Moving to some other specifics: income support for seniors. As my opening remarks suggested, this is an area of real concern for a large number of Alberta seniors. The government is in fact boasting of spending an additional \$4.9 million for the Alberta seniors' benefit program this year. Of course, any increase in money is something that we applaud, but this increase is really misleading. It's not going to have a significant impact. As a percent, it amounts to I think just over 3 percent of the total budget in this area, barely adequate to cover a rise in the cost of living. I doubt if it's adequate, in fact, to cover the per capita rise in the cost of living. If I'm wrong on that, I'd appreciate the minister correcting me.

I would like to see in the longer term greater support for the incomes of seniors. I'm wondering how much of the increase that's there this year will go to things such as administration costs. How much of the increase will actually go to individual seniors and senior couples? Is the department changing its criteria for availability for funding under the income support programs?

3:40

Now I'd like to move to one of the particular things that undoubtedly the minister will be leading, taking a great interest in personally, and that's the announced seniors policy initiative. I believe, going from a news release, it says: Alberta will lead the country with a seniors policy initiative that will develop a strategic framework and a 10-year action plan to address the needs of Alberta's aging population. Well, I think that's a terrific idea. If we're looking for a strategic framework and a 10-year action plan, I've got various thoughts and suggestions for that kind of an initiative.

I would, for example, suggest that there's a strong rationale for that initiative. It's a well-known fact that Alberta faces a rapid increase in the number and proportion of older persons in its population. As a result, Alberta's system of services for seniors probably needs to be re-examined to ensure that it can effectively meet the changing needs of seniors in the future without sacrificing resources available to future generations.

I think you may want to look at some key objectives for this seniors policy initiative. It could include, for example, developing a seniors action plan to guide government action and decision-making for, say, the next 10 years. It could also include as a key objective developing and continuing an effective consultation process that involves seniors and other members of the community in decisions about public policy and about the seniors' plans. I would encourage you to ensure a good geographical and sociological mix of people in these debates about seniors' issues and the development of a seniors' plan.

In developing and proceeding with the seniors policy initiative, there is a series of strategies that the minister may want to look at. You may want to consider a public opinion survey, for example, of seniors or people, say, age 45 and older about what their experiences and expectations and attitudes are with respect to aging and programs and services for seniors. You may want to invite briefs about seniors' issues and potential resolutions to them from organizations across Alberta. You could potentially conduct a survey of people who provide services to seniors, including perhaps services focused on aboriginal Albertans, who are too often overlooked. You could have a series of public meetings in, say, 12 different communities across Alberta to address issues of concern to seniors. You might want to have some special study sessions on issues, and of course you'll have a series of meetings with seniors and with people interested in seniors' service delivery.

You might well find that seniors want more money, but I suspect that they would recognize that there are limits to what society can provide to them. They would want, as much as anything, fair treatment, not special treatment.

If you proceed with this seniors policy initiative, I'm sure you'll find some important results. You might find that the people expect commitments to seniors to be respected and that if significant changes are made to seniors' programs, enough time is allowed for them to successfully adjust. After all, many people plan years and decades in advance for their senior years, depending and counting on government programs to be there. If those government programs are cut or eliminated or changed, people do not necessarily have the time to adapt and change decades of planning.

You might also find from your policy initiative that greater emphasis should be placed on services provided in the home and in the community as opposed to services provided in institutions such as nursing homes and lodges and so on. You'd probably find that people are encouraging the provincial government to provide a greater range of housing options for older people so that people have the most flexibility we can allow them to adjust their housing to their own physical, financial, and social needs.

You might find that the provincial government ought to co-ordinate more closely with the federal government to improve the financial security of older Albertans through, for example, expanding pension coverage to cover the people I mentioned earlier on, widows and people who find themselves in their older age without adequate pension coverage because they never had the opportunity to contribute to pensions.

There are great concerns around the co-ordination of services to seniors. That has been an issue for many, many years, and I guess it will always be an issue, something that we have to always work at. Of course, the need to evaluate seniors' services will come up.

Now, a great deal of information and study was done and a great deal of money was spent on this exact kind of initiative 10 years ago. Something close to \$1 million was spent on that. An extensive report was developed, planning for seniors' services, looking 10 to 15 years ahead from that time. It looked at spending patterns. It looked at technological developments, new technologies enabling people to stay at home. It looked at issues such as elder abuse.

I'd encourage the minister to go back and review all those files and draw on that knowledge that was prepared at such length and with such expense and commitment 10 years ago under the former Department of Seniors. He may even wish to consult with the minister of the time, the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury, Mr. Roy Brassard. Of course, a lot of that material was going to be made public and in the end was ordered to be destroyed by the government, but perhaps we'll see it come back to the public eye.

I'll wrap up my comments by encouraging the department and the minister to enthusiastically pursue his mandate, to listen carefully to the needs of Albertans, not only seniors but all Albertans, people who will become seniors as the years go by, and to consider their plights, their needs, and the frailties and problems that all of us will face as we grow older.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I'll wrap up. Thank you very much.

3:50

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to have an opportunity to participate in the estimates debates on seniors this particular year. It's nice to see that finally this government has elevated the importance or status of seniors by separating it out of its previous home in Community Development and giving it some measure of importance. Certainly to seniors this is a very important department, and certainly to all of us who will some day be seniors it is also very important.

[Mr. Maskell in the chair]

It's of particular concern to us, I think, when we take a look at what's happened to seniors and seniors' programming and seniors' funding over the past years that I've been in this Assembly. They've taken some pretty hard hits on programs. They've taken some pretty hard hits in housing, and they've taken some pretty hard hits in direct dollars and benefits. Many of us, including the Official Opposition, would argue that those programs haven't been reinstated and that seniors are still hugely disadvantaged in this province that's supposed to have an Alberta advantage for all. In fact, they are still behind in terms of the original '93 round of cuts that came forward. Continually it is of serious concern to people in my constituency how seniors are supposed to experience their share of the Alberta advantage after putting decades of their lives into supporting this province.

My constituency, Edmonton-Ellerslie, people often think would

have a very low seniors population. Mill Woods is a relatively new community in Edmonton, but the fact is, Mr. Chairman, that I have a high seniors population. More than 8 percent of the people in the constituency are up to 65 years of age, in the 55 to 65 years of age range, and 7 percent of the constituency are 65 years or older. That percentage is creeping up year after year by small percentage points, by tenths of percentage points in terms of the age of the population base there. So we are seeing a significant aging in that particular population. They are vocal about their concerns and about what has been happening to them in programming, and it's wonderful to have an opportunity to bring some of those concerns forward.

The Member for Edmonton-Riverview talked about some of the issues that are also outstanding in my constituency. Property taxes were a big benefit and were something that people planned into their retirement income or expenses and which isn't available. There used to be home upgrading grants. I know there's now that seniors' benefit that's available to seniors for unusual expenses, but there is a great deal more than just unusual expenses that come up to throw seniors into a loop.

In terms of them being able to share in the vision that the Seniors department outlines in its ministry business plan, I think that significant changes have to be made, Mr. Chairman. If we take a look at that division, it talks about "a vibrant province where all Albertans experience the quality of life to which they aspire." Oh, that's a motherhood and apple pie statement if I ever heard one. But is it actually a vision that this government is on the road to being able to implement and seniors are able to access? I think not, Mr. Chairman. I don't see it in the acts of the government. We see some commitment in the words of the government, but we see little commitment in the acts of the government to ensure that all Albertans experience the quality of life to which they aspire.

In fact, even when you take a look at the mission and the core businesses and goals supporting those, we don't see quality of life specifically defined there. For the most part, what they talk about are issues that they don't support with dollars or programming.

In the core businesses when they talk about "supporting the independence and well-being of seniors," there are specific problems. If we take this over and relate this to the measure of quality of life that is in the more detailed Seniors' business plan 2001-2004, what do we talk about? If you're talking about supporting the independence and well-being of seniors, what's that backed up by? It should be backed up by some of the measures.

The measure they have here is Quality of Life, and that's the only one I see here that relates to this particular core business. What do they say? They say, "Percentage of eligible seniors receiving the Alberta Seniors Benefit." So what they're talking about is dollars, Mr. Chairman. They don't talk about the other aspects of well-being or independence for seniors that would support that. Money helps, Mr. Chairman, but it isn't the answer to all of the issues that are outstanding for seniors.

So who this helps, then, in terms of money are those who are significantly disadvantaged, but what else do seniors need to be both independent and have well-being? They need health. How do they get health in this province? They have to have access to the health care system. Do they have timely access? Are there support systems in there once they are within the system to help them be both independent and support their well-being? I would suggest the answer to that, Mr. Chairman, is no.

If we take a look at access to health care, there is no special treatment given to seniors for them to be able to jump queues or have access to support systems. I don't see any special access for seniors in terms of even letting them know what's available and how they make their way through the variety of systems.

Talk about often complicated problems when it comes to seniors. It isn't just primary care hospitals that they need to access. Often there are rehabilitative issues around injuries, or there are mental health issues often with seniors or support issues in terms of those who are accessing the health system.

Do we have a good home care system in this province so that seniors, if they have some sort of a health issue, can either be independent or ensure that their well-being is enhanced? The answer is no, Mr. Chairman. If seniors do not have children or other people supporting them who come into that sandwich generation, those who provide support for elders in the community, if they don't have access to those kinds of people, they are often left in great trouble. They don't have the support system from the government to provide enough or ready access to home care if they need transitional health care.

They don't have that kind of access to mental health or even to transportation to get to primary care sources. There's the bus system. The public transport system in this province is nonexistent in many locales and poor in the larger regions. So if they don't have independent means of getting there – and often if they're not well, they're not able to transport themselves – how do they get to these primary care facilities, and how does this core business of supporting independence and well-being support that? It doesn't, Mr. Chairman.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

There's the DATS program that supports people who need to access the system, but what's wrong with the DATS system? Quite a few things. They won't guarantee pickups, Mr. Chairman, so people can't make appointments on time. You have to book several days in advance, and people often don't know. If they have a health issue and they need to see their doctor that day, it doesn't work like that. You just can't pick up the phone and call them like a taxi. You have to book well in advance. You can't make appointments on time. The arrival time is not guaranteed, so often we see frail seniors, people who need assistance out in the cold, out on the street waiting for their rides, to be picked up.

Those are serious issues that I don't see being addressed in either the business plan or the summary if we're talking about achieving independence and well-being of seniors. Where does this happen in this program? This has got to come under this particular minister's mandate, and I don't see any measures there in terms of enhancing quality of life on those kinds of issues. So if the minister could tell me specifically what it is they are doing in their department to enhance access issues, to enhance transportation issues just on the health care side.

What else is there that can support the well-being of seniors? Well, there are all the extracurricular activities, the cultural side of society. What do we have that the government does to support that? Nothing in this particular department. So if the minister can address that in terms of the issue, I would appreciate it, because I don't see anything listed here. It seems to be completely not here.

4:00

Then they talk about "supporting family and special purpose housing needs." Well, it's a joke, Mr. Chairman. If we take a look at the waiting lists and the requirements for people in terms of housing needs, they're astronomical in this province. There are huge waiting lists for people who need access to housing.

I liked the system that there was before in this province, where the government owned and participated in low-income housing. Now with the kind of system that we have, it's a long waiting time for people to get on the list to have housing.

Often with seniors, because of health reasons, housing needs can change overnight. I think there are some pretty decent programs in place in terms of adapting households for wheelchair access or decreased mobility. [interjection] Yeah, the home adaptation program. I think that's a pretty good program. We've had a few concerns over the years in my constituency with that program, but for the most part it works pretty well. But if we take a look at people who, because their health changes, need to come out of the homes they're in and into other kinds of housing, particularly if it's low-cost housing, it's a nightmare. It's a nightmare of paperwork for those people to go through, it's a nightmare of departments for them to have to access, and the waiting list is long.

What often happens and what I see in my constituency quite often is lower income people where the husband has a stroke or a heart attack or some other issues and now he's in a wheelchair. Generally in my constituency that spouse has been the primary breadwinner, so often the wife isn't working. Suddenly now they're coping with reduced income, perhaps only pension income left, reduced mobility of the person, dealing with the wheelchair, dealing with additional support systems that they have to provide for the individual, and what help is there for that person? There's not much, Mr. Chairman. If they need to move into a different kind of housing, the waiting list is long and the paperwork is formidable, to say the very least. They have to deal with transportation issues. Is there support within this department for those kinds of issues? I would suggest that it is minimal and tough to get. Hard for these people to make their way through the paperwork.

I know that in my constituency office my executive assistant spends a great deal of time supporting these people through the hallways of government to try and access the kinds of resources they need, and that's a real shame, Mr. Chairman, because these are people who would like to live in dignity, who would like to be a part of this vision that the government has for seniors, and clearly they are not. So if the minister could address why that is.

When I take a look at their business plan and I take a look at the second measure that they have in the quality of life category, it says "percentage of . . . applicants receiving the Alberta Seniors Benefit." Mr. Chairman, I don't know why that's a quality of life measure. I'm not exactly sure where you would put that kind of a measure, but people who need the Alberta seniors' benefit, who are eligible for that, are looking at quite a different quality of life than this member is going to look at when she's a senior. I'm not sure that measuring who gets it, who's eligible for it, is a reasonable way to measure quality of life. It's 99.3 percent in '98-99, 99.4 percent of those people in '99-2000, and the target is 100 percent for future years. Excellent. That's an excellent target. It isn't a measure of quality of life though. It's a measure of the efficiency of the bureaucracy of the government. I do not think it's truly a measure of the quality of life, and I take great offence that that should be listed as a measure here.

Let's talk about the other one. The percentage of eligible seniors receiving the Alberta seniors' benefit is a new measure, and the targets haven't been established yet. Once again I believe that that is a measure of the efficiency of the government department. It isn't a quality of life measurement.

For quality of life, measuring the success of that would be to go out and survey the seniors and ask them what they think about their quality of life based on input factors like the cost of living, like access to health care, like access to proper housing, like access to transportation systems, like access to cultural activities. Those are quality of life measurements, Mr. Chairman. Let's see what people have to say about that. List those categories; ask them on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied they are with the kind of support they get from the government on that. I think we're going to see some very

interesting information, and it may point out to this minister where there are some serious deficiencies in the kind of support that this government is providing in terms of meeting what they say is their vision and their mission and their core businesses. So let's get some performance measurements in here that actually measure what it is they're talking about, not government efficiency, although that's important to have too, but let's put those under government efficiency measures. I don't think they're quality of life measurements at all.

Satisfaction measurements. Once again, what do they talk about? They talk about performance factors for government departments. They don't talk about anything to do with quality of life issues. So I think that's very important to be addressed.

Before I run out of time, I just wanted to spend a little bit of time on the Auditor General's comments. Seniors was taken out of Community Development, which is where it was and where the seniors' issues are addressed in this particular report. Most of them are with regard to housing assistance, Mr. Chairman. I would like the minister to update us in terms of what's happening with the issues outlined by the Auditor General.

He talked about how this ministry "provides subsidized housing to Albertans in need" and how "housing programs are administered by management bodies on behalf of the Ministry." How effective are those management bodies? Do we see the costs of those being lower than what they used to be when government did that service itself?

You know, a lot of people think that the government isn't an efficient provider of some services, but in fact that's not true. If you take a look at things like road building, the government is much more efficient. Particularly when you take a look at the long term and the cost of repairs and standards, the government can be very efficient. So does the minister have some information available on whether or not these management bodies are providing better service and more efficiency and lower costs than the government did when they did it themselves? Any documentation he has on that, I'd be happy to take a look at.

Then it talks about the ministry maintaining "an infrastructure of government owned housing projects, and supplies additional housing units," and so on. The issue is that there are increasing numbers of families and seniors needing assistance, such an issue that the Auditor General remarked on it. We need to know what it is that this minister is doing about this, how they're shortening up the waiting lists, how they're providing more housing: important issues, Mr. Chairman.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm glad to have the opportunity in this special longer debate today to be able to do a part 2 and continue on. I had started out by saying that I was looking at three areas: seniors' health, seniors' housing, and other issues that have arisen around seniors' financial situations. In the first part I had spoken about health care premiums and why weren't they eliminated, access to dental, concerns around home care and availability of home care and housekeeping, comments on hearing aids and glasses, the need for doctors trained in gerontology, medical research on women and osteoporosis.

4:10

Just two more issues I'd like to do under that general category of health. The first is exercise. This is interesting, because the generation of seniors that we have now is not a generation that grew up with Club Fit and Spa Lady. I mean, essentially these folks

worked, and that was their fitness. So they are not as aware as generations that will be following them of proper exercise, access to facilities, perhaps even being trained in the use of equipment or in rules of the game.

One of the points that's been raised to me, again by Wanda Cree from the Seniors Community Health Council, is that it's difficult for seniors to get good information about exercise without paying a significant amount of money, and I'm aware that seniors may not be terribly comfortable going to some of the fitness centres that are around now. The point she's making is that seniors' centres should be offering more of these types of programs, but it's difficult for them because they're not receiving funding. So I was very happy to hear that my years of pounding away saying that there should be some kind of operational funding for seniors' centres is being taken seriously by the minister and that the minister has charged the Seniors Advisory Council and the Alberta Council on Aging to work together on a study about operational funding for seniors' centres. I'm very glad to hear that. It was worth it. Sometimes you wonder if you're being successful. It's nice to see when you are.

But I think that's an interesting point that she's raised about essentially training for exercise. It's just not part of the current generation's life experience that you need training for exercise or even different things that people could be doing. It just isn't part of their life. They just worked and got their exercise through their work, and now they're not working anymore. We do know now that exercise is a part of health and wellness, so what can we be doing to promote this? Certainly putting it through the seniors' centres seems like a good suggestion to me.

Earlier I was looking for the reference for one point – and I've found it – coming from Ed Gordon. This was around prescription drugs. He and others are suggesting – and this isn't the first time I've heard this – “reduce the charge for prescription drugs from 30% back to the 20% that it was prior to 1993.” I know somewhere else – I'm sure I'll find it in my notes as I go – there was a suggestion that there be no more than a \$25 charge for prescriptions. We are more and more managing seniors' health through pharmaceuticals, and it's not unusual to have a senior on eight to 12 prescriptions. Those all start to add up on the pocketbook pretty seriously. So that's the suggestion.

My question, then, to the minister is: what's being done about that? What kinds of studies are up? What amount of money is budgeted for it? How much will be allowed for that? What kind of assistance is available around that?

One of my colleagues had talked about the home improvement grant, and there was a RRAP program in conjunction with the federal government. Now, I'm noticing that there is a home adaptation grant line. It's appearing under the housing budget. Yeah, 3.2.1, home adaptation program grants. Based on what I'm seeing from the seniors, they don't know that this is still available, so I'm wondering exactly what this program is. Perhaps it's just on your web site and is easily downloaded and sent over to me, and I apologize for asking if in fact it is on the web site. But obviously the seniors are not aware of it because I've got several people that are commenting on the loss of it.

Particularly when we look at increased prices in utilities and we add to that the government's desire to have seniors staying in their own homes, I think we may all be well served if they were able to make adaptations to their homes to make them more energy efficient both for electricity and for heating. So that was from Ed Gordon.

Now, two more things under health care. One is – and there's no specific program for this; it's just a situation that I keep seeing come up – what's the department got to offer in these circumstances? I understand that there is an expectation that people should be able to

look after themselves, but that isn't always true. Certainly there's an expectation out in this society that when you get sick, somehow you'll be cared for, and people just don't understand that that is not a seamless function. I note that in a copy of the *Alberta Council on Aging News*, the May/June 2001 issue under Val's Views, she tells a story about a couple where one of them fell and was injured and was hospitalized for a period of time.

The spouse at home in fact was not very independent, had been relying on the wife to do the grocery shopping, take the dry cleaning in, do the laundry, clean up the house, get the prescriptions, and all of those little trips back and forth. He in fact was blind and all of a sudden was faced with strangers coming into his home going: “Okay. Your wife won't be back. She's in hospital for a month. She won't be back until the end of the month, so now we've got to look after you.” They discovered very quickly this is not a seamless system. There's a lot of places where you can fall through the cracks: in trying to get respite care, in trying to get home care workers. She details the concerns about personal care attendants supplied by a private company and the concern that they'd “been given minimal domestic and dietary training.” I've certainly heard that concern before, and what we're coming to here is standards of care.

I'm curious as to why there was a lack of support – or was it a government policy? – for the Member for Calgary-West's private member's Bill 203 to establish a committee that would look at developing standards of care. I've raised this issue of standards of care a number of times in the Assembly. There seems to be reluctance on behalf of the government to go down that path. I'm interested in hearing from the Ministry of Seniors the reasons why there is so much resistance to developing standards of care, which would cover wide-ranging levels of care.

I have often heard the complaint about limited domestic and dietary training that they'll come in, but they won't actually make you a hot meal. They'll make sandwiches, and maybe they'll open something that's in the pantry, a can of soup or something. Then the person is asked to sign a form that says that the care worker has been there for 45 minutes. In fact, they may well not have been, and there's a question about whether travel time is included in the time the individual is signing off for or not. So I think there's an issue there.

So I highly recommend this. I'm sure there are staff members in the department that regularly read the *Alberta Council on Aging* newsletter, but this is the May/June issue with Val's Views, and I'm particularly talking about that story. It is a good illustration of a story that I've heard many times.

The last issue under the health area that I want to talk about is elder abuse. I did receive a very thoughtful letter from Catholic Social Services talking about their elderly adult resource service, which is nicknamed EARS, and the elder abuse intervention team. They point out that while many seniors do have the resources to be able to extricate themselves and they're not as vulnerable as children, there are seniors who are not. They are too frail. They have a life history of being victims of abuse. They have increased social isolation, family dysfunction: a number of things that add up to this small group of people being very vulnerable and requiring outside intervention.

4:20

They raise a very good point, and that is that we are now dealing with a number of seniors that arrived in Canada as immigrants and haven't fully integrated, and that can be for a number of reasons. More frequently I'm seeing family reunification where there are grandparents who are being brought over to join the rest of the

family. That's hopefully a good thing. They may not have ever really learned the culture and how to get around on the bus and how to use the bank machines and all of those other things that the rest of us take for granted and know very well how to do. They are particularly vulnerable if they are outside of that particular ethnic community.

The plea that I'm making on behalf of these organizations is to consider creating a mandated service for them. They're envisioning caseworkers who are trained in intervention strategies in abuse and have legal and financial resources to implement change. So when I look back on the Protection against Family Violence Act that was originally proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands in 1996 and eventually became a government bill and was passed – I mean, there are all kinds of financial resources and legal resources that were in that bill, and I think it might be time for us to look at a similar sort of bill that puts those in place for vulnerable seniors who are victims of elder abuse.

Part of the concern here is that these two programs through Catholic Social Services are really only available in the city of Edmonton. They're not available for outlying regions or for rural areas, and I did not have time to check to see if there was a similar program in Calgary. So there's a very good one here and very good examples to be followed, but we certainly need the support for it, and they need to be able to do the intervention.

Now, I'm moving into the area of seniors' housing. I have had a motion up two years running now – I never had a good enough draw to actually get it up and get it debated – about having the cost of telephones included in the 30 percent subsidized rate that seniors are paying in subsidized housing, the argument being that telephones are no longer a frill, an extra. For anyone that has the medic alert, they work through the telephones. If you don't have a telephone, you can't even have that service. The phone is certainly the first resource that someone who's hurt or in trouble would need to dial 911, but it goes well beyond that in that it's also a contact with the wider world of families and friends, and that's contributing to better mental health and better socialization.

So I urge the government to consider including that. I mean, it's \$22 or \$23 for a base telephone rate at this point, which may not seem a lot of money to members of the Assembly but can be significant when the disposable income for a senior is less than \$100 a month. That's a big chunk of it. I'm looking at someone that's contacted me from one of the seniors' residences, and they're again asking about that telephone subsidy and again asking why they're still paying health care premiums.

The other thing that has happened with housing – and I know the government's aware of this, but the situation is improving at a glacial pace.

DR. TAFT: Painfully slow?

MS BLAKEMAN: Yeah, painfully slow.

That's around long-term care beds and new housing alternatives or living alternatives for seniors. We do have a situation where the system is backing up. There aren't enough long-term care beds, so then they've got people staying in lodges and other types of accommodation for much longer than they would have. So now you have a program that was not set up to be dealing with seniors that are that ill, but they are having to. Then people that should be moving into the lodges can't get in because there's not enough room, and now we've got them in my constituency, where I have independent living, where I have apartment buildings with individual suites in them. The building itself is a subsidized seniors' residence, but every senior has their own apartment in there. Those started out as

55 and over, and they were meant to be either for individuals who had to retire early because of some health problem or who were in fact seniors that needed subsidized housing.

They were meant to be independent living units, but what we are seeing now is that they are having to accept people who are more frail and in much more need of assistance, without any sort of consultation with the seniors that were already in there. The buildings are having to become less independent and more care oriented, which is of some distress to the seniors that are already living there. There's no question that it's the lack of long-term care beds that has made that come into being.

Another issue that's raised often by seniors who are living in the subsidized senior residences is that the 30 percent they pay for their rent is based on their gross income, not on their net income. They feel very strongly that it should be based on their net income, in other words on what we would call their take-home pay, rather than on their gross revenue for the month. We've had problems with that in the past, where somebody would cash in a bond or an RRSP and because it appears as a lump sum in their bank account, then all of a sudden they are assessed 30 percent of that huge chunk of money. I mean, eventually we find ways to work that out, but it's quite a frightening experience for a senior to think they're going to lose 30 percent of that kind of income. They feel very strongly, and I'm wondering whether the minister has looked at this at all, considered it.

What is the justification for the policy that they have in place at this time? Considering increased numbers of seniors, is the department looking at sort of grandfathering one type of program and phasing in another type of program? What's being looked at? I mean, I've read all of the studies that have been done by this government, but there are not very many specifics there. A lot of nice words, but it's not clear what direction it's going in, and I'm looking for more detail.

I've also spoken before about portable subsidies. And I'm aware I'm going to run out of time, so I will come back to do part 3 as soon as I can get back on the speaking list. But I'd like to cover having these subsidies being portable, protection of persons in care, standards of care, and then some of the other miscellaneous issues that have been raised with me around programs that were cut by the government that seniors would like to see reinstated. I will return to go over those issues at another time.

Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The leader of the ND opposition.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to speak on the budget estimates for the Department of Seniors. It's a new ministry. In talking about budget estimates this year, I've been somewhat critical of the creation of several new ministries. The Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General: that ministry has been split. Finance and Revenue have been split. These splits were difficult to justify in any real way, based on substantive reasons for it. It appeared to us, at least, that these splits and the creation of new ministries was more an attempt to create work, you know, for more Tory MLAs than based on the need for good governance.

4:30

However, in the case of a separate ministry for seniors, I think it's a welcome development, a welcome change, and I congratulate the government for making that decision. I wish the minister, who's an experienced member of the cabinet, good luck with his new responsibilities. I think he's well qualified to represent the interests of seniors and to make sure that services are delivered to them.

[interjection] I'm talking about myself too. He'll represent me well.

So the minister, I think, needs to be commended for undertaking this effort and presenting his budget estimates in the way he has.

Seniors, as we all would agree, have paid their dues to our society. They worked hard. They paid their taxes. Now is the time that they need our care and support, and we ought to meet their needs. Their numbers are growing. There's an identifiable need for these services, and the need for these services is growing.

I think when I look at the ministry's core business statement here, "supporting the independence and well-being of seniors," certainly the question of independence and well-being is a very critical one from the point of view of aging seniors. Many seniors, of course, who own homes want to stay in them, and certainly all of them want to live healthy lives in their aging years as much as possible.

Of course, in order to remain healthy, they need to be able to access health care services with reference to their particular needs. It is, I think, well known that seniors in general use more drugs than the rest of us, so their resources get increasingly channeled into paying for the portion of the expenditures that they incur with respect to the use of drugs to remain healthy and to seek a cure of ailments that are related to aging in particular. So I was looking here to see where the new ministry may have undertaken some new initiatives to address, for example, the special needs and the special circumstances which seniors are faced with.

In general, I perhaps should say that in looking through the mission statement, the core business, the goals, the highlights for 2001-2002, I was looking for sort of a statement which would suggest that the minister is willing, as I know he would want to be – in addition to being shepherd of the services and the provision of those services that seniors need – to play an advocacy role as well. So he would become an advocate on seniors' issues, although that statement is not to be found in the text on pages 389 and 390. I would certainly encourage him to view his role, in addition to what's stated here, as seniors' advocate. I know that seniors' interests, seniors' concerns are close to his heart, so I will encourage him to think about inserting in the next year's business plans a commitment to advocating on their behalf.

I know that in 1994, in the midst of the Tory government's budget cuts, the government started requiring Alberta seniors, for example, to begin paying health care premiums. I suspect that this minister may be one of those in the government and also in the Tory party who might in fact favour the scrapping of health care premiums for all Albertans. Certainly there is, I think, a compelling argument that can be made that health care premiums should be scrapped for seniors. Most seniors, unlike many working Albertans, do not have the employers sharing their premium costs. Many Albertans who work may in fact benefit from the employers picking up at least part of these costs.

In the case of seniors where incomes are particularly limited, middle-income seniors in particular, I think they find paying \$800, if a senior couple, rather onerous when their expenditures related to use of needed drugs continue to go up as their ailments increase with age. So I would ask the minister to seriously consider standing up for seniors and to call for abolition of health care premiums. The seniors are a good group to start with in order for us to move towards scrapping health care premiums for all in Alberta and to become the ninth province in the country to do so.

Secondly, in the health care issues I think there's a need for a seniors' universal drug plan which covers medically needed drugs for all seniors without seniors having to pay exorbitant prices for the use of these drugs in order just to remain healthy. So that would be my second proposal to the minister. It's certainly not in the works. It's not in the budget, but I'm trying to sort of focus my comments

on what I see is missing in the budget rather than what is. I'll come to what is, also, if time permits.

I am aware that the minister recently met with several seniors' groups. These seniors' groups have been urging this government, and I'm sure they've urged this minister, to work towards the elimination of health care premiums at the earliest opportunity. The question is: will the minister take these concerns seriously and work towards putting an end to this unfair, regressive tax that especially hurts seniors? I would like him to comment on it to see what kind of actions he might be contemplating taking on behalf of seniors on this issue.

One of the other casualties of the government's budget cuts over the years is the partial rebate of property taxes to seniors, that dealing with education taxes. This was a very useful program in that it encouraged seniors to remain in their own homes longer rather than having to sell those houses and move into institutional care.

4:40

In my own constituency there's a very large number of seniors. Many of them live in their own homes, and with the costs of heating and electricity going up, they are very concerned and express these concerns to me at the door and through phone calls to my office. They're very concerned about their ability in the future to be able to own their own homes and stay in them as long as they choose. They may have to make the decision to sell them for economic reasons, not for reasons that they cannot any longer live alone or independently in those homes.

On the surface many seniors look rich because they are owners of homes. Their homes are all paid for. They may be home rich, but most seniors are income poor, and I think that needs to be kept in mind. So the question there is: is the government considering bringing back the seniors' property tax rebate, at least for lower income seniors who own their own homes? I guess if the answer is no, is the minister thinking of taking an initiative in the future? Is he opposed to it? Seniors in my constituency certainly will be interested in hearing from the minister on his reasons either for or against reinstating that rebate program.

The next set of questions that I have deal with waits for home care and waits for admission into long-term care facilities. I do frequently receive complaints that waiting times are too long. I appreciate that the primary responsibility to address this rests with the Ministry of Health and Wellness, but I also notice that one of the key strategies that the ministry has stated here is to play a leadership role, to "provide leadership, organizational assistance, consultation and facilitation services" to support seniors' organizations and also to co-ordinate, I guess, across ministries the programs that seniors need and access. So I wonder what the Minister of Seniors is doing to address this problem.

Mr. Chairman, a few other comments here. I was looking at page 391, the ministry statement of operations by program. I apologize to the minister for being absent during most of the time he was making his introductory comments. Some of these questions may have been addressed already. If that is the case, I do apologize for it. I had to go out to attend to some other urgent business.

There is a question here that I have on the debt servicing costs on page 391. The debt servicing costs budgeted for this year, for example, the current budget year, are smaller than for the previous two years, information on which is included here. Is it because of the drop in the mortgage rates or interest rates, or is the need declining? How do we explain this? So some comment on it, if possible, would be helpful.

A couple of other matters here that caught my attention have to do with program 3, special purpose housing. There's an item, 3.2.3,

support to special purpose housing providers, with \$18.6 million allocated there. That's a figure that's about 50 percent more than the previous year's actual estimated expenditure. First of all, what form does this support take, and secondly, would the minister kindly comment on this 50 percent increase, which is a fairly substantial increase? I just was curious as to how come we have this increase here?

Community-based homelessness housing. There is again \$3 million mentioned here, and there are several initiatives that seem to be indicated here. I just wondered what those initiatives are. Does the minister consider \$3 million adequate, or is the figure there because that's all that the government can afford? Is this sufficient to meet the needs associated with these initiatives related to community-based homelessness?

Assistance to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation at 3.2.6. I notice a substantial increase there of about \$10 million. I think that is to be welcomed, because the needs for housing are growing for seniors, and this increase in assistance to the Alberta Social Housing Corporation I think will be very, very useful.

There are a couple of highlights for the year 2001-2002, two items at the bottom of page 389 that I was looking at. "Provide \$31.7 million to support the Healthy Aging Partnership Initiative." I wonder who the partnership is with and how this money can be accessed. Is it a new initiative, or is it something that has been there and more money has been added to it? It looks like it might be a new initiative, and that's why I'm asking the minister to provide some basic information on it: what exactly it means, how it can be accessed, if it's new, what specific population it targets to service.

The second item there: "Provide a \$7.9 million increase in funding for seniors and family and special purpose housing providers to assist with maintenance and rising operating costs." Again there's a mouthful of things here: seniors and family and special purpose housing providers. Seniors and families: are these the ones that are living independently in their own homes? Is "special purpose housing providers" a reference to special subcategories that refer to the activities of providers or what? So I'm a little bit unclear about what this particular allocation of money is about and what its purpose is.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will conclude, and I'll let other members of the Assembly speak to the estimates. Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

4:50

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to get an opportunity to discuss the new Department of Seniors this afternoon. Certainly it was part of the provincial election campaign of the Liberals in Edmonton-Gold Bar to advocate that there be a stand-alone ministry. I think it's a very, very good idea that this ministry is now independent. I thought that to keep the size of the cabinet down, we could have eliminated the junior Ministry of Health and Wellness and had a stand-alone ministry without increasing the size of the cabinet. Regardless, I congratulate the government for initiating this stand-alone ministry, and I wish the minister the very best as this ministry develops its programs and policies. Certainly seniors and seniors' issues in this province cannot be taken for granted.

I hope we're not going to continue to consider that the rising costs of health care are the fault of seniors. We have heard countless times, Mr. Chairman, that the cost of health care is increasing because the seniors percentage of the population of Alberta is increasing. Well, we all know that is simply not the truth. There is

10 percent of the population of this province that is over 65. To cite the rising population of seniors as a reason for health care costs going up is again simply not true. I don't think it is appropriate to use seniors as a scapegoat for rising costs in health care. This negative stereotyping of seniors in this provinces is simply not supported by any data.

Donna Wilson, a professor of nursing at the university, did a very extensive study, and her conclusion was that a small minority are heavy users of the health care system. Most of Alberta seniors are healthy, happy, and able and willing to live independently. I would encourage the minister to ensure that Albertans who are over the age of 65 have that choice to live independently. Even if they have some health problems, I think that there should be a program in place to ensure that they can live independently in their own homes as long as possible.

Now, there's the CHOICE program, which has been initiated by the Capital health region. I believe it came as an offshoot of a pilot project in San Francisco, and it worked well with seniors. To the credit of the regional health authority they have experimented with it here. It is working well. I understand it is an expensive program, but it works well. I would encourage the minister to take programs of this nature and expand them, because it would be, I think, appropriate to do.

We see that in the budget there is an increase in ministry support services. I'm curious about that. I understand the department has now grown and was previously only one part of a bigger department. Before I get into my questions regarding the reasons why this spending increase has gone on, I would encourage the minister and his officials – and some hon. members of this Assembly may be astonished at this – to study what the Japanese nation is doing in its care of the elderly. The percentage of Japanese citizens who are over 65 is significantly higher. If they can't do some studies on the Internet or through the fine library that's downstairs, I would encourage the minister not to travel alone but to take several members of the department and go to Japan at taxpayers' expense and study exactly what the Japanese are doing and come back and apply that to long-term planning in Alberta. So when the day comes that we have an aging population, then everything can be in place so that we can deal with it effectively.

The first example that comes to mind of the lack of long-term planning is the manpower study that was done on the shortage of health care professionals in this province by Alberta Health in conjunction with the regional health authorities. It was squirreled away in the library. It was hidden from public view, and now look at the mess. I even see in the paper today where there's cancellation of surgeries at the Royal Alex because of a shortage of nurses. They have pared back six weeks early for the summer season because they simply do not have the nurses. If that study had been acted on three years ago, then we wouldn't be in this trouble today. I would bring that to the minister's attention so that if there are some long-term studies, the minister and his officials can start planning now for the future. There won't be nearly the need for crisis management through appropriation bills, which is currently the trend.

Now, program 2, services to seniors, on page 387. Under 2.1 a number of items are seeing slight increases from the 2000-2001 budget, but since a number of those are expected to be over budget for 2000-2001 – this is according to the preliminary, Mr. Chairman. The preliminary actual amount reported in this year's budget for some of these is actually dropping from the comparable 2000-2001. Why was it deemed necessary to increase spending throughout last year but it is not necessary to continue? Could the minister also please tell us what the money was spent on, tell us all the things that are going to be available this year?

In the time that I have, will this minister tell us if seniors can expect an increase in benefits yearly to match inflation and the rising cost of living? I understand that the federal government was even contemplating in 2001 having an exclusive seniors' benefit. [interjection] Yes, we as Liberals considered that we have an increasing cash benefit to match inflation. Such a program would lead to yearly increases in the budget but would bring stability to recipients and the ability to anticipate what their future benefits will be. It also would provide the security of knowing that benefits will increase to match rising costs of living. Static expenditures do not allow for that.

Now, I don't have the page here, but I see a significant increase in grants for the Alberta special-needs assistance program. That's needed certainly. I would be curious if the minister could provide an update to me on the turnaround time on the application for these grants. I know the staff in the Alberta special-needs assistance program go out of their way with constituency-based applications, particularly with the rising costs of energy. The special-needs assistance program was even quoted when the crisis was at its zenith before Christmas as a solution for seniors who may be cold or in the dark this winter. The turnaround time for the special-needs assistance program will certainly have to be turned around.

When we think of fees and fee changes in this province and how it might affect seniors or how it might affect how the government thinks of seniors, I have to look at the Community Development fee changes for the Provincial Museum of Alberta, for the museum in Drumheller, the field station outside Drumheller, Rutherford House, and the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre. Seniors' entrance fees are going up a dollar at the Provincial Museum of Alberta. At the museum in Drumheller they're going up a dollar. At the field station they're also going up a dollar. At Rutherford House they're going up 50 cents, and at the Frank Slide they're going up \$2.50.

5:00

Now, I would have thought, you know, that at nonpeak times in the spring and fall perhaps we could keep those fees for seniors where they were if not eliminate them entirely. It's sort of a reflection on the whole argument of Alberta health care premiums for seniors. If you put the price up, that amount of money, if you're on a fixed income and three or four seniors want to go on a day trip, is a lot. Other people may think it's small and it's insignificant, but I think it's a reflection on just what this government thinks of seniors. I certainly hope not, but I was looking at that and thinking to myself: those price increases can mean a big difference on whether seniors will visit the facility or not.

Now, in getting back to increasing cash benefits to match inflation, I would strongly encourage the minister to adopt our policy and match the Alberta seniors' benefit to inflation. We need to look at the boosting in funding here. I think it's \$4.1 million for the special-needs assistance program. Now, I've gone through that, and I have one more item that I would like to briefly discuss before I take my seat and cede the floor to my colleague from Edmonton-Centre.

It's regarding seniors' housing grants. I had the privilege of attending along with the mayor the 100th birthday celebration of a senior in Montgomery Legion Place. You enter the Montgomery Legion Place – it has over 300 units. We need more of this type of housing, not less. I think it's the responsibility of the government, regardless of whether it's here or whether it's in Saskatchewan or British Columbia, to provide affordable, safe housing for seniors. The word here is affordable. The private sector seems to be taking care of the high-end units. Many of the seniors, particularly women, can't afford those, and I would encourage the minister to ensure that there are lots and lots of units built across this province at this time,

because they're needed. They're what people can afford.

I would like to ask: what is the department's policy on providing support to housing providers and to seniors directly? What is the balance between the two, providers and seniors, and will that be changing?

With those questions, Mr. Chairman, I believe I will take my seat. Thank you.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much. There were just a few other points and comments that I had received from people that I wanted to bring up. In this, my part 3, I've already addressed a number of issues under health and quite a few issues under housing. There are just a few more I want to go over.

I should make a point here of saying that in all the correspondence and comments and opinions I received from people that I've been using in my comments today, the agencies that have responded were very complimentary to the department and made a particular point of noting that they felt that the staff had always worked to try and resolve issues or try and make something happen. I think that that's a very good sign of the dedication of the staff, that are understanding that the endpoint is what's important here and not allowing bureaucracy to stand in the way.

Now, Operation Friendship is pointing out something that in fact has wider implications. They're talking about the shortage of nursing home or long-term care beds, and I had spoken of this before. It's interesting because they're dealing with people that are more difficult to deal with. They have addictions or chronic mental health, a bad lifestyle, or a combination of all of those. She does point out that the government has been aware since 1981 of the need to be dealing with the hard to house, but she's raising the point that they can't find any place to move people when they need more care than their facilities are designed and funded to offer. So they end up trying to cope with people who in fact need a higher level of care.

That's a point that I raised in the second section, that was around the subsidized seniors and the independent living and the whole dearth of long-term care backing everything up all the way down the line. That's exactly what she's bringing out here, so it is an issue. I know it's been brought up in the long-term care report and in the impact on aging report, but we're still struggling with this, and the facilities are not becoming available fast enough.

The other issue she raises – and again this is not specific to the particular community she's dealing with. Early discharges from hospitals, both for physical and mental problems, is a really large problem for seniors without families to help. They have trouble getting out, maybe dealing with stairs. They can't shop or find something proper to eat, get their prescriptions filled. She in particular is dealing with people who are illiterate, but again this crosses communities, because if you have a language barrier, it's almost the same thing. They're not understanding directions for care as well. So that's the gap I spoke about earlier, where it's not seamless.

I also heard from some folks in Ansgar Villa. They're raising a lot of the same points. The subsidized housing should be 30 percent of net. They talked about dental care. They note: "Mr. Klein announced free dental care for children, why not include seniors? When our teeth fall out, they don't grow back." They're talking about the increase in seniors' benefits in general as they start to look at the cost of food, gasoline, heating, and bus fares. Everything is going up, and their incomes don't go up. So it's very important, and we need to look at indexing whatever assistance we are providing.

Always there are questions about what happened to the property tax rebate program and the renters' assistance program. Now, there was a series of I think it's close to 20 programs that were cut or reduced by the government in '93-94, and every day there are seniors saying: "When are we going to get some of that stuff back? We helped. We gave up our 5 percent. Why is the government restoring everyone else to a level they were at before these cuts or restoring them in some way, everybody except the seniors?" I have to agree. Certainly, again, if we're going back to that overriding principle of keeping people active and healthy and independent in their own homes, the issues around property taxes are ones that we're going to have to deal with here.

The other issue that's new to that mix is the cost of energy and of electricity, particularly for people that are living in high-rise apartments or condominiums. Once again, I'd point out that they are paying both a higher rate for the utility and their rebate is lower because the government has allowed them to be classified as a commercial user and are not recognizing that this is residential. For seniors in condominiums this is an enormous struggle, and it's not going to help any of us here if they end up having to sell or move out of their condo because they can't afford the condo fees anymore and then are looking for some kind of subsidized housing from the government. That is all just going to back upstream and end up in the minister's lap, and we have to be proactive about that and, at the same time, be fair. I think that's going to be the struggle.

Another woman, Mrs. Moore from Calgary, was asking about the provincial property tax and said that "fixed-income senior homeowners need larger rebates on electricity and [natural] gas." So same point being raised again.

5:10

I wasn't able to get into a number of the other specific questions that I had for the minister. When I sort out the notes, what I will do is pass them on to him in writing and ask them to be included and to be answered as well. Even with an extended debate period today, I'm finding I didn't have enough time to get out all the questions and issues that I wanted to raise with the minister.

My thanks to the House leaders for allowing this ministry to be designated as a special debate time. I appreciate that very much. Thank you for the opportunity.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Before I recognize the hon. Minister of Seniors, is there anybody else who wishes to speak?

The hon. Minister of Seniors to close debate.

MR. WOLOSZYN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank the participants for their questions. I will be trying to get back and respond to the relevant questions upon a review of them. There are, as was pointed out, a lot of issues that we have to deal with. A lot of the questions raised were on cross-ministry stuff, so you can see that our cross-ministry initiative is very appropriate.

I would like to close by saying thank you for your input. We'll try and get back to you with as good answers to the relevant questions as possible. Thank you very much.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: After considering the business plan

and proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors, are you ready for the vote?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Capital Investment \$342,582,000

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Shall the vote be reported?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MR. MASKELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2002, for the following department.

Seniors: operating expense and capital investment, \$342,582,000.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we call it 5:30 and that pursuant to Standing Order 3(4), regarding Victoria Day, the Assembly stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, May 22.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

The House stands adjourned until Tuesday afternoon at 1:30. Have a wonderful weekend.

[At 5:16 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

