

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Thursday, March 22, 2007

1:00 p.m.

Date: 07/03/22

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant us daily awareness of the precious gift of life which has been given to us. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and of our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture.

Mr. Goudreau: Merci, M. le Président. Aujourd'hui j'ai le privilège de présenter en votre nom, à vous et aux membres de l'Assemblée, des invités spéciaux venant de ma circonscription, 17 élèves du secondaire accompagnés de leurs deux enseignants. Ils sont assis dans la galerie et sont à Edmonton pour célébrer les Rendez-vous de la francophonie, une quinzaine de jours où l'on célèbre l'histoire et la culture française.

Alors, c'est un grand plaisir de vous présenter les élèves de l'école Georges P. Vanier, accompagnés de leur enseignant M. Roger Doucet, et les élèves de l'école Héritage, accompagnés de leur enseignante Mme Anita Johnson. J'aimerais aussi vous présenter un membre de mon équipe, Mme Cindie LeBlanc, directrice-adjointe au Secrétariat francophone, une finissante de l'école Héritage.

Je leur demanderais de se lever et recevoir une bienvenue chaleureuse de cette Assemblée.

Merci, M. le Président.

[Translation] Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the privilege of introducing to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a number of very special guests from my constituency: 17 high school students and their two teachers. They are seated in the gallery and are in Edmonton to commemorate Les Rendez-vous de la francophonie, a national two-week celebration of French culture and history. It is with great pleasure that I introduce the students from l'école Georges P. Vanier, accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Roger Doucet, and the students from l'école Héritage, accompanied by their teacher, Ms Anita Johnson. I would also like to introduce a member of my staff, Ms Cindie LeBlanc, assistant director of the Francophone Secretariat, who is a graduate of l'école Héritage. I would ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [As submitted]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly on behalf of the Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry a class from New Horizons school, 38 in number. With them are their teachers, Ms Camie Hamilton, Mme Suzanne Le Gars, and Mr. Shaun Wilde. Also, it has been brought to my attention that there is a relative of yours in this group named Paul Matichuk. I would ask the guests to please stand and for this Assembly to give them the appropriate recognition.

Thank you so much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf I'd like to introduce to you and through you 17 students from the Neerlandia school. They're accompanied this afternoon by teacher Jim Bosma and parent helpers Rhonda Tischer, Mike Waggoner, Evelien Koekkoek, and Johanne Leonard. They are seated in the public and members' galleries this afternoon. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 42 visitors from the Gibbons elementary school in Gibbons. Along with them are teachers Mr. Don McIntyre and Ms Colleen Lowe and parents and helpers Robin Kathan, Gary Haynes, and Lorna Simpson. I believe they are seated in both the members' and the public galleries. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly today a fine example of the many hard-working and dedicated members of the public service. As chair of the Regulatory Review Secretariat under Service Alberta I am working with Angela Prokopetz, who is a secretariat director. In this fiscal year the busy secretariat will process about 275 requests from departments and regulatory authorities. Of course, all of these require an analysis by the secretariat. Angela is seated in the public gallery, and I would ask her now to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed it's a pleasure for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all the colleagues of our Assembly a lovely lady that is an acquaintance of many of us. She has a very distinguished job, and that is to maintain our minister of culture. I would ask that Angie Goudreau stand up and that our members join me in wishing her a good day and a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. R. Miller: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure today to have the opportunity to introduce to you and through you to all members of this House 16 individuals who are here visiting the Legislature as part of the Fushimi exchange. It's a junior high school exchange that's operated by D.S. MacKenzie junior high in my constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford.

I would like to introduce all of them if I could. The teacher that has co-ordinated the program is Ms Christine Cao. The volunteer parents today: Glen Burley, Ann-Marie Cote, and Cyndy Lang. There are six D.S. MacKenzie students, four of whom will actually be going to Japan in July – Ashley Lang, Cleah Takahashi, Cassie Carroll, Corbin MacKenzie, Chris Burley, and Sawyer Marsden – and the most important guests, of course, the six exchange students from Japan. Please bear with me as I try to work my way through their names: Nami Miyazawa, Hirono Takano, Saori Komata, Mei Sasao, Hidetaro Matsuno, and Chieri Namba. I would ask them to

all please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour for me today to welcome to this Assembly 15 travelers from the Northwest Territories, including four members of government from both the territorial and the municipal governments. They're here to present to the Legislature a resolution, passed on March 5, named the Right to Water, and I have a laminated copy here which they have asked me to pass on to the Premier.

Let me introduce them: the MLA for Yellowknife Centre, Robert Hawkins; the MLA for Fort Smith, Michael Miltenberger; city councillor for Yellowknife, Paul Falvo; city councillor for Yellowknife again, Kevin Kennedy, with his wife, Roberta; Martin Kennedy; Christa Domchek; Juniper Falvo; Daron Letts; Doug Ritchie with Ecology North; Raymond Beaver from Fort Smith; Gilly McNaughton; Steve Whittaker; Martin Dubeau; Archie Smith from Fort Smith; Alex Beaudin; Tom Unka from Fort Resolution; Phillip Bealieu, Fort Resolution; Lindsay Telfer; Leila Darwish; and Meredith James. I'd ask them all now to stand and have the recognition of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Mr. Perri Garvin. Perri has been involved in the labour movement for the past 30 years as a board member, a delegate, a shop steward, and a health and safety activist. Perri became a delegate to the Edmonton and District Labour Council in 1987 and was just recently re-elected as their recording secretary for his 10th term. He has been with the Alberta capital region's United Way for the past seven years as the labour co-ordinator and has worked with over 200 locals in the Edmonton region. Perri's work brings unions in the community and the United Way together in helping to make the Edmonton region a better place for all of us. Every year union members contribute a substantial portion of the United Way's fundraising goal. I would now ask that Perri rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a number of environmental activists and citizens concerned about the uncontrolled growth of the Alberta tar sands. They're here today to recognize International Water Day and to call for a moratorium on oil sands development, something that we in the NDP have long been calling for too. I was present today at their rally and commend them on their hard work and dedication to environmental issues. I will call each of their names, and please reserve applause till the end: Lindsay Telfer, executive director of the Sierra coalition; Leila Darwish, associate director of the Sierra coalition; Meredith James, Mackenzie Wild co-ordinator; along with Meghan Newman, Alli Conroy, and Mike Neuman. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:10

A second introduction is Robert Hawkins. Robert serves as the MLA for Yellowknife Centre in the Northwest Territories Assembly.

Robert was elected to the 15th Legislative Assembly in 2003. He was educated at SAIT and graduated as a mechanical engineer. He's here today as well to add his voice to the growing concern about the environment and the effects of industry. I'm very honoured to introduce him to our Legislature, Mr. Speaker, and I would ask him now to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have two guests to introduce to you and to the House today. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Paul Pomerleau. Paul is a proud member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers local 424. He divides his time between working in Fort McMurray and at home in Beaumont. Paul is here today to show his concern around the employment of temporary foreign workers despite some of his colleagues being unable to get work here in Alberta. Paul has lived in Alberta all his life. He and his wife spend much of their free time driving their two sons around to hockey practices and tournaments across the province. I would now ask that Paul rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, my second introduction today is for Linda Duncan. Linda has been a tireless advocate on environmental issues not just in Alberta but globally. She is currently the vice-president of Sierra Legal Defence Fund, a national nonprofit organization litigating precedent-setting environmental cases for Canadian communities. She is also the vice-president of the Lake Wabamun Enhancement and Protection Association, a grassroots organization of residents and lake users concerned about industrial impacts on one of Alberta's recreational treasures. She is an active member of the Alberta Environmental Network's energy caucus as a board member. Most importantly, she's the NDP candidate in the next election in the federal riding of Edmonton-Strathcona. I would now ask that Linda rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, have two guests today, and I'd like to introduce them to you and members of the Assembly, two very active women in the city of Edmonton. First of all, Docia Lysne is a tireless advocate and constituent of mine in Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. She is a home provider with the Elizabeth Fry Society and vice-president of Planned Parenthood in Edmonton. She is very active in the Unitarian church and works with the Kara Family Resource Centre in Edmonton, who provide safe environments and programming to enhance the self-esteem and independence of low-income families.

Also with her today is Marion DeShield. She is the former leader of the national black women's coalition and is a senior citizen volunteer with a seniors' centre here in Edmonton. By the way, Mr. Speaker, Marion will be celebrating her 87th birthday in June.

I would now ask that both of them rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Neil McCrank, QC

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since 1998 the Alberta Utilities and Energy Board has regulated the safe, responsible, and efficient development of Alberta's energy resources under the

watchful eye of its chairman, Mr. Neil McCrank. On February 21 of this year Mr. McCrank announced his retirement. His significant role in increasing the public's awareness of energy and utility issues will be greatly missed.

A native of Val d'Or, Quebec, Mr. McCrank graduated with a bachelor of law degree from Queen's University and was admitted to the bar in 1971. After coming to Alberta from Ontario in 1979 to work with the Alberta Attorney General, he served as a special prosecutor, assistant deputy minister for the criminal justice division, Deputy Attorney General, and deputy minister of the Alberta Department of Justice until his appointment as chairman of the EUB. During his tenure with the EUB Mr. McCrank has served on numerous national commissions, steering committees, task forces, and review panels related to emerging legal issues.

Mr. McCrank embodies the finest values of service to the public. He is an active community volunteer and currently serves as a board member at a number of educational institutions and professional organizations.

On behalf of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta I would like to thank Neil for his service to Albertans as chairman of the board during this period of unprecedented growth in our energy sector. His leadership of the EUB will be missed, and on behalf of my colleagues and this Assembly I wish him all the best in his retirement.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Wetaskiwin Sports Hall of Fame Inductees

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Saturday I will be attending the Wetaskiwin and County Sports Hall of Fame banquet. This event celebrates Wetaskiwin's impressive history of athletic competition. This year five individual and one team are being recognized for their excellence in sports and for their outstanding contributions to the community.

Valerie Greenwall-Weldon will be inducted as an athlete for her distinguished play in softball. She represented Alberta at a number of national competitions, including the western Canadian championships in 1974, the Canada Summer Games in 1977, and the Canadian junior Olympic team in 1978.

The late Tom Dorchester will also be inducted as an athlete. He was considered the Gordie Howe of chuckwagon races as he consistently won races from 1937 to 1981. Mr. Dorchester was inducted into the Canadian Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1982.

Willie Littlechild is being inducted as an athlete builder. He participated in numerous sporting events, especially hockey, as an athlete and coach. He represented Alberta at the world aboriginal games and the 2006 Canada Senior Games. As well, Mr. Littlechild has been inducted into the Alberta and Saskatchewan hockey halls of fame.

The late Ralph Pocock is being inducted as a builder for his work in building the Wetaskiwin curling rink and tennis courts. Mr. Pocock played a pivotal role in developing minor hockey in Wetaskiwin.

The Brightview Huskies hockey team is being inducted for accomplishments as a team. The Huskies were Wetaskiwin district champions from 1946 to 1952 and from 1943 to 1952 lost only three games while winning over 100.

The final inductee and special award recipient is the late Vern Henry. Mr. Henry was involved in numerous sports, including midget fastball, girls bantam soccer, and minor hockey. He also was chairman of seniors curling in Wetaskiwin.

I want to congratulate all of the inductees for the distinguished contributions to the sport history of Wetaskiwin.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Water Management

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every living system has limits to growth, and this has seldom been recognized by this government on development issues. Overallocation of the Oldman and Bow rivers systems, groundwater contamination from oil and gas activity without adequate groundwater monitoring, and threats to the quality and quantity of the Athabasca River from oil sands development have shocked and mobilized not only Albertans but citizens from the Northwest Territories, as we've seen today. Albertans are looking for enlightened leadership on our finite water resources, only 2 per cent of Canada's freshwater supply.

An independent water study commissioned by this government, the Rosenberg report, highlighted the lack of planning, investment, science, and action on Water for Life at a critical time when these are most needed. Population growth and climate change have increased the demand for wise and integrated water management. Another example is the need for collaborative planning on the eastern slopes, the source of all of our water in the province.

Integration is also clearly needed between government bodies such as Energy, Environment, and Sustainable Resource Development, that continue to compromise both land and water resource through lack of full consultation. But full integration also requires good science. We don't have the information we need on groundwater, even in the upper Bow River, our primary population water source. We know that water withdrawals affect both surface and groundwater. They're connected but in unpredictable ways that must be defined in each region. All major development must have cumulative impact assessments before approvals, as the minister has admitted in the House yesterday, but this government continues to make development decisions without that framework and without cumulative impact assessment.

1:20

Meanwhile the government has denied and delayed action on climate change, the most profound and unpredictable threat to human security on the planet, with added impacts on our water. Water is our lifeblood. It must guide development decisions above economic considerations. Alberta's future will not be defined by oil but by how we manage our water and place limits on growth. They will not accept any compromise on the future.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Joffre Carbon Capture and Storage Project

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to speak about a carbon capture and storage project near Joffre and Prentiss, in my constituency. This project, led by Glencoe Resources, captures carbon dioxide from the MEGlobal and NOVA Chemicals petrochemical complexes southeast of Lacombe. Once captured, the carbon dioxide is converted into a purified and liquefied form. This liquid CO₂ is then sent through an 80-kilometre pipeline grid into oil fields in the Ponoka area. It is projected that this particular project will capture about 365,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, or about 1,000 tonnes a day. This is the equivalent of taking 80,000 cars off the road. This will reduce the emissions for the two petrochemical companies by at least 25 per cent.

CO₂, when injected into certain types of partially depleted oil fields, has the ability to enhance the recovery of oil that would not be recoverable without the CO₂ stimulation. This is good news for

our province as it can represent a large increase in oil recovery from these depleted oil fields. As a result, Alberta will gain the full potential of these valuable resources.

Capturing carbon dioxide also represents a positive for the environment. Instead of releasing CO₂ into the atmosphere, this project will turn it into a valuable asset. There has been much discussion recently about managing the effects of carbon dioxide emissions. Two weeks ago Prime Minister Harper and our hon. Premier announced the creation of the carbon capture and storage task force. This task force will find solutions to implement carbon capture technology on a large scale. I hope that the task force will take the opportunity to come to my constituency to look at the Joffre/Prentiss carbon capture project. This is an innovative project that is a perfect example of what we are doing here in Alberta to solve greenhouse gas challenges, and I look forward to the adoption of this concept throughout our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Millwoods Cultural and Recreational Facility Association

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week I attended a celebration of a significant group in my constituency. Inscribed at the bottom of the cover of a classy black-and-gold program was: building the community's dreams. If you heard those words in another context, you'd probably think that was an advertising slogan or the target for a fundraising drive. In this case they were not hype but a description of achievement.

The Millwoods Cultural and Recreational Facility Association is not simply one organization that has grown up on the coattails of a growing community. In many respects MCARFA has grown Mill Woods into a dynamic community, a community that if incorporated would be Alberta's third-largest city. Thirty years ago "Mill Woods cultural association" would have been an oxymoron. A friend of mine, writing a field trip manual for Edmonton public schools, was encouraging teachers to look at the resources on their doorsteps, in their own communities. "That's all very well for the rest of you," a teacher in Mill Woods complained. "Here all we have are strip malls."

The fact that this is no longer true is due largely to MCARFA. An arena complex; the Mill Woods golf course; the Jackie Parker park of picnic sites, trails, and an all-season pavilion; a 440 track adjacent to two high schools; and a rollerblade, skateboard, and bike park are projects that MCARFA has brokered among 10 community leagues, city, and provincial funding when no one group or level of government could have done this work on its own. A spray park and adventure playground are set to open this summer.

These achievements are more than fundraising and organization. They represent an impressive mobilization of volunteers across local neighbourhoods and cultures in a larger spirit. MCARFA brings together resources and contacts in an effective way that is a model for other communities.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Temporary Moratorium on Oil Sands Development

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Our political environment reached a tipping point sometime last year. Research and scientific consensus and numerous public opinion polls combined to push some other political parties past the point of no return

on their emissions policy. Suddenly it's considered good politics to talk about emission reductions. But Albertans have good reason to be skeptical about Conservative and Liberal plans for emission reductions. The Liberals say that they would cap emissions only years into the future, while the government says that we don't need absolute reductions at all.

What neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals are willing to admit is that unless you are willing to manage growth, particularly in the development of the tar sands, then you can't manage emissions. The NDP has called for a short-term moratorium on approvals of new tar sands projects and expansions of existing ones. We understand the connection between pace of development and attempts to control greenhouse gas emissions.

By contrast, the Premier is on record saying that the government won't press the brake and has warned of dire consequences should Albertans attempt to manage the development of our tar sands. Similarly, the leader of the Liberals said that a temporary moratorium would be like locking the brakes on a speeding car. The moratorium we propose is only a short-term measure but an important one. Alberta needs a plan to deal with the serious economic, social, environmental, and infrastructure impacts of tar sands development.

A temporary moratorium on new approvals will allow Alberta to catch its breath and to get caught up. The management of our nonrenewable resources must be done in a way that lays the groundwork for a post oil energy world. It is time to talk seriously about using our present tremendous wealth to invest in a truly sustainable economic environment.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Bill 205

Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Conservation and Reclamation) Amendment Act, 2007

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 205, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Conservation and Reclamation) Amendment Act, 2007.

This is an act that will help forestry and oil and gas industry to meet some of the targets that our Environment minister is looking at under Bill 3.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 205 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Bill 207

Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce private member's Bill 207, the Child Care Accountability and Accessibility Act.

The purpose of Bill 207 is to increase the number of high-quality, affordable child care spaces available in our province. This will ensure that parents are better able to find the care that they need for their children. The bill will also improve accountability and transparency surrounding child care in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 207 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Bill 208
School (Restrictions on Fees and Fund-raising)
Amendment Act, 2007

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce private member's Bill 208, the School (Restrictions on Fees and Fund-raising) Amendment Act.

The purpose of Bill 208 is to eliminate school fees and fundraising in Alberta's public school system. All Albertans have the right to schooling from K to 12, and the ultimate responsibility for education funding rests with the government. This bill will provide relief to parents struggling with costs of school fees and ensure that students have equal access to education in our province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 208 read a first time]

head: 1:30 **Oral Question Period**

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

St. Joseph's General Hospital

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past hour we have spoken to a woman whose father died from the MRSA superbug after contracting it at the hospital in Vegreville. This woman's father contracted the infection at the Vegreville hospital in 2003. He was moved to a facility in Viking, then to the University of Alberta hospital, where his infection was treated very seriously. He was eventually transferred to a long-term care facility, where he died of MRSA. In the fall of 2003, this same woman has told us, she contacted her MLA, who is now the Premier, to raise her concerns about safety and treatment issues at the Vegreville hospital. To the Premier: did he take any action based on the concerns that were brought to him about the hospital at Vegreville?

Mr. Stelmach: First of all, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is suggesting that I had some contact with an individual. I don't know who he's referring to. Usually in this House documents are tabled with respect to information when they're pointing special attention to either the Premier or any member of this House. So, first of all, there's protocol.

Secondly, this is a serious matter, and I find it very upsetting that it has to come up in the House.

With respect to an individual patient, we are very concerned about the health not only of the patients in St. Joe's but in every facility in the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a very serious issue. Again to the Premier: can the Premier tell this Assembly and all Albertans if any other persons have died as a result of the breakdown of infection control at the Vegreville hospital?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, first of all, this Leader of the Opposition is making an assumption, nonprofessional. I'd like to see the report that has confirmed that as a result of some health care service in St. Joe's hospital it was proven that that individual has passed away. I haven't seen that, so I'd ask him to table it.

With respect to the further protocol followed with respect to St. Joe's hospital, the minister of health can answer.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier on what we all agree is a very serious issue. These are questions that Albertans want answered. Can the Premier tell this Assembly if any other local health professionals, such as dentists, were using the sterilization facilities at the Vegreville hospital?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is an interesting question. I don't know the answer to that question. I will make inquiries. We do have the Health Quality Council on site now looking and talking with the people who operate the hospital and the region to find the scope of the investigation that they're going to undertake. Certainly, that will be one of the things we'll want to know: to what extent was the CSR in the hospital used and for what purposes? But let's be very clear. This is not a situation where it is prudent for the opposition or anyone else to alarm Albertans. The look back that we're doing is being done because there were found to be inappropriate procedures followed, and it bears us to investigate and to let people know.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The public health issues emerging in Vegreville are just the thin edge of the wedge. What about next week, next month, next town? Albertans are worried about whether this government is capable of anticipating future problems and producing a strategy to protect public safety. My questions are to the Premier. We are already aware of one patient who died in Viking after contracting MRSA at St. Joseph's hospital in Vegreville. This patient was transferred several times between hospitals. How many other potentially infected patients were transferred from St. Joe's to other sites?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is not a prudent thing to do – this is a very serious situation, and we have the Health Quality Council looking at it. We've made sure that no further incidents happen. We've made sure that the CSR there is shut down until the investigation is done and appropriate protocols are put in place. We don't know that anyone died of the thing. The hon. member has raised one individual situation and is taking that reference. We'll be happy to take that reference if you provide us with the details and investigate it and any others that people might bring forward. But it's not prudent to do this in an alarmist fashion. It's prudent to do it in a serious manner with an appropriate, responsible review, alerting people to have blood tests done, and following up appropriately.

Ms Blakeman: Again to the Premier. The East Central health region has lost 17 full-time registered nurses over the last year alone. It is common practice for staff to transfer between hospitals for shifts, especially when facilities are short-staffed. What steps are taken to reduce the risk of spreading MRSA if staff from St. Joseph's hospital rotate between facilities?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, it is known and understood that the MRSA virus is one which is transmitted hand to hand, or by touch, and that the most prudent way of stopping the spread of the infection

is by properly washing hands and properly disinfecting surfaces. That is something that every health professional knows and understands, and that's something that's being reinforced for them through this incident.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. A final question to the Premier. In Vegreville there hasn't been any sort of government response, public information session, or town hall held to reassure the Vegreville residents. Why has the Premier waited so long to make himself or government staff available for an information session to inform and reassure the people of Vegreville?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we immediately sent professionals to assess the situation. They posted a public health order. The Health Quality Council is there today interviewing people in the hospital and making sure that steps are being taken immediately to deal with this situation. Once further information is made available, we will of course communicate with not only the town council, the chamber, but all of those that may be interested with respect to what we're doing in their hospital, at St. Joe's.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Standards

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government, which has included the Premier for 13 years, has spent that amount of time dismantling Alberta's public health care system. It has politicized the regional health boards. It's accelerated the privatization of health care to the detriment of our quality public system. Vegreville is only one symptom of the problems that have ensued. We have an opportunity here to fix the system before other problems arise. To the Premier: given that the Premier along with the member from Brooks and other members of the so-called Deep Six was part of the group leading the charge to cut essential health services, does the Premier accept responsibility for the inevitable outcomes of these decisions?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the Vegreville hospital, St. Joe's, is not a private facility. Again, innuendo, misleading, giving information that is totally incorrect. Secondly, in 1993 the budget was about \$3.2 billion or so, \$3.3 billion. I believe that over a period of time in that first year about \$200 million was reduced, most of that on the administrative side. The budget today is, of course, the largest per capita anywhere in the country of Canada. I believe our health professionals are doing extremely well in this province. In fact, we have people coming from other provinces to access services here.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated case. The decision of his own government has resulted in patient safety problems at the Holy Cross, in the Calgary health region, and in long-term care centres across the province by dismantling the system's capacity to set and enforce standards. Will the Premier admit that the department of health needs the very capacity to set and enforce standards that this government pressed so hard to eliminate?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the department of health has been doing a very good job. We've attracted some of the world's best in terms of cardiologists, oncologists. I mean, this is where people want to practise. We have, of course, the Alberta medical research trust fund, that again is attracting Nobel prize material not only in research, but now we are benefiting from that research in terms of new medical treatments and pharmaceuticals, new drugs, right here in the province of Alberta. I think we've come a very long way.

1:40

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has sidestepped the issue absolutely completely. Will the Premier commit to reassembling the centralized monitoring and enforcement standards in the department of hospitals that were dismantled by this very government in the 1990s?

Mr. Stelmach: What I will commit to is to ensure that we get to the very bottom of the situation at St. Joe's so that we put at ease, of course, other Albertans that may be accessing services in hospitals in this province, find out what the issue was, what the problem was, and make sure that it never happens again. That is what I'm committed to.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

St. Joseph's General Hospital (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. While the Premier may say that he wants to get to the bottom of this, this government's response so far is very similar to the response of the Harris government in Ontario to the Walkerton situation. The Vegreville hospital scandal has threatened the health of Albertans. Today I wrote to the Premier and asked him to appoint a public inquiry to get to the bottom of this matter. Will the Premier accept that recommendation from me and, I'm sure, supported by many thousands of Albertans and appoint a public inquiry?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I've asked in this House a number of times in answering questions that we not make this alarmist. What has happened in Vegreville at St. Joseph's hospital is that there was a breakdown in the protocols with respect to the sterilization of certain equipment, so the sterilization room was closed. The infectious disease specialist who was asked to examine this indicated that because of the breakdown – we're not aware that any blood-borne pathogens actually were transferred, but there may be a low possibility that that happened, and therefore it's prudent and in the best interests of the people there that we do a look back and we ask them to have blood tests done. This is not a Walkerton, and to put it into that context is alarmist. There's no sense making the people of Vegreville area alarmed about this. We're dealing with it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the minister says that we shouldn't be alarmed about it, but I think that Albertans would be a lot more confident if this government was seen to be taking clear action instead of giving it off to this toothless tiger, this Health Quality Council. This is for the Premier. Why won't the Premier appoint a public inquiry to make sure not just that the Vegreville hospital is safe but that all Alberta hospitals are safe?

