

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, December 2, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/12/02

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon.

As we pray this afternoon, let me share with you some words from the author Judith Singer.

First one solitary light,
then each evening, one more,
Until eight shining lights send forth
such a wonderful glow –
a message of freedom and faith
for all people.
These are the lights
of Chanukah.

Happy Chanukah.

Please be seated.

head: Presenting Petitions

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present an ACTISEC petition asking for a tuition freeze, signed by 648 individuals from Vegreville, Mundare, Morinville, Stony Plain, Ryley, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, and other parts of the province. To date that brings the total ACTISEC petitions presented to 3,562.

Thank you.

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

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, thank you. They just keep rolling in. Another 66 signatures on the petition – I'll give a cumulative down the road – opposing for-profit hospitals.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got a petition here from the Alberta College and Technical Institute Students' Executive Council with 307 signatures. The signatories are from all parts of the province, and they are urging this Assembly to call on this government to freeze tuition fees for postsecondary students across the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I'd like to present a petition urging the Government of Alberta to conduct an independent public inquiry of the Workers' Compensation Act, including an examination of the operations of the WCB, the Appeals Commission, and the criteria for appointments to the Board.

This petition is signed by over 200 Albertans, bringing the total now to over 7,000 signatures that have been presented in this session.

Thank you.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to be able

to present a petition signed by 142 Calgarians. This makes a total of 1,152 people from the city to the south all urging

the Government to increase support for children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

Thank you.

head: Reading and Receiving Petitions

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to request the petitions that I made on Tuesday and Wednesday be read and received today.

THE CLERK:

We, the undersigned, urge the Legislative Assembly to freeze tuition and institutional fees and increase support in the foundation of post-secondary education.

We, the undersigned, urge the Legislative Assembly to freeze tuition and institutional fees and increase support in the foundation of post-secondary education.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request that the petition I presented yesterday regarding a full public inquiry into the operations of the Workers' Compensation Board now be read and received.

THE CLERK:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to conduct an independent public inquiry of the Workers' Compensation Act, including an examination of the operations of the WCB, the Appeals Commission, and the criteria for appointments to the Board.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like the petition that I presented yesterday to the Legislative Assembly from the Save Our Schools petition campaign in Calgary to be now read and received.

THE CLERK:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase support for children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would ask that the ACTISEC petition on tuition freezes I presented yesterday be now read and received.

Thank you.

THE CLERK:

We, the undersigned, urge the Legislative Assembly to freeze tuition and institutional fees and increase support in the foundation of post-secondary education.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

MS PAUL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like the petition that I submitted to the Legislative Assembly yesterday to be read and received. It's the petition requiring a full investigation into the WCB.

Thank you.

THE CLERK:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to conduct an independent public inquiry of the Workers' Compensation Act, including an examination of the operations of the WCB, the Appeals Commission, and the criteria for appointments to the Board.

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

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like the petition that I filed on increased educational costs now read and received.

THE CLERK:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase support for children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I would request that the petition I presented earlier in the week now be read and received.

THE CLERK:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase support for children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

head: Notices of Motions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the third party on a Standing Order 40 notice.

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, thank you. Pursuant to Standing 40 I will be asking for unanimous consent of the Assembly to debate the following matter of urgent and pressing necessity.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to facilitate a fair settlement in the labour dispute at the Bethany care centre in Cochrane, where the use of unqualified replacement staff is threatening patient safety.

I have copies for distribution.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, there appear to be a great number today. We'll begin with the Provincial Treasurer.

MR. DAY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I'd like to table five copies of the Alberta Treasury Branch second-quarter update. The update was just released this morning. It contains news that every Albertan should be pleased about. It shows ATB enjoying a record breaking quarter, posting revenues of \$59.6 million. It shows that this turnaround at ATB is not just a one- or two-quarter phenomenon, but as a matter of fact it appears to be setting a consistent, upward-moving trend line, two profitable years in a row now,

eliminating the \$152 million deficit that was recorded in March 31, 1997.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I'll be tabling copies of a document on improving and enhancing Canada's competitive position. This was put together by the 10 provincial finance ministers and the territorial leaders in a meeting last month. It's rare to have consensus among all finance ministers and territorial leaders, but in fact there's consensus here. Reflecting the importance of tax reductions and the restoring of the cuts to the health and social transfer, it will be presented to the finance minister next week.

Speaker's Ruling Statements during Tablings

THE SPEAKER: Before we go on, hon. Provincial Treasurer and all hon. members, effective Monday the rules invoking tabling returns and reports will be strictly adhered to. There will be strict tablings. It will not be opportunities for statements. But we started today with statements, so we will allow that to happen, and if we're here to 3 o'clock doing this stuff, we'll be doing it.

The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports
1:40 (continued)

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. First, I am pleased to table the annual report of the operation of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act in accordance with section 81 of the act for the fiscal year ended March 31, 1999.

Secondly, I'm pleased to table copies of the annual report submitted by the Alberta Elevating Devices and Amusement Rides Safety Association.

Finally, I'm pleased to file with the Assembly six copies of my response to Written Question 172, accepted on April 14, 1999. Mr. Speaker, this response provides documentation outlining the number of times the working group established by disaster services, who are now part of Alberta Municipal Affairs, met regarding potential emergency consequences resulting from Y2K. Also, this response includes those who make up this group and the material that has been produced to date as a result of the group's recommendations.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Again, I'm going to repeat what I said a little earlier: effective Monday tabling returns and reports means tablings, not editorial comments.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of the annual report for the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. It identifies progress made in 10 policy areas and introduces the new council members.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I wish to table with the Assembly five copies of a news release of the Alberta Liberal caucus dated November 4, 1999.

Further, Mr. Speaker, I wish to table five copies of a letter from the Premier of British Columbia to the Prime Minister of Canada regarding health care.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

MR. DUNFORD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to file with

the Assembly eight copies of my responses to written questions 245 and 252 and Motion for a Return 251.

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

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have five tablings, I believe. First is five copies of a memo by the Bethany Care Society to its staff inviting family and friends to go to work on some shifts. It says: gas paid, free meals, no criminal check.

Mr. Speaker, the second filing is from Allan Sheldon. It's a copy of a letter to the Premier opposing private, for-profit hospitals.

The third is on the same subject matter, and it is from Barry Crittenden in Medicine Hat.

The fourth is from the dean of medicine at the University of Sydney, Australia, in which he says that it would be much more cost-effective for the government to enhance public health rather than promote for-profit.

Finally, a letter from AMA president, David Bond, urging the government to hold off approving Bill 40 pending further consideration.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got one tabling to make today. It's a copy of a letter sent to me that was sent to the Premier by Miss Mary Trumpener encouraging him and his cabinet to do a better job of meeting commitments made to all Albertans to complete a network of parks and other protected areas in Alberta.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have four sets of tablings this afternoon. The first is a tabling that every member has on their desk. It's called A Round 'Tuit.' It's courtesy of the friends of the Head Injury Association. They felt that all Members of the Legislative Assembly required one but especially that the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Associate Minister of Health and Wellness pay attention to the needs of the brain-injured in this province.

The second is a tabling from the Capital Region Medical Staff Association. It's their physician access survey, which indicates that there are significant delays in services. In particular, there's a wait of 66 days for urgent cardiovascular and thoracic surgery and 73 days within the region for urgent surgery in orthopedics.

Another set of tablings: individual letters from April Banigan, Linda Crawford, Jenny Whittome, Tracey Boyd, Michael Ulrich, Alison Irwin, Jill Thomson, and Lori Froese asking that the government "take the next step by funding midwifery."

The fourth is a letter – actually, I'll save this for Monday.

I did want to thank the Speaker for his comments on Chanukah. They were well appreciated.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to table a letter from the Alberta chapter of the College of Family Physicians of Canada with respect to the Health Information Act in which it says, "This bill fundamentally violates the trust relationship between a patient and his/her physician" and "is absolutely unacceptable."

Secondly, I would like to table on behalf of a constituent a letter to the Premier with respect to the Alberta government having taken the first steps towards improving the health of newborn babies and

their mothers by licensing midwives in Alberta and urging the government to go on to the next step.

Thank you.

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

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today with your permission. The first is from Dr. and Mrs. de Jongh. It is correspondence related to the proposed Natural Heritage Act urging the government to actually put some action behind their claims that they want to protect Alberta's natural heritage.

The second is a letter to the Premier from a constituent by the name of Slawomir Pietrzkiwicz, which was copied to me, and my constituent strongly disagrees with the Premier's notions behind privatizing health care and urges him to reconsider and not to tamper with such a marvelous and wonderful system.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to rise. I have four tablings. The first two relate to urging the province to fund midwives. The first letter urges the government to "take the next step by funding midwifery through Alberta Health care."

The second tabling is a letter from a constituent who also calls upon the government to take the further action required to incorporate midwives as full partners in the health care system.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I would like to table copies of two articles. I am prepared to do whatever possible to convince this government that their private health care scheme is wrong, and these articles talk about analyzing the contracting out of government services, the relevant cost-benefit considerations, and contracting for social and health services. I hope they will be of assistance to them.

Thank you.

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

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have but two tablings this afternoon. The first one is a summary of debate time on Bill 40, the Health Information Act, that shows that of all of eight hours and three minutes the Liberal opposition has had but six hours to debate that.

The second item is an English translation of a bill passed by the Dutch parliament on November 23, 1999, entitled the Protection of Personal Data Act, which sets a much higher standard for protecting patient information than our Bill 40.

Thank you.

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

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have eight letters from Edmontonians that are asking the government to "take the next step by funding midwifery." They're from Jim Ayrheart, Jennifer MacTavish, Deborah Robb, Michael Kalmanovitch, Cathy Vydra, Laura Louie, D. Lam, and Heather Crawford.

Thank you.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have two sets of tablings. The first is from midwives Dawn MacDonald, Laurel Kvarnberg, Fiona and Michel Audy, Nicola Fairbrother, Glen MacTavish, and my constituent, Meghan Low. They're all asking the government to fund "midwifery through Alberta Health care so

that all Alberta families have the choice of benefiting from mid-wifery care.”

The second tabling is letters from Albertans Jana Siminiuk, Joe Vipond, Dale Cousineau, Richard Brinkman, Ayal Dinner, H. Bessey, and W. Sellers. What they want is for this government to properly protect a large portion of the Chinchaga Foothills region from both forestry, mining, and any more oil and gas exploration.

1:50

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a report prepared by an Alberta injured worker outlining how the present system of appeal at the CSRC, an appeals commission for injured workers, requires them to justify a doctor's diagnosis when they are not medically qualified. I know this is one of the challenging areas that the new committee announced today by the minister will be looking at.

Thank you.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have tablings as well. They are letters concerning midwifery from Rosalie Zinner, Heather Houle, T. Parks-Legge, Jan Pickard, Dr. Colleen Greer, Krista Wilson, N. Thompson, Nekolina Berlie, Tracey Meyer, Almera Morin, Elizabeth Maudsley, many being from Spruce Grove and Stony Plain.

Thank you.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table a letter from Garth and Cathy Peevey in Edmonton-Mill Woods asking that Alberta Blue Cross include the pharmaceutical drug Ribovone in their services.

The second is from a constituent, Wendy Sauve, who has asked me to table her letter expressing her opposition to the for-profit health care.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of letters to the Premier from Charlotte Lusson, Shannon Kohlman, Hilary Shannon, Shannon McKenzie, Teresa Bucknum, Lucinda Klapwyck, Teri Clarke, and Sandy Deby asking for the government to fully fund midwifery care.

Thank you.

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have nine different letters to table this afternoon. They're from concerned Albertans June Christensen, Ian Matty, Michelle Wagner, Pierrette Requier, Tanya Birkbeck, Beverly Milroy, J. O'Connor, and J. Pon. All these Albertans are concerned and would like to see carefully implemented midwifery, because they feel it would not increase the cost of health care.

Thank you.

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

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a tabling of the CBC commentary from aboriginal human rights activist Muriel Stanley Venne applauding the bravery of the victim of convicted sex offender and Member of Parliament, Jack Ramsey.

Thank you.

DR. NICOL: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to table the five copies that are required of annex 2 of the WTO agreement on agriculture. This shows that the requirements for measurement of the margin on the base years of the disaster program are the same as they are for the income support, which requires the middle three of the last five, not the top three of the five.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, the chair needs to table five copies of a memorandum from the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose requesting that Bill 208, Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act, 1999, be brought to third reading on Tuesday, December 7, 1999, and the appropriate copies of a memorandum from the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow requesting that Bill 210, Charitable Donation of Food Act be brought to third reading on Tuesday, December 7, 1999.

Speaker's Ruling Statements during Tablings

THE SPEAKER: Please, for the third time, just to remind hon. members, effective Monday the rules with respect to tabling returns and reports will be very clinical. In fact, in virtually all jurisdictions that follow our form of government, the section of the routine dealing with tabling returns and reports is restricted to statutory tabling of returns and reports. Something for the three House leaders to consider.

head: Introduction of Guests

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

MR. LUND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure, indeed, it's an honour for me to have the opportunity to introduce to you and members of the Assembly a large group of very dedicated people, men and women. They are very important to the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. They do a lot of extension work. They're very valuable to the 60 municipalities that they represent. I'm, of course, talking about the members of the Alberta Agriculture Fieldmen's Association, an association that's been in existence for about 50 years. Today we have in excess of 90 members that will be in the Assembly, and I would ask the members that are currently here to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The Associate Minister of Health and Wellness.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I'm very, very pleased to introduce to you four very special guests who are visiting here this afternoon. Mr. Harnej Hothi, Mrs. Gurdev Kaur, Gurkaranjeet Hothi, and Lieutenant Colonel Mohinder Singh from the Indian navy, who is also the brother of Mr. Hothi. These special guests are here visiting, I think some of them at least for the first time. I would like to say to them: sat-sri-akal, truth is immortal. I would ask them to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of all members.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a great group of students from Bertha Kennedy school in my riding in St. Albert. They are here with their teachers and my friends Mrs. Sharon Prefontaine, Mrs. Karen Hicks, Mrs. Debra Kaplar, and Mr. Glen Newbie. I would ask these wonderful students to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to rise and introduce to the Assembly constituents of Edmonton-Riverview, Laurie Schutta and Lola Baydala, who are accompanied by students from St. Paul elementary school. I would ask these citizens to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure? So many hands are up that it's difficult to tell, when everybody is waving, if they want to be recognized or not.

The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can't say for sure if they're in the public gallery, but I'd like to introduce a grade 6 class from the John Wilson elementary school. There are 24 students and their teacher, Mrs. Pederson, and parents Paddy Douglas, Mr. and Mrs. Bjerke, Mr. Brian Burkitt, and Mrs. Judy deBeaudrap. If they're in the gallery, I'd ask them to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to introduce two friends of a person that works in this Chamber but with the rules as they are is unable to introduce these friends herself, so it falls to me to have that honour, sir. I'd like to introduce to you two friends of our favourite head page, Laura Gill, that are sitting in the gallery today. They're friends from Louis St. Laurent high school. Would Miss Sarah Bailey and Miss Lyndsay Phelan please rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

head: Ministerial Statements

THE SPEAKER: The Associate Minister of Health and Wellness.

International Day of Disabled Persons

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, tomorrow is the International Day of the Disabled Person. As the minister responsible for the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities I'm very pleased to rise and recognize the many abilities, contributions, and accomplishments of disabled Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, we have all benefited from the increased participation of disabled Albertans in the everyday social, economic, cultural, and political life of our province. I want to briefly highlight our provincial government's strong commitment to work even harder with and for persons with disabilities and the organizations that represent them and/or of which they are part to help shape an even brighter future for disabled Albertans.

Some recent examples of our government's commitments in this area are this year's budget increase of \$22.7 million followed by an additional \$10 million to community boards across the province for persons with developmental disabilities programs and services in order to address the unanticipated growth in the number of people requiring those services. At the same time, I am now personally

completing a very comprehensive, provincewide review of programs, services, and funding for individuals served through the six regional PDD boards.

Secondly, the allocation of \$25.6 million for the student health initiative, which has resulted in 25 new cross-sector community partnerships across the province all focused on enhancing services for students with special health needs in their areas.

Thirdly, the November 29 announcement of the minister's new Employability Council, chaired by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, which will provide advice and help enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. And, of course, our government's renewed commitment to the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, whereby we have extended the council's mandate to the year 2003. The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan was appointed as chair of this Premier's council in 1998, which, by the way, is one of only three across this country.

2:00

Mr. Speaker, these initiatives all have a common denominator. They ensure that people with disabilities and the organizations representing them will continue to have a strong voice in determining future directions for the disability community. Together they add up to a strong united effort across our province to further improve the status of persons with disabilities.

As we stand on the eve of a new millennium, we stand on the eve of new opportunities. We also see the need to continue working together across sectors to evaluate what is working and/or what is in need of improvement and to build on the excellent foundation already established. Yesterday the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan identified the Premier's council's intention to work with government and with community stakeholders to identify what the new provincial disability strategy should look like for Alberta. This provides our province with an opportunity to once again lead the way for all other provinces.

In recognition of the United Nations International Day of the Disabled Person, the Premier's council is meeting tomorrow in our Legislature Building to discuss the provincial disability strategy as well as other important aspects of their work. We are all looking forward to working on and to hearing more about this important disability strategy.

I want to close by thanking the council for its sincere efforts, and I want to encourage all Albertans to continue to do whatever they can, wherever they can, and whenever they can to improve the status of persons with disabilities in our province. I can, and you can too.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the minister's statement. We're talking about a matter that is obviously very, very dear to my heart and an issue that I was very deeply involved with in the early '70s. We made some tremendous strides in improving the lifestyles of persons with disabilities in the early '70s under then Premier Lougheed. I also had the opportunity in 1981 of co-chairing the Canadian organizing committee for the International Year of Disabled Persons, and I had the chance to attend a 10-day conference in Vienna, where there were representatives from virtually every country in the world. We as Canadians did stack up very well against some of the other countries.

I applaud the minister for announcing the new initiatives that he talks about in his statement. I'm particularly impressed with the

minister's Employability Council. There are some good people on there, people like Beverley Matthiessen, people like Lawrence Noel, who know what it's all about. They know the shortage of employment opportunities and such.

But there are still challenges to be faced, Mr. Speaker. The question of accessible housing, particularly in Calgary. There is a great demand, a waiting list of approximately 40 looking for accessible housing. The question of home care: there is more and more concern that home care is being squeezed to the point that some disabled persons feel threatened that they may have to return to institutions.

The question of AISH: there were some strides taken, some positive strides, but there are still additional reforms that have to be made. The handicapped parking I talked about the other day. The minister of human resources was correct yesterday when he said that disabled persons want the opportunities. They don't want to vegetate at home. They want the opportunity to participate in the mainstream of society. They want the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process that affects their lifestyles. So any opportunity, like the Employability Council, that moves in that direction is very, very positive. We have done lots, but there is still a great deal to be done.

Thank you.

head: Oral Question Period

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

Confidentiality of Health Records

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise for the first question today. Albertans have received in their mailboxes a rather glossy brochure from Alberta Health and Wellness. It boasts of all kinds of developments in health care. My first question is to the minister of health. Why is there not one single mention, not a word, in this brochure that's come in the last number of days about the plans to invade the personal health files of Albertans?

MR. JONSON: Basically, Mr. Speaker, because, one, contrary to the tone of the question of the hon. Leader of the Opposition, this information is accurate. I think it's a fairly modest brochure, which provides good information to Albertans.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, because we always want to report information accurately and we do not have a plan to invade the privacy of Albertans, we wouldn't want to put that inaccurate statement into the brochure.

MRS. MacBETH: Second, Mr. Speaker: why did this minister break his promise to hold public hearings so that Albertans would have a say in what they think of the government's plan to use their most personal information?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, the consultation process has proceeded on this particular legislation for some two and a half years. The hon. member of the opposition, the critic in these areas of health information, was part of the original steering committee. We've had a number of different rounds of consultation, and I would be prepared at an appropriate time to table a total accounting of this. There were dozens of written submissions received. We met with 13 separate stakeholder groups. We met with 47 organizations in total.

We tabled Bill 30, I believe it was, which was the first version of the legislation, and debated it and held it over for a considerable

period of months for further input and examination. Then there has been a very, very extensive amount of work carried out with respect to the legislation that is before the Assembly. It has been debated a number of hours, as the opposition pointed out today, and a number of amendments have been considered and passed by the Assembly, including one from the opposition.

MRS. MacBETH: I'll table the letter from the minister to the Opposition House Leader, Mr. Speaker.

Finally, will this minister tell us exactly when and how this government got a mandate to fundamentally change the rules and trample on personal privacy?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, the legislation certainly does not trample on personal privacy and, in fact, has just the opposite purpose. Members across the way well, well know that Alberta is being a leader in terms of proposing and working and consulting previously on legislation designed to protect in a reasonable manner the privacy of individuals in this new information age.

I would like to just add one other thing, if I might, Mr. Speaker. Because the opposition across the way would like some people to believe that the medical profession does not have individuals who are well qualified and agree very much with the legislation as proposed, I would just like to quote – and I'm prepared to file the requisite copies – a letter from a very respected physician who is very, very familiar with this legislation. It's Dr. Greenwood, a very experienced and respected physician here in Edmonton. He concludes his letter – and I commend the whole letter to everybody to read.

I do not believe that the proposed legislation is any threat to the physician patient relationship or allows any new opportunity for inappropriate disclosure of health information and is a huge improvement over the current non legislated arena.

Speaker's Ruling Tabling Documents

THE SPEAKER: Both the Leader of the Official Opposition and the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness are aware that the appropriate time for tablings comes under the section of the Routine known as Tabling Returns and Reports and other such letters.

Let's move on now to the second main question. The Leader of the Official Opposition.

2:10 Red Deer Regional Hospital

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's now becoming abundantly clear that this government has tightened the screws on public health care in order to create a market for private hospitals. Albertans now know that this government is back in the business of being in business. My questions are to the Acting Premier. Why is it that an entire floor of the Red Deer regional hospital has been shut down?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I can tell you – and the minister of health can supplement – that there's a master plan which is before and has been before the minister of health for some period of time. As with all plans for expansion in hospitals or, in fact, on that one particular floor in Red Deer, those are before the minister of health, and we will see where it moves in the process. Obviously, as the MLA for the area – and I'm not being asked the question in that context – I'd like to see that move ahead, but speaking to the general issue, there is a process built on priorities on which these are addressed.

If the minister of health wants to supplement, I know he'd be capable of doing so.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, part of the Red Deer regional hospital's overall redevelopment plan was addressed in a very significant way with respect to the phase connected to long-term care in terms of the approval of a project to replace the Parson's clinic. I have toured the regional hospital. I'm aware that they're periodically – the hospital is actually not short of square footage. It is a matter of it being modernized and brought up to current standards. There has been some rearranging and reorganizing within the hospital.

Mr. Speaker, the other thing that's very, very important here is the very significant additional funding announcements that have been made to regional health authorities. The Red Deer regional hospital, which along with the majority of regional hospitals in the province has a balanced budget situation, benefited very substantially from the recent onetime per capita grant, as well. So we're certainly supporting health care in that region, and we have certainly in significant part responded to that overall building need.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, how many beds are shut in across the province in addition to the Red Deer regional hospital?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I can certainly indicate to the Assembly that we know there were a number of beds being used previously that are not being used today. However, the basic problem which we have acknowledged in this province and have responded to is that we have acute care beds in this province that are operating, and I think across the province generally they are of sufficient number. The problem is that we do need more long-term care and aging-in-place type capacity so our aged population, who in many cases are in an acute care bed, can go to more appropriate accommodation, and those acute care beds can be used for acute care services.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, with 40 surgeries canceled this fall and 15 patients rebooked just last week for orthopedic and urinary surgeries, will the minister admit that restricting capacity in Red Deer is simply another part of the plan to artificially create a demand for private orthopedic hospitals?

MR. JONSON: No, Mr. Speaker.

Health Diagnostic Services

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, like private health insurance companies and private hospitals, diagnostic firms thrive as this government slowly, methodically, and incrementally privatizes health sector by sector and delists public insurance coverage procedure by procedure. Yesterday I brought to the attention of the Assembly the innovative Edmonton-based company DC Diagnostic-Care, whose investor information kit lists its company goals, including

negotiating joint partnerships with existing hospital-based facilities where we can asset manage, buy the equipment, pay the staff, lease space and provide services.

My questions are again to the minister of health. Will the government's privatization policy allow the handpicked health authority officials to sell off the public equipment purchased by taxpayers of entire hospital diagnostic departments?

MR. JONSON: First of all, in the area of diagnostic imaging, Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important to recognize the very significant effort that we have made in terms of improving overall diagnostic services in this province, including those of MRI machines. We had a multistakeholder committee that involved, certainly, physicians in this area called our diagnostic imaging review committee. That committee examined the overall capacity in terms of diagnostic tools

in the province, and they recommended that we, for instance, expand MRI services in the province. Specifically, they recommended Lethbridge, Red Deer, and Grande Prairie. Lethbridge's MRI is now in place. It's up and running. Red Deer is close to that particular stage, and it's coming along quite well in terms of the project in Grande Prairie. So that's just one illustration, I think, of our commitment to the best possible diagnostic care and service in our regional health authorities in the public system.

Mr. Speaker, as I have pointed out in this House many times, this particular area of health care is one which is not an insured service. It is one where, yes, we do have privately operated MRIs for uninsured services out there. This, I guess, happens to be a company that's interested in that particular area.

The important thing about our overall policy statement, Mr. Speaker, is that it is a policy statement which holds the possibility of contracts with private firms but under very strict rules which comply with the Canada Health Act. Of course, this does not seem to be a relevant question in that regard. Our policy is very, very clear.

MRS. MacBETH: Yes, Mr. Speaker, there have been improvements in the public system. In fact, \$56 million has been invested in diagnostic equipment in this province since 1996. The question is: has this government given RHAs the right to sell off that equipment at fire sale prices?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, if I recall correctly, I think that on other occasions in other places the health care system certainly has identified the need for further investment in equipment. The Auditor General's report indicates that there should be a reinvestment and upgrading of our medical equipment, and recently we announced I believe it was 10 million additional dollars for that type of high-tech equipment.

Certainly across the health care system, Mr. Speaker, there are going to be additional diagnostic devices being purchased. There will be some that are new ones, and they will get rid of the old equipment. I don't think, however, that the market for very, very well-used diagnostic equipment is really going to in any way be very strong or in any way harm the public health care system.

MRS. MacBETH: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that this government handed over millions of dollars of taxpayer-funded hospital laboratory equipment to private lab service monopolies, is it going to do the same thing with diagnostic imaging equipment which has cost this province and our taxpayers \$56 million since 1996?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, it is a fact that for decades in this province laboratory companies have been a part of our overall health care system, through the years of Blue Cross and MSI and then during the years of medicare under the Canada Health Act. So this is a component of our health care system that has always had a strong private business presence. It has been cost-effective. It has provided, I think, good service in combination with publicly operated laboratories, and this has worked well for Alberta, so I do not particularly see what the concern is.

2:20

Health Information Act

MS BARRETT: You know, Mr. Speaker, in its mindless pursuit of privatizing medicare to please its corporate friends, the government shows contempt for democracy. The government's promise to consult Albertans over Bill 40 is just a sick joke that is met by public relations rubbish backed up with the heavy hand of closure. I'd like to ask the health minister why it is that the government is trampling

democracy by shutting down debate on a bill that is so full of holes that it is opposed by every health stakeholder including the Alberta Medical Association, the Association of Registered Nurses, the Alberta College of Family Physicians, provincial ambulance authorities, Friends of Medicare, and consumer rights advocates. Why is he doing that?

THE SPEAKER: I can only assume, hon. member, that that was not an exhibit. You just spilt your coffee, which was overly hot; is this correct?

MS BARRETT: It's a bill full of holes.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the contention on which this question is based is full of holes too.

Mr. Speaker, I will not take excessive time of the Assembly to repeat once again the long list of the stages, the many steps, the years that have been taken to consult and to work and to design the legislation which is now before the Assembly, but the record is very clear. It can be provided. It has been a very extensive examination of this very important issue, a particularly important issue for the modern telecommunications, computer-based economy and health care system that we have right now. I think the legislation is reflecting the needs for privacy and the needs to have adequate information to manage our system on behalf of Albertans. That balance is there. We need this legislation.

MS BARRETT: Well, on the subject of need for privacy I don't understand, then, why the health minister is supporting legislation which provides more privacy protection for the commercial dealings of health providers than it does for the most intimate details of a patient's life, family situation, and medical condition.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, it is very difficult to answer constructively a question which is based on a totally false premise.

MS BARRETT: Well, why is it that the government is supporting health information legislation which will make it easier for wanna-be profit hospitals to hide details of their contracts and commercial dealings from public scrutiny? Maybe he can get that one.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, again, the hon. leader of the third party is reading – she must have written her own version of events in terms of consultation and also in terms of the legislation. There has been a major effort made over two and a half years involving doctors, involving a whole range of health professionals as well as stakeholder groups and members of the public to strike the right balance in this legislation between the need to have good information to use as evidence for improving our health care system and our health care delivery to individual Albertans and, on the other hand, balancing the need for respect for the privacy of individual patient records.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, at this time on Monday I'll recognize you for a question.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Adoption Records

MS GRAHAM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, December 1, the amendments to the Child Welfare Act which provide greater access to adoption information came into effect. My question this afternoon is to the Minister of Children's Services. How will this

new legislation afford greater access for Albertans to adoption information?

MS EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, it will provide greater access, yet at the same time it will protect the confidentiality of those that do not wish to be acknowledged and will in fact provide safeguards so that veto power is in place. But adoptive parents and descendants of deceased adoptees will for the first time be able to access records and obtain adoption information.

Mr. Speaker, it is our hope to clarify and improve legislation for those requests we've had in the past that have not been able to be fulfilled because of the legislation.

MS GRAHAM: Mr. Speaker, I have a further question of the same minister. Will these new amendments be retroactive?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, no, they will not be retroactive. This legislation will be enacted for adoptions that take place after January 1, 2000. It would be a breach of our confidentiality previously promised in adoptions of the past, and it will protect those that do not wish to have revelation of their adoption records.

Mr. Speaker, I think that overall this is a signal of a more open process for dealing with information.

MS GRAHAM: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister relates to my understanding that the minister will be able in special circumstances to release adoption information to certain individuals. When would the minister do that?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, if there is a serious medical condition that has been identified, the situation will be assessed not only for the impact on the quality of life for the individual whose information may be released, but it will follow general criteria of prudent management of the information, and the effects for all parties involved will also be very thoroughly scrutinized.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Private Health Services

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's health care scheme has nothing to do with providing choice or alleviating pain and suffering and everything to do with eliminating public health care in Alberta. The government has now embarked on another stage of its cynical blueprint to destroy medicine by releasing a propaganda brochure which is very selective about the information presented. It's nothing more than a public relations scheme drawn up by advertising executives on Madison Avenue and Bay Street that just won't sell on Main Street, Alberta. My questions are to the minister of health. Why does this government hold extensive consultations with Albertans on paying down the debt, the future of the heritage savings trust fund, and the Calgary accord, as examples, but refuse to hold consultations with Albertans on its scheme to privatize medicare?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think that this is, again, a situation where the member of the opposition across the way fails to recognize, first of all, the overall context in which health care operates in this province. All aspects of the health care system were examined at the health summit, a very public and open event which involved a very representative group of people from the general public as well as people working in the health care system. We have had that

major consultation process, discussion process. We have responded to that particular report. That is just one of a whole series of overall consultations and discussions that we've carried on with respect to getting advice on the future directions of our health care system.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the other thing that is not acknowledged here is that we have put out across this province, made available to anybody who wants it – and of course there's an effort being made to make sure people get copies of the policy – a policy statement which is out there clearly indicating our intent or our proposal as far as this whole matter of bringing under the principles of the Canada Health Act and our publicly funded, publicly administered health care system in this province this whole matter of contracting for services under the umbrella of the public health care system. Yes, we do plan to follow this up with legislation, but we are not rushing the process. There are going to be months of distance from the release of the policy paper. We're inviting responses and the views of Albertans on this particular policy statement with a view to having the best legislation possible.

2:30

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the Premier tell us exactly where, on what page in the health summit recommendations does it say that Albertans want to privatize medicare and give their tax dollars away to private, for-profit hospitals? I was there. I don't remember that being a recommendation.

MR. JONSON: Within the health summit report, Mr. Speaker, I think there are very major references to innovation, to looking at new approaches to health care and the delivery of health care. There are references to the need to balance the demands of the system against sustainability. There is clearly an indication that we need to have a health care system which is comprehensive, which is of high quality, but is also going to be able to be funded and operate as efficiently as possible in the future.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why doesn't this government allow Albertans to make the decision to reject the scheme to privatize medicare rather than putting out these documents to manipulate public opinion? Why won't you let Albertans have a say?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, you know, it is somewhat ironic – that's a polite term – that the opposition on other occasions is critical of government or of other entities because they do not provide enough information. We are and have been as a government providing information to the public on the performance and accountability of our various departments in government. That major emphasis that we have as a government on performance measures and accountability is recognized outside the borders of Alberta, even, I think, outside the borders of Canada as being a very good direction.

In Alberta Health we are certainly not an exception to this overall effort of government. We are continually looking at better ways of communicating across this province, Mr. Speaker, with information on the health care system, and that's to every average Albertan.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

School Class Size

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing is more important to most parents than the health and the safety and the education of their children. Parents in my constituency continue to

be concerned about the size of some of the classrooms in local schools, especially in the younger grades. My questions today are all to the Minister of Learning. Can the minister please advise what if anything is being done to address their concerns?

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, a lot of the research is showing that in the K to 3 age group there is truly an advantage to having smaller class sizes. The actual number, the strict number that is needed in class size to see this improvement is still a little bit up in the air, with some studies showing 17, others showing up to 23.

Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is that this government is extremely concerned about class size, especially in the K to 3 age group. We are bringing forward a proposal that has yet to be approved. It is a proposal called the Alberta incentive for school improvement, that has been developed by the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta School Boards Association, as well as three or four other different learning organizations. What this will do, hopefully, is allow the school boards to work with the schools to decrease the class size in the K to 3 age group. This will be one of the true impetuses of this initiative, and I really feel that we can do something extremely positive, especially in the K to 3 age group.

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If we know that smaller classes benefit children, why don't we set, then, a maximum limit on class size?

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. As I stated in the first part of the question, the research that is out there shows that anywhere from 17 to 23 is probably the limit on class size; we need it below that. There are a lot of issues. A lot of the studies also show that the smaller class size is more effective when there is a population at risk. We will be working with Edmonton public schools, for example, to address especially the 20 schools that have a population at risk, address the class size in the K to 3 age group.

We feel that's a better approach to take rather than strictly saying that every K to 3 class must be under 17 people or must be under 23. The obvious question that comes is: what happens when there are 18 students in small rural schools? What happens if there are 20 students? Mr. Speaker, we have to allow the school boards some give-and-take when it comes to numbers, but as a general rule we have to look at decreasing the class size in the K to 3 age group.

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What kinds of measures do we have on class size? How do we know if they are affecting the performance of our students?

DR. OBERG: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, generally speaking, when it comes to measures, the students in Alberta do extremely well. Whether it's on international tests, whether it's on national tests, generally speaking they do very well.

Unfortunately, we don't have the research that shows the benefits of the smaller class size. Mr. Speaker, this is something that we absolutely have to do. We can't necessarily rely on the research of someone down in southwestern Alabama or someone in northern Alaska. We need to do that research, and this is what will be the benefit of the Alberta incentive for school improvement. I feel that we can get some very valid data, some very good data that can be extrapolated across the country and across North America with this new incentive program that's coming in.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Education Property Tax

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government's education property tax committee recommendations to cap the residential portion of the education tax at 5 percent do nothing more than lock in the current unfairness and inequality in the amount of education tax collected from Albertans. At the same time that this government cut grants to municipalities by 48 percent, they've increased the education tax on the residential ratepayers of this province by \$114 million since 1995. The reason why Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, and many other communities in Alberta are talking about property tax increases this year is because this government dumped its debt and tax increases on the backs of its municipalities. My questions are to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Why does your government collect the third highest percentage of property taxes of any province in Canada?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Mr. Speaker, in our travels – and we did travel extensively throughout the province this summer – we heard very clearly from Albertans that Albertans' top priority was education. Education was something that Albertans deemed an absolute, and consequently if, indeed, we're going to provide the quality of education that we are required to provide to see that our Alberta students are fully competitive in this world, there's going to be a cost. It's as simple as that. The reality is that a good education is also going to have a cost associated with it.

We recognized that there was growth in the costing, and as a result of that the three-person committee that was structured addressed that issue. What they did is average it over two years to take away the spiking that would take place, and as a result a capping was put in place so that it could be no more than 5 percent on residential and 10 percent on commercial.

So though we recognize that there is a cost to education, the cost of education is being borne more and more by the province, by the Treasurer's department, in that since '97, when the province bore 44 percent of the cost of education, to last year, when the residential taxpayer bore 39 percent of the taxes, indeed, the residential taxpayer as well as the commercial taxpayer is paying less and less of the cost of education.

MR. GIBBONS: Mr. Speaker, why have residential ratepayers had a \$114 million education tax increase at the same time that businesses had an \$89 million education tax cut since 1995? Why the double standard, Mr. Minister?

MR. PASZKOWSKI: Mr. Speaker, this province is growing and growing substantially, and as you grow, there is a larger tax base to draw from. As a result of that larger tax base, obviously, there's going to be more that's going to be taxed.

MR. GIBBONS: Mr. Speaker, will your government stop tax tinkering and adopt the recommendations of the AUMA to freeze the education property tax at its current level today, not three or five years from now?

2:40

MR. PASZKOWSKI: The task force that was structured is still actively pursuing solutions to the costing of education. This was a two-phase recommendation. There was an interim report. The interim report was tabled, and indeed the interim report dealt with the immediate. The tax group is still studying the whole process. They're asking for recommendations, and if the hon. member has recommendations, bring them forward to the tax committee. Tell them what you want done. As a matter of fact, this is a very, very

complex situation, and the hon. member has admitted to that.

If you have solutions, the committee is still functioning, the committee is still operating, asking for longer term solutions. The committee will be meeting with the AUMA. The committee will be meeting with the AMD and C. The committee will even meet with the Liberal critic if, indeed, that is the wish. So if you have any recommendations, please feel free to bring them forward.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta Health and Wellness recently distributed important information to all households. While the clarification on a number of points was useful and informative, particularly with respect to some of the health care funding issues, the people of Medicine Hat and area have some questions regarding the reference to increased MRI capacity in the province. New MRI facilities in Lethbridge, Calgary, Red Deer, and Grande Prairie are highlighted in this information package. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Mr. Minister, why was Medicine Hat not included on this list?

MR. JONSON: There are two basic reasons, Mr. Speaker. The approvals and support funding that were provided by Alberta Health and Wellness, as I indicated earlier in question period, were based on the diagnostic imaging study and report. In acting upon the recommendations of that report and the recommended locations, we followed through with support for Lethbridge, Red Deer, and of course I referred also to Grande Prairie.

Now, the important thing that the report references and that we're well aware of on the government benches of this Assembly is that it is one challenge, of course, to get the capital money in place to purchase this very sophisticated diagnostic tool, but it is even more important to be assured that there will be the operational funding available and the volume of business or treatment required to make this diagnostic tool not only effective in terms of diagnoses but also in terms of cost-effectiveness. In the case of Medicine Hat they were, I understand, according to those criteria, not on the initial list, at least, for MRIs.

MR. RENNER: Mr. Speaker, how will the people of Medicine Hat benefit from increased capacity everywhere else but Medicine Hat?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I expect that there are probably a number of other centres in the province that might ask the same question. There are other small cities that might be interested in that particular type of service. Perhaps as this province expands with a healthy economy, that will one day come to be the case.

Yes, it does require that a patient, an individual needing this diagnostic tool or service would have to go either into Calgary or Lethbridge. Lethbridge is certainly somewhat closer and more convenient to Medicine Hat than is Calgary for this purpose. Of course, it will depend upon the referral patterns of the local doctors as well. But certainly, at least in distance and access, it's an improvement for the people of southern Alberta and for the people of Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Finally, Mr. Speaker, given that RHAs who identified that it was cost-effective to have on-location MRIs – and they did have operational costs included in their budget – received funding when requested, will the minister assure the people of

Medicine Hat that when the Palliser RHA identifies the same situation, similar funding will be forthcoming?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I would make the commitment that any proposal that may come from the Medicine Hat area, that is, the Palliser regional health authority, or any other part of the province will certainly be referred to the experts in this particular area of diagnostic imaging and will be fairly and thoroughly assessed. I do want to also repeat that there has to be a very careful look, when we come to these very, very sophisticated medical tools, at the availability of specialized staff to operate them, the availability of a sufficient volume of patients to make them reasonable from a cost-effective standpoint in terms of installing them in a particular location. In other words, there are criteria that have to be met. But certainly in that respect and according to those criteria, Medicine Hat, the Palliser region, would be treated fairly, along with any other part of the province that might show interest.

User Fees

MR. SAPERS: Mr. Speaker, Albertans are continuing to pay \$1.34 billion in user fees. That's about equal to the new budget surplus after allocation: \$1.34 billion. Will the Treasurer please rise and tell Albertans if it's true that not one of the user fees charged by, let's say, Alberta Registries is in fact a tax?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, we're in a very exciting position, doing a study of all so-called user fees, all charges that Albertans face, because overall right now in Alberta, taking into account fees and charges that people pay for a variety of things, we are the least taxed people in the entire country. We want to maintain that position, but the government feels, our Premier feels very strongly about the fact that we still pay too much in taxes of all sorts, and we're continuing to bring those down.

Part of that is a review of all the fees and charges which are assessed to Albertans right now. As far as I know, even though we're the least taxed right now, we are the only government in Canada that is analyzing those fees and charges to see if we can do even more to bring them down. We'll see an interim report on that I think fairly soon, and by the spring session we will have a list in time for the budget. I would suggest that people should stay tuned on this, because it could be in the millions of dollars in terms of reducing some overall charges and fees which Albertans are paying now.

MR. SAPERS: Well, if the Treasurer is so confident, Mr. Speaker, that not one of the 400 user fees and charges that his government has imposed over these past seven years is in fact a tax, will he prove it by releasing the 437 pages of analysis that his department has been hiding from Albertans, that they've refused to disclose? Why wait for the committee report, Mr. Treasurer? You've done the analysis. Release the report.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, we don't hide these things. As a matter of fact, along with the volumes and volumes and volumes of material which I send to the member who just spoke – I don't know if he ever reads the stuff because I never hear back from him, which pains me a bit emotionally. He never gets back to me, but as I deal with that pain, I can tell you that we have sent to anybody who has asked a very extensive list of all the fees and charges which are assessed. Every minister in this government has had to go through their entire department and look at all the fees and charges that are assessed. That material is available. I know the member has access to it. I

don't know if he's ever seen it. I'll happily send him another bundle of it so he can see, just as every Albertan can see, every fee and charge that's in place. It's clear, and it's out there, and it's being looked at.

MR. SAPERS: Well, thank you very much for that invitation.

Mr. Speaker, Registries has in fact released a document that talks about indirect and direct taxes, and I'm just wondering if the Treasurer can explain why this analysis from Alberta Registries calls these user fees a tax if they're not a tax.

2:50

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'd like him to explain how one question ago he can stand up and say that we release nothing and then he stands up and shows that all the information has been released.

Canadian Forces Reservists

MRS. BURGNER: Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Forces Liaison Council is mandated to develop employer support for the reserve force in Canada. Under the chairmanship of Derek Bullen, president of SI Systems, we recently proclaimed the provincial Reservist Day last June. My question is to the minister responsible for the personnel administration office. There is an obligation on the part of government to support the reserve component of the military. Will the minister please identify to the government what support we will be giving employees who are being asked to volunteer for Y2K service within their communities over the Christmas season?

MR. DUNFORD: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I should thank the hon. member for the question, because it allows us to have an opportunity to talk about the importance of reservists to the Canadian military and also of course to express our thanks to the Canadian Forces Liaison Council.

Now, I think it's significant to note, Mr. Speaker, that reservists are everyday citizens who volunteer a great deal of their spare time to military service. I'm particularly proud to say that many of them work within our public service, and indeed we will support them with necessary time off for the Y2K situation. In fact, I'm pleased to report that this matter had come to our attention earlier this fall, and we've offered our full support. Requests have already come in from several work areas within government, and these requests have been approved.

MRS. BURGNER: My second question to the same minister. The Canadian Forces Liaison Council is also asking that a human resource policy be developed to grant time off to reservists in other instances. Will this government develop such a policy?

MR. DUNFORD: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to report that such a policy already does exist. This policy is contained in collective bargaining agreements that we have with AUPE and of course is also involved in our regulations for senior officials and managers.

Now, for the record, Mr. Speaker, the policy recognizes the importance of this volunteer work that's required by the military to ensure public safety. It provides time off to be used for training purposes and to respond to any situation in need of military personnel. So we're committed to the Canadian forces' efforts for the public good whether it's the Y2K situation or any other matter that requires assistance.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Advanced Education Tuition Fees

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To help the province balance the budget, students accepted increased tuition and instructional fees. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. In light of the government surplus and the 21 percent past cut to postsecondary schools, what action is the minister now taking to relieve students of that burden?

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're doing a tremendous amount, as budget 2000 will soon show. The question has come on tuition fees. As the hon. member knows, we have one of the best student finance programs in Canada. Presently when you go to school, after a four-year program you come out with a maximum \$20,000 debt. That's in keeping that you will receive up to \$40,000 in student loans.

Mr. Speaker, the other thing I would remind the hon. member is that presently in Alberta institutions and Alberta postsecondary institutions the Alberta taxpayer pays roughly 76 percent. When you add that to the tuition fee remission, you're looking at around 85 to 86 percent. [interjections] You're absolutely right. It's a fabulous investment. That is why we will be coming forward with some new initiatives for student finance.

Student finance is the way to address the issue, Mr. Speaker, and the issue is not tuition fees; the issue is student debt.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: how can the government publicly decry debt while endorsing and encouraging larger student loans?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, I would just like to remind the hon. member that the level of student debt is one of the lowest in Canada. The level of student debt has actually decreased this year from an average debt of \$12,500 to \$11,500. The debt in the province is going down.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. To the same minister, Mr. Speaker. When can students expect an end to a policy that encourages tuition increases to cover shortfalls in government funding?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, there is no such policy.

head: Members' Statements

THE SPEAKER: In 30 seconds from now we'll call the first hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Chanukah

MR. STEVENS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise in the Assembly today to mark the coming of a very important holiday for those Albertans of the Jewish faith. Tomorrow evening the first candle will be lit, and as the sun sets, the first day of Chanukah will begin.

On December 5 the city of Calgary will host a community menorah lighting ceremony at city hall to be broadcast on Shaw cable 10 for the enjoyment of all who wish to celebrate this important event. Edmonton's Jewish faithful will also celebrate a menorah lighting that same day on the grounds of the Legislature.

Chanukah is the festival of lights to celebrate the victory of the Jewish Maccabees over the Syrians and the rededication of the Jerusalem temple. The holiday also commemorates the miracle of the oil. On the first night of the Chanukah celebration a single

candle or oil wick is lit on the far right side of the menorah, the most recognizable symbol of Chanukah. The menorah is usually a nine-branched candelabra whose candles are lit by a shamesh, or service candle, which then takes its own place at the centre of the menorah. A candle is added from right to left each night, and the newest candle is always lit first. Ideally, the candle should be lit as soon as stars become visible in the night sky, but they can be lit late into the night. While the candles are being lit and the blessing given, the whole family and any guests who are gathered to witness the ceremony are encouraged to participate. By the eighth night, when all the candles are lit, the menorah makes a spectacular sight and signifies the end of the eight-day celebration.

I'm encouraged to see that Alberta's many cultural groups, including the Jewish community, remain vigilant in preserving their traditions and customs to maintain Alberta's colourful tapestry of people and cultures. I'd like to extend best wishes of peace, prosperity, good health, and safety throughout the holiday season to all Albertans and to wish all the Jewish faithful a happy Chanukah.

Thank you.

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

Health Information Act

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand, or on their foreheads:

And that no one may buy or sell, except one who has a mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

Revelation 13:16 and 17.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans deserve to know why their government is cutting off the debate on its health information bill. On July 1, 1994, the Alberta government issues new health insurance cards with unique personal information numbers for every Albertan so that no one may receive public health services without a number. Every database needs unique identifier numbers for each record in the database. Each Albertan is a record, each PIN number the unique identifier for that record.

On July 7, 1997, the Alberta government begins contracting with private, for-profit international computer hardware, software, and network corporations to construct the electronic network that will allow for the trading in citizens' most personal and private health information. It is the birth of Alberta Wellnet. Actually Orwellnet is more appropriate.

3:00

From 1997 to 2000 the Alberta government requires its hand-picked health authority boards to divert millions of public taxpayers' dollars away from providing health care services to pay for constructing and connecting the Alberta Wellnet.

On November 17, 1999, the Alberta government introduces Bill 40, the Health Information Act, to make Wellnet operational and to lay the groundwork for its legislation enabling private, for-profit hospitals in the spring of 2000.

Why does this Premier need Bill 40? He needs Bill 40 to be passed this fall. He needs Bill 40 so that Alberta's digitized personal health information can be traded between public health officials and private, for-profit health contractors.

I would urge every single Albertan who cares about protecting their personal health information to call the Premier and tell him to stop Bill 40. A revelation, Mr. Speaker, perhaps.

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

Symposium on Aging

MS KRYCZKA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise in the Legislature today to speak about the symposium on aging, Planning for the Future, which took place November 18 to 20 in Edmonton at the Ramada Inn. The symposium was one of the key components of the governmentwide study on the impact of the aging population that began a year ago. I am very proud to be chair of the steering committee for that study.

The purpose of the study is to involve all generations, all levels of society, and all levels of government in planning for a significant increase in the seniors' population. With the help of input from Albertans, the government can develop appropriate policies to ensure that seniors can live active, healthy lives in every community across the province.

Leading up to the symposium, my colleague and vice-chair, the Member for Leduc, and I participated in 17 focus group sessions. They were held in 15 locations across the province during October. It is not easy to visualize society in 10 or 20 years, so I commend all Albertans who attended the focus groups and provided valuable input.

The symposium was attended by a total of 217 Albertans. There were 77 randomly selected public delegates, 73 stakeholder delegates, and 23 observers, including MLAs, representatives from every level of government, including federal, and media.

To open the symposium, presentations were made by three experts: Dr. David Hogan, Dr. Veronica Doyle, and Mr. David Baxter. Their topics coincided with three discussion areas: healthy aging, supportive communities, and impacts of the aging population. For the remainder of the symposium small groups of delegates worked very hard but also enthusiastically as they discussed the topic areas while projecting ahead to 2020. Summaries of their viewpoints were presented to the whole group in the final session.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that feedback from the symposium delegates was very positive. The symposium was successful in gathering invaluable information from many Albertans of all ages to help the government plan for the future.

Thank you.

head: Projected Government Business

MR. SAPERS: Pursuant to Standing Orders I would now call upon the Deputy Government House Leader to provide the Assembly with the projected business for next week.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the projected government business for the next week will be as follows. On Monday, December 6, in the afternoon Bill 46, the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, will be introduced; under Government Bills and Orders for second reading, Bill 43 and Bill 44; third reading, Bill 7; Committee of the Whole, bills 43, 44, 38, and 40 and as per the Order Paper. On Monday evening under Government Bills and Orders for third reading, Bill 7; under Committee of the Whole, Bill 38 and Bill 40 and as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday, December 7, under Government Bills and Orders for second reading, Bill 46; under third reading, Bill 7; under Committee of the Whole, Bill 38 and as per the Order Paper. On Tuesday evening under Committee of the Whole, Bill 46, Bill 45, Bill 43, Bill 44, Bill 38 and as per the Order Paper.

On the evening of Wednesday, December 8, we will be looking at Bill 46, Bill 45, Bill 43, Bill 44, Bill 38, Bill 7, Bill 40 and as per the Order paper.

On Thursday, December 9, in the afternoon we hope to be looking at Bill 43, Bill 44, Bill 38, Bill 7, and Bill 40 and as per the Order

Paper. Of course, all of this will be based on the progress having been made on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.

Thank you.

head: Motions under Standing Order 40

THE SPEAKER: The hon. leader of the third party on a Standing Order 40 submission.

Bethany Care Centre

Ms Barrett:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to facilitate a fair settlement in the labour dispute at the Bethany care centre in Cochrane, where the use of unqualified replacement staff is threatening patient safety.

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I advised before question period, I will be circulating the motion that I'm asking for unanimous consent of the Assembly to consider. It was short-sighted of me. I just filed copies earlier of the memorandum from the Bethany care centre that has raised the alarm bells here. I should have thought to actually circulate a copy of this to everybody as well, but I'll go through it quickly, and hopefully this will be enough to convince the members of the Assembly to grant unanimous consent.

This was faxed to me this morning, but it was actually dated November 20, 1999, so this has been going on for several weeks now. The Bethany Care Society sent this to all Bethany Care Society staff. Item 3 is the most important one. It says:

Please ask your family and friends if they would like to work some shifts. This is an excellent opportunity to make [some] extra money before the holidays. A half day training program is provided, and the work pays \$10.30 per hour. Shifts range from four to 12 hours a day.

Then what's written on the memo in handwriting is "gas paid," which I assume means that the gas to and from your home, if you do choose to take this employment, will be refunded to you. It also says, "Free meals." And then it also says, "No criminal check."

Now, on Tuesday of this week, Mr. Speaker, I filed with the Assembly a number of documents that were given to me by the locked out/striking workers who have been off the job for over three weeks now. I won't go into what it is that they're arguing for in their contract negotiations, but along with that stack, on top of what they're arguing for in negotiations, there were a number of letters written to the chief executive officer of Bethany Care and to the regional health authority by friends and families of patients who are in the centre who expressed grave concerns about the level of care that has apparently dropped significantly since the workers got locked out three and a half weeks ago. Those documents are available for anybody to read. I would have killed a tree if I'd copied every one of them to circulate for today's purposes, but I think it's pretty indicative of the problems that are happening since the lockout has occurred.

Now, when we find out that family and friends are being invited to come and work there and enticed, you know, pre-Christmas enticement, by the health care provider, that really concerns me. My number one concern in this discussion is the patient care at Bethany, which I think should be held up to the standards that it was up until three and a half weeks ago, and persons with a half day of training I do not believe can meet that goal.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I am urging all members to vote with me in supporting the resolution to consider this matter that I think is quite urgent. Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, this is a Standing Order 40 petition, and as all hon. members will know, this motion requires unanimous consent to be proceeded with. The hon. leader of the third party has certainly met the time constraints with respect to the filing of this with my office as a courtesy, and it's appreciated.

Now I must ask the question. Would all hon. members in favour of proceeding with this Standing Order 40 waiving of notice please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

3:10

THE SPEAKER: It's defeated.

Hon. members, before proceeding with Orders of the Day, just two notes. First of all tomorrow, December 3, but going back to 1939, Princess Louise Caroline Alberta, who was the fourth daughter of Queen Victoria, died. Now, the reason I say this is that the province of Alberta and Lake Louise were named for her.

Secondly, the motions and business this afternoon, of course, rest entirely with the Assembly. There will also be another activity going on outside the doors of this Assembly later on this afternoon. There may be competition in terms of sound, but in both cases, of course, it is the Government House Leader who determines the agenda on this particular day. The minister of the government has also determined the agenda outside these doors. So, hon. members, if you have any concerns with respect to that matter, please convey them to the hon. Government House Leader, not to the Speaker.

head: Orders of the Day

head: Government Bills and Orders

head: Second Reading

Bill 45
Appropriation (Supplementary
Supply) Act, 1999 (No. 2)

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to move for second reading Bill 45, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1999 (No. 2).

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

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today, one day after, I understand, in the 1930s, Nellie McClung's grandson was made a Rhodes scholar at the University of Alberta. So it's an interesting week in history.

Mr. Speaker, the Treasurer has moved second reading, and I was actually hoping that he would elaborate a little bit because there were many, many points raised during committee debate of the supplementary supply estimates. Of course, we're talking about the same numbers. The Treasurer actually hardly ever passes up an opportunity to have the floor, so I was looking forward to him reflecting on some of the issues that were raised. He hasn't, so I'll try to highlight some of those same concerns, and I know some of my colleagues will as well. Maybe when this bill gets into committee, we can actually get to some answers and some real debate.

To start things off, Mr. Speaker, let me say what the Treasurer didn't, that Bill 45 is a supplementary supply appropriation act. It's the second such act that the government has introduced into this Chamber this budget year. It requests \$1.535 billion in supplemen-

tary appropriation or spending. There's an amount of about \$109 million that's being netted out of Alberta Gaming from the lottery fund and another \$9.5 million for the consumption of salt and gravel inventories and other consumables under Alberta Infrastructure. These items won't have any effect on the consolidated government spending, but that leaves a total of in excess of \$1.4 billion, which is brand new, unbudgeted, unplanned for spending.

There's been some media attention paid to this in the past, Mr. Speaker. There's been a suggestion that in fact this is an unprecedented level of unbudgeted spending and constitutes a lack of responsibility and accountability. There's also been the suggestion that, well, you know, we had some unexpected things happen. We had more forest fires to deal with than we had planned for, et cetera. Now, that's true. There were some unexpected things, both pleasant surprises and unpleasant surprises. The aforementioned forest fires, of course, would be in the category of the unpleasant surprises. Nobody likes to see all that timber and all that wildland consumed by fire. We give full marks to those men and women who put their lives on the line in bringing those fires under control. Of course, the government had to respond to that crisis.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

Now, I suppose you could also say it was a pleasant surprise when gas and oil prices rebounded as quickly as they did, and of course that has resulted in about half of the surplus which was made available to the government so that they could indulge in this \$1.4 billion in unbudgeted spending. But approximately the other half of that surplus comes about, Madam Speaker, not as a result of these pleasant surprises but, in fact, as a result of revenue streams that this government should have a much closer handle on. For example, the government predicted very high employment growth and housing starts. So you would have to conclude, based on their own projections of employment growth and housing starts, that they were fully expecting the growth in the province in terms of the population migration into Alberta and the economic activity that results from all of that.

So it comes about really as quite a puzzle in my mind, quite a mystery as to why, having on the one hand predicted this population growth and these housing starts and new employment, they couldn't on the other hand fill in the blanks and predict the growth in personal income tax and the growth in corporate income tax and the growth in revenue from commercial enterprises such as the sale of liquor.

Of course, the one that always makes me sit up and pay attention is when the government so consistently underestimates revenue from lottery and gaming, particularly the growth in VLTs. You would've thought the government would have paid particular attention to gaming issues considering just how controversial they've been over this last little while, what with the VLT referendums and all. Madam Speaker, you of all people know just how much effort the government has put in to try to create coherent policy, what to do not just with gaming on the one hand but with the revenue on the other hand.

So in my simple mind I could only have concluded that tremendous effort would have been expended on the government side to make sure that those ministries that rely upon, to some extent, gaming revenue would have been working very hard to crunch the numbers and re-crunch the numbers and look at them again and scrutinize them again and pull them and tease them every which way possible just to make sure they had an adequate picture. Yet we see the government being horribly wrong on those estimates as well.

So while we can chalk up some of this supplementary supply to surprises, I think we have to chalk up the rest of it to just plain bad

management. I think what we're looking at is a question of the government just not really doing its job very well on behalf of the taxpayers and the people that it serves.

Now, I say that based on the government's own response to the criticism that's been leveled that they did it on purpose. The Treasurer has said that he does not and the government of Alberta does not lowball revenue expectations and that it is no conspiracy and that this government does not – does not – artificially create low expectations. So if, in fact, the Treasurer is truthful in that regard, then it must just be a question of competence. Well, I'm not sure if I feel better about that, Madam Speaker, but that's what we're left to conclude.

Now, when the supplementary estimates came in, Madam Speaker, I took a careful look at them. As I was flipping through page after page of the information here, I got to the Reconciliation of Adjusted Gross Amounts, that is a section that begins on page 79, and I looked at Discontinued Departments, and I saw that, and then I looked at what was supposed to be the new department. Then I turned to page 82 and I noticed that it was the same as page 80, and I thought, you know, it must just be my inability to read these government documents. I took the responsibility for just not being up to snuff.

I took this booklet to a neighbour of mine who's an accountant, and he said: well, you know, this doesn't look like it's your problem of comprehension; this looks like it's a problem of presentation. I said: you have to explain that to me. He said: well, it looks like they've repeated some information here. I thought: well, that's kind of curious. Then I started to scratch my head, and I thought: well, you know, I see where they've put in the discontinued departments, but where's the reconciliation for the new departments?

My question was answered the next day when not the Treasurer but the Government House Leader tabled an erratum, a one-page correction to the supplementary supply estimates. Of course, I guess we shouldn't have been terribly concerned because it only dealt with \$41 million for the Legislative Assembly, \$372 million for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, \$466 million for Children's Services, \$350 million for Community Development, \$48 million for Economic Development, another \$354 million and change for the department of environmental protection. You know, I suppose those are small numbers for the government, and it would be just a little oversight. At least I could be reassured that it wasn't my intellectual abilities that were in question when it came to understanding the document. The fact is that there was a huge mistake in the printing.

3:20

Now, mistakes do happen, Madam Speaker, and I can be charitable about that, recognizing that it was an oversight and the government at its soonest opportunity corrected the oversight. But, you know, we were left debating supplementary supply estimates in committee that weren't accurate. In my mind I think that just sums right up my feelings about how unaccountable this government has been to taxpayers for this unbudgeted spending.

When I say that mistakes will happen, of course we know that it's not the first mistake. There's a rather interesting litany of errors that the current Treasurer has visited upon the Chamber, starting with the postelection update from 1997 when the provincial government failed to add \$32 million in principal to the Alberta heritage savings trust fund loan to Al-Pac, a \$32 million error. As a result of that, there was an errata to the Budget '97 postelection update after the Official Opposition brought this \$32 million mistake to the government's attention. In October '97 there was an order in council that incorrectly authorized ATBs' acquisition of a company that had been struck from Alberta Registries a number of months earlier. Kind of a curious error there.

I could go through the list historically, but I want to stick to the appropriation act that's before us. What I do is take a look at how we got there, and I notice that there were some mistakes this year as well: a mistake regarding the first-quarter update and mistakes, again, in the government's own Bill 35 about the user fee review that the Treasurer spoke about earlier today in question period.

It's clear that mistakes do happen, continue to happen, and I guess we can expect them to happen. I just wish they didn't happen with such frequency and that they didn't affect an area that is so important as minding the dollars and cents of the Alberta taxpayers.

Madam Speaker, the area that I want to particularly focus my remarks on in the brief time I have available to me in second reading has to do with the supplementary appropriation request for Health and Wellness.

We're in committee; are we?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No, no.

MR. SAPERS: Oh. Good. That'd be better. It just throws me right off, Madam Speaker, when they play musical chairs like that. [interjection] Yeah, that's right. Those of us who put Alberta first would know that, Madam Speaker.

As I was saying, I want to particularly focus on the estimates of Health and Wellness in this appropriation supply act. I will note that there are \$322 million and change that's being appropriated by the minister for a number of areas. These are no doubt priority areas. You've got the Canadian Blood Services, the purchase of additional equipment, the elimination of RHA deficits, some initiatives like the healthy aging partnership, of course sterilization claims, and to help pay for some programs for persons with developmental disabilities.

Now, I want to make it perfectly clear that I'm not speaking in opposition to spending on these priority areas and programs, but I once again do have some quibbles with the process. We're being asked to provide in excess of \$322 million in unbudgeted spending. If I take a look at the part of that request that has to do with regional health authorities, what I notice is that every one of the 17 regional health authorities plus the Alberta Cancer Board plus the Alberta Mental Health Board are all going to get what is presented as onetime financial assistance. This amount will total \$215,676,000. Two hundred and fifteen million dollars. What's curious is that there's no breakdown in any of the documentation that explains how much of that is going to eliminate deficits in those regional health authorities and how much is going to pay for onetime purchases of advanced medical equipment.

Now, I remember reading an Auditor General's report in which there was a suggestion that there was in excess of \$100 million – \$100 million – spread out amongst the regional health authorities in capital depreciation costs. In other words, if you spent a hundred million dollars amongst all the regional health authorities, you would be able to replace old and obsolete and worn out equipment and sort of bring the regional health authorities back up to the starting gate. That wouldn't have been enough money to buy new equipment or take advantage of new technologies; it simply would've been enough money at that time to replace aging equipment.

Since that time, of course, things have changed, and the regional health authorities have been operating in a deficit. The Calgary regional health authority was operating in a deficit under Chairman Dinning in excess of \$50 million. What an irony. More than \$50 million.

So what we see is that the regional health authorities are going to have their deficits eliminated. Now, that's okay. That's good. Regional health authorities should have those deficits eliminated, but let's examine why those deficits got there. Did the deficits grow in

the regional health authorities because of mismanagement in the regional health authorities? I think not. Did the deficits grow in those regional health authorities because they did a lousy job budgeting and managing their dollars? No, I don't think so. Were the deficits developed in those regional health authorities that had them because there was just hugely unanticipated costs? No, I don't think so.

The sole reason why we had deficits throughout the regional health authorities is because the government has consistently over the years underfunded regional health authorities. Not only have they underfunded them, when this government started off on its ill-conceived health care cutting, they created deficits right off the get-go. Here in the Capital region the cuts, of course, were retroactive, and the first big deep cuts to the Royal Alex hospital, the University hospital created such panic that the management had to start laying off staff just to make up for their retroactive loss of income that they were no longer going to receive. In other words, they were told, after they'd already spent the money, that the government wouldn't be giving them the money to carry on at the current staffing levels that they enjoyed back in 1993.

This has created an ongoing impact that has rolled through the health care system right up to the present day, where we still see in Red Deer a hospital floor closed that's needed, where we see in Olds-Didsbury the call for a hospital, where we see in Vilna their centre being closed, where we see the people in Galahad wanting to go back to a full-service hospital after their centre was retrenched and became a long-term care centre. So it's all over the province. It's not just a big-city phenomena, but in fact it's an across-Alberta phenomena, where we've seen the impacts of this chronic underfunding.

Now, the chronic underfunding is a problem not just because of the pain and the suffering that it causes Albertans and the delays for the relief that modern medicine can bring but also because, of course, many Albertans, the Official Opposition included, see this underfunding as part of a plan. It's not a plan to improve health care; it's a plan to privatize health care. By underfunding, by creating frustration, by squeezing the public system, by making the public system look weak and frail of course what you do is create a market opportunity. You create a market opportunity for those organizations that would like to make a buck on the backs of the sick.

We're not talking about a physician that opens up an office and builds in some overhead and bills according to the fee guide that's been negotiated between the government and the AMA. We're not talking about making a living. We're talking about turning that whole notion on its head, destroying that whole balance that's been worked out through public administration, and zeroing in on how to maximize profits using taxpayers' money and do it in such a way that it destroys all of the efficiencies of public administration that Canada and Alberta now enjoy in our health care system. So the underfunding, the deficits are problematic, as I said, not just because they're deficits and they shouldn't have happened but because of course we see it as part of this government's overall vision of how to privatize our health care system.

3:30

I look at the \$250 million request, and of course I want to support it because I know in the Chinook region they need that money to help balance their budget and to buy the equipment that's necessary. We had a question from the Member for Medicine Hat today talking about MRI capacity. I know that the folks trying to make the diagnostic system work in Palliser can use that money. [interjection] I don't want to be misunderstood, Madam Speaker. The Member for

Livingstone-Macleod was suggesting that I said Chinook had a deficit. I never said that. But to balance their budget includes helping meet the needs that they've identified for their growth.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

MR. CLEGG: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn debate on Bill 45, the Appropriations (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1999 (No. 2).

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Dunvegan, does the Assembly agree with the motion?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: It's carried.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:31]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

For the motion:

Boutilier	Fritz	O'Neill
Broda	Graham	Paszkowski
Burgener	Hierath	Pham
Calahasen	Johnson	Renner
Cao	Kryczka	Severtson
Clegg	Laing	Smith
Coutts	Langevin	Stelmach
Day	Lougheed	Stevens
Doerksen	Magnus	Strang
Dunford	Mar	Thurber
Evans	McFarland	Woloshyn
Fischer	Melchin	Yankowsky
Forsyth	Nelson	Zwozdesky
Friedel		

Against the motion:

Carlson	Massey	Sloan
Dickson	Nicol	Soetaert
Leibovici	Pannu	White
MacDonald	Sapers	

Totals:	For – 40	Against – 11
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[Motion carried]

Bill 43

Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 1999

[Adjourned debate November 29: Mrs. Forsyth]

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

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to review this bill this afternoon. Its size is in no way a reflection of

the problem that this government has with accountable budgeting.

I recall, whenever we were discussing this bill in caucus, what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder had to say about this bill. He used two words, Madam Speaker, to describe this bill, and they were "binge budgeting." All this bill does is permit the government to do binge budgeting.

AN HON. MEMBER: That's very catchy.

MR. MacDONALD: The hon. member across the way says that it's catchy. It is catchy.

Binge budgeting. This is what this is. Other people could say that this is vote buying, but I say that it is absolutely true when the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder calls this nothing more than binge budgeting.

Now, we look at the amendment. We are going to amend the 25 percent allocation formula for the economic cushion or surplus to permit government to fund a \$600 million onetime infrastructure program for municipalities, schools, postsecondary education, and regional health authorities. We know that because of chronic underfunding there has to be funding for schools, hospitals, roads . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. member, excuse me a minute. What exactly is over there? [interjections] This is your time.

MR. MacDONALD: To discuss this amendment is to discuss the complete financial attitude of this government. Everyone wants to talk about the private sector. I cannot imagine the private sector – let's, for instance, take a construction site. We will say that we're going to go back to the client. "We need more money. We underestimated our materials, we underestimated our time, and we didn't take the weather conditions into account. We need more money." For a government that prides itself on fiscal responsibility or fiscal integrity to come back since the spring sitting and want an increase like this is wrong.

We need accountability; there's no doubt about that. We need a plan. We need a plan that Albertans can rely on, and this does not do it. This is not a reflection of what Albertans want when they say that they want to increase health care spending, when they want to see education spending increased. This just adds to their already deep suspicion that this government is out of control and its fiscal plan is managed poorly.

How are they to think otherwise, Madam Speaker? The Premier himself, I believe, talked about fiscal responsibility in the spring session, and now we have the Provincial Treasurer: oops, we were wrong. We look at all the other financial forecasters. We look at the banks. We look at all the Wall Street forecasters. We look at the forecasters in Toronto. We look at the forecasters in Calgary. We look at the forecasters in Vancouver. They all seem to be able to get it right, but suddenly now in this province we have to change our Fiscal Responsibility Act. We have to protect ourselves from ourselves.

Now, sometimes I look at this government, Madam Speaker, and I think of the oil patch and the booms and the busts. I think of the roughnecks. They've been up in Chinchaga all winter without a break drilling for gas and oil so this government can have royalties. And then spring breakup comes. Their wallets are full. The roughnecks want to go to Banff and ski, and they do that. They spend money recklessly. That is exactly what the government is doing. All the government ministers are running around two-stepping with Albertans' money, not their own money but Albertans'. [interjection] Yes. The hon. member has just said that not

only are tax dollars being spent in Banff in a reckless manner, but they're spent abroad as well.

This is not what Albertans wanted when they voted for a Progressive Conservative government. They wanted accountable fiscal responsibility, and they're not getting it with this bill.

3:50

Now, Madam Speaker, we think of six months ago. I talked about this earlier. What happened to the fiscal discipline and business planning process that the Provincial Treasurer was talking about last February? The Provincial Treasurer was very proud of his budget, but look what we have now. Obviously, with a need to make change to the allocation formula of the economic cushion, the government must have determined that imposing this fiscal discipline and business planning on itself was so much harder, so much more difficult than it had been just six months ago.

Actually, Madam Speaker, it was six months ago that the negotiations for the registered nurses across the province started with the regional health authorities. It went on and on and on. It ended up in a crisis in June when our health care system was held hostage. Of course, there was no money. There was not a dime to support the negotiated settlement; we had no money. What do we have now? We have the exact opposite. I want to know how this message is being accepted by Albertans. They were told as late as June that there was not another dime to be put in the health care system. Then: we're going to allocate more money. So who are they to believe? Who are Albertans to believe in this case? I'm certain that the nurses and all the health care professionals and the regional health authority administrators have to be as confused as everyone else because there's such a mixed message here. It is not what Albertans want to see.

We need fundamental changes to the budget management process in Alberta to create certainty, predictability, stability, and sustainability for all our local authorities, whether it be the school boards, the regional health authorities, or the municipalities. The binge budgeting that has been demonstrated by this government in the last months since the Provincial Treasurer stood in this Assembly and presented his budget to the province and the financial world has to stop. Binge budgeting is just not working.

Now, over the years members of this caucus have proposed a number of other elements to improve the credibility and stability of the budget planning process to sustain our core programs in health care and education and ensure that there's a fiscal plan and a balance between economic issues and social issues in both good times and bad. These elements included amendments to require the government to table monthly budget updates so Albertans know where they stand on a regular basis, not binge budgeting. We believe there should be a requirement for an independent assessment of provincial revenues by an independent source because obviously the government has difficulty with this. It's a moving target, and they cannot hit it. For example, we would be better served if the forecasts were tabled in the budget and we had these monthly budget updates. We would have stability in this way.

As the consumer critic I've been tracking natural gas prices. You can look at the forecasters in New Orleans, you can look at the forecasters in New York, and you can look at them in Chicago. The American natural gas prices, since we had so much pipeline capacity to America, now is reflected in the price that someone is going to pay, for instance, to heat their home in, say, Calgary-Foothills. Their forecasts are startlingly accurate. I don't know whether this government is reading the same reports that the Liberal caucus and the Liberal researchers are, but I rather doubt it. If they are reading them, they're not retaining too many of these forecasts.

Now, Madam Speaker, the performance measures. It's my view that whenever they see a performance measure that doesn't work, their solution to the problem is to remove it from the budget process, just remove it: hey, we don't want anyone to see this, so we're just going to remove it from the next business plan. That is their solution. This is the Alberta Liberal solution: we should establish ministry performance measures and benchmarks for variances between budget and actual revenues similar to what has been done in the state of Minnesota in their finance department.

As I recall, this summer the state of Minnesota increased education spending by, I think, over \$719 million, probably a billion Canadian dollars. Now, if that is working in that state, perhaps all hon. members would consider adopting that here. For instance, the old department of labour has disappeared, Madam Speaker. I think it's the first time in the history of this province that a government has dismantled a department and absorbed it into a much larger department. In the old department of labour there were so many performance measures that disappeared, and I don't want to see that happen. It should be explained to all Albertans why they were removed. You know, we can talk about performance measures and business plans, but it is just not working the way it had been planned.

I believe, Madam Speaker, that a requirement in the budget should be the preparation of a sound fiscal strategy with 10-year trends, not trends towards getting past the next election. Now, it's horrifying for me to see our conventional reserves of natural gas at current production rates. Ten years ago it was a 19-year supply, and now it's a nine-year supply, and we've built a 42-inch line to Chicago that's going to be running at 1,750 pounds. I believe Alberta Treasury notes that this policy is a reflection of production rates and what we think we can increase our production to.

There is an answer there, but I believe it's the wrong answer. Now we look at conventional oil supplies. We have a seven-year conventional oil supply. In the ground we have a seven-year supply of conventional oil. Now, Madam Speaker, we need to get beyond the next election with strategic planning. It's not working. We need to ensure that there is a supply of resources, whether it be natural gas or whether it be oil. Whenever I'm talking about natural gas, I'm also talking about ethane, which is an essential feedstock for the petrochemical industry.

4:00

Now, how does the petrochemical industry feel about this? Madam Speaker, the petrochemical industry in this province has expanded in this decade at the rate of 8 percent a year. I would be delighted if hon. members across the way could explain to me how we are going to continue this expansion – I welcome this expansion – when our conventional reserves of natural gas in the same time period have declined from a 19-year supply to a nine-year supply. We need to ensure that that vital industry in this province has a reliable, cheap supply of feedstock.

I would welcome hon. members from across the way to not only caution. I would also like to hear if they have an answer to this, because this is a concern I have. I can look around the Assembly at many hon. members and know that the petrochemical industry is vital to their communities. I want to make sure that it is going to grow and continue to grow perhaps not at 8 percent a year on the average of a decade, but we have to ensure that it continues to grow as it adds to the prosperity of this province. I'm not convinced that with this sort of planning, that is going to hold true, Madam Speaker.

We need also to look at the issue that has many Albertans as well as myself confused, and that's about the messages that come from this government regarding their plan and the fiscal stabilization plan. We have to look at the past, at how this government has spent money, and where they will go in the future. There are five major

revenue sources, and we need to review these, Madam Speaker. They are crude oil royalties, corporate income tax, bonuses from the sale of Crown leases, natural gas royalties, and personal income tax. That is making up, from what I understand, the largest share of our revenue.

When so many people pay so many dollars to the province and they see this bill – this bill is the oops bill; it's the binge-budgeting bill. First we had to protect ourselves from ourselves and our habits. I don't mean to talk ill of the roughnecks, but I've spent a couple of winters up in the Chinchaga area, and I've been very anxious to do some spring skiing during spring breakup. I can see that if our spending habits are to be reflected by this government, the taxpayers are going to suffer.

I cannot support this bill. I just can't whenever I review the past spending history of this government.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Before I recognize the next speaker, could I have the unanimous consent of the Assembly to revert to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

head: Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you. I'm pleased this afternoon to rise and introduce to the Assembly my office manager, Jan Baker. Jan and I have had a long professional association. Prior to her working in my constituency, she practised as a registered nurse at the University hospital and also was a labour relations officer in the nursing and health care sector. She provides outstanding advocacy and representation to my constituency, and I'm proud to have her as part of my team there. Thank you. Madam Speaker, I'd ask Jan to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Before the chair recognizes Edmonton-Strathcona, I would ask your indulgence and seek your assistance. As you can hear, there is a choir in the lobby, and actually if we lessened the interjections in the House, listened more to the Speaker and to the choir, it might be somewhat of a calming effect.

head: Government Bills and Orders

head: Second Reading

Bill 43

Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 1999

(continued)

[Adjourned debate November 29: Mrs. Forsyth]

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We're dealing with a very serious bill here. There are six lines to this bill, and each line is going to cost Albertans a hundred million dollars. I think this bill probably makes history in the close to 90-some years' history of this Legislature. I would ask the Treasurer to go back and see if he can find another bill where each line cost

Albertans a hundred million dollars. That's what this bill is about.

It's a clear example, an illustration, of lack of foresight in the drafting and the language of the original bill that this bill is an attempt to modify and amend. That bill was before this Assembly not very long ago, only in the early part of this year, in February, and we are back to it to amend it. What does it say about the ability of this Treasurer and the ability of this government to foresee things even in the short term, which is what they are committed to doing? They have no long-term vision, but even in the short term they can't see beyond their noses, it seems to me. We are spending the precious time of this House amending a bill that we spent considerable time enacting just eight months, 10 months ago. So that certainly is not a very responsible way of dealing with legislation, Madam Speaker.

To amend so soon an act that was passed in this Assembly and received royal assent not long ago is in effect repealing or suspending an existing statute, and I sometimes wonder about the legality of that kind of action in the first place. This Assembly passes a bill, the Lieutenant Governor gives it royal assent, and then six months later we come to amend the act, in effect paralyzing the act. To me that's a very strange and curious and unique way of enacting legislation in this province, and I think the Treasurer of the province must certainly be held accountable for such a poor way of enactment of the bills that relate to his responsibility and duties.

Madam Speaker, the bill amends an existing act called the Fiscal Responsibility Act, and it amends it, as I said, in order to paralyze it. It's a rather irresponsible thing to do, in my view. I wonder why the Treasurer didn't in fact try also to amend the title of the bill and call it either fiscal irresponsibility act or fiscal misresponsibility act, one or the other. If the existing act is to be changed, then I would suggest to the Treasurer that he still has time at the committee stage of the study of this bill to change the title of the bill to fiscal irresponsibility act, and if he is not willing to do it, I'd be happy to oblige him on that one.

Madam Speaker, it's a reflection of what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar called binge budgeting. I think it's worse than that; it's misbudgeting. When the Treasurer misbudgets, it's no different from the misconduct of a player on the hockey rink: you break the rules, you're called for misconduct, and for the misconduct you're given a penalty. You're not allowed to change the rules. You're judged to be in penalty, and you're asked to go and sit in the penalty box or leave the rink if the offence is so severe that it requires it. I'm wondering if that's not what this Legislature should do to the Treasurer here: call a misconduct penalty and put him in the penalty box for whatever period of time is deemed appropriate by this House.

4:10

We have just gone through another bill in this Legislature, Madam Speaker, private member's Bill 208, which seeks to hold in misconduct young people who are in possession of tobacco or who purchase tobacco, and we want to slap a \$100 fine against them if they do this, another good example of how these members want to deal with misconduct. And this Treasurer's misconduct is to be rewarded by giving him \$600 million? No, it shouldn't be. I think I'll need some convincing and some persuading by the Treasurer. He'll have to somehow disabuse me of comparing his form of conduct with the other forms of conduct which I've just drawn the attention of the House to and shown that those kinds of misconduct do bring some consequences. What are the consequences for the Treasurer? It's not clear. I think the House had better take note of this and show some resolve in making a judgment on that.

Madam Speaker, it would be good if you could fine the Treasurer

for this, maybe a symbolic thousand dollars. You know, if a little kid can be fined \$100 for possessing tobacco, surely a \$1,000 fine to the Treasurer for his misconduct wouldn't really be excessive; would it? I don't think Albertans would think that excessive. In fact, they would be pleased that we are beginning to hold them accountable in terms of consequences that people have to bear if they misbehave or conduct themselves in ways which are against the spirit of their own legislation. This is exactly what this proposed bill is. It really is against the very spirit of the legislation that was passed and spear-headed by the Treasurer in this House not a long time ago.

Madam Speaker, these kinds of ad hoc, last-minute, onetime requests coming before this Legislature mean only one thing, that we cannot really scrutinize the government's fiscal behaviour, its fiscal plans, in a thorough and serious way. That's one of the most important responsibilities of this Legislature, to make sure that every dollar that is spent by this government is scrutinized by us as members of this Legislature, as members who represent our constituents' interests and the public interest. To bring in this kind of bill certainly constitutes a violation of a certain kind of trust that we have with our own constituents, with Albertans, about how we should be scrutinizing bills that come before us. It's really a very poor way of going about it. It's not a way that Albertans would approve of.

Another issue, Madam Speaker. These kinds of ad hoc requisitions or changes in the bill to get more money show lack of planning. I just want to draw the attention of the House to what the Auditor General's concerns are with respect to this kind of ad hoc planning. This really is a cash flow based way of planning public expenditures, and in the annual report of the Auditor General of Alberta for '98-99 he has on page 13 some interesting observations to make. He had the opportunity last week to elaborate on those observations, which I would also like to put on the record so that Albertans can judge for themselves whether or not this kind of bill should receive the support of this Assembly and the support of Albertans.

Madam Speaker, on page 13 the Auditor General states as follows:

It is not in my role to make a formal recommendation to government on its fiscal policies. My mandate extends only to commenting on systems for the improved use of public resources. The fundamental purpose of an information system is to provide evidence to enlighten decision making. Instructive capital asset planning systems . . .

And he's focusing here on capital asset planning systems that this government now uses. I guess that's part of the reason for this \$600 million request in the form of this bill that's before us.

. . . will provide policy makers with rigorous analysis of all alternative strategies.

For example, a cost-of-capital concept could be used to determine whether cost savings from a proposed expenditure exceed the cost of obtaining the funds. Such analysis recognizes that while debt has a cost, so too does deferral. Further, analysis of the cost to the public and to the economy of funding capital assets from current revenues would be instructive.

The conclusion that he comes to, Madam Speaker, is as follows:

Capital asset planning needs to shift from annual cash availability thinking . . .

which is what this bill represents,

. . . to thinking about long-term costs and benefits.

This is the Auditor General of this province. As a little footnote to these observations he makes another very profound comment, which I would like to share with the members of this House and through this House with the citizens of this province. He says:

In my view, the term "affordability" is commonly misused in government to mean "whatever can be paid for from current cash inflows." Further, too often, expenditures are justified by expounding their perceived benefits and deferral is defended by pointing to immediate capital costs.

I had the opportunity to request the Auditor General to elaborate on what he meant by this misuse of the notion of affordability by this government. Madam Speaker, this is what the Auditor General had to say:

We think it's used to mean whatever can be paid for from current cash flows. That's a concept of affordability that's used. We wouldn't agree that that's the most appropriate timing to make an expenditure. There are other criteria that enter into timing. One would be future costs; one would be future cost savings. There are a variety of other activities that can go on in the capital asset management field that would tell you that some other date might be the appropriate date to make the expenditure. We're not involved in political decisions.

And I'm very happy to hear that.

We don't want to be. It's not appropriate that we are. What we are interested in is the methodology for managing the province's assets and the decision processes that occur with respect to the expenditure of public funds.

4:20

This is a quote, Madam Speaker, of the Auditor General's elaboration of his reservations about the use of "affordability" as a term and rationalization that this government has used again and again and again not only to underfund infrastructure and therefore capital assets, thereby allowing them to deteriorate to a point where repairing them at later stages will cost far more than it would cost to spend money on them now, even if that money has to be borrowed, in the language and the judgment of the Auditor. But I think the same applies, in my view, to the operating side of the expenditure.

Now, there are really three sets of considerations here. One is unfortunate. There are budget deficits that are now being addressed, whether they are school boards' or whether they are health authorities'. That's one element of consideration in bringing this bill forward. The second has to do with operating costs, and the third one has to do with capital assets, I guess, and their maintenance and improvement.

Now, talking about operating costs, I think this underfunding of the operational areas is seemingly the best way of course of undermining the institutions, particularly publicly owned and publicly funded institutions, thereby creating, first, dissatisfaction on the part of the users with respect to these facilities and their ability to deliver important social, educational, and health services, that is their exclusive duty and obligation to deliver. The second stage, of course, once people become dissatisfied with those facilities, is to then discredit those facilities and say we need alternative ones.

Not only do we need to restructure the ones we have now, but we need some other facilities to grow in this province – that is, the private sector – to provide health care, to provide education, to provide for secondary education, to increase tuition fees in existing institutions, and whatnot. All of this speaks, I think, rather loudly about the consequences – and it looks like intended consequences – of the systematic underfunding of our public institutions, to which part of the operating budgets of course apply.

Then at the end of the year the same government which has thrown these institutions into a crisis, whether it's in terms of big class sizes, whether it's pushing parents to fund-raise for core services in schools, whether it has to do with skyrocketing tuition fees and crushing student debt loads – the government turns around at the end of the year and says: we'll relieve a bit of the pain and suffering that we have caused. The pain and suffering is caused by this kind of lack of vision, lack of commitment to certain basic values which undergird our social programs. They turn around at the end of the year and become a benefactor of sorts and say: okay, we'll give you \$50 million, school board of Calgary; Edmonton,

we'll give you \$30 million; health authorities, we'll give you so much; see how nice we are, how kind we are.

I think we need to listen not only to the Auditor General of this province in planning and budgeting and developing systems that help us have a longer view of where we are going and what we need to do as a government, but we also must listen to Albertans. This is the least appropriate way of listening to Albertans, Madam Speaker.

I find it amazing that a Treasurer who boasts about, you know, his prowess as a fiscal wizard comes before us within nine months of the bill he brought before to us to have that bill amended in such a way that the bill, in effect, stands repealed. It stands suspended and it stands paralyzed.

With those comments, Madam Speaker, I'd like to sit down and let other hon. members have a chance to speak. Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I wasn't going to participate in this debate at this stage of the bill, but I think I would like to from the standpoint that the hon. member that just spoke said that the government needs to listen to the people. Quite frankly, that's exactly what's happened. People told us in two mandates: don't spend money you don't have.

Both speakers prior to my getting up talked about the ability to forecast revenues when the budgets are planned. If you look back at the forecasts that were made – I sit on the Treasury Board and have watched this process for a number of years. Last year when we were doing budget forecasts, we had a situation where our oil and gas revenues were sitting at \$13.50 a barrel. Within a matter of months they almost doubled in value. When you are budgeting based on commodities and commodity pricing, the forecasting is very difficult for anyone to do.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar talked about the experts in forecasting and how he had looked at some of their latest reports on commodity pricing. I would ask him to go back and look at those same reports that were around last January and February, when the budget preparations were being put together, and compare the analysis that came in from Goldman Sachs, the Lehmann Brothers, et cetera, and the oil and gas industries themselves and see that in fact the budget forecasts that were in the original budget document, that we filed in this Legislature and passed, were in conjunction with those forecast models that came forward from the industry itself.

The other thing that's important to remember – and I take exception to the criticism coming from Edmonton-Strathcona that we don't come back to the people. I believe we are the only government in all of Canada that does fiscal updates on the quarter and comes back with updated budgets to bring into effect the changes that have in fact changed in the fiscal regime. In fact, the other day our Provincial Treasurer filed a restated document of Budget '99: The Right Balance, that shows the second-quarter forecast and the comparison, which is a change from the estimate to actual, or variance analysis, on the finances of this province. Clearly reflected in that is the change in the commodity prices. Whenever you're looking at commodity price forecasting, you are vulnerable as to what the market will bear and what the market does.

Some of the statements that came out of the previous two speakers I find to be absolutely ludicrous from the standpoint that people said: don't spend the money you don't have. So when dollars have come in in additional operating revenues on an annual basis, we said that if in fact there were those additional dollars, then they would go back to the people, but we wouldn't spend them until we had them or we knew they were coming in.

Every day in this Legislature – and today was no exception – we hear member after member stand up and say: put more money into education; put more money into this; don't raise taxes; give more money. Then when we do give more money, they complain that the system is flawed. They would like us to spend money before we know we're going to have it come in, because these people would like to see us in a deficit position in this province every year. Why? Because that's the way they operate. That's the way they would like to see the government operate. But the people clearly told this government twice, in two mandates: do not run deficits in this province ever again – ever again – and pay off the debt as the top priority.

Our Provincial Treasurer is a fiscal hawk, and in fact he has put forward a proposal this year, in this second-quarter budget, that will see us pay down one of the largest lump sum debt repayments, \$1.4 billion, to the debt to clear the debt of this province. Why? Because the people said to do it. The people said to do it. They also said: don't go off course because of pressure coming in to add extra expenditures.

The members opposite, Madam Speaker, clearly don't like the process. Why? Because it's transparent. Why? Because it's what the people asked for. Why? Because it does respond to the pressures of growth, the pressures of a changing system, and the pressures of need. This budget and this bill, Bill 43, reflect the needs of this province, and hon. members opposite can't accept that. They want the spending. Every day we hear about a petition: more money for this, more money for this, more money for this. But our commitment is not to spend money that we don't have. Never again will we allow for a deficit to come back into this government. That's why we're in government and they're not, because we responded to the people.

4:30

When you go down the list of the allocation of the money that is identified in Bill 43, I would dare any member on the opposite side to stand up and say that they shouldn't have those funds that are proposed in Bill 43. Every day you stand up with a petition and say: spend it. So how can you be opposed to this bill? How can any member in this Legislature say, "Albertans don't know what they're talking about," and ignore what they've said and play the little game of saying that we had to have known that oil was going to be \$23, \$24, \$25 dollars a barrel when the very day of the budget, I believe, it was \$13 a barrel? If you guys on the opposite side are so smart and you can go out and forecast that far ahead, then you should all be gazillionaires. There's nobody – nobody – in the world that knew that oil was going to go to the price it is today.

MR. DAY: They said it was \$13.75.

MRS. NELSON: Their number was \$13.75.

Madam Speaker, I have watched oil prices all my adult life go up and down like a yo-yo. Nobody can predict what those prices are going to be. Nobody can predict what gas will be. The fundamentals should have said that gas should have dropped, but gas was strong, and that was only because of the anticipation of the extra take-away capacity because of the proposed Alliance pipeline, which is now becoming a reality.

We should be glad, not like the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, complaining because our gas was actually going to market. He'd rather have the gas stay in the ground and nobody sell anything. How can you complain about a gas pipeline that's going to give 1.5 bcf a day of take-away capacity to producers here to get it to market? How can you even oppose or suggest that that shouldn't happen? Then he makes comments about roughnecks who go out and work like dogs in terrible weather conditions, et cetera, and

complains because they take a weekend and go skiing. Where does that fit in with Bill 43, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act? Nowhere. Was that all you could come up with? It was ludicrous to zero in on roughnecks, who go out in all kinds of inclement weather to do the development of the natural resources for the people of this province so that they get a royalty. Then he runs out and complains that they go skiing. You know, ludicrous.

MRS. SLOAN: He said he was one of them, Pat.

MRS. NELSON: Couldn't possibly be.

So I look at this, Madam Speaker. I look at how we have opened up the books of this province, how we've brought forward our supplementary estimates, how we've identified how this additional funding will go, how we are going to be paying the largest debt repayment identified in Canada of real dollars, of \$1.4 billion, onto our debt, how we've cleared this off. You know why we've done it? [interjections] Listen for a minute. You know why we've done this? Because we want to provide a future. [interjections] Are you two going to debate, or are you going to let me be in this conversation?

Madam Speaker, we do this because we made the commitment to the kids, to our children that we would not leave them with the mess that we had inherited here because of our own fault and the previous generation's, because everybody was a wimp and didn't have the courage to stand up and say: we're in trouble. Well, we're getting out of that. We're getting out of that, and that reality has come into play. Now we as Treasury and Treasury Board will bring forward every quarter an updated budget forecast. Quite frankly, if that pricing goes down, then it has to be adjusted downward. If it goes up, then that provides us with greater leeway to pay down more debt and deal with the reality of some of the pressures that are there.

Nobody in this House understands the pressures of growth more than this caucus. Nobody understands that more than we do. From the growth summit, from the different summits we've had, we understand that growth. But the problem is that you can't deal with it all at once. It would be nice. Madam Speaker, when I hear these petitions for spend, spend, spend, spend, I sometimes wonder if this group over here thinks we have somebody up in that tall part of the dome that prints money.

You know, today I heard a question come out about the shame of – what was it? – raising property taxes and paying for education. That was one of the things. Where do they think the money comes from? Money only comes from taxation in one form or another. That's the only source of revenue a government has. So if you want to spend, spend, spend, then I guess you want to raise taxes. We want to put taxes down. We want to lower them. We want a balance. We want to clear off the debt. These guys haven't got any sense of reality at all. That's why they're there and we're here, twice.

Thank you.

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

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Madam Speaker. In speaking to Bill 43 at second reading, I think there are a couple of principles that need to be examined. The first, I guess, is the principle that government spending must be controlled through legislation, and this bill joins a number of bills in North America that have attempted through legislation to do just that. We can think of similar efforts elsewhere: in California the propositions that were voted on to cap public expenditures; legislation in state Legislatures that parallels some of the legislation we've seen here, that was predicated on the same principle, and that is that government spending must be controlled by legislation.

Madam Speaker, I remember, as you must do, when the first piece of legislation came in after the 1993 election. Every piece of similar legislation since has raised a number of questions with citizens, and we've all heard them. The questions are: will this legislation bind future governments? If they find themselves in different circumstances, will they be able to change, or will they be bound by this legislation? We know that the answer to that is no, that as we've seen with Bill 43, the legislation can and should be able to be changed at any time. So Bill 43 answers those critics who said: you know, what's the use of having legislation like this, because the Legislature will turn around and change it?

The second question. What would happen if conditions changed? We just heard the minister talk about changing conditions, how the fiscal circumstances in the province have changed and changed dramatically. The question was raised: when those circumstances change, is that not going to make living within the legislation very, very difficult for governments? We were told at the time that, no, the legislation was hallmark legislation and was generous enough to accommodate changes. Well, Bill 43 proves that that wasn't true.

One of the other questions that was raised at the time was: how adequate is the 25 percent number? There were arguments made at the time that 25 percent was the appropriate number, and of course the bill carried.

So the questions that were raised with the original legislation have now been in part answered by this piece but raised all over again. Bill 43 really confirms what skeptics said at the time, and that is that that kind of legislation is really quite hollow in terms of its durability and reliability in terms of citizens. Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, I think that the passage of this kind of legislation fosters public cynicism, that there is a very, very, widely held view that governments can't be trusted to follow legislation such as this.

4:40

I think it calls into question not just the government members who brought this forward but all of us in Legislatures, all the people who call themselves politicians. We really can't afford to lose much more of the public confidence than we've already lost. If you look at any trust scale filled out by citizens in this country, you'll find that politicians don't rank very highly. We have to ask ourselves why, and I think Bill 43 gives us a good example of why that happens. What is there in this bill to inspire the confidence of citizens in this province in legislation such as this? I'd say there's not much. The conclusion that many will arrive at is that this is another public relations exercise, as was the original legislation. That is truly unfortunate, because I think those of us who supported the original legislation believed that what we were voting for was going to make a difference in the fiscal affairs of the province. This proves that our confidence was ill placed.

Bill 43 raises some new questions and some old questions again. What happens the next time? Is there going to be another amendment next year? Is that what we're going to be faced with year after year, a series of amendments to the legislation? If that's true, is there not another way of handling this kind of fiscal planning? What does this do – and I've alluded to what I think it does – to the original act in terms of the power that we thought that act had for governing fiscal affairs of the province?

The second principle, that seems to be supported by the legislation, is that fiscal planning is either inadequate or not flexible enough to handle change, that our annual budgets cannot handle changing conditions. I think it's serious if that's really a principle that the government believes should be adhered to. You have to look at how the money is being spent. The money is spent for municipalities, for highways. The money is spent for schools to relieve the problems that they're facing. The money was spent on postsecondary education. The money was allocated to the regional

health authorities. Every member of the Assembly knew last budget that those needs were there. It is no surprise that this spending is warranted. So why wasn't it handled at budget time? That's the question that has to be asked as we consider Bill 43. There isn't much in the allocations that Albertans didn't know about and hadn't been telling the government at budget time.

This is quite different, Madam Speaker, from the supplementary estimates, that are under consideration. We've seen some good reasons in those supplementary estimates for the budgets being changed: the allocations for forest fires, not being able to meet unforeseen circumstances, outbreaks of disease in forests, again things that couldn't be foreseen. There have to be mechanisms for the government to deal with those, and I think we've seen that a lot of those expenditures in the supplementary estimates are thoroughly justifiable.

Again, the kinds of items that have been addressed with these funds were sums that we knew 10 months ago had to be spent. The principle seems to call into question the capability of the government to plan. What are we to do next February, next March when we look at those business plans? What kind of confidence can we have that those plans are as thorough and as well grounded as most of us believe they must be? I think what Bill 43 does point out is the need for some plans to be put in place to stop the ad hocery, some long-range infrastructure plans for the province that will allow citizens to understand where the province is going. We need some targets, again some long-range targets, for service levels to prevent the kind of bill that we see before us today.

I guess if we're going to see a series of amendments to the act and if the act can be so flexible that it can't be depended upon by Albertans, then I would urge the government to do the right thing and rescind the Fiscal Responsibility Act, if it's as meaningless as this seems to be.

I would conclude with a couple of comments. The previous speaker indicated that this side of the House was asking for money and referred to the petitions. What the minister did was slap in the face the 22,000 Albertans who signed those petitions. I think that's unworthy of this House.

Thanks, Madam Speaker.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

MR. MAGNUS: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to adjourn debate on Bill 43, please.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Having heard the motion by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, does the Assembly agree with the motion?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed? It's carried.

Bill 45
Appropriation (Supplementary
Supply) Act, 1999 (No. 2)
(continued)

[Adjourned debate December 2: Mr. Clegg]

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

MR. WHITE: Thank you kindly, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to speak at second reading of Bill 45, an appropriation act. Many

would call this misappropriation. Of course this member certainly would not, but many would.

Proper planning. I just happen to have the report of the Auditor General before me and the recent statements. Now, one of the classic lines here that the Auditor General lays out is really, really quite important and should be read over and over and over by members of this House. From his first report, four years ago, to this one now he still believes, and I will quote: I believe strongly that effective governance will over time contribute to successful performance, although it does not guarantee it, and I am sure that poor governance leads to poor performance. He was speaking and still speaks of the agencies that report to and through the government but in fact stand alone. You'll see in the supplementary estimates, of course, that there are those agencies as well as the line departments. You'll note, too, that management by – it used to be by special warrant or by order in council. That was supposedly done away with when this government took office in '93. That is still not the case, and it's governance at its poorest.

When you can arbitrarily decide partway through a budget year, after you go through and tell the people of Alberta that this is what we intend to do, that this is the direction, that this is where we think we have to be by the year 2000, and then: "Well, what the heck? It's our money; isn't it? We'll just spend as we darn well please." And it's spent before. Perhaps one of the cabinet ministers that happens to be present can tell me if in their department these funds that we're debating today have already been spent. Most of them.

4:50

Now, I just happen to be from the school that says you plan on proper expenditures. You don't sort of knee-jerk and make these decisions on the run and budget on the fly, I think they call it. There was a recent cartoon, I think, where we saw something to that effect, probably in the *Edmonton Sun*, that money comes in and it goes out and we just spend it as we see fit at the moment. Well, that seems to be how the budgeting is occurring.

I actually looked it up, and I can't find anywhere where a government in western Canada in history has spent \$1.4 billion over what they budgeted for. There may be some in Ontario, where budgets are much larger. I didn't look there. But I looked in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Nowhere. Here we are. We just say: "Oh, well," it's sort of like budgeting. I've got a few bucks in my pocket. It just came in, so, hey, what do you want, folks?" We just spend it: where can we affect a vote here or there? I wouldn't want to ascribe that, Madam Speaker. I should probably withdraw that statement. This government would never, never consider just buying a vote with some funds, and I should not imply that. It would be a violation of 23(h), (i), (j), (k), and all the others too, I'm sure.

Madam Speaker, I should read to you, too, another section about government. It's quoted directly from the Auditor General, who does spend some time looking at the books and how one expends money in this province. Here's a quote. He's recommending that the Deputy Minister of Executive Council work with other Ministries to set out governance principles for all agencies, boards and commissions.

He would further say that all governance is that important. What he means – and he's explained it many times to the committee which I happen to have the privilege of chairing as well as to anyone that'll listen – is that governance is the key to all performance, of course, and measurements of that, which this government has said they'll be taking up and in some measure have tried to do just that, to be able to measure the effectiveness of governance. Governance is simply laying down the foundations in fact. This government says that it's a business plan; others say it in other ways. It's in a budget you say:

this is what we intend to do; this is where we intend to be. Yes, there will be some variation, and there's no question about that, that within each budget there would be and could be variations. One would expect that but certainly not to the extent that this government does.

Madam Speaker, I'm called upon by my colleagues to resume my seat and that there are others who do wish to get their words in on this debate before it closes off rather shortly. So I'll take my seat. Thank you.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to spend the next 10 minutes or so, if I may, on Bill 45, Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1999, (No. 2). I want to say right off the bat that the moneys that are being sought here for health, for education, for infrastructure are absolutely desperately needed. There's no doubt about it. Albertans have been crying out loud about the consequences of systematic underfunding by this government year after year after year, and they have been sending strong messages through their petitions to all members of this House and in particular to the government of this province that this underfunding cannot continue.

I want to make it very clear that I'm not opposed to the new moneys being requested to be put back into some important programs. What I'm concerned about, however, is the practice of systematic underestimation of revenues and systematic underfunding of our public health care, of public education, and of very, very highly needed social programs for the homeless, for the poor, and for the aged.

We cannot continue to deprive our children, even if they are not our own children, the children of the province, in a way that we throw them into poverty. We cannot continue to pursue policies of underfunding which will result in our children having to go to school without breakfast and the whole family having to live in a little one-room apartment, where the children don't have the possibility of doing their homework, of paying attention to what work they need to do related to their schooling, and of growing up as healthy individuals in order to learn and maximize their presence in terms of benefit from school.

So this government needs to rethink the practices of underfunding. These supplementary estimates clearly demonstrate that that's exactly what they're doing. They starve these institutions, schools, hospitals, nurses, working people of the funds that are needed for them all to accomplish and to deliver the services that they have the responsibility to deliver. Then come November or December we come back with a little bit of supplementary money to plug a few holes here and there.

In this one there clearly is no commitment for social housing. I hear a great deal about the homeless in Calgary, and it's all blamed on in-migration from other provinces. It's a really shameful way of looking at the plight of the homeless. These are not people who are beggars. These are not people who refuse to work. These are not people who are not hardworking Albertans. These homeless in Calgary and in Edmonton are people who are the working poor. They cannot afford to rent even modest accommodation for themselves.

I was in Calgary about a month ago, and I was walking back from downtown, you know, one block to the other, from the Hudson's Bay area towards the Westin Hotel. On the way I saw about 12 o'clock in the morning people sleeping on the lawns. That's really dreadful. We should all be ashamed about it, and particularly this

government should be ashamed about it. The count of homeless is being taken in this city now. The homeless are not just individuals. These are people with families; they have children.

MR. DAY: What did you do to help them?

DR. PANNU: This Treasurer is so stone-hearted. He wants me to go out and help the poor while he's taking money away from them and pulling the rug from under their feet. That's shameful. That should never be allowed to happen in this province. There's no commitment here in this for him to do anything for the poor and for the homeless or for the working poor in this province.

Madam Speaker, I want to moderate my – I'm speaking to you. I'm speaking to you very clearly. I'm looking at you; I'm speaking to you. I'm in fact trying to tone down a bit, because I was provoked by intervention from that side. I'm sure you will manage that situation reasonably well.

It's the problem of systematic underfunding over the last seven years. It's not a new story. It's not something that just happened this year. The Treasurer comes here. He is a repeat offender in this process. He certainly has become habituated to it. He's habituated to it, and I think we need to send him a message, deal with him in the way in which we deal with repeat offenders in this society in general and say: no, you cannot do this, Mr. Treasurer; you can't do this. I think we need to do some plain talking in this Assembly so that the Treasurer begins to get the message and stops doing things the way he has been doing them over the last three or four years that he's been Treasurer. He simply is carrying on the legacy of the Klein government and Dinning, who is now trying to wreck the Calgary health authority.

5:00

Anyway, Madam Speaker, there's a terrible downside to this short view, to this spending at the end of the year and not having plans. This doesn't lead anywhere. You start plugging the roof while the basement walls are crumbling, and that's a waste of money. That's a waste of public resources. We need to strengthen the foundation as well as changing the tiles on the roof. This Treasurer doesn't understand this. It's a very commonsense kind of way of looking at our situation. If you have a house and the basement walls are crumbling and the roof is leaking, would you just try to plug the roof? No, you wouldn't, because you know that it will cost a lot more and that later on you may lose the house. You may lose the building; you may lose the structure.

Madam Speaker, I just want to conclude by saying that this is a government in disarray. This is a government of ad hockery. This is a government that keeps on plugging holes in the roof while the foundation is becoming weak, is crumbling, is eroding. That shouldn't be allowed to happen.

I guess I wouldn't vote against this bill. The money is needed, as I said, but this is not the way of budgeting. This is a very poor way of using public resources to provide public services.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have a few comments that I would like to quickly put on the record in the short time that's remaining. Unfortunately, at other times when this has been before us to talk to, the time has been very limited in terms of the number of departments who required funding.

I want to go back for a moment, Madam Speaker, and talk about

the money that was requested in Environment. I've got some additional questions to those that I put to the minister the other evening, and I will look forward to him responding to them in writing.

The first was in terms of the decommissioning and monitoring of the Swan Hills special treatment centre. We didn't ask at that time why that cost was included in the spring budget, so we'd like to know why that was and what has happened during the year to increase the costs. If there has been a new study or some new information that has come to the minister's table, then we would like him to table that and to show us the costs of decommissioning, the reasons behind it being higher than originally estimated. We would also like to know if there is an explanation of future monitoring costs. Are we going to be on the hook for more money? If so, why is there no contingency fund, and why has he not told us that information at this time? So if he could tell us that.

Another \$8 million was requested in water management. Ongoing money is needed in that regard all the time. Once again, if this government was in the habit of planning, they would have planned for that. Why were those figures not included in the spring budget? We want to know the proportion of the total number of projects that need rehabilitation and upgrading and how the priorities for those are decided. The other day we asked for the list of where they are and how soon they're going to be doing them, but how do they decide the priorities? Are these new proposals that have come in asking for money, or were these ones that were sitting in the wings waiting to be funded?

Forest protection: again, we see more dollars there. We're wondering if the government is going to be treating all Crown lands for this specific outbreak. It's with regard to the spruce budworm outbreak that he asked for the money, so is this for treatment of all Crown lands or for just specific areas that have had an outbreak? Is this attack worse than was anticipated in the spring? We know that there was some talk then. If so, why was the money not budgeted for at that time? Why is the money not taken from the environmental protection and enhancement fund, which is meant for unexpected events of nature, rather than coming under supplementary estimates? That seems strange to us.

Fire suppression: a few more questions that I didn't get to. Why is the government, when they know the existing conditions in the province and they know that they're not going to change in the near future, underestimating the amount required for forest fires? It was \$38 million this year. They're putting in another \$172 million. That's quite a difference in figures.

MR. WHITE: Two years in a row.

MS CARLSON: Two years in a row, as my colleague reminds me. That's true. Clearly, if they can do some planning . . . [interjections] A collection, a whole herd of ministers on the other side are telling me that they don't have a crystal ball, Madam Speaker, and I understand that they don't have a crystal ball, but reasonable projections are expected by a government who has access to the kind of information they have.

Municipalities do it all the time when it comes to snow removal. They make reasonable projections based on the information that they have before them and on the moneys they have spent in years past, and they project reasonable amounts. For a government to underproject by over four times the amount of money required for forest fire suppression two years in a row, Madam Speaker, tells me that this government doesn't know how to plan.

They know that conditions in the province are poor and getting poorer. They know that the water table is not where it should be in

many areas in this province and that that is a huge contributing factor to the number of fires we have in this province. So I put it to this herd of ministers who are babbling and refusing to engage in debate that they are not properly planning when they have every opportunity to do so, and they are hurting economic development in this province and putting firefighters at risk by doing so. So I would ask them to please properly plan in the spring when it comes to this particular matter.

Madam Speaker, we have repeatedly given very, very good suggestions to this government, who refuses to budget in a competent manner. In the few moments that I have remaining I would like to remind them . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: It is so noisy in here that the chair cannot hear the speaker, and I believe Edmonton-Ellerslie does have the floor. Go ahead.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, very much. I would like to remind these ministers who are so quick to heckle but are not quite so quick to engage in debate on the record in this Legislature that we have brought forward many suggestions for improving the budget management process in Alberta, good solid suggestions, Madam Speaker, that this Treasurer would be well advised to take under consideration and to in fact implement.

One of those is the auditing and certification of annual performance reports. It's done in industry all the time, particularly in companies that have large budgets, and we're going to put this on the record again as something that we think this government should be doing that they're not.

We need to see economic and fiscal strategy reports coming forward from this government. Once again, these should be released in conjunction with the budget. They would provide projected trends for key economic and fiscal indicators over a 10-year planning horizon and a discussion of the general policies that government intends to pursue to achieve its economic and fiscal objectives.

This government doesn't want to do that, because it would be a responsible thing to do. If they did that, they would be able to project the budgets so that they could properly fund municipalities in this province, Madam Speaker, but once again they don't want to do that. They want to hoard the cash so that they can play Santa and dole it out as required and when . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Provincial Treasurer.

Point of Order

Questioning A Member

MR. DAY: I'd like to compliment the member for bringing some excellent questions forward, and based on *Beauchesne*, I'd like to pursue some of those questions with her and ask, since she's accusing us of not getting into the debate, if she'd be willing to wrap up her remarks and allow me three or four minute to conclude. She's doing an excellent job, and I'd be . . . I see the Member for Edmonton-Glenora telling her no, no, no. But I'm asking her; I'm not asking the Member for Edmonton-Glenora. She has a mind of her own.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: You are entitled, of course, hon. Provincial Treasurer, to ask a question, but asking someone to take their seat is not really what you'd call a point of order.

Will you entertain the question?

MS CARLSON: No. Because budget debate has been so limited on supplementary estimates that it would be irresponsible for me to do that in this House, Madam Speaker.

Debate Continued

MS CARLSON: Since there is no point of order, I will resume my comments, which I think are important to put on the record and to put on the record as many times as we need to between now and the next election, Madam Speaker, because this government doesn't listen.

This Treasurer wants to be Santa Claus and dole out cash as promises to organizations, to departments, to municipalities when they think they're in trouble rather than having a strategic 10-year plan that would put money in place on a basis where people in this province could adequately do their planning and budgeting and so that they could more effectively provide the service that's required. This particularly hurts municipalities when this government won't act in a responsible fashion, and we think that's very irresponsible, and it's really too bad they won't consider this.

5:10

Another excellent suggestion that we have brought forward to the government is monthly budget updates and quarterly performance updates. Go figure. This government doesn't do that. Everybody in private industry does that, Madam Speaker. It's the only responsible way to budget for anybody. It's the only responsible way to make strategic business decisions that will help and assist in obtaining whatever the objectives of the organization are.

The objective of this government should be putting people first and helping people. Too bad that isn't their objective. They have a completely different objective that doesn't talk about the needs of people and the need for proper planning and the need to responsibly report, Madam Speaker. It's absolutely appalling to see how this government runs their budgetary process. Certainly, if they would put forward monthly budget updates and quarterly performance updates like everyone else in industry does, we would see much more responsive and responsible budgeting coming forward, but unfortunately it's not something we can look forward to in the near future.

We can't figure out if they just don't know how to do it, Madam Speaker, or if they're just simply not prepared to do it.

MR. WHITE: No. It's hiding; that's all.

MS CARLSON: They're hiding. I think my colleague is right, that the intent there is to hide behind the very poor kinds of budgeting processes they use.

MR. WHITE: It's all managed for optics.

MS CARLSON: And then managed for optics, as he says, and at the appropriate time a whole load of cash is dumped on people to try and keep them happy.

Another suggestion we've come up with, which is excellent, is the independent projection of revenues. You know, you don't let the fox watch the henhouse, and this is what this Treasurer is doing when they do the nonindependent projections of revenues in-house. If you could tie having an independent projection with the monthly budget updates and proper projections and the independent side of the question that we have brought forward, then we would have a government that was credible, Madam Speaker, that we could all be proud of, that opposition would have a very hard time being the watchdog of because there wouldn't be much to watch and report back on that was out of line. But as it stands, that isn't the situation in this province, and that's a sorry thing for the people who live here.

Independence in reporting is vital, is important. They expect it of everyone reporting to them, but they do not expect to deliver that

particular quality of service to the people of this province. It's really quite a shame that that's the way they want to carry on the business in this province. It's an unfortunate turn of events, and it will only get worse. We will see a return to the wasteful kind of spending that we saw in prior years in prior governments, when we saw huge surpluses that were in effect mismanaged. The same thing is starting to happen here. When you don't plan, when you don't project, when you don't have any strategic thoughts in terms of the dollars and cents, definitely when you go to spend the money, you're inefficient.

The other thing that happens when you do that is that money is spent often in areas that are not only ineffective and inefficient but which are not the true priority areas in terms of the needs of the people of the province. I think we can look to lots of examples of that, Madam Speaker: health care, education, infrastructure, both hard and soft infrastructure throughout this government, the hammer that this government is currently using over municipal governments, which is going to be a backlash for them.

Municipal governments, people working within them, used to be

the friend of this government, but you know, Madam Speaker, that's changing. When we go out into the province and we talk to these councillors and we see the kinds of hardships they're under in terms of trying to provide service to their constituent base and we hear the frustration in their voices, we know that come the next election, there are going to be some changes in this province, changes where people will expect responsible people to be in place in government.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, but in accordance with Standing Order 61(3), the chair is required to put the question to the House on the appropriation bill on the Order Paper for second reading, Bill 45, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 1999 (No. 2).

[Motion carried; Bill 45 read a second time]

[At 5:17 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]