

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, February 24, 2003**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2003/02/24

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Family Employment Tax Credit

501. Mrs. Fritz moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to enhance the Alberta family employment tax credit to include all children in a family in order to bring equality between families with three or more children and families with two or less children.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise and introduce Motion 501. This issue came to my attention on May 30, 2000. Mr. Thomas Lipp, who is a constituent, wrote to me with a serious concern regarding a flaw in the Alberta family employment tax credit program. I'd like to quote from his letter. Mr. Lipp wrote:

There is [an] area of tax law that needs fixing.

The Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit is capped at two children per family. This disadvantages larger families because one parent almost always needs to stay home. The extra tax credit would recognize the extra employment effort of parents with larger families. In my business experience and study of demographics there is an enormous need for well trained young Canadians (i.e. the next generation). They will be the engine of the future tax system and social support network. Let's not discourage ambitious, employed parents with an unnecessary cap of two children per family.

Mr. Speaker, three months later Mr. Lipp wrote again. He said:

The single rate tax system is beautiful in its simplicity and fairness.

Any changes to the AFETC should also be kept simple. Making this credit available to all children in a family is simple and fair.

That is what this motion is about. It is about fairness and equality.

Currently the Alberta family employment tax credit provides a tax credit of a maximum of \$500 per child to each qualifying family for the first two children of the family. The Department of Finance is currently reviewing this program and examining options for incorporating additional children into the program. It is my hope that this motion will help the department come to a fair and just decision for the thousands of children that are excluded from the Alberta family employment tax credit.

This motion is extremely important to Albertans for three reasons. First, this is a motion for Alberta's children, and our future generation is depending on us to make the right decision. Second, since the AFETC is a program that acts as a bridge between the welfare system and the labour force, enhancing the program will provide more incentive for parents to leave and stay off social assistance. Finally, bringing equality to the Alberta family employment tax credit program will bring the program into line with other family-friendly programs that are provided by the government.

The AFETC maximum benefit of a thousand dollars for two children is reached at around a net family income of \$19,000. After paying for rent, food, transportation, and clothing, a \$1,000 tax credit can be what gets some of Alberta's large earning families by in troubling times. However, families with two or more children need bigger apartments to rent, have more food and clothes to buy, so it makes no practical sense that there is a cap of two children for

the AFETC when it is more difficult for larger families to make ends meet.

Another hardship large families face is that many times only one parent can work while the other stays at home to raise the children. Removing the AFETC cap would improve these families' ability to provide basic needs for their children and allow parents to stay at home, thereby reinforcing family values in our communities.

Motion 501, I believe, is a step in the right direction. Families of three or more children need the same benefits that families with two or fewer children receive. Enhancing the AFETC will help parents of families of three or more children who are attempting to enter the labour force. Parents currently on social assistance would be reassured that the AFETC would come into effect for all of their children once they earn more than \$6,500. Acting as a bridge between social assistance and the workforce, the Alberta family employment tax credit under Motion 501 ensures that working families with three or more children are supported in achieving the Alberta advantage.

It is critical that the government take a proactive step in assisting working families to achieve financial stability. A strong workforce, Mr. Speaker, benefits us all. It is our responsibility to ensure that hardworking Albertans are able to provide a healthy environment for all of their children. Helping families achieve financial independence is one of the goals of this government. Enhancing the AFETC to include all children in a family will help bring this goal to reality.

Because the AFETC only applies to working families, it provides an incentive for working families to continue to work and not rely on government assistance. In this respect, the AFETC can be seen as a capacity-building program that helps shift low-income earners into middle-income earners. The AFETC leads to economic independence for Alberta's low-income families, which in the long term creates a stronger and more viable Alberta. This government has a number of family-friendly programs to help low- and middle-income families meet their needs. The child financial support program, the Alberta child health benefit, and the child care subsidy are all examples of excellent programs that make it obvious that this province is committed to helping working families.

The child financial support program provides medical and financial assistance when parents are unable or unwilling to care for their child and the child is being properly cared for in another home by a responsible adult caregiver. There is no limit to the number of children in a family who are eligible for this compassionate and sensible program.

The Alberta child health benefit is part of Alberta's role in the national child benefit, a series of programs designed to address child poverty across Canada. The ACHB is a premium-free health benefit that provides dental, optical, emergency ambulance, essential diabetic supplies, and prescription drug coverage for children living in families with low incomes. Eligibility for the ACHB is based on family size and the previous year's family net income. For a family of one child the annual net income must be below \$22,397, and for each additional child of the family the maximum threshold increases \$2,000. There is no limit to the number of children in a family that are eligible for this important benefit.

The child care subsidy program helps low-income families with child care costs. It applies to pre school-age children who are attending licensed day care facilities or approved family day homes. The program is operated by the Ministry of Children's Services and administered by the appropriate child and family services authority. Any number of children in a family that are in the pre school-age category are eligible for the subsidy if the family meets the program requirements. A low-income family of four children all requiring day care would be eligible for the subsidy.

Mr. Speaker, the common theme in all three of the programs that differs from the Alberta family employment tax credit program is that there is no restriction on the number of children eligible for these programs. For this government to continue to be the leading progressive jurisdiction in the country, I believe that the AFETC must be enhanced to bring it in line with all of the other policies and programs that relate to children in our province.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge and thank Mr. Lipp for bringing this matter to our attention so that we can revise the AFETC program to best meet the needs of families with three or more children. In the name of equality I ask and I strongly urge all my colleagues here today to support Motion 501, and I also urge the Finance department to make a sound decision which will benefit and bring equality to all children and families as it relates to the Alberta family employment tax credit program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

8:10

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks very much to the member who has proposed this motion. I know that she works hard on behalf of her constituents, and obviously she's following through on a long-ago commitment to bring forward this issue affecting at least one of her constituents.

It's a very interesting proposal. I listened carefully to what the member said, and some questions have come up in my mind. As with all nongovernment, private member motions and bills, the opposition caucus has a free vote. It's up to each one of us to decide on the bills on their own merit, so I'm looking to having some questions answered before I finalize how I'm going to vote on this.

One of my first questions, in fact, the member referred to just at the very end. It would require an increase in the budget to support this particular program, and I was wondering if there was concurrence from the Finance minister to increase the budget as it would need to be. Somewhere I've read that this program currently deals with about 160,000 families. Now, it's not giving me the information on how many children are in those families, but one presumes seeing that the issue that's being brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Cross is that the program effectively limits families gaining benefit to those families with two children. How many of those 160,000 families have more than two children, and therefore what's the added expense to the program? So there are two questions there. One is: what's the added expense? The second is: is there buy-in from the Finance minister?

One of the other questions that came to mind as I listened to the member is that this program currently almost has no cost administratively because it is tied to or tags along behind the federal child tax benefit program, so the eligibility is tied very clearly to that. If you are eligible under the federal child tax benefit program, you're in on this Alberta family employment tax credit. It strikes me that in changing the way this program operates, it would also necessitate moving away from the essentially free administration that's being offered by following so closely upon the federal child tax benefit program. In other words, in order to create equality between families, the program would either have to have an allowable maximum per child and no family limits would be put on that, or it would have to be calculated in a way that significantly differs from what the federal program is doing now, and therefore the administrative costs would also go up. It makes it more complicated to administer because somehow a formula has got to be developed that deals with this. I think it would be reflected in higher taxes or higher cost anyway for the budget and perhaps have to pull services or

benefits away from another sector because I know that this government likes to zero out things. So what will be the effect there?

I think the idea behind this proposal overall is to help lift children out of poverty. Obviously, when you look at the parameters of the program, it's not a higher income or perhaps even a middle-income program. Its lower eligibility program level is \$6,500 a year, and I think its upper level is \$50,000 a year, so we're not talking families that have a lot of dough here. I'm questioning whether this is the most effective way to help lift those children and their families out of poverty. I'm questioning whether money invested in educational opportunities isn't a more effective way to in fact lift that child forever out of poverty. I understand the good intentions that the Member for Calgary-Cross has brought forward, but I'm not sure that this motion accomplishes that goal. It seems to be working inside of a very narrow parameter.

When I'm looking at what is the most effective way of addressing poverty for children or lifting poor families out of that situation, I was quite concerned recently to hear in the media about the discussions around the differences between inner city schools and suburban schools, between urban schools and rural schools. I think there's an area that we could be looking at to try and equalize things so children have a better opportunity and, in fact, can lift themselves out of poverty. I spoke a little earlier about opportunities for life: if we teach a man to fish, then he can feed himself forever. Well, doesn't that have something to do with . . .

Dr. Taft: Unless he lives on Calling Lake.

Ms Blakeman: Particularly if he lives on Calling Lake.

Dr. Massey: The right half of Calling Lake.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, I'm sorry; the correct half of Calling Lake. Exactly.

I would be more concerned with whether there was access or opportunity for a child to take advantage of apprenticeship programs or college or institutes of technology or university rather than having to now, as we're looking into the future, seeing differential fees for certain elite faculties in education. I don't know how that's going to help a poor kid lift themselves and the rest of their family forever out of poverty.

I also question why this government is one of the few that claws back the federal child tax benefit; I think it's almost dollar for dollar. I know that the government has always said: oh, we take the money that we save there and we invest it into other programs. And I guess there are two questions: one, I still don't see how clawing back a federal program against benefits that are being offered in a provincial program helps this family or this individual in the long run; two, exactly what is the direct link? Where is that money that is being so-called, in quotes, saved? What programs exactly is it being redirected into? Is it going into hot lunch programs? Is it being linked directly into the same area that it was pulled from when we're pulling it away from the Alberta-offered programs. That has interested me for some time and I think is closely linked to what is being considered here.

Again speaking about education, if we could look more closely at how we keep kids in school and how we help kids graduate from school and, as I said, go on to some kind of postsecondary endeavour, I think it's a better way of lifting people out of poverty forever.

The last point that I have to make here is that we've just had announced in the federal budget that more money is going into the child tax benefit program, and I'm wondering, just knowing how far in advance private members are required to submit their motions and

bills. Obviously, the member didn't have an opportunity to consider the effect of that federal budget on what she's considering here.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, we waited 10 years for it, Laurie. We didn't expect it to happen.

Ms Blakeman: She didn't expect it to happen. [interjection] I'm looking forward to what she has to say when she gets an opportunity to speak.

I mean, there's a \$965 million per year increase in this national child benefit spread out across – these things are always spread out across years; you can never tell how much you're actually getting per year. It runs to 2007. So this is bringing a maximum annual benefit for a first child to \$324. If that money all gets clawed back, then I don't see how this motion is taking us forward.

8:20

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, your time has run out.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The chair recognizes the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to have the opportunity to join in the debate on Motion 501. To my way of thinking, bringing forth this motion shows a great sense of priority and deeply felt concerns for our children, and anything that helps Alberta's children lead better, healthier, and happier lives is something that I want to support. To reiterate, Motion 501 urges the government to

enhance the Alberta family employment tax credit to include all children in a family in order to bring equality between families with three or more children and families with two or less children.

To use the popular expression, the motion is in other words about leveling the playing field by ending an unfair practice.

Mr. Speaker, there are many reasons why this House should give its support to Motion 501. The foremost of those reasons is perhaps also the most obvious: it is our children. It is unfortunate that there are children among us who live in poverty and children whose parents are unable to properly care and provide for them. Through no fault of their own these children are often forced to begin their lives at a disadvantage. Lifting children out of poverty is a challenge fraught with considerable difficulty. Raising children is primarily a parental responsibility, but having said that, our children and the circumstance of their well-being is a communal responsibility. The idea that the responsibility for our children is shared by all members of society is part of our thinking and our attitude.

Mr. Speaker, we work diligently to see that education is accessible to all children regardless of their parents' income. Where there is need, the government where possible offers various forms of financial assistance to parents whose financial and/or employment situation is such that caring for their children is difficult. These are all aspects of how society at large comes together and offers support to our children. We do this because we recognize that our children are not only among the most vulnerable members of society but also because they are our most precious assets, and they point to our future as we want it to be.

Motion 501 is a timely initiative aimed at rectifying lingering unfairness with regard to how the Alberta family employment tax credit is distributed to low- and middle-income working families in our province. What Motion 501 seeks to accomplish is to enhance the Alberta family employment tax credit by extending the maximum credit to include all children in a family. At the present time the

maximum number of children covered under this program is two at a maximum annual amount of \$500 per child, or \$1,000 together. There are quite a few families in our province where the number of children exceeds two. A cap such as is in place disadvantages Alberta's larger families at a significant rate. Like it or not, the cap runs counter to the policy of this government to not disadvantage one group over another in the province. Families with more than two children have a greater financial burden than families with only one or two. Families with more than two children stand to benefit significantly from the outcome of Motion 501 as larger families are included under this benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 501 is consistent with existing government policies stating that Albertans unable to provide for their basic needs will receive assistance. This is stated clearly in goal 5 of the government business plan 2002-2005. Rising inflation and the increased cost of living make it extremely difficult for larger families in the low- and middle-income brackets to continue to provide well for their basic needs.

Mr. Speaker, in 2001 the AFETC provided \$80 million in benefits to 160,000 Alberta families. There can be little doubt that removing the two-child limit would add more families as well as increase the cost of the program. Existing policies such as goal 5 of the government's business plan make expansion of the program imperative.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Alberta is the envy of every other province in the country. Our economy outperforms the economies of all other provinces and also that of Canada as a whole. We lead the country in economic growth, and we have weathered the recent fiscal storms better than any other jurisdiction. In spite of this, there are several other provinces that manage to offer child tax benefit programs where there are no limits on the number of children. As well, the payments exceed those available to low- and middle-income families in Alberta. British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia all have implemented child tax benefit programs without caps. My point in mentioning these other provinces is that if other provinces, whose economies have not fared quite as well as our own, can afford to provide broader and more extensive assistance to their low- and middle-income families, there's no reason why we shouldn't do the same.

Our children are both our legacy and our future. We owe it to them to help them as much as possible, particularly where doing so can give a child an opportunity to live a life of possibility. For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I will support Motion 501, and I urge all my colleagues to do the same. Simply put, it is the right thing to do.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak to Motion 501 this evening, urging the government

to enhance the Alberta family employment tax credit to include all children in a family in order to bring equality between families with three or more children and families with two or less children.

I agree with the mover of this motion. I think anything that can be done to make life easier for low-income families or families of limited means is worthy of our consideration and worthy of our support. I think it's unfortunate that in a province and in the midst of the great wealth that is being generated in this province, we have families who find themselves in the position of having to look to the tax system for relief to try to make ends meet. As much as I will

support the motion because it's an attempt to help those families – and goodness knows they need all the help they can get – I think that it's a motion that should be much broader and should contain a lot more than what we see in front of us this evening.

8:30

I think one of the issues that has been before this Assembly for years has been the amounts of money that are made available to families living on SFI. No matter how you manipulate the tax system, what really counts to low-income families and families of limited means is the money in the pay packet on the 15th or the 30th or 31st of each month. That's where those families look for help, and it's really what impacts their life on a daily basis. I think that it's unfortunate that as one of the wealthiest provinces in this dominion we have not seen fit to make sure that those benefits are paid at a level that would make this kind of tax benefit more problematic for families. I think that if we were doing our job, looking after our neighbours, this kind of a tax credit would not be needed.

If you look at the numbers, they're really quite staggering. Each family who participates in the program is entitled to receive \$500 per child with a maximum of \$1,000 for the calendar year, and the credit is calculated at a rate of 8 percent of family working income over \$6,500 and is reduced by 4 percent of family net income over \$25,000. If you can think of yourself these days, Mr. Speaker, living on \$6,500 or even \$25,000 and trying to raise a family, I think you get some idea of how staggering the problem is for families and how badly they need some relief whether it's in the form of a tax credit but preferably in the form of direct aid.

We seem to have two minds in terms of helping people who need some help. On one hand, we'll have motions such as this, that seems to embody great sympathy for those families and the plight they find themselves in, and on the other hand we have programs like the supports for independence where we seem to be afraid to give those families too much, that we might be overdoing it were they to live a comfortable life, the notion that the pressure has to be kept on them at all times to get out and get a job. I think it's the discrepancy between this member's motion and what is done in the province that I find disturbing. I think that if you have lived in poverty, the way in which it degrades you and those around you is devastating and the judgments that are made about you because of your financial situation are for the most part unwarranted.

As I listen, Mr. Speaker, to the families in my constituency that need help, I wonder just how well we are, as I said before, looking after our neighbours. I'm going to support the motion, but I'm also very, very keen that the motion become part of a larger package that looks at the plight of low-income families and families with limited means and does more than tinker with the tax system. This is one thing we can do, but it's minimal in terms of the kind of help and the kind of assistance that these families need.

I think that with those comments, Mr. Speaker, I'll conclude.

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

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction to rise tonight and join in the debate on Motion 501, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Cross. I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the hon. Member for Calgary-Cross for bringing forth this initiative. It's a reminder to all of us that family values are and should remain a cornerstone of this government and its policies.

Mr. Speaker, there's no denying that the children represent our future in this great province, and it must be our mission as a society

and as a government not to leave a single one out. We owe it to our children to provide them with the best education, health care, and family service support in order to foster an environment for them to grow into future leaders and strong contributors in a vibrant society. It is in Alberta's interest to promote and facilitate strong family units. It is from the family that a young child learns about values, respect, and integrity. These virtues lay the foundation for a productive and responsible human being, one that makes a positive contribution to society. More and more people understand that childhood experiences influence success and happiness later in life. Many things affect these experiences, including parenting, family and community supports, income, and social services.

Families living on low incomes often face particular challenges in meeting the needs of their children. Financial support, social services, and early intervention can help address some of the difficulties that might otherwise lead to a need for costly services later in life. The Alberta government took the initiative in 1999 to divide the family and social services ministry to form, among others, the Children's Services ministry. One of the goals of forming this separate ministry was to devote resources to needs specifically centred on children. The province of Alberta, Mr. Speaker, has taken great strides in creating a family-friendly environment. From the introduction of the Alberta family employment tax credit, AFETC, in 1997 to the Alberta child health benefit, ACHB, to the child financial support program, this province has a strong record of promoting a cohesive family unit.

The Alberta family employment tax credit is a program funded by the Alberta government to help working families provide for their children. The program's main objectives are to support children in low- and middle-income families and provide incentive for the parents of these children to continue to work. Similar to the federal national child benefit the intent of the Alberta family employment tax credit program is to reduce child poverty and to support parental attachment to the labour market. The AFETC provides important support outside of the social assistance system for low-income working families. In 1998 the maximum credit was doubled so that more families could qualify for the benefit. In 2001 the AFETC provided \$80 million in benefits to 160,000 Alberta families.

Mr. Speaker, while the AFETC is a very well-respected and effective program for helping families provide for their children, it lacks a level of equality that is so greatly needed. Currently the Alberta family employment tax credit program provides a maximum \$500 tax credit per child to each qualifying family for the first two children of each family. Motion 501 would urge the government to remove the two-child limit under the existing AFETC program thereby providing a tax credit for every child in the family. Motion 501 is aimed at providing a level and equal playing field for all families in need of assistance.

The AFETC has several parameters. First, there is the phase-in rate, the phase-out rate, income thresholds, and credit amounts. The phase-in rate of 8 cents for every dollar earned on income over \$6,500 ensures that this credit program rewards increasingly a working family's income. It is reduced by 4 percent of family net income over \$25,000. This is known as the phase-out stage, and to qualify, family net income for the previous year must have been below \$50,000.

8:40

The Alberta family employment tax credit program provides an important support outside of the social assistance system for low-income working families. In 1998 the maximum credit was doubled in order that more families could qualify under the benefit. In 2001 the AFETC provided benefits, as I mentioned, to 160,000 Alberta

families. Mr. Speaker, these figures go a long way in establishing the profound benefit that the AFETC provides to low-income working families, but it's lacking in one crucial area, and that is equality. Equality amongst the children who are included in this program is essential, and that is one of the premises behind Motion 501.

Another factor behind Motion 501 is the improvement of one of Alberta's family-friendly programs. The province of Alberta should be proud of the emphasis it has placed on its status as a family-friendly jurisdiction. Mr. Speaker, another family-friendly program offered alongside the AFETC is the Alberta child health benefit. The Alberta child health benefit program is part of Alberta's role in the national child benefit, which is a series of programs designed to reduce child poverty across Canada. The Alberta child health benefit, or ACHB, is a premium-free health benefit plan that provides 100 percent coverage on dental, optical, emergency, ambulance, essential diabetic supplies, and prescription drug coverage for children living in families with low incomes. ACHB is for children under the age of 18 who are living in families with low incomes. Eligibility is based on family size and the previous year's family net income, similar to the AFETC program.

The child financial support program, Mr. Speaker, is another program offered here in our family-friendly province. The child financial support program, or CFS, provides medical and financial assistance when parents are unable or unwilling to care for their children and the child is being properly cared for in another home of a responsible adult caregiver. To qualify for this program, a caregiver may be eligible to receive benefits on behalf of a child if the child's parents have provided written consent and the child will be properly cared for in the home of the caregiver or if the child's income does not exceed the financial guidelines of the program. The amount of the monthly benefits received under this program can vary based upon the age of the child, the income of the child, and the relationship of the caregiver to the child. It is important to remember that while receiving benefits from child financial support, children can also receive medical benefits under the Alberta child health benefit program.

Mr. Speaker, I have shown here that Alberta is indeed a family-friendly province with many effective and compassionate programs aimed at improving the lives of so many underprivileged children. Motion 501 goes the next step by bringing an equality factor to the equation, an equality that crosses between families with three or more children and families with two or less children. Programs such as the child financial support program and the Alberta child health benefit offer some very valuable assistance to many Alberta families. It is the goal of Motion 501 to introduce the same type of equality of benefits that these programs offer our families and their children.

As stated, currently the Alberta family employment tax credit program provides a maximum \$500 tax credit per child to each qualifying family for the first two children in each family. Motion 501 would move to change the stipulation of the two-child limit thereby providing a tax credit for every child in the family.

I would like to encourage my colleagues, the hon. members here in the Assembly, to vote in favour of Motion 501. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to join the debate supporting Motion 501, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Cross. I'd like to congratulate the Member for Calgary-Cross for raising this very important concern.

Extending the Alberta family employment tax credit to three or

more children from the existing maximum of two helps strengthen the pool of resources available for parents. It seems to me that we should be extending some help to the larger families, and as every parent here knows, help is always welcome. Children can bring great joy and fulfillment that cannot be measured in dollars. Nonetheless, raising a child is a costly endeavour, and it costs more every year.

The Alberta family employment tax credit is a program funded by the Alberta government to help working families provide for their children. The program's main objectives are to support children in low- and middle-income families and to provide incentive for the parents of these children to continue to work. To help in the support of children is admirable and important, but it's more admirable to extend the support to all children.

The Alberta family employment tax credit helps support low-income earners re-entering the workforce and provides a bit more incentive for unemployed people to get back to work. Motion 501 simply extends the scope of this successful program to include families with three or more children. Re-entering the workforce is not easy. Extending tax credits would help encourage this. Currently the program operates by providing a tax credit of \$500 per child in a family with two children. I think this program works because it gives people incentive to move away from income support programs as a means of providing for their families. Mr. Speaker, the Alberta family employment tax credit operates more like an investment program rather than a support program, and I can't think of anything better to invest in than our children.

Mr. Speaker, the goal of any social program should be to encourage people back into the workforce as soon as possible. I believe that Albertans would prefer to earn their own way rather than rely on government assistance. The Alberta family employment tax credit recognizes the realities of returning to the workforce while trying to raise a family. There are people in Alberta who have a harder time finding and keeping stable employment, but the situation becomes more complicated when children are involved. This tax credit helps build the bridge between unemployment and a solid return to the workforce.

The overriding goal of Alberta's support programs is to give people the best environment possible to be independent. This government decided a long time ago that people should not be living off Alberta's support system if they were able to work. Since the early 1990s Alberta's support programs have been designed to protect people from impoverishment and prevent people from taking free rides at the expense of taxpayers. This tax benefit is an extension of this philosophy by providing increased incentive for people to keep their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, as we heard earlier this evening, there are two primary financial and health benefit programs that complement the Alberta family employment tax credit and protect low-income earners and their families from economic hardship and costs associated with health problems. The reality is that low-income earners often live from paycheque to paycheque. This can pose problems for families when children get sick. First of all, there's the Alberta child health benefit. This program is part of Alberta's role in the national child benefit program designed to address child poverty across Canada. As we heard, the Alberta child health benefit helps families by providing coverage for various services including dental, optical, emergency ambulance, essential diabetic supplies, and prescription drug coverage for children living in families with low incomes. The program is based on family size and the previous year's family net income. The tax credits earned by low-income Albertans don't necessarily have to be used for health-related products because of the coverage provided by the Alberta health benefit.

The second program that helps ensure the safety and health of low-income families is the Alberta adult health benefit, formerly known as the extended health benefit. This provides free health benefits to people and parents who leave supports for independence for work.

8:50

Low-income families must be healthy to succeed. I see no reason not to extend the credit program to include families with three or more children. Doing so would encourage more families to consider working rather than relying on income support. Other programs supporting low-income families have no cap on coverage based on the number of children in a family. The Alberta family employment tax credit should be consistent with other programs supporting independent families.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta continues to enjoy a growing, prosperous economy. Each year hundreds of jobs are created in Alberta by a variety of industries, and employers need to fill these positions. The unemployment rate in Edmonton, for example, is currently under 5 percent. This is incredibly low considering the state of the global economy. I mention this fact because there are opportunities for people to do better in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, studies have shown that the first two children born in a family pose a much greater financial hardship than any children born after them. There are a variety of reasons for this as there are many costs related to establishing a home suitable for children. However, three or more children still pose financial challenges for families, and a tax credit could help larger families overcome these pressures.

Motion 501 would be an investment in Alberta families. Support for low-income Albertans will give them incentive to work. The tax credit program will provide families with more income to provide for their families and make them healthier. Studies have shown that healthier children perform better in school. Better grades will open doors for postsecondary education and a better standard of living. I realize that a tax credit is only part of the scenario. I believe that a lot more needs to happen besides raising a tax credit to better the lives of low-income Albertans. Motion 501 is a small step in the right direction.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I would once again like to thank the hon. member for introducing Motion 501. If passed, this motion would help many Alberta families adjust to employment and independence. The Alberta family employment tax credit already helps thousands of Albertans and their families. Motion 501 will make it better by expanding the scope to include families with three or more children. In this day and age, with the number of children being reduced in Canadian families, I think that to extend this tax credit would encourage more than 1.5 children in a family. Motion 501 would not be a quick fix, but it would help larger families adjust to living independently. Healthy and happy and successful families are the cornerstones of a happy and successful Alberta.

I will support Motion 501 because it's the right thing to do, and I ask my colleagues to also support Motion 501. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to rise and talk for the minutes that remain on this particular issue. I think it's a great discussion we've been having, and we'll be able to continue later on in debate on Bill 1 the whole discussion about the importance of families and children and income and poverty and so on.

The details of the motion have been reviewed for the record. I don't need to go through those at any great length. I would like,

though, to commend the Member for Calgary-Cross for her good intentions, I think, in bringing this forward. I have no doubt that she shares concerns that all of us have for improving the lives of families living with very low incomes and especially the children in those families. So I'm inclined on the basis of the intentions and the idea here to support this motion.

On the other hand – and this is frankly why we have the kinds of debates that we have or try to have here – there are some questions that are left with me that cause me doubts about supporting the motion. While the motion presumably would increase the income level of children in poor families, my concern, like that of both of my colleagues, is: is this enough, or should we be spending that money on ways to provide these families with the skills to move out of poverty? Is there a risk in bringing this particular motion in that we'll actually be sustaining people at a poor level? I don't know, and I'm not sure that the numbers have been worked through one way or the other, the analysis that's been done on that.

Would we be better, for example, taking the costs of this bill and putting it instead into, say, early childhood education programs or nutrition programs? Those are issues that I struggle with on all of these debates. It doesn't mean that I'm opposed to this bill; it means that I'm simply trying to expand the debate. I should say that I'm not opposed to this motion. It's not a bill yet. Maybe someday it will be a bill. But I'm trying to reflect on the broader issues that are touched on or are raised by this particular motion.

The costs of administration have been mentioned here. There's no sense here of the costs of administration of this motion if it ever did become law. What would those be? I'm wondering if the Minister of Finance has any insight into that particular issue.

There's also a question of how this works with the federal child tax benefit, which has been substantially increased and will be, I believe, substantially increased further in the next four years. I guess I would like to have more information on exactly what this proposal would entail: what it would cost, who it would benefit, how many people it would benefit, and how much they would benefit.

So I have a great number of questions about the impact of the motion. I don't question the motives of it. I don't question the importance of improving the lot of people living at very low incomes and especially children.

With those comments – and I see we're just about running out of time for this level of debate this evening – I will take my seat and review *Hansard* and listen to the closing comments of the sponsor of the motion before I finally make up my mind which way to stand on this.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Calgary-Cross, in the one minute remaining today and four minutes next Monday, your final comments.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In closing, I would like to refer to a letter that was written by the same constituent that I talked to you about earlier, Mr. Tom Lipp, where he wrote:

I would like to recommend the cap of two children per family be removed for the following reasons:

1. This cap disadvantages families with three or more children. Such families already have a greater financial struggle, and would make good use of any extra funds from the AFETC.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member.

Mrs. Fritz: Two, "The removal of this cap would be in keeping with the family friendly policies of the Alberta Government."

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member.

Mrs. Fritz: And: "I appreciate Alberta's leadership's desire to strengthen families."

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I call for the question.

**Speaker's Ruling
Speaking Time**

The Deputy Speaker: Too late. We've gone over, and I've been standing here for 30 seconds.

One of the problems with this particular set of rules is that we have 60 minutes in which to do a 65-minute debate. That's why the chair admonished you: in the one minute and the four minutes next day. So it'll have to be next day. I'm sorry; those are the rules that we've all agreed to.

9:00head: Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

**Bill 5
Line Fence Amendment Act, 2003**

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to stand today and move second reading of Bill 5, the Line Fence Amendment Act.

The Line Fence Act was enacted in 1980 to provide rural residents with a cost-sharing and dispute settlement framework that was primarily created to deal with livestock fencing issues. A fence that is mutually beneficial to two landowners of adjacent land occurs quite frequently in rural Alberta. One landowner will erect a fence, and if the fence provides a benefit to the neighbouring landowner, the neighbour will contribute to the cost of the erection, maintenance, and repair of the mutually beneficial fence. This concept is very simple, and it has been effectively applied to a great number of instances where fences benefited two rural neighbours. It is a cost-effective and efficient way to build and maintain a fence. Having neighbours build two overlapping fences to contain each of their respective herds just doesn't make any sense. The Line Fence Act is effective and is accomplishing everything it was intended to do, but there is a need for clarification. The bill being brought forward provides this needed clarity.

Urban residents are increasingly citing the Line Fence Act in instances for which it was not intended. With these citations, municipalities are being faced with the situation of having to share in the cost of a private landowner's fence. Mr. Speaker, municipalities should not be burdened with costs attributable to private fence construction and maintenance bordering on public lands where the legislation being applied was not intended for that situation. This use in an urban setting is completely against the original spirit of the Line Fence Act.

Bill 5 will ensure that the original intention of the Line Fence Act, to provide a cost-sharing and dispute settlement framework primarily for livestock fencing issues, is maintained, Mr. Speaker. The amendment also defines which livestock are contemplated. Under the act it recognizes that different species require different fences.

I urge all members of this Legislature to give this bill their full support. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of Bill 5, the Line Fence Amendment Act. I think this is a minor change, but it is one that's adjusting what's become a bit of a problem and, I'm sure, in some circumstances a major problem.

Essentially, the bill is attempting to restrict the circumstances under which a party to a shared line or a fence can seek to have the costs of that fence shared between them. Under the original bill both urban and rural property owners had a legal right to demand compensation from the person on the other side of the fence, the adjacent property, if they derived any benefit. Really, this was intended to address issues of livestock containment and delineation of property, I think, and having it used or applied under urban sensibilities perverts the original intention of the bill.

Certainly, in urban areas to have one person decide to build a six-foot fence between themselves and their neighbour and then try and ding the neighbour for equal cost of the fence is unrealistic, especially if they're trying to claim that somehow the second neighbour derives some sort of benefit. They may not have wanted a fence, and they certainly may not have had it in their budget to pay for one, so there's an issue here of fairness and of having the bill apply to where it was meant to apply. All that this amending act is doing is just correcting what the movement of history has perverted.

Essentially, it's making the act conform to the goals it was originally meant to achieve and eliminating any unwelcome interference in the urban areas, and I'm happy to support this bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan, then, to sum up, to conclude debate?

[Motion carried unanimously; Bill 5 read a second time]

**Bill 9
Mines and Minerals Amendment Act, 2003**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move second reading of Bill 9, the Mines and Minerals Amendment Act, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, in dealing with amendments to this bill, we are specifically dealing with part 8, which deals with seismic or geophysical exploration. This act will amend existing legislation by upgrading terminology to reflect the way the seismic and geophysical exploration is currently done. For instance, it will clarify administrative criteria, streamline existing procedures, enhance enforcement tools, and strengthen various roles already within the act.

Mr. Speaker, these amendments are a result of extensive consultation done for the exploration regulation review. During the process over 2,000 stakeholders were consulted about changes to how our province manages exploration. Since the Mines and Minerals Act also deals with geophysical and seismic exploration, we also need to amend this act.

Now that we are talking in terms of change, I think the easiest way to speak to these amendments is through a few examples. For instance, we want to introduce a unique identification number to the act, Mr. Speaker. This number will identify subcontractors working on an exploration program. Why is this important? Well, let's say that you are a landowner who notices a truck at the far end of your property, but there doesn't seem to be any visual sign or logo on the truck to identify it. As a landowner or community member you just want to know who is around your property for security reasons. With the creation of this unique identification number, you can now phone the department's information line. We will be able to tell you exactly who has approval to be working in the area based on this number.

Another example of how changes to this legislation will better reflect what should be happening in the field is through the stop-order program. The new stop-order amendment will allow our field staff to take immediate action if environmental incidents happen on the site. For instance, under present rules when field staff or an inspector finds a situation like a flowing shot hole causing water to run across a public road, we need to contact the licence or permit holder before any action can be taken. This sometimes takes a number of hours or longer, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, our field staff will always use every avenue to contact the licence or permit holder, but some things can't wait for hours on end. The stop order can be issued immediately to an on-site supervisor, directing that the activity must stop for the protection of the area.

9:10

Mr. Speaker, these are just a few examples of some of the changes that we are suggesting to update this legislation. After all the communication and consultation we've done on these changes, we are confident that everyone involved with geophysical exploration will see the many positive advantages. Industry will have the benefit of clearly understanding their level of responsibility, and the public will see that this government is willing to provide direction to ensure that this happens.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this time it is my pleasure to move to adjourn debate on Bill 9.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd now call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 1

Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, I'm pleased to rise to address Bill 1 in what I hope will be a tremendous debate here and an insightful one. I know from the comments earlier this evening as well as just from knowing some of the individuals in this Assembly that the intentions of this bill will be close to the hearts of many of us and especially the notion of undertaking a promise to Alberta's children.

As we discussed at one point earlier, this bill lays out a framework, as the Deputy Premier put it, for addressing some issues, but its shortfall, to me a fundamental shortfall, is that it doesn't say what the framework is about. It refers to Alberta's Promise in the title, Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise Act, and there's even a section called Alberta's Promise, which reads: "Alberta's Promise is an initiative to encourage organizations, corporations and individuals to enhance community resources in order to further the well-being of children." It doesn't really say what the promise is. What is it that we are promising here? As a result, with that gap in this legislation, I think that first of all we need to debate that, and secondly, we need to look for ways to fill that promise, to make clear what that promise is.

Now, the one place where I have read the promise is in the Speech from the Throne. That is a substantially more clear expression of the

promise than what we have in Bill 1 itself, and I think it's probably worth reading into the record here. I'm quoting here from the Speech from the Throne of last week.

Alberta's Promise will mobilize every sector of Alberta to build the character and competence of young people by making and keeping promises that focus on five specific areas of commitment. These are

- giving children a healthy start and a promising future,
- providing safe and healthy communities for our children's growth, education, and development,
- ensuring that every child receives ongoing support, care, and guidance from at least one caring adult in his or her life,
- offering children the chance to make a difference through volunteer activities and opportunities to serve others, and
- seeking out the best tools, models, and examples of other individuals and communities so that Alberta's children may learn, benefit, and succeed.

Now, you note, Mr. Chairman, that that promise has somewhat, in fact substantially, more detail than what's in the bill, and I think that even with that, it falls short of what a real promise ought to be. Without something like this in Bill 1 it's really a pointless bill. Maybe it's not entirely pointless, but it's missing a direction. It talks about a promise, but it never makes one except that it promises to set up a council. Frankly, it's not news and it's not adequate that we simply set up another committee, another council for government. This government is becoming notorious for striking committees and councils.

So, Mr. Chairman, I would like to propose an amendment. We have the sufficient number of copies here, so we will distribute those, and then I'll speak to it in a moment.

The Chair: We require the original here plus four others.

Dr. Taft: Okay. There's the original. It's been approved by Parliamentary Counsel, and there are all the copies you need.

Mr. Chairman, may I continue? Thank you.

The Chair: This will be known as amendment A1.

Dr. Taft: Amendment A1. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Pretty well everybody now has copies of amendment A1, and for the purposes of the record I will make clear what amendment A1 is. It is an amendment to insert the promise as described in the Speech from the Throne into the legislation, and by doing this, it will in fact give some force, some weight, some substance to Bill 1, which otherwise is seriously in danger of looking like nothing more than window dressing.

The amendment reads that Bill 1 be amended in section 1 by renumbering it as section 1(1) and by adding the following after subsection (1):

- (2) The Alberta Promise is an initiative that focuses on the following areas of commitment:
 - (a) giving children a healthy start and a promising future;
 - (b) providing safe and healthy communities for children's growth, education and development;
 - (c) ensuring that every child receives ongoing support, care and guidance from at least one caring adult in his or her life; and
 - (d) offering children the chance to make a difference through volunteer activities and opportunities to serve others.

That, Mr. Speaker, is the amendment, and the reason for making the amendment is, as I said earlier, to give Bill 1 some substance. I would assume that all members of this Assembly will support this amendment because we are drawing directly from the Speech from the Throne, which to my understanding reflects the commitments of

this government. All we are trying to do here is take some of the ideas that this government presented in the Speech from the Throne and put them into legislation. Pretty straightforward, and I would hope that it gets the widespread support of members of this Assembly. I'll be disappointed if it doesn't. I can't imagine why it wouldn't.

9:20

We could go through these items one by one. "Giving children a healthy start and a promising future." If that's Alberta's Promise as laid out in the Speech from the Throne, well, let's put it in Bill 1. Who can argue with giving children a healthy start and a promising future? I mean, after all, those are the points upon which a child's life and an adult's life are built. A healthy start and a promising future are exactly what this government should be committing to provide to its children, to our children, to the children of all Albertans. By giving that sort of commitment, we will be building a better future for all Albertans.

The second point, "providing safe and healthy communities for children's growth, education and development." Well, safe and healthy communities: again, good sentiments taken straight from the Speech from the Throne. Why wouldn't we put this into Bill 1? Safe and healthy communities. We all, I'm sure, want to have safe and healthy communities not just for our children but for all of us. If we're making a promise, let's promise this. Frankly, we've left it general enough. We're not saying in this particular amendment that there's any time frame. We're not demanding that there be any particular amount of money spent. We're just saying: if a promise is worth making, then let's really make it.

The third point under the amendment, again taken from the Speech from the Throne: "ensuring that every child receives ongoing support, care and guidance from at least one caring adult in his or her life." The bare minimum we can provide as a compassionate society for our children. Lacking that, children are left entirely on their own, and I can't imagine that anybody in this Assembly or anywhere in this province wants to see children left without any adult guidance at all. So it seems reasonable, taken from the Speech from the Throne. I think all of us in the opposition caucus would like to see this brought into Bill 1.

Finally, to speak to the fourth one a little bit for a moment directly: "offering children the chance to make a difference through volunteer activities and opportunities to serve others." I'm sure the intent behind this in the Speech from the Throne was to recognize that the real gift in life isn't what you get but is what you give and that the people who do best in life, the people who are happiest in life, the people who find life most fulfilling are not those who worry all the time about how much they get and how much they take. They are the ones, instead, who learn how to give and give and give. There's a wonderful paradox. One of the great paradoxes of life in many ways is that the more you give away, the more you end up getting in return automatically: the joy of giving and the joy of service, which is recognized in this particular part of the children's promise.

There's no particular cost involved here. There's no time frame. There's no onerous duty that the government will be saddled with. There's simply the notion of making the promise count. Let's realize what we're standing for as a Legislature. Let's take a stand. Let's take the Speech from the Throne and engrave it in legislation for the sake of our children.

So, Mr. Chairman, with those comments, I look forward to response from any and all MLAs. I hope they will find it in themselves to support this amendment. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on amendment A1.

Ms Blakeman: Right. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise in support of my colleague's amendment A1, which is essentially incorporating the detail that was found in the throne speech into Bill 1.

It was interesting. During the second reading debate on this I clearly remember the Deputy Premier talking about how as an ideology – and I hope I'm paraphrasing accurately here – the government prefers to have what she called a framework legislation and acknowledged that the Official Opposition preferred to have more detail. Indeed we do, and a big part of that is that it allows you to have something to measure against to see whether you are in fact accomplishing the goal. If you have too vague a framework, if it's not clearly outlined, then how do you ever establish what you were trying to do and whether you're achieving it in any way, shape, or form, whether you've moved towards achieving that goal?

In fact, I thought long and hard on the words of the Deputy Premier, and I thought: "Well, this seems to contradict some of the other things I see. Where have I heard someone arguing very strongly for clearly set out guidelines and measurements?" In fact, it's on page 3 of the Auditor General's report of 2001-2002, so the current Auditor General's report. Right at the very beginning it says Predominant Theme of Our Findings. I will just sort of skim through it, but essentially

government organizations need a systematic approach to manage risk. They need formal processes to explicitly link risks with controls and to ensure effective internal controls.

The government and certain . . . agencies would . . . have avoided weak internal controls if they had used formal risk management. This conclusion is based on the interrelationship of explicit risk [management], cost-effective internal control, and internal auditing.

Well, you can't do an internal audit if you have nothing to measure against, and the point is made by the Auditor General that poor risk management exposes Albertans to unnecessary costs.

Good risk management improves the government's ability to reach its goals.

I think that the idea that's presented behind Bill 1 is, in fact, a good idea, and I would like to see the government be able to achieve it, but without anything more specific in the bill I don't know how they can move ahead with the specifics of this or, indeed, for any of us to be able to look at the public accounts in a year or two from now or just look at the legislation and say: yes, this has been achieved. How? There's nothing that we're measuring against here.

So I commend the Member for Edmonton-Riverview for bringing forward a beginning of detail that needs to be in the bill by enshrining those five points found in the throne speech inside the bill. Again, I feel that this could be fleshed out again and further so that there is some detail from which we could gain a performance measurement, but I think this is an excellent start, and I urge the members of the Assembly to support amendment A1.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to address the proposed amendment to Bill 1.

I look, Mr. Chairman, at the similar promises made elsewhere, and of course I raised America's Promise in second reading. If you look at the web site, there's a fairly good description about Ontario's Promise, which is a similar document, and when you look at Ontario's Promise on the web site and you look at our bill, there's a striking difference in terms of clarity. Ontario's Promise has five

points, very straightforward. It says that there are five promises at the core of Ontario's promise. Each promise focuses on "the fundamental elements that are essential to the successful development" of children and youth:

1. A healthy start . . .
2. An adult who cares . . .
3. Safe places to learn and grow . . .
4. The tools to succeed . . .
5. A chance to make a difference.

That's very, very clear, Mr. Chairman, and I think it's much more consistent with America's Promise, which was the root document for the Ontario work and Bill 1, Alberta's Promise, that we have before us.

9:30

I think what is good about the amendment is that it takes those five ideas and puts them in the body of the bill. It's the kind of detailing of the promise that gives them some legitimacy that having them in the preamble doesn't do. I say that with the full knowledge that I've in the past often been critical of preambles or the lack of preambles in government legislation, but in this case I think that much of what is in the preamble belongs in the body of the bill. Even with our amendment and trying to be true to the bill as it's written, there is still a lack of clarity.

It's very clear.

- (a) giving children a healthy start and a promising future;
- (b) providing safe and healthy communities for children's growth, education and development

really incorporates (3) and (4) of what's in existence in Ontario;

- (c) ensuring that every child receives ongoing support, care and guidance from at least one caring adult in his or her life

is the second of theirs. They state it more simply and, I think, almost more effectively: "an adult who cares." And (d) in our amendment, "Offering children the chance to make a difference through volunteer activities and opportunities to serve others," they encapsulate in (5), "A chance to make a difference."

So even with these amendments, Mr. Chairman, one could ask that it be made clearer. I think the bill is the kind of bill that could have a great deal of influence on individuals and organizations in the province, and for that reason I think it's important that it be very, very clear. I think it could, as I indicated, be more concise, but I think there should be no doubt about exactly what the promise is that we are making to children.

I think that for even an outsider to look at the bill and to find out that most of the bill about Alberta's Promise consists of items and clauses that refer to the Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise – the activities of that council, the membership of the council, the staff of the council, the bylaws and meetings of the council, the annual report of the council, and the expiry of the mandate of the council – it's really quite astounding that that makes up the body on pages 2, 3, and 4 of the legislation, and the actual promises have to be teased out of the preamble.

I believe that the amendment is sensible, it's logical, and I think it gives to the body of the act the kind of substance that those of us who support Bill 1 would find much more in keeping with what we understand to be the intent of the bill. So with those comments, I would encourage the Assembly to adopt the amendment as proposed by our colleague from Edmonton-Riverview.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to make just a couple of comments with respect to the proposed amendment A1.

First of all, I'd like to thank the hon. members opposite for their interest in this and for making suggestions which in their view improve the bill. But in listening carefully to their comments, it seems to me that they have not given full reading of the whereas clauses at the beginning, which set out in general and in clear terms what the purpose of this legislation is. I think it's important to read these words so that it forms part of the record:

Whereas the Legislative Assembly of Alberta recognizes that children are our greatest resource;

Whereas the Legislative Assembly of Alberta is committed to building a province where children are valued, nurtured and given the opportunity to reach their full potential; and

Whereas the Legislative Assembly of Alberta recognizes that achieving these goals for children requires a commitment and effort on the part of all Albertans.

That is the purpose of this legislation. It is very clear. Yes, it is in general terms, but that was intentional. It was intentional that we not drill down into detail but rather in clear and general terms outline what the purpose of this is.

So while I appreciate the efforts of the hon. members and certainly in general terms they would be in accordance with the thrust of what this legislation is, I would urge my colleagues in the Assembly to vote against this particular amendment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on amendment A1.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I genuinely appreciate the response from the minister. Without bogging down in details, I guess our sense is that normally the preamble would lead to "therefore," and here's the purpose, and the "therefore" that follows in our reading doesn't make a promise. So I think there's a substantive difference there.

Frankly, in the preamble the whereas are honourable. I don't dispute that. I wouldn't dispute that at all. It

recognizes that our children are our greatest resource;

Whereas the Legislative Assembly of Alberta is committed to building a province where children are valued, nurtured and given the opportunity to reach their full potential,

and so on. Those are wonderful statements, but they are a preamble. They are the whereas that normally would lead up to the promise. Instead, what they lead up to is establishing a council. We were just wanting to follow the lead of the Speech from the Throne and put the promise right into the bill. So that's the intent of this particular amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I, too, will have an amendment that I will speak to later. I will take the opportunity to send it to the table now so that you have it.

Just a couple of points that I wanted to make in general debate while we're in Committee of the Whole on Bill 1. A couple of things are still concerning me in this bill overall. Without getting into the issue of the lack of specificity, which my amendment and a number of other ones are attempting to address, but speaking more generally, when we look at what was intended by the originating promise that came out of the United States and then was picked up in Ontario, the one in the U.S. was an all-party endeavour, not a partisan endeavour at all. This very clearly is a partisan endeavour, and I would like to see that widened up. If truly we are seeking the

support of the Legislative Assembly – and I think at one point the legislation actually does even mention that it is seeking that support – I think, then, that it should be more of an attempt to have it be all-party rather than be as partisan as what is spelled out here. So that’s an issue that continues to concern me.

9:40

The other issue – and, again, I brought this up during second reading and listened carefully to what members of the government said in refuting my point, and I’m willing to debate this issue further – is that in asking for a council to be put together of leaders of the corporate sector and of the community and the individuals, I think is how it’s actually worded in the legislation, clearly there’s an expectation that there is a fund-raising component to this bill and an expectation that the council would engage in raising funds, which would then be directed towards programs which will help children. My concern in all of this is that it’s a pretty tight fund-raising pool out there in Alberta right now.

We have some very good groups who currently raise money, and they have a great deal of respect behind their names; for example, United Way or Catholic Social Services, who work very, very hard to raise money to fund existing programs for children. This council now gets into competition with those organizations who are already working very hard to raise money in a limited pool. So we’re throwing another really big fish into quite a small pond, and my concern is that this council might be seen to be more prestigious, has the name of the Premier attached to it. If it moves money away from the good work that groups like United Way or Catholic Social Services are already doing and takes some of their money into the fund-raising pot or the coffers associated with this council, I don’t see how we’re further ahead, and I have real concerns about that.

I think at one point – and I’d asked for confirmation – I heard one of the members say that there was a hope, a desire that this Premier’s council would in fact increase the amount that the corporate sector and the individuals were donating by 5 percent. Well, where’s that 5 percent going to come from? I’d be really interested to see whether there’s a belief by government members that this is 5 percent in addition to all of the fund-raising that’s already going on out there for any number of excellent causes which benefit children directly or indirectly.

Through that we’re talking about fund-raising for things like children’s amateur athletics, even fund-raising for day care centres, other kinds of recreational opportunities for children, arts and cultural opportunities for children. I mean, there are already a lot of groups out there that are trying to provide this programming, and I’m not seeing where the additional 5 percent is going to come from without it taking away from the groups that already are out there. I don’t hear a concrete argument as to how this moves the lives of children in Alberta further forward. So I’m interested in hearing a response to that.

I had wanted to raise – and I’m not sure that I did – the issue about the budget and the salaries. I’m interested in hearing what is the budget that will be accorded to the operation of this council. There’s obviously an expectation that there will be staff. I’m interested in what the classification is that the staff would come in under and the commensurate salary level or range that would be attached to that. I’d like to get that answered, and even if you can’t provide me with the total budget numbers – maybe it’s coming when the budget is actually introduced by the Minister of Finance – you can certainly tell me the anticipation of whether this is going to be done by an administration 4 position or whether it’s going to be ranked into management or a deputy minister level. What’s the expectation there?

I think that my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview has already argued my concern that what’s in the preamble, as we all know, is unenforceable. It is considered in advance of the actual legislation. So interesting sentiments that are put forward but not anything that we can actually measure against, because it’s not considered part of the enforceable section of the legislation. But maybe there is a differing opinion on the other side.

Those are a couple of the issues that I have concerns about, and that is around the fund-raising. It is around: what can be measured from what’s being proposed in the legislation? What’s the budget that’s anticipated being associated with it? What’s the level of staffing that’s being anticipated here?

Now, I did send to the table a copy of an amendment that I would like to bring forward. Perhaps it’s possible to have that distributed at this time.

An Hon. Member: It’s done.

Ms Blakeman: It’s done. Oh, great.

The Chair: Okay. This is called amendment A2.

Ms Blakeman: And we’re calling it amendment A2. Thank you very much. That’s extremely expedient.

This amendment is moving that in section 3, which is addressing the activities of the council, a clause be added as (g), which is following the last one: to “develop recommendations that will facilitate the delivery of at least one nutritious meal a day to children through a program available in every school in Alberta.” So, again, this is our attempt to tie a very concrete activity that can in fact be measured and the success of it can be measured as we go through this.

One of the things that I notice in my schools – and all of my schools are classified as inner city, and we certainly know that a lot of these kids are coming from disadvantaged households and households that are working very hard to lift themselves out of that. Certainly we know that children who have an empty stomach don’t learn as well at school. They’re not as attentive. They don’t take in the information as well. We have found over time that it actually is a good idea for society to join together, government and agencies in the community, to in fact provide some nourishment to children because it does help them learn better and retain information and be able to move ahead. I’d like to see that added into this promise because it should allow us to do even more work.

One of the interesting things that’s been pointed out to me was a question that was asked, and that is: what’s the difference between the last day of grade 6 and the first day of grade 7? The answer is: the child is not provided with the same access to those hot lunch programs. So those programs are available from K to 6, in my understanding. Perhaps it’s changed, and I’d love to hear different, but once the youngster is in junior high or high school, the access to those programs is gone. There’s no longer a funding flow-through and an encouragement from government for those programs to exist for those kids. From what I’ve been told, I mean, you’re more likely to have a kid in junior high school that’s in a rapid growth stage or is much more in need of a lot of food than I think could be argued a child who was younger than that. So to cut them off arbitrarily I think can be causing great hardship, and if we’re trying to help these kids be involved in their community, to be taking in and maintaining what they’re being taught in school, then this is a way to do it that we know works.

9:50

I'll give you another example of how we know it works from my community, and it's part of that same question, just slightly paraphrased, being the difference between the last day of school and the first day of summer, and the answer is the same. There was no program that was available for those kids that provided them with any nourishment once summer rolled around. So they could be in grade 4 or grade 5 or whatever, and they went down to the park the first day of summer holidays, and that's it. There's nothing available for them. They started a program called Snack in the Shack, and it's been immensely successful, and again it's a partnership. There is some funding from the government, I think through Capital health authority, and the co-operation of a number of the service organizations that work in my community and in other communities. I'm sure that in Edmonton-Norwood or Edmonton-Highlands or Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview or Edmonton-Castle Downs and certainly in Edmonton-Centre there's the need for that.

So I'm urging people to consider adding this. I hear the reluctance from members of government who are not interested in providing any more detail in the bill, but I don't want to see this bill be a slogan bill. I don't want to see it be something that five years from now everybody goes: "Oh, yeah. Right. We had that, but it meant nothing. There was nothing in it. Nothing was ever done, and there was no way to ever call anyone to account, because there was nothing to call people to account for."

If you want to make that promise to children, I think we have to take the promise seriously, and we have to say what we're going to do and mean it, and for that to happen there have to be clearly laid out programs that are expected to happen and some measurements that are to be achieved, targets that go with that. Now, that all doesn't have to be written specifically into the legislation, certainly, but the outline of the specifics of what we're talking about does need to be in the legislation. Otherwise, I think it does become a bill that's simply a slogan or a blank cheque or an empty bill, and I think Alberta children deserve more than that.

So those were the issues that I wanted to bring forward in support of my amendment A2, which is asking to "facilitate the delivery of . . . one nutritious meal a day to children through a program available in every school in Alberta." I know that my colleagues are interested in speaking to this particular issue, so I will clear the way and sit down.

The Chair: No, please don't sit down. We'd like you to move the amendment.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, I'm sorry. I would like to move the amendment that's known as amendment A2. Thank you.

The Chair: Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to begin the debate on this amendment by reading from a recent book about poverty by one of Edmonton's best known authors. This is an excerpt from that book. I'm quoting the author's account.

One of my first interviews was with the principal of an inner-city school. It was an old three-storey brick building with creaky linoleum floors and small classrooms. My appointment was for noon and I got there just a few minutes early. We sat talking in her tiny second-floor office. Suddenly she got up from her desk and moved to the window. She motioned for me to join her. I pressed my head to the glass as she instructed and down below I could just barely see a little girl hiding under the stairs. Just then the noon bell went off. The little girl leapt to her feet, ran along the side of the

building, disappeared into a door, quickly reappeared and motioned across the schoolyard. Immediately, two small children, a boy and a girl, maybe five and four years of age, came running across the yard. All three vanished into the school.

The principal told me that the older girl, who was seven, was sneaking her younger brother and sister into the school's hot-lunch program. She did this several times near the end of each month. One of the new teachers noticed what was happening and, in a non-confrontational way, questioned the girl, who began to cry with shaking shoulders, deep sobs, and tears rolling down her face. There was no father in her family. Their mother had been sick in bed for months. They always ran out of food before the end of the month. The utility bill had to be paid; if it wasn't, child welfare would take the kids away from their mother. There was nothing in the house to eat.

Now, Mr. Chairman, if we're going to make a promise to our children, the least we can do is promise to give them a meal a day or at least a meal every school day – one meal, not three, not two, just one nutritious meal a day – and that's why we're making this amendment to Bill 1. If a promise is worth making, it's worth making specifically and it's worth keeping.

We might in this Assembly think that there aren't very many children in this province who go hungry, but the figures don't confirm that. Certainly, the majority of Albertans are well fed, and as the minister of health will agree, too many Albertans are too well fed, but at the other end of the spectrum too many Albertans and especially too many Alberta children are not fed enough, and malnourishment, undernourishment, is too widespread in this wealthy society.

Just to give you a sense of some of the figures on this – and there are, as we all know, many measures of low income. This is a subject of some substantial debate, and I'm just using one particular figure here, and I'll use another in a moment. In Alberta the prevalence of low income as a percent according to Statistics Canada: under 18 years of age from 1991 to the year 2000, year by year, it varied between a low of just over 10 percent to a high of 15.9, almost 16 percent, and translating that into actual numbers, we're talking anywhere from 90,000 to 140,000 Albertans under the age of 18 who are living in poverty. If we look at that by family unit, in two-parent families in the last decade anywhere from 8 and a half to 13 and a half percent of those families are low income. Those are families with children, two-parent families with children. If we go to female lone-parent families, shockingly almost 60 percent of those families are living at low income, and that has varied up and down. It's been as low as 30 percent, and in 2000 it was 38 percent. That's atrocious in this society. Let's see if we can do better. Let's make a promise to these people to do better.

Now, I've done some straightforward calculations and estimates on what this particular proposal would cost in its simplest form, and if there are, as I believe there are, 560,000 students in this province and if we only targeted this program to the half of those students who are in kindergarten to grade 6 – so let's say that's 280,000 students – and if we say that 15 percent of those students are living in conditions where they may not be getting nutritious meals, that's 42,000 children. Let's say that for a simple meal, maybe a container of yogurt and a whole grain sandwich, it's \$3. So that's \$126,000 to give one meal to each of those 42,000 children, and if we multiply that by the 200 school days, we're at about \$25 million for the year, substantially less than we subsidize the horse racing industry, and for that \$25 million we could ensure that every hungry child in this province gets at least one nutritious meal a day. What an amazing investment. What an amazing promise to fulfill to our children, and it is so doable. The schools are there. The teachers are there. The children are there. All that's lacking is the political will.

10:00

Let's think for a minute about what this would achieve. First of all, we're directly addressing children living in poverty and children going hungry. We're directly giving those kids food in their bellies. What does that do? Well, it helps them pay attention in school. It helps them learn. Perhaps, most importantly it teaches them that school is a hearth, that school is a place to go where you can get help, where you can get somebody who can care for you, somebody who feeds you. It turns school into a wonderful place for these children. At school it gives them a break from the otherwise impoverished conditions they're living in. The long-term benefit of that surely is that these kids instead of being turned off by school are turned on by school. School is a place where you go not only to get nourished in the mind but to get nourished in the stomach.

So it helps with learning. It entices children to love school. It helps them to pay attention. And do you know what? It will also help them to be healthier. These are kids who will have the adequate vitamins and minerals and calories to lead a healthy life. We all know, most of all I think the minister of health, who's here this evening to his full credit, the importance of something as simple as nourishment for a lifetime of better health. There certainly are very few greater threats to a lifetime of good health than poor diet, and here is a way that for \$25 million a year we can directly address that for tens of thousands of kids across this province.

Beyond that, what about the issue of justice? I'm not just talking here social and economic justice; I'm talking about the hard nuts and bolts of criminal justice. What happens to kids who when they are 10 or 11 or 12 are going hungry? Where are they going to turn? They're going to turn if they have no other choice to breaking and entering, to theft, to shoplifting, to petty crime. Where's that going to lead? Well, too often we know exactly where that leads. They end up on a path towards a conflict with the justice system, a path towards crime.

So those are some of the benefits that could come from taking this amendment seriously. I know the Member for Red Deer-North and the Member for St. Albert earlier this very evening talked about how much they value children. I hope that they're paying attention now because this is an opportunity to really stand up and be counted.

One of the promises in the promise that's in the Speech from the Throne, Alberta's Promise, is the promise to give children an opportunity to serve. I talked a few minutes ago about how wonderful that promise is because in the long run the happiest people are not those who are always in this world for what they can get but are in this world for what they can give. Well, this is an opportunity for us to give and for this government to give and for this government to be better because it has given.

So I hope – I hope – at least some of the members in the government benches will stand and support this amendment, an amendment of minimal cost, an amendment of substantially less cost than what we routinely provide to the horse racing industry, for example, and an amendment that in the long run, year by year by year, would make Alberta an unquestionably better society, a promise worth keeping.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert on amendment A2.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just want to rise to speak to the amendment and to suggest that the proposed amendment is to micromanage the work of the Premier's Council on Alberta's Promise. I will not be supporting the amendment. Although the previous speaker indicated that there are many ways in which we can serve children, provide for children, I do not believe

it is being specific in this particular bill by way of the amendment that is proposed by the Member for Edmonton-Centre.

I'm not supporting the amendment, simply because the intent and the construct of the act as proposed in Bill 1 specifically do lay down the framework whereby the council can operate. It does not indicate and should not indicate what the specifics are of every detail, the rationale, and how the council should perform in its role as a council attending to Alberta's Promise, which is the promise for our children. So while I believe that certainly one nutritious meal a day to children in our schools, not every school but in many of our schools, would indeed assist a number of children, I do not believe that the place for that kind of direction is to be inserted into Bill 1. Therefore, I will not be supporting it.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again I thank the Member for St. Albert for rising and participating in the debate. This is a House of debate. We are in committee. All of you will know that many times I've said that I'm happy to debate these issues in committee.

This amendment in my view is not in any way, shape, or form micromanaging. To say that we should provide one nutritious meal a day to children is not micromanaging. It seems to me to be a bare-bones minimum of a compassionate society. We don't say, for example, in here how the program should be specifically delivered. We don't micromanage it by saying what the menu should be. Micromanaging would be putting the parameters of the program in here in absurd detail. We are simply saying: let's set a standard of ensuring that every school child in this province for 200 days of the year gets a minimum of one nutritious meal. Clearly, the majority of Alberta children don't need this, but equally clearly there are probably 40,000 who do.

What in the world is wrong with setting down a minimum standard? We don't say how it should be delivered. We don't say how much should be spent on it. I did some rough estimates. If this is micromanaging, we'd better chuck out 95 percent of the legislation in this province. I cannot believe that this is micromanaging or that the Member for St. Albert sees this as micromanaging and uses that as a reason to block an amendment that has as its motive, as its sole reason for being giving kids one nutritious meal a day. I just cannot accept that reasoning.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to speak to the amendment. As members have probably surmised by now, Bill 1 was a topic of debate in our caucus, and in our decision to support it, I guess we looked at the bill and the great possibilities. We thought that the bill opened up in terms of making the lot of children better and in terms of creating conditions in which children could thrive and do better. That discussion both in caucus and informally resulted in a number of ideas coming forward that we hoped would make the bill better. I think as you've listened to the discussion and as you've listened to the amendments, the motives have been to try to make the bill better, to try to put some clothing on a rather bare-bones proposal, and to focus on additions to the bill that would truly make the promises tangible and would give anyone reading this bill and anyone attempting to adopt the ideas in the bill a good idea of what was intended.

10:10

The first promise: "giving children a healthy start and a promising

future.” I think this amendment speaks directly to that promise that youngsters would have a nutritious meal each day delivered through schools. Mr. Chairman, I think the Member for Edmonton-Riverview made the case quite eloquently and strongly in terms of the importance of nutrition in terms of that healthy start.

It’s also related to the second of the promises, and that’s “providing safe and healthy communities for children’s growth, education and development.” Part of that community in terms of youngsters’ development is one that would take on the responsibility to make sure that they were – not well fed. I mean, the amendment does not leave these youngsters in any way well fed. What it is is a minimum, a bare minimum that would ensure for most youngsters that at least once a day they were well fed. I think we’ve seen from programs that are in operation in some parts of our inner cities the huge difference breakfast programs make to youngsters and their performance. We’re certainly seeing there and have testimonials from teachers and parents in terms of the difference that providing those breakfast programs makes in youngsters’ ability to concentrate and to benefit from their participation in school experiences and instruction.

So it’s not an earthshaking proposal, Mr. Chairman. It’s one, as I said, that takes and extends the promise and puts something very concrete in front of people so that you can turn to this and say: “Yes. The promise is to get youngsters off to a healthy start, and this is the way we do it. One of the ways we do it is to provide a meal a day.”

I know it’s getting late, and our tolerance for amendments at this time of night seems to wane, but this is an important bill. It’s the first bill on the legislative agenda for this session, and it’s the Premier’s bill. We think it’s just got great possibilities, and we’d like to do what we could to make it better.

With those comments, I’ll conclude. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I said a few minutes ago, the tolerance at this time of the evening for amendments grows rather thin. I can’t miss the opportunity to do what I think is the right thing to do, and that’s to fully debate the bill and to put forward those ideas that we think make the bill a better bill. With that in mind, I’d like to propose an amendment to Bill 1, the Premier’s Council on Alberta’s Promise Act. I have the original here.

I’d like to move the amendment if I might, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: This amendment will be called A3.

Dr. Massey: I move that Bill 1 be amended in section 3 by striking out “and” at the end of clause (e) and by adding “and” at the end of clause (f) and by adding the following after clause (f): “(g) develop recommendations to attain an 80% completion rate for students entering primary education to finish secondary education.”

I think the amendment, Mr. Chairman, is straightforward. We want to make a promise to children that we will put forward the effort, the needed resources, and the enthusiasm that it takes to have 80 percent of youngsters who enter school complete high school. It’s a promise that has been worked on elsewhere. A number of jurisdictions now have set completion rates, goals for their learning systems. It’s consistent with, I believe, a motion that’s coming forward fairly quickly in this session that would have youngsters retained in high school to the age of 17 years. I think the intent is consistent with that in that we want youngsters to stay in high school to complete it successfully.

I think that if we look at the statistics, it’s rather disturbing. I know that we raised the issue of completion rates in the House some time back, and the Alberta high school completion rates, if I recall correctly, are some of the lowest in the country if not the lowest. I remember that at the time the Minister of Learning indicated that one of the reasons for that was the booming economy in Alberta, that youngsters were finding it very attractive to leave school and to enter the market because they could get jobs and they didn’t need to have completed high school to pick up a job and in many cases to be well paid. So the explanation for more of our students not completing was an economic one, that times were good. But we all know, Mr. Chairman, that Alberta goes through bust and boom, and even when things are booming, the evidence is abundantly clear that students who complete high school do much better in the long run, throughout their lives, than those who fail to pass that kind of minimum standard. So the amendment would have us set the goal of 80 percent.

I think you can look at subgroups in our population. For instance, if you look at aboriginal students, the completion rates for many of those students are really very abysmal. There are efforts, I know, in Edmonton to create a separate school to attract those students and to try to develop a culture in which they feel comfortable so that they would be encouraged to . . .

The Chair: Hon. members over there, would you please take your party outside and into the Confederation Room and carry on there as loudly as you wish but not in here. Was that message received?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

10:20

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was just indicating that there has been an attempt by some boards, particularly the Edmonton board, to create a school particularly for aboriginal students, and one of the big concerns that led to the creation of that was the failure of those students to complete high school.

So there are great efforts being put forward by boards to do as best they can to encourage students to complete high school. What better way to aid those boards, what better signal to young people than to have a statistic like this: 80 percent will complete high school in Alberta’s Promise, that’s backed up by the Premier. I think that by making that kind of a statement, we make an important cultural statement, and we start to establish some norms. For many students it’s taken for granted that they will complete high school and go on to some form of postsecondary education, but for other students that’s not the norm. They come from some subcultures and often from backgrounds where completion of high school is just not taken for granted, and I think that this could go some way in terms of, as I said, creating the norm that you must complete high school and that that has the support of the community.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I’d conclude. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Chairman. I move that we adjourn debate with respect to Bill 1.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Mr. Stevens: I move that we rise and report progress.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports progress on Bill 1. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I move that the Assembly stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 10:25 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

