

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, April 7, 2003** **8:00 p.m.**
 Date: 2003/04/07
 [The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Water Supply Standards

505. Dr. Nicol moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to create an organization similar to the Clean Air Strategic Alliance for Alberta's water supply to ensure that Alberta's water supply is maintained at the highest standards possible.

[Debate adjourned March 24: Mrs. O'Neill speaking]

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

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I had begun last time, I was speaking about Alberta being able to manage its water supply thanks to a relatively abundant supply of clean water that meets Albertans' needs and our desire to maintain a healthy aquatic environment, but Alberta is facing a number of pressures on its water resources. As our population levels have surged in the past decade, this province has seen rapid industrial, agricultural, and municipal growth. This has increased the pressures on existing water supplies, thereby potentially affecting the quality of surface water and certainly of groundwater.

As increased demands are placed on our water resources, the quality of that product becomes more relevant. As we monitor this situation more closely, we are learning more about natural pathogens in surface water that are difficult to treat by municipal water treatment facilities. These pathogens have the ability and the potential to cause waterborne illnesses such as those seen in Walkerton or North Battleford in recent times.

As the human population in Alberta increases, the uses of industrial water also increase. Understanding and monitoring the quality of surface water is very important, and in order to do this effectively, monitoring and testing methods need to focus on three categories of characteristics: chemical, physical, and biological. Surface water quality varies naturally throughout Alberta. Quality is based on differences in local conditions such as climate and geology, and water quality is also affected by human activities.

There are three major factors that affect water quality, all of which are subject to human influence. First of all, of course, the water quality; number two, the point sources; and number three, the nonpoint sources. Each of these factors represents an opportunity for water quality management, and water quality is ultimately the government of Alberta's responsibility. Thus we take this very seriously.

There is a growing demand for water in Alberta and a decreasing supply. There is also increasing uncertainty about the ability to predict water supply and of course its demand. Officials can estimate demand levels to a degree, but with uncertain weather patterns supply is more difficult to predict. Alberta has a significant amount of groundwater, yet there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of its groundwater resources. So certain basins in some areas of the province are nearing the limits of water allocation, particularly during dry periods when less water is flowing into the rivers and streams.

Alberta must continue to honour its commitments to Saskatchewan and Montana with regard to the amount of water that will flow into each jurisdiction. One can certainly appreciate that because of this characteristic water quality and quantity must be carefully tracked and monitored in this province. As many of my southern rural colleagues can attest, some economic opportunities are being lost in this area because of lack of sufficient water. With the water for life initiative that this government has introduced, Mr. Speaker, we strive to meet these demands with feasible solutions.

The point that is being raised here is that the hon. member's motion is a step forward in the process of improving our valuable environment, and this government is already undertaking such an initiative. Mr. Speaker, I am so very, very pleased to see that the hon. member of the Liberal opposition party is finally beginning to realize the merits of a Progressive Conservative way of thinking, and I'm happy to see that a Liberal has begun to articulate these perspectives on a clean air strategy that has already taken flight under the leadership of the Department of Environment, Clean Air Strategic Alliance.

It is for these reasons, Mr. Speaker, that I am in favour of Motion 505. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: There are only two minutes remaining. The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul in the two minutes that we have left.

Mr. Danyluk: Good evening, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad to have the opportunity to say a couple of brief words about Motion 505. It's not very often that we find ourselves in such agreement with the Official Opposition about how well a government initiative works. For that reason, I'd like to give my support to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East for the motion. I guess I would like to say that I think that when we do meet as government for an initiative, it is very, very positive, and again I would like to compliment the member opposite for his efforts and for our conjunction.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: In the time remaining, the hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure for me to rise tonight and to thank all of those who spoke on this motion. It's really important that we bring it forward and make sure that this kind of an approach reflects the kind of spirit that was in the water strategy that the minister made public in the debate period for this motion.

The interesting part of this, Mr. Speaker, is that I began my professional career doing water policy analysis in the United States, and some of the work we did was with some of the major commissions and congressional agencies in the United States from the National Water Commission, the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency. This kept me busy down there for about eight or nine years looking at what would happen to water, water quality, the issues of water availability, interbasin transfers, all of these kinds of things with economic models and spatial models of looking at water across the United States. At one time I was running the largest computer simulation model outside of the U.S. military.

So, you know, these are some of the things that reflect on the commitment that water and water management really have played in the focus that I've taken in a lot of my career. I'm not saying that now to indicate that just because this is a motion that I'm bringing forward here, that's going to be the end of my career by any means, but this is kind of the background that I can put to talking about how

important it is that we as a province really make a commitment to water, water quality, and all of the issues that the minister had in that strategy. I've had a chance in the intervening week to go through a lot of it. I can't say that I've read every word of it, but I've gone through a significant amount of it, and this is the kind of thing that we need to start.

We need to make that kind of a commitment to the water resources of this province and make sure that in the end there's strong public input but also a strong monitoring system in place, and this motion would in effect put in place a monitoring system that reflects what the minister has put into the structure of that water strategy. I guess it just kind of shows that in southern Alberta we've lived with water and water management issues for a long time, and when you get to thinking about them, there's one kind of solution that you need, and it comes out when you start trying to put together these kinds of strategies.

So it's the idea that in effect what we're going to have through this process is a strong commitment that water is important to our province and that we need to make sure that water plays a role in the future, helps our province reach into the future. We want to make sure that each one of us when we pick up a glass of water can say: this is quality. It's safe. The government has in place all the appropriate monitoring systems that will allow for Albertans to feel confident about that water system. You know, living just on the edge of Feedlot Alley, the idea of water, the impact on water, the relationship between economic growth in an area and water quality is kind of like everyday coffee shop talk in our area, and this is one of the things that people are always saying, that there is a balance, there is a way to make sure that water is a resource that we value, that we protect, but that it can be used as a major component in growth and the direction of our province.

8:10

You know, Mr. Speaker, I think that I want to just commend the minister on his water strategy initiative that was put onto the web site. I think it fits very well with the intent that I had with this motion, and I think that if we let this work through the process outlined by the minister, we'll have a really great opportunity for water and water protection in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 505 carried unanimously]

Provincial Education Savings Plan

506. Mr. Herard moved on behalf of Ms Graham:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to explore new means of helping students finance their postsecondary education including the establishment of a provincial education savings plan to supplement Canada's registered education savings plan.

Mr. Herard: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise today to introduce Motion 506 on behalf of the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. I'm quite honoured that the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed has asked me to begin debate on this motion, because she knows that I have more than a passing interest in this issue.

Motion 506 urges the government "to explore new means of helping students finance their postsecondary education." Mr. Speaker, one of the reasons that the Member for Calgary-Lougheed has brought this motion forward is because many families around the province are finding it increasingly difficult to provide for their children's postsecondary education. This is happening at a time when postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important

in this day and age if Alberta wants to continue to prosper. I think it's common knowledge that over 70 percent of all jobs in Canada require some form of postsecondary education. Today's economy is fueled by knowledge, and we must find ways to ensure that all Albertans can afford to maximize their potential and to maximize that knowledge.

Over the past 10 years the total cost of postsecondary education, like most other things, has been going up. When I refer to the cost of postsecondary education, I'm not strictly referring to tuition fees. There is far more involved in the cost of education than tuition alone. We often hear statements that refer to Alberta as having some of the most affordable tuition rates in Canada. This may be true, but what about all the other costs? Do we really have affordable postsecondary education when all costs are considered? The total cost of educating students includes other amounts such as university fees, fees like material and services fees, athletics and recreation fees, administration fees, and student union fees, which in and of themselves may also include a number of other fees. Students must buy textbooks, calculators, and other supplies, but of course it does not end there because for many students who do not live where they choose to attend, there's still room and board to disburse plus additional expenses such as transportation, personal allowance, and household expenses. For many families that all adds up to a significant financial burden and is among the reasons why many students throughout the province are having difficulties funding their educational needs or, what is perhaps more serious, are discouraged from attending at all. Now, granted, students can apply for student loans, but they may not receive the amount of support they really need.

We need to find new ways to encourage families to fund their children's postsecondary education, and, Mr. Speaker, that's what Motion 506 is about. It simply asks the government to explore new ways of helping students and their families fund postsecondary studies. Having said that, is it solely government's responsibility to fund postsecondary education, or is there a shared responsibility on the part of families to save for their children's education? Government already funds around 70 percent of the cost of postsecondary education, and in my view that's a significant contribution, but I believe what we must do is find new ways to encourage families to save for part of the postsecondary education costs of their children.

One of the possibilities that I've been working on for some time is ways to encourage a provincewide culture of family savings for their children's postsecondary education. One way may be for the government to institute a savings grant similar to Canada's registered education savings plan grant. The Canada education savings grant was established by the federal government, and it works by having government pay a 20 percent grant on the first \$2,000 of annual contribution made to eligible registered savings plans.

My research shows that fewer than 20 percent of Alberta students have an RESP. Just think what could be done if all of our children had RESPs. Studies show that 80 percent of children who do have RESPs go on to postsecondary training. This is significantly higher than our current experience with the number of grade 12 graduates that go on to postsecondary. As I understand it, we're at about 50 percent eventual participation right now of our grade 12 graduates in postsecondary. So this is something that is worth looking at.

The government of Alberta could institute a program similar to the one at the federal level. We could contribute to RESPs of a prospective student in an amount that would encourage families to match it and start a savings plan very early in the life of their children. This would clearly establish that postsecondary funding is a joint responsibility and would encourage a culture of saving within our families.

Another area that government should explore is revamping the student loan system. Is the current system doing the job? Are the parental income thresholds appropriate in all cases? What about support for part-time students, Mr. Speaker? What about additional costs of rural students or urban students that must move to a different location to pursue their education? These are all questions that must be considered if we want to have the best support for postsecondary education for all students regardless of where they live. Alberta's future economy and quality of life depend on it.

I look forward to the debate, and I urge all hon. members to vote in favour of Motion 506 today. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure for me to rise in the Assembly this evening and join the discussion and the debate on Motion 506. This motion urges the government, as the previous speaker has indicated, to explore new means of helping students finance their postsecondary education, and I believe it goes without saying that we all believe that postsecondary education in whichever form and shape it takes for each individual is indeed valuable not only to that individual but to the community at large and certainly to the strength of both the workforce and the thought force of all Albertans. So I stand in support of the motion because I feel that this exploration would offer valuable insight, and it is a very important initiative at this time.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the insight that the Member for Calgary-Lougheed has contained in her work on this motion. It raises some important issues that need to be addressed regarding student financing for postsecondary schooling, training, education.

8:20

This motion, in addition to exploring new measures, would also examine the establishment of a provincial registered education savings plan. Many of us have had the experience and fortunately been given the direction so that when our children were small we did invest in an education savings plan simply because we knew the money could be used, but I think there are other means and other multiple ways in which parents can of course look to the future on behalf of their own children.

So now more than ever education is extremely important. We all know that. It's important if we want to compete in our global knowledge-based society. However, postsecondary students are faced with increasing costs of tuition and educational materials. We know that. We know that the institutions, as we dialogue with both the students and the staff, realize that it costs more to educate more these days. I believe we must revisit our policies surrounding financial assistance programs for those who are pursuing postsecondary education because the benchmark for a basic education has indeed risen and risen in the last 25 years.

Alberta does have a comprehensive portfolio of flexible student finance programs. We know that, and available assistance ranges from bursaries and scholarships to both student loans and grants. But I feel that it is important to continually search for new and better methods and programs to assist those wanting to attend a postsecondary institution. I also believe that it is our responsibility as legislators to create an environment that enables individuals to plan and to provide for their own immediate families and their own futures, for that matter.

One possible measure the government could include in its study is provincial student loans for part-time students. We are in a society where many people learn on a part-time basis. They don't just learn

partly; they learn wholly. But often it takes a longer time, and it's well integrated into their work site, the workforce, and their family lives.

When student loans were first implemented in Alberta, they were done so in an effort to help low-income students deserving of entry into a postsecondary program to pay the associated costs of doing so. But it has become apparent that the costs to attend postsecondary institutions have risen in conjunction with and to reflect an institution's operating cost, and we know that as we see the fluctuation in the percentages that both the government, the private grants and assistance, and individual tuition contribute to the cost of educating students in our postsecondary institutions. So it's not only lower income families that are experiencing difficulties funding the education of their children but many middle-income families as well, and indeed we cannot forget that many individuals themselves need that extra assistance even though they are the main contributors to the financing of their own postsecondary education.

So as the system stands, part-time students cannot apply for provincial student assistance, and therefore the government, I think, should research the provision of extending the student assistance and changing the rules for provincial student loans because citizens of this province deserve at least the opportunity – and I stress that – to pursue the career of their choice and to contribute and benefit from the Alberta advantage.

Another possible provision that is highlighted in the motion is the establishment of a registered education savings plan program, which would allow savings to grow tax free until the student is ready to attend a postsecondary institution full-time. The Alberta government could provide a grant to RESPs to help future students save for postsecondary education, and this savings plan is favourable because the income accumulated on the contributions of the grant, as well as the grant itself, does not become taxable until the student uses the RESP to fund their education. Usually at that time, if attending school full-time, they have little income to claim and therefore would pay little or no tax on the RESP income.

Mr. Speaker, financial assistance for university, college, or a technical school education is a means of contributing to our economy as well as a way to help individual Albertans improve themselves, improve their communities, contribute to the knowledge-based economy that I believe we're moving into more rapidly than we sometimes admit, and this, in turn, improves our province as a whole. This initiative is about assisting young Albertans to get the education they need in order to compete in a global, knowledge-based economy dominated by technology, by advanced skills, and by superior thinking skills. I say superior; I mean in that sense advanced and quite sophisticated.

It is in Alberta's best interest to have an educated populace, a populace that is flexible enough to adapt to the challenges that they face in the workforce and in everyday life, because a strong knowledge base provides individuals with the skills to be innovators and entrepreneurs, and furthermore a well-trained workforce is important to the Alberta economy and significantly contributes to our productivity and capacity while developing innovative products. As a province we should do all we can to develop successful methods to help finance the education of those individuals who are committed to pursuing lifelong learning and who need that hand up and that assistance that will enable them to live a decent life, at the same time pursuing their education formally.

So, Mr. Speaker, I feel that an exploration of new measures and an examination of a possible registered education savings plan grant could alleviate some of the pressures that postsecondary students experience today. So I would like to again lend my support for this motion because the measures that are possible and that I've men-

tioned could increase finance accessibility for students hoping to attend postsecondary education. For this reason, whenever we give hope to someone and whenever we enhance the environment within their realm of possibility, when we can tell young people that there is a possibility that they can achieve what they want in order for them to be better citizens, I truly believe this is a good motion and I support it.

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 make a few comments about Motion 506 and to certainly support the mover and the intent of the motion. I think it's something that's long overdue. It's a piece of the problem that we in the opposition have tried to address with a motion. I believe it's a motion that's coming up, and I think it's an important motion.

One of the things that I think has really concerned us has been the perspective that has been taken on postsecondary education by the government, and that notion I think has been expressed by the Minister of Learning in the House a number of times, by other members of the government too, the notion that because only a small percentage of students go on to postsecondary education and that those students are the primary benefactors of that education, they, in fact, should bear the burden of paying for it. He points out, I think on a number of occasions – and I may have the wrong examples – that taxi drivers and people who are less educated, bricklayers and other people, end up paying taxes that support students in these institutions. What he omits in the argument, of course, is that those same taxi drivers and postal workers and all of us in fact are benefactors of having a well-educated citizenry, particularly the kinds of specialists that are developed at our colleges, universities, and technical institutes. The very highways and bridges we drive across, the expectations we have when we go to hospitals, the kind of care that we place our children in when we put them in our public school systems: those are all places where all of us, regardless of your occupation, benefit from having students pursue a postsecondary education and become the specialists that allow those services to be delivered to ourselves and for our families.

8:30

So, as I said, I was alarmed at the perspective, and if nothing else I hope that maybe Motion 506 will cause the government to at least revisit that perspective and their view of students. There are a number of things such a review could look at, in particular the place of grants. I think that most would admit that the Americans have a far, far more generous grant system to encourage students to participate in postsecondary education in that country than we have here. In fact, I recently read an article that indicated that a student south of the border with fairly good grades, average grades could expect to rely on the grant system to pay most of the cost of a four-year program at one of the public institutions there and certainly at the college level. So I hope that part of the review that is undertaken as part of Motion 506 looks very seriously at grants and the grant system.

I think the indications that such a review is needed are all around us, the most recent being the introduction of differential fees, I think a backward step in our province, first at the University of Alberta and then at the University of Calgary, where we're going to see in some faculties astronomical increases in the kinds of tuition that students are going to have to pay. With it, there's going to be the obligation for students to find ways to pay for them and ways to finance them. So this motion, I think, in light of that development is timely.

I think the fact that we're running food banks on our campuses is something that we should be ashamed of. That we have students that have to rely on that kind of a service is an indicator of the kind of financial position that students in this province find themselves in, a position that I think is really unnecessary.

There are a number of ideas that I hope, as I said, would be looked at with the motion should it be successful. One of the things that we've looked at in the opposition and have been promoting is the whole notion of contingency repayment plans so that students could repay their loans based on the kinds of occupations that they are employed in on graduation. So someone who's in an occupation that doesn't pay quite as well would have their loan payments adjusted to reflect that income as compared to someone who may have a higher earning job and be able to pay back a loan more rapidly.

I think there's an opportunity here to review our commitment that was made by Canada in 1976 at the United Nations where we along with a number of other countries agreed that we would move free education up a year at a time as finances permitted. So we would move to the first year of college being tuition free, to the second, third, and fourth until you got to the point where a student in the province could obtain a degree tuition free, much as they now secure their high school programs. I think what it did was cause all of us to reflect on what exactly we do to students. What is the magic between grade 12 and the first year of college or university or technical school? Why all of a sudden in grade 12 are you supported by the public tax system for that education, and when you turn a year older, that support is withdrawn and you're faced with some pretty terrific burdens when you look, as I say, at tuition and particularly at the new differential fees?

So I think that for a number of reasons it's a good motion. It's timely. I look forward to the motion passing and being acted upon. Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Cao: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise this evening to participate in the discussion, debate on Motion 506, exploring new means for helping students finance postsecondary education. I have a conviction in the human resource development of Albertans because I believe that our Alberta economic strength and quality of living depend on higher education. Investment in education brings multiple returns. Also, as the chair of the Committee on Lifelong Learning I have a deep interest in the subject matter, and I want to acknowledge the need to help Albertans to return and continue learning as their career changes. We can see all of this as a sound economic development policy for Alberta, and I have the feeling that the hon. Minister of Economic Development and the Minister of Human Resources and Employment agree with me on this point.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

Motion 506 would allow the government to look at new ways of helping students fund their education. Tuition costs are increasing every year. Students are encountering an overall rise in costs associated with attending postsecondary education, including increases in rent, food, labs, books, other supplies. Both the federal and Alberta governments do provide financial support to those attending postsecondary education on a full-time basis. However, the increase in costs to students calls for new measures to be explored and examined. New provisions for helping students finance their education equate to more students being able to afford postsecondary education. The Alberta government is dedicated to ensuring that postsecondary education remains accessible and

affordable to all Albertans. It is clear that this motion is consistent with the government's commitment.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta Learning, under the leadership of the hon. Minister of Learning, continues to ensure that our excellent education system is sustainable and remains so to meet the current and future needs of students. The government provides financial aid where cost may be a barrier for postsecondary education. The total provincial and federal assistance to Alberta students is forecasted to be approximately \$470 million. The government provides funds to students through a variety of scholarships, grants, bursaries, and loans. Postsecondary students who receive Alberta student loans are also eligible for loan relief in their first year and after their final year of study. These benefits are applied only against Alberta student loan funds.

The mentioned programs show the government's commitment to supporting and assisting students with costs associated with postsecondary education. However, it is always important to continue to search for new measures and provisions which may lead to innovative approaches to student assistance. It is in the public interest for all Alberta residents to have reasonable access to postsecondary education and training. Students should not be denied the opportunity to attend postsecondary institutions due to their lack of financial means. However, we need to find a balance of student assistance programs that are affordable for the government and for the students. Motion 506 allows the government to explore possible new alternatives.

8:40

It is important that we do not underestimate the opportunity we have to better the lives of those Albertans who have strived to better themselves. We have the ability to provide educational opportunity to individuals who might think they do not have the chance to get a specific type of education and training. Mr. Speaker, if there is a way that we can make it easier for Alberta students to access financial assistance and attain the education they desire, we will benefit as a province by equipping these individuals to contribute to our vibrant economy. This motion does not outline any firm measures but rather is flexible to study the entire issue and is not held within a boundary with only one provision. Motion 506 is able to examine a variety of different ways to assist students with funding for their postsecondary education.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 506 hopes to explore new measures to help students finance their postsecondary education. This initiative would allow a possible provincial registered education savings plan, for example, to assist students in financing their education. New funding alternatives could possibly help more Albertans to pursue a specific career and those who may have otherwise abandoned postsecondary schooling and training.

I want to commend the MLA for Calgary-Lougheed for bringing this issue forward. I support this initiative and urge all my colleagues to vote in favour of Motion 506 and the exploration of possible new means to help students finance their advanced studies.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to join the debate on Motion 506 and add what I believe are constructive and effective ways to help students afford their postsecondary education. The escalating costs related to going to school are not going to slow down. Tuition will continue to rise, but so will other expenses such as rent, utilities, textbooks, and food. As Alberta continues to grow, the cost of living will continue to rise. There are

ways to protect students and encourage others to pursue postsecondary education. Some people may shy away from pursuing higher learning because they feel that they can't afford the expense. It is true that school isn't cheap, but it's also a fact that postsecondary education leads to bigger and better opportunities for graduates.

Mr. Speaker, many of the options and ideas provided during this debate include modifications to Alberta's student loan system, but I believe that Motion 506 provides an opportunity for this Assembly to look at ways to reduce expenses for students rather than injecting more money into the student loan system. There are many ways to help students afford university besides more funding for student loans.

First of all, Mr. Speaker, I think it would be a good idea for this government to explore the viability of encouraging and sponsoring registered education savings plans. RESPs have become enormously popular for a number of reasons. The federal government's Canada education savings grant matches RESP contributions up to \$2,000 per year.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Mr. Cernaiko: Two thousand dollars per year.

As we all know, postsecondary education has become increasingly expensive. According to Statistics Canada university tuition fees have increased 126 percent in the last 10 years. Mr. Speaker, based on the projected cost of postsecondary education, RESPs may be the best idea to help fund postsecondary education in the long run but do little to help students right now. However, I have a few ideas that will help students who are already in school or who are planning to attend in the future. Some of these options include reducing the amount for student housing, looking at more campus-style housing, and finding ways to slow down the escalating prices of textbooks.

I have learned that there's a need to create opportunities to develop more secondary suites in Alberta. These secondary suites do not have to be derelict housing, as some critics would suggest. I believe that the Alberta government should encourage municipalities to create more R2 zoning, which would allow more secondary suites. These suites could substantially reduce the amount of money needed for housing.

For students not living at home, living expenses can easily exceed \$6,000 over an eight-month school year. I know of several students who take a class and try to sell their textbooks back to the bookstore to cover some of the expenses of future purchases, but a problem arises when a professor chooses to use the most recent version of the same book. This becomes a major expense for students, who are basically forced to pay top dollar for an identical book. I believe that utilizing SuperNet would reduce the need for students to buy new versions of the same book, and I, Mr. Speaker, personally went through this same issue some 25 years ago at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.

Rather than increasing the minimum wage, Mr. Speaker, the government could provide an earned income tax credit. I understand that it is not this government's policy to provide an abundance of tax credits because Albertans already enjoy a low-rate broad-based system, but this tax credit would benefit students who work part-time while attending school. Under this system, used a great deal in the United States, the government would reverse-tax low-income earners attending school. The earned income tax credit is a refundable tax credit for low-income earners. The United States federal government designed this system to help offset the burden of social security taxes and provide an incentive to work. This Assembly should consider a similar program for students working part-time who earn less than \$10,000 a year. This system would reward those students with the

time management skills to work a few hours a week while going to school. Rewarding work may also encourage students to be less dependent on the student loan system.

The American program also allows employees with children to receive an advance on their credits through their paycheques. The employee and employer fill out a form that allows the employer to pay part of the credit throughout the year. Again, Mr. Speaker, this program could be adopted for postsecondary students struggling to make ends meet. Earned tax credits would reward students working part-time and offer incentive for students to gain employment. Most importantly, the program would keep more money in the pockets of students, money that would not have to be paid back to the government. They could earn \$7 an hour but then get topped off on the employer's payroll.

Mr. Speaker, I believe and I realize that the ideas proposed are not the conventional solutions for postsecondary students, but these policies would send a message that students are valued, these policies would also show the students that their concerns are heard and are being addressed by the Alberta government, and finally these alternative methods for alleviating the financial barriers for pursuing higher learning would encourage more Albertans to go to school. These ideas should at least be explored as asked in Motion 506. Lowering expenses is the same as giving more money to students. These strategies may save students and taxpayers in the long run. Motion 506 is a step in the right direction and is a motion that we must all support.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have some concerns with this particular motion as we see it before us. I don't think that it necessarily addresses the real problems. I think it's skirting around at the symptoms once again. [interjection] I know that that's not a view shared by all of my colleagues, but I really have to put my concerns on the record. Just because he's the Learning critic and a professor who writes textbooks, doesn't mean he's always right about everything.

8:50

Here are my concerns. My concerns now are in terms of tuition fees and getting kids into postsecondary education, which really is our goal: to get as many kids in as want to go. First of all, access to student loans is a huge problem. I know that the minister has told us repeatedly that most appeals are won and that the criteria these days is for a combined family income of \$50,000 as a ceiling for people to be able to apply, but it really isn't enough in some families. Because of whatever kinds of circumstances kids can't access the loans. They still want to stay at home, which we should be encouraging if we're family oriented, and they can't get the money. So it doesn't matter how much the tuition is if they can't access money for it right now. Sure we can set up another kind of plan for savings, for contributions, but that is not the circumstance of every family. In many families there isn't the extra \$50, \$100, \$75, \$25 a month to put into plans, and there is a system right now that works quite well.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I think we have to start addressing the real systemic problems in the system in terms of kids being able to access education, and I'm not convinced that this motion is the right way to go. I think we need to put in a program where everyone who wants a student loan can access it. They may put a limit, then, on what the remission

amounts are based on combined family income, but if the family doesn't feel that they can afford the tuition fee, then let the student access the money in some fashion so that we can get as many kids that want to go into the system. That is, I think, our primary responsibility as parliamentarians, and I'd like to see us do that, not put in another level of plans that kids have to learn about and apply to before they can get there. It isn't about making it harder to get educated. It's about making it easier to get educated, and I haven't heard any convincing arguments so far to say that that will be the case with this particular motion. So I think, Mr. Speaker, that I will not be supporting it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and join the debate on Motion 506 this evening. The motion is one that must be seriously considered by this government. I think that this motion shows this Assembly that many of us in government have to realize that postsecondary education is an important issue that must be addressed.

It seems that over the past couple of years the majority of focus has been on the kindergarten through grade 12 system and not on the postsecondary system. This has caused much unrest in the postsecondary student population. Students have demonstrated, asking for their fair share of the funding pie. Well, Mr. Speaker, I believe they get their fair share of the funding pie; however, only on paper. I feel that we as a government give the postsecondary education system plenty of money to use, but I don't feel that it is used to its full advantage. That is why Motion 506 should be supported. It gives us an opportunity to sit back and look at where we are spending the taxpayers' money.

As the motion urges the government to explore better ways of helping students finance their postsecondary education, I believe the best way of helping students is to take a look at where we are spending these resources. I am sure that this government could find innovative ways and investigate different ways of allocating its resources to students. I do not want to increase funding, but I do believe that throwing money at problems doesn't solve anything. It would be more prudent for us to review our policies to ensure that we are doing all we can with what we allocate.

We keep hearing of these stories, that they are not as bad as we are told; they are exaggerated. Mr. Speaker, if things were as positive in the postsecondary system, why are we hearing of increasing cases of students not having enough money for food and shelter? Why are there so many students who say that they have to go to the food bank so that they can eat? The counterargument that the stories are exaggerated is absolutely ridiculous. There are students at universities and colleges that are struggling, and I feel that it is time we looked at or explored new ways of helping out because there are challenges.

For example, I heard a story of a young man who attended a university in southern Alberta. This young man prepared for his third year by working in a lumber yard during the four-month break and saved for the upcoming university year. His parents had too high an income for him to get a loan. He didn't have the grades for scholarships and he wasn't poor enough for grants or bursaries, so he had to make sure he saved enough for two semesters.

After the summer he had made what he felt was enough to get him by. His savings totaled a similar amount as the year before, and since that year's income covered expenses, he felt his third year would be tight, but he could get through. However, when he arrived at university he quickly discovered that he might run into some difficulties as there were some significant price increases. First of

all, the price of the textbooks went up dramatically as many of his classes required the newest editions of the texts, and therefore buying used books was not an option as it had been in the past. As well, there were increases in fees that pushed up the amount that he had to pay before he got into his first class. The student was taking five classes per semester, and the amount he paid was quite a bit higher than the year before. He did have a small job with the students' union as an elected member, so that brought in a little bit of money, but he could not work at another job because he was a full-time student and his classes required night dedication. So working was not an option.

As his year started, the young man quickly realized that he was going to run out of money. With about a month left before the end of the school year his early realization became reality, and he was broke with one month to go. This came as a bit of a shock as he had lived no differently than in the previous year except that the costs had increased around him out of control, and subsequently he ran out of money. Now, this young man happened to be from an upper middle-class family, and his parents helped him, and inevitably he got through his university year. However, this problem is not uncommon, and the ending is rarely as positive.

Young people who don't have their parents to fall back on can find themselves in a stressful situation at the same time as they should be studying for their finals. The cost of postsecondary education seems to increase every year, and it is very difficult for students to save enough money to get through an entire year. This is why we need Motion 506. We need to find new and innovative ways to help these kinds of students get through at least four years of education.

I urge all members to vote in favour of Motion 506. [interjection] Just as I was getting to the good part. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The time limit for consideration of this item of business on this day has now concluded.

9:00head: Government Motions

Amendments to Standing Orders

17. Mr. Zwozdesky moved on behalf of Mr. Hancock:
Be it resolved that the Standing Orders of the Assembly be amended as follows.
- (1) Standing Order 7(1) is amended by adding "Tablings to the Clerk" after "Tabling Returns and Reports."
 - (2) Standing Order 37.1(2) is amended by striking out "Tabling Returns and Reports" and substituting "Tablings to the Clerk."
 - (3) Standing Order 58(5) is amended by striking out "immediately after Orders of the Day are called" and substituting "not later than 3:10 p.m. provided that Orders of the Day have already been called."
 - (4) This motion comes into force April 7, 2003.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. These changes are the result of much consultation with the opposition parties and the government. The main change represents an improvement – some would call it a fix or a repair – to a long-standing procedural matter regarding Committee of Supply when it occurs in the afternoons.

Mr. Speaker, in closing I would ask for the support of all members in the Assembly regarding this motion, and I would like to thank the opposition parties for having helped draft some of the amendments and improvements as enunciated by me just earlier this evening.

With that having been said, I do look forward to the recognition and support for this important motion that does bring in some significant improvements.

Thank you.

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the change we see there was our excellent idea, we will of course support it.

[Government Motion 17 carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Third Reading

Bill 22

Child and Family Services Authorities Amendment Act, 2003

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

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to third reading of Bill 22, the Child and Family Services Authorities Amendment Act, 2003, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Children's Services. As previously mentioned in the House, the proposed amendment to this bill is very straightforward. It removes the stipulation of a maximum number of members that may sit on a child and family services authorities board. This change aids in the amalgamation of the child and family services authorities from 18 to 10 that is being implemented. The amendment is good news because it allows for the flexibility to meet governance needs and ensures adequate community representation on the boards.

I want to comment briefly on some of the points raised during discussion in Committee of the Whole. The child and family services authorities were originally formed based on extensive consultation with Albertans. More than 3,000 Albertans from 65 communities were consulted. A consensus from the consultations was that the system of services for children had to change to include decision-making that addressed issues of local children and families. Such a service delivery system was created and exists today. This foundation will not change through amendments in Bill 22.

Mr. Speaker, local presentation will be enhanced because some of the 10 new regions will represent larger, more diverse geographical regions, and therefore boards will benefit from expanded membership. If a particular region is large in size and needs more board members to sufficiently meet the governance model in that child and family services authority, then that would be permitted.

The hon. Minister of Children's Services traveled the province, Mr. Speaker, consulting with Albertans late in 2002 and early in 2003 about the issues surrounding CFSA amalgamation. Stakeholders were assured that boundary changes are not only a chance to improve the governance structure but will further entrench community involvement in service delivery for children and families. For example, family and community support services will play more of a vital and formal role with the new CFSA boards, and we will build on existing community partnerships for effective local decision-making.

A concern was raised in Committee of the Whole about the aboriginal pillar relating to child and family services authorities. Mr. Speaker, Children's Services remains committed to the aboriginal pillar through its regional governance structure, and in addition to aboriginal board members each of the CFSA boards will have one aboriginal co-chair.

Reference was also made to a question surrounding administrative

efficiencies when dealing with large regions. Mr. Speaker, having 10 regions is not going to be more costly. We will be utilizing the built-in infrastructure already established through the smaller regions. Our vision is for these boards to be boards of influence. They will be more proactive in building community networks. It will be the job of the boards to serve all outlying areas and to create stronger community networks that will provide input into policies, strategic directions, and services for children, youth, and families.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to move third reading of Bill 22 because I know that it will allow the flexibility to determine the size of a board based on the specific needs of individual regions.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Massey: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Just a comment or two at third reading. I was pleased to hear the member on behalf of the minister talk about the makeup of the boards and the boards including aboriginal representatives. It's something in the information that we haven't had. I go back to the forum First Circle: Uniting for Children that was held in 1999, and one of the recommendations at that forum was that there be at least three youth representatives appointed to each of the then 18 regional child and family authorities and that this also be done to school boards and youth justice committees. It's a question I hadn't asked at Committee of the Whole in terms of the makeup of the boards, and I would be interested if the minister has an outline of the kinds of groups that must be included on each of the boards. I think it would be in the interests of all of us to have that shared with the Assembly. I hope that that might be done at a later date.

With that, I think I'll conclude, and we'll be supporting Bill 22. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo to close debate.

Mr. Cenaiko: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to close debate on Bill 22.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo has moved on behalf of the hon. Minister of Children's Services third reading of Bill 22, Child and Family Services Authorities Amendment Act, 2003. Does the Assembly agree to the motion for third reading?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Second Reading

Bill 23

Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act

[Adjourned debate March 10: Dr. Massey]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to second reading of Bill 23, the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act. I outlined the bill during our debate on second reading on March 10. I'd like to briefly go through some . . .

Speaker's Ruling Closing Debate

The Deputy Speaker: I'll have to check with the table, hon. member. My record shows that Red Deer-North has already spoken once to this bill at second reading, so the second one is not permissible. It was the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods that adjourned it.

Mrs. Jablonski: I'll close the debate.

The Deputy Speaker: I think so. Yes, that would close debate. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before the next election everyone in here will figure out what the rules are. It's going to be just fine.

Debate Continued

Ms Carlson: I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak in second reading to Bill 23, the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act. It's a bill that we've had an opportunity to send out to a few stakeholders and get some of their comments back. What this bill does is create a stand-alone act to provide services that were previously delivered under a specific section of the Child Welfare Act. We've raised a few concerns. We've had a few stakeholders who say that there aren't too many issues, and we've had some others who say that there are a lot. But, in essence, what it comes down to is that it seems like, as usual with government bills, the devil's going to be in the details, and the issues that we'll see as it rolls out will be within the regulations themselves.

9:10

We do have some very specific concerns that were brought up with regard to therapeutic services that are outlined in this particular act. The concerns that were raised were that there was no place in the act that actually instructed the director "to seek out either assessments or treatments which rely on evidence-based research." This is a professional in the field who gave us these comments, and I think that they are actually quite interesting and should be taken into consideration by the minister, and we hope that when we get into committee, she will get back to us on her interpretation of this particular concern that's being brought forward. This person talks about an analogy to medicine is that

it is demanded of the medical profession to practice within specific diagnostic and treatment guidelines developed on the basis of evidence-based research. No such demand is placed upon most non-medical therapy services provided to children with disabilities, even when such research is available [in such areas as] the provision of Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention . . . programs for children with autism.

So that's a problem. If we have an ability to go to evidence-based research, then clearly it seems to me that that's where we should go, but it isn't required as it stands right now. So they're not instructed to seek out and use "evidence-based treatments when they exist," and "no such demand is placed on the service providers."

What happens then is you may get less than optimal outcomes, which is not what we want when we're talking about kids, and certainly not what we've heard the minister ever talk about in this House. So what happens is that when they don't have those kinds of guidelines to work with, then the outcome is a lack of instruction. It means that those people who are rolling out the rules, the directors, aren't responsible for even knowing if the treatments exist and

what they would entail. So what this person is saying is that a great deal more structure is required in this particular area.

They go on to talk about:

The reason for pointing out this issue is that a lack of instruction to directors ensures that, at best, developments in the delivery of services to children with disabilities will be fragmented and not always moving in a positive direction.

So these days when we see cutbacks, financial constraints in programs, and we want to essentially get the best bang for the buck, that's not going to happen if you don't have really good plans laid out for how these kids are handled within this system.

He goes on again to give another medical comparison, and he talks about how "health would not be anywhere as good as it currently is if the medical establishment followed such wide open policies as suggested in this legislation." I think that is a very good comparison. There are very structured protocols in medicine, and he's saying that there is no reason why there couldn't be very structured protocols in this particular service to children with disabilities. So if the minister could tell us what the plan is there.

So that is exactly the issue that comes up in terms of the problem being with the regulations. We need to know with some certainty up front that there's a large framework built within the system so that as events unfold, there is a structured format or protocol to follow with decision trees helping to determine what the next stage of therapy can be. It is possible in this particular field because there is enough documented evidence to do this. He is concerned that this doesn't show up anywhere in this particular bill and that there are enough experts in the field to be able to determine treatments and options. Often what will happen is that directors will turn for information to whom they think is an expert, and it may not be as comprehensive or the best possible option. So this is, I think, something that needs to be talked about.

There's also, then, the issue that comes up in terms of regional autonomy and questions of who you go to there and who decides what the next stage of the protocol is. That's a problem when we see what's happened in this particular case, where there's a lot of regionalization happening and there isn't a comprehensive kind of framework from which decisions are being made. Some regions will have better access to resources and expert advice than others. There needs to be more structure within the bill. I don't think it's enough to leave it to the regulations. So if we can get the minister to comment about this when we get into committee, I think it would be very helpful if she can give us some idea. We've seen other bills where the regulations have been posted on the web site for people to take a look at and review, and it would be very helpful, I think, if we could see some of that happen with this particular bill.

There's always a bit of concern and apprehension when we change legislation that deals with children. We want to know that it isn't an experiment, that there are good, substantial reasons for proceeding in the fashion that we are, particularly when we talk about family support for children with disabilities, where there are often other kinds of extenuating circumstances in the family situation which means sometimes that the families themselves don't have access to enough resources to do the research themselves. They have to rely often on the system for guidance, and we need to ensure that that guidance is provided in the most comprehensive fashion; that is, provided by experts, that there are protocols that will be followed which will ensure that the needs of the children come first and foremost, that we're not looking at experimentation, that we're not looking at cost-cutting measures, that we're looking at providing the best possible service for these youngsters.

So with those concerns I'll wait and see in committee what the minister has to say about this particular bill – or perhaps the Member

for Red Deer-North can address some of them in her closing comments today – and make sure that we're moving forward with caution in this particular area. I think those are all of the comments I have at this time, and I'll wait to see what other people have to say on this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any comments or questions?

I wonder if we might have unanimous consent to briefly revert to Bill 22.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Third Reading

Bill 22

Child and Family Services Authorities

Amendment Act, 2003

(continued)

The Deputy Speaker: When we were finishing off Bill 22, the vote went in favour of third reading of Bill 22, and we have one more step to go.

The Clerk: Bill 22, Child and Family Services Authorities Amendment Act, 2003, is now read a third time.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Second Reading

Bill 23

Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act

(continued)

The Deputy Speaker: Okay. Are you ready to close debate, hon. Member for Red Deer-North?

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very happy to be able to close debate this evening on Bill 23, the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act.

First of all, I'd like to briefly go through some of the issues that were raised during the discussion in second reading. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods asked for information about the consultation process with communities. This legislation has been developed through extensive consultation with and participation by parents of children with disabilities, community stakeholders, advocates, health professionals, and service providers. The Children's Services ministry will continue to work closely with parents and community partners in the implementation of this new and innovative program for disabled children and their families.

9:20

There was a concern that the bill medicalizes disabilities and that doctors are in charge of the medical diagnosis on which the determination of a disability is based. The proposed legislation does not adopt a medical model of disability. On the contrary, the provision of therapeutic services for a child will be based on an assessment of the child's ability to function in normal daily living. This approach is very clearly articulated in the bill.

The provision of family support services will be based on an initial determination that the child does indeed have a disability as that term is broadly defined in the legislation. However, there is no requirement that confirmation of the child's disabling condition or impairment be made by a physician. We clearly heard from stakeholders

that confirmation of the child's disabling condition should come from a medical professional qualified to make that particular diagnosis and that there should be flexibility in terms of the nature and level of detail of the diagnosis. The legislation provides for this flexibility.

An issue was also raised regarding the definition of disabilities. The definition of disability in the legislation is broad and is intended simply to identify those children and families the legislation is intended to serve. The definition applies only in the context of this legislation. It does not have the effect of redefining disability as set out in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

There has been an assertion that the act makes provision for income testing, which is alleged to be a departure from the original philosophy of the handicapped children's services program. This legislation recognizes and values the ability and responsibility of parents to care for and support their children. Stakeholders indicated to us very clearly that they do not want a financial assistance program. They want and need a program that supports them in fulfilling their responsibility as parents and meeting the extraordinary needs of their disabled children. This legislation will provide that support. The legislation does not provide for income testing. Rather, it will ensure that necessary supports are provided to families based on the particular extraordinary needs of that family and their ability to meet those needs. Expectations regarding parental cost sharing will be reflected in regulations developed in consultation with parents and other stakeholders. These expectations will take into account a parent's financial abilities and will ensure that cost sharing does not result in financial hardship to families or prevent access to necessary services.

In regard to the issue of the separation of family support services and therapeutic services we heard from stakeholders that family support services and therapeutic services are very distinctive kinds of services and that this distinction should be reflected in the provisions of this bill. Family support services are based on the families' needs and will support families in meeting the needs of their disabled children. The intent is to preserve and strengthen the family's capacity to promote their child's healthy growth and development. Therapeutic services are focused on the needs of the disabled child. The nature and level of service will be based on a functional assessment of the child.

Mr. Speaker, as I have said, we have consulted extensively with stakeholders about this legislation. The Alberta Association for Community Living has called this proposed legislation an historic moment in our country and has in fact commended the hon. Minister of Children's Services for her continuing commitment to involve families in the implementation of this legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I'm very pleased to move second reading of Bill 23.

[Motion carried; Bill 23 read a second time]

Bill 24
Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003

[Adjourned debate March 10: Mr. Cenaiko]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak to second reading of Bill 24, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003. During our discussion on March 10 regarding second reading, I outlined the background of the review process for Alberta's Child Welfare Act and some of the changes being recommended in this bill. Recommendations for legislative changes have

placed greater emphasis on and accountability for the safety and well-being of children; permanent placements for children; the involvement of children and families in decision-making; the importance of respecting all cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and religions; and the importance of supporting youth who are in transition to adulthood.

Bill 24 will amend Alberta's child welfare legislation to improve the lives of children, youth, and families, Mr. Speaker. It will also strengthen the ability of the Children's Services ministry to support Alberta's children.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move second reading of Bill 24, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003.

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

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to make some comments at second reading of Bill 24. I appreciated the overview that the Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* provided the last time the bill was before the Assembly. The speaker at that time made a number of points about the legislation, and it prompted me to go back to the review that that member had been responsible for conducting for the government and the kinds of principles that were outlined in that review. Because we're in second reading and it's our opportunity to examine the principles on which the legislation is based, I think it's appropriate that we look at those principles and then, as we proceed to Committee of the Whole, make some judgments as to whether the principles as enunciated really are carried out in the details of the legislation. So I'd like to just visit some of those principles.

One of the very first recommendations has to do with the primary consideration of any legislation, that if there's going to be legislation amended or redeveloped, the focus had to be primarily on the impact of those changes on children and on their families and that it had to promote the best interests and the well-being of children. I think it's a principle that we can all agree upon, and it's one that I'm not sure is consistently carried out in the legislation. As I said, there'll be an opportunity when we move to committee to look at some specific instances where I believe that that may not be the case, but certainly it is a principle that's found in similar kinds of legislation. It's consistent with the kinds of things that were part of the Children's Forum, and the recommendations of the Children's Forum were very much in the spirit that any changes, any action that the government undertook had to promote the best interests, the protection, and the well-being of children. So it was the first principle that was recommended by the review, and it's a principle that we're going to be very vigilant in making sure the legislation actually reflects.

The second principle is one that I believe, in looking at some of the submissions, there was some disagreement about. The second principle that was recommended from the review was that "parents are responsible and accountable for providing their children with adequate care and supervision and ensuring their safety, protection, and well-being" and are "responsible for seeking support." There is a "but" applied to that principle as it was recommended, and that "but" was that it "should be clear that the best interests and safety of the child must take precedence over parental and community rights when children are in need of protection." So it seems to me that with this principle as it was recommended from the committee, there has been some discussion whether that obligation of those parents should take precedence over the best interests and the safety of children.

9:30

It says in the principle that that is the case, but by including the phrase and trying to put that burden on children, there has been

concern expressed that the children's best interests are going to be forfeited in some cases to trying to hold parents responsible for what we would hope they would take on as their responsibilities for their own youngsters, but we know from experience that that's not the case. So the principle that was enunciated is one that, again, is reflected in the legislation, and it's the whole role of parents and their responsibility that I think we have some questions about in terms of the details of the bill.

The third principle that the legislation is based on is that the legislation should be clear that any decisions that are made about children and family have to take into account their cultural, their spiritual, their religious, and their social heritage. It goes on as a principle to expand upon that, indicating that they have to maintain ties with extended families and community members where possible. And that – I go back to the Children's Forum – was a huge, huge issue in that particular forum in 1999, and that of course is with respect to aboriginal children. We've seen the kinds of difficulties in the province trying to work with those principles and the very sad things that have happened to children as a result of trying to adhere too rigidly to that principle.

We can all agree that that's the way it should be, but I think that at some point it has to be tempered with reality. We have to make sure that children are not sacrificed to a principle that insists that they be kept attached to a particular cultural or religious or social heritage. Again, it's a principle that is I think one we can agree upon, but I think it is also a principle that is being developed and has to be very, very carefully applied in practice. The principle talks specifically about aboriginal children, and as I indicated before, there have been some great difficulties in this area. The department has had to take some radical action when the department was trying to make sure that this principle was being respected with respect to the treatment of some aboriginal children in the province.

The next recommendation that came from the report had to do with increased accountability, and it indicated that "the rights of children, youth and families should be clearly identified in the legislation to increase accountability and ensure children's needs are being met." It says, "As well, children should be clearly informed of their rights." This is something that the Children's Advocate has mentioned time after time in reports and has been, I guess, somewhat disappointed that it hasn't been the case. He had examples, for instance, of children not even knowing that there was a case plan for them and their future, and often children were kept in the dark in terms of their relationship to the government and what was available to them.

It was quite acute when it came to youngsters as they reached the age of 18. I think that one of the good things, one of the changes the department has made is that that abrupt cutoff at 18 that was the practice in the past has been amended, and that is for many youth no longer the case. There's an effort to recognize that just because they reach the chronological age of 18, their needs continue and that many of them still need support as they try to make their way. So I think it's a good principle and it's one that's long overdue, and there are some specifics in the legislation that we'll be looking to amend, I think, in this area.

A further principle, I think the fifth, was that "services to children and families be provided in a manner that is supportive, least disruptive to the child and prevents the need for further interventions under the Act." Again, an important principle, you'd think one that would have been paramount in previous legislation and certainly one that would be acted upon in trying to support youngsters, but we know that that's not been the case. Examples of multiple placements of youngsters, the kind of instability as a result of the way that they have been handled have really resulted in some unfortunate things

happening to children that were in government care. So I think the principle of it being least disruptive to the child is an important one, and again I think it's consistent with the first principle, where that focus is on children and their needs.

The next principle is one that is concerned with permanency, and this again is related to the previous principle, something that's going to be least disruptive. The whole business of permanency is making sure that youngsters are not bounced from home to home and never do end up having the kind of stable life that we would hope for all children. This principle indicates that all children deserve "a safe, stable home" nurtured by a healthy family and that that is best done when they are in a permanent placement and that those placements are supported as a result of legislation. It's an area that I think is going to be difficult for the government; just because we pass the legislation, it's going to take a lot of hard work to make it a reality in the province. It's unfortunate, but the kinds of placements that are needed are not always available. The kind of climate that one would hope is created for youngsters to be placed in permanent situations has still to be created. Once the legislation comes into being, it's going to need a tremendous amount of work, and it's going to be interesting to see the kinds of specific programs and actions that the government will take to make sure that this principle that is behind the legislation is actually honoured in practice.

9:40

The last recommendation that came from the review was that under the current act "Albertans report any instances where there are probable grounds to believe a child may be in need of protection," and this "should be reinforced and strengthened in the new legislation." This is an important principle. There are a number of reasons why a child may be in need of protection – physical and emotional neglect, abuse of one kind or another – and if they don't have a guardian, we have to ensure that they're protected. It's again a most difficult area for the community to deal with, but I think we have to ensure that children are protected in terms of what happens to them emotionally and physically. It's an area that's fraught with all kinds of difficulties, and it's going to be, again, a really difficult area for the government to create the climate where we can assure ourselves that for the most part, as far as humanly possible, if children are in need of protection, that protection actually is there for them and that there's a process in place that will ensure that they'll get the help and be relieved of any kind of duress they may be under.

Those principles, Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, came from the review. I think they're principles that for the most part most of us can agree on with a couple of exceptions. As I said, we have taken those principles as they were laid out in the review, and we have put those principles against the elements of the act, the amendments before us, and tried to measure the changes in the act before us with respect to these principles. We've been looking for consistency, and we think that for the most part they are consistent, but there are some notable exceptions, and we'll take the opportunity to look at them when we move to Committee of the Whole.

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

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 24, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003. This is a pretty extensive bill. It's looking at some fairly extensive changes in legislation, and it's a bill that has certainly generated a lot of interest by a lot of people. I think it requires some very significant debate, and I'll be quite interested in hearing what

government members have to say about this piece of legislation, the recommendations that come forward, their thoughts on it in terms of the overriding principles, which is what I'll primarily speak about today because of course second reading is speaking in principle to the bill.

We've had lots of feedback from people on this in terms of the adoptions and so on, and I'll be tabling the information I've got when we get to committee and talking about some of those issues, but tonight I would like to spend most of my time, I think, referring to a submission that we have from the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre. They did a very comprehensive review of this bill and had some strong recommendations that they wanted to bring forward, and they primarily focus around the UN convention on the rights of the child. This is a convention that we have tried for many, many years to get the Alberta government to endorse and support, and what we've seen were some backhanded attempts. "We support it, but . . ." happened over the course of the years but not an outright endorsement.

So I'd like to just review that for a moment, because since the last time the UN convention on the rights of the child was intensively debated in this Legislature, we've had an election, and there are a number of new members that support the government's position who should really know the parameters of the discussion that they are making the decision on. I would hope that by doing that, we would see them change their stance and unilaterally endorse this convention, because it does establish very minimum standards for civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children, not maximum standards but minimum standards. When we have a minister who likes to talk so much about her commitment to children and when we hear that echoed by people in this Legislature, then it seems to me that the very least we could be doing is endorsing minimum standards.

So the convention on the rights of the child requires countries to undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures necessary to implement its provisions. Canada became a signatory in 1990 and played a key role in the development of this. The convention on the rights of the child has 41 articles, the majority of which deal with the protection of children. They talk about protecting

children from all forms of abuse and neglect perpetrated by those responsible for their care and to institute prevention and support programs as well as processes for identification, reporting, referral, investigation and treatment of incidences of child maltreatment . . . appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration . . . [and] children's basic right to survival and development, the right to belong to families and community, and civil and political rights.

So it promotes the concept that the child is an active subject of rights but also the importance of parents and family, which we think is all very good and which is covered in principle in many ways in this particular bill, some of which I agree with in how the bill has gone forward and some of which I don't.

In terms of their particular review of this bill, they have some concerns, and one of those is the office of the Children's Advocate, that it "may be eliminated because of the belief that there is no longer a need for a formal, centralized advocacy office under the new regionalization system of children's services." The Civil Liberties Research Centre strongly disagrees with that, and we strongly disagree with that as well. It really is an ill-founded belief. "The provision of service to children through . . . service delivery authorities could [very] easily result in children falling through the cracks." In fact, we have seen examples of that in the whole 10 years that I've been here, and we want to minimize that as much as possible. Certainly,

children in care need the Office of the Children's Advocate now more than ever. It is important to note that the existing program has been very successful and has served as a model for advocacy programs in other jurisdictions.

So we would very much like to see that continue, as would the Civil Liberties Research Centre. If that could be talked about and discussed in committee, we would appreciate that.

The children's rights charter also talks about children's views being heard.

The Office of the Children's Advocate provides children with an effective complaints procedure regarding the services they receive and access to appropriate advice and independent advocacy, as required by both provisions.

9:50

The recommendation from the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre is that

the Office of the Children's Advocate be maintained in the new legislation and that the Office's mandate be extended to include children who have applied for but been denied protective services, children making reports of abuse or neglect to child welfare authorities, as well as those who are particularly vulnerable – such as those children subject to the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act.

So that is a strong recommendation that they come out with.

They also talk about the best interests of the child being strengthened. Another recommendation they have is that section 2 of the act be strengthened. "It should be made clear in the new Act that the best interests of children should be the overarching consideration when making decisions about their welfare and protection," something our caucus also supports.

They have a third recommendation here, and that is entitled Views of the Child. They recommend that "a high priority be given in the new legislation to respecting the views of children." You don't see that actually enacted in this legislation. We may hear that that's the intent. We'd like to see it in writing. We don't want to see it happen in regulations. It needs to be enshrined in legislation in terms of three overriding priorities for this act.

They then go on to talk about specific issues they have, and they provide a discussion of the concerns they have with the current legislation which they believe should be addressed in this new piece that we see before us. One of those is the qualifications of child welfare workers. If you go to the charter – that's the convention on the rights of children – and you go to article 3(3), it

calls on countries to ensure that institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care and protection of children conform with standards established by competent authorities, particularly with respect to health and safety and the number, suitability and supervision of staff.

So this is something signed onto by Canada that should happen.

They talk there specifically in the regulations about persons qualified to be appointed as child welfare workers if they're employed by the department of social services at the time that the act came into force or who are registered social workers and hold appropriate education or are deemed by the minister to be qualified to do the job based on academic qualifications and experience. These workers, as we know very well, are the backbone of the child welfare system, and they perform the vast majority of the duties and responsibilities and really need to be highly qualified to do their job. So when the minister gets broad discretion with respect to appointments, the general regulation provides for the watering down of qualifications and standards. As a caucus we see that as a major concern, and the Civil Liberties Research Centre also does. Their recommendation is that

high minimum standards for qualifications for child welfare

workers be established under the new legislation and that these be applicable across the province. This is particularly important under the current regionalization process, in order to ensure high quality service provision across the province.

In addition, I would like to add that we see this as an increasing concern with the amount of contracting out there is. There have to be very strict guidelines and there has to be strict protocol in terms of qualifications, because otherwise there just aren't enough checks and balances in the system. If you don't have effective monitoring in place, which we have seen time and again does not happen with this particular government, then we're going to run into problems with the kids. One of the ways to circumvent those problems is to ensure that those workers who are the frontline workers have a high minimum standard of qualifications. So we'd like to see the minister's comments on that. That would be very good.

In terms of their discussion on the rights of children in care, the Civil Liberties Research Centre talks about:

Although current legislation recognizes and respects children's rights in a number of different ways, we believe that what is lacking is a clear and distinct statement of the rights children in care are entitled to.

They would like to see this statement provide an interpretive guide for those making decisions under the legislation. The rights statements included in the new act should mirror those provided in the charter under the United Nations convention for the rights of the child, and those would include such things as key rights for children, which are

- Freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of association
- Right to privacy
- Right of access to high quality health care services and treatment
- Right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, spiritual, mental, moral and social development
- Right to an education
- Right to be protected from all forms of violence
- Right of children who are Aboriginal or who are members of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language in community with other members of their group.

The recommendation that comes forward from the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre is that these rights

be incorporated into the new legislation. This could be done by referring to the [United Nations convention on the rights of the child] in the body of the legislation or appending it to the legislation.

So what I hear is that it isn't enough to say that that's the intent. They want to see it written right into the legislation.

Another concern they have is in terms of the recognition of evolving capacities of children. They talk about how

the current legislation enables children to participate in the child welfare process at different ages. Under sections 8 and 9 of the Act . . . child welfare authorities may enter into support and custody agreements with children 16 years of age or older who are in need of protective services and living independently. Throughout Part 3, as well as other parts of the Act, children 12 years of age or older acquire certain rights to participate in proceedings and be consulted with regard to matters which affect them. Section 30(4) . . . specifies that children 12 years of age or older who are the subject of temporary guardianship orders can apply to court for an order prescribing access to the child's guardian or other individuals.

Mr. Speaker, the convention on the rights of the child recognizes and respects the capacity of children who possess sufficient understanding to make decisions and participate in the

child welfare process. The current legislation certainly acknowledges this principle. However, in establishing a rigid age limit, the Act precludes the participation of younger children at risk who possess sufficient understanding of the matters in issue.

So the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre recommends that the use of benchmark ages for participation in the new legislation be qualified to allow younger children who possess sufficient understanding of their circumstances to fully participate in decisions affecting their care.

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

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise this evening and speak to Bill 24, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003. I would also like to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo for the tremendous amount of work that obviously went into consultation with many, many people throughout the province and certainly for providing the report *Strengthening Families, Children and Youth: Report and Recommendations from the Child Welfare Act Review, 2002*. It certainly indicates the great concern that all of us in this Assembly have for children in this province, particularly those children, the most vulnerable members of our society, who for whatever reasons have had the need for some type of intervention in their living standards.

As we have seen from the bill, it is a very, very extensive bill, as it should be. It's certainly a bill that we do have to get right the first time because we are dealing with children and in many cases children who are in their formative years, and I think it is essential that we get it right. We certainly don't want a situation that we had here a few years ago where we put forward the notion that 200 hours of kindergarten would be adequate for children per year, and very quickly we learned the errors of those ways.

10:00

In looking at the report *Strengthening Families, Children and Youth*, one of the things that I'd like to focus on tonight in my discussion is the statements under *Our Vision and Values*. These are outlined in that review, and these are the principles that we are looking for in this legislation. We're looking for the details that will support these visions and values. Certainly, one principle and belief that has helped shape these recommendations is that "the best interests and well-being of children come first. Every child in Alberta deserves a safe, stable home where they are nurtured by healthy families." It is something that we want for all children and is certainly something that all children deserve. In a province that is so blessed as we are with the resources that we have, then it is a situation where no child should go without.

I think that, as well, when we are looking at the principles that were in the report and the principles that we see in the legislation, Mr. Speaker, we all realize that children are best served in "loving, stable, nurturing and sustainable relationships" and that these are absolutely paramount in the development of any child, and in order to have that stability, children need some type of permanence in a situation. I look at this particular bill, and certainly many, many of the recommendations and principles that are enshrined in this bill point to permanence in those situations.

In looking over the bill, one area I'd like to focus on with my comments tonight is what is in the way of adoption here in the province and the rules for adoption here in the province. I'm looking in the bill, particularly section 63, which will allow for a private process for adoptions. This here has caused me a great deal of concern, and also it has caused many others in this province a great deal of concern. In reviewing the report that I referred to

previously, I look at recommendation 7.2, which states:

Paramount consideration should be given to the best interests of a child in any adoption. This should be reflected in the legislation and could include:

- the child's views and wishes if they can be expressed;
- the benefits to the child of stability, cultural and family ties;
- the effects of delays in decision-making;
- the mental, emotional and physical needs of the child and stage of development; and
- the importance of a positive relationship with a parent and family.

These are very, very good recommendations. It goes on to say, "In the case of an Aboriginal child, the uniqueness of culture, heritage, spirituality and traditions must be respected." Of course, that is a further addition to recommendation 7.2 which I think is extremely important.

Where the difficulty arises in this particular bill – and I've pointed out section 63 – is that there seems to be a huge problem here in that we have what is stated in recommendation 7.2 and we look at recommendation 7.5, which states:

All private-direct adoptions should be allowed to proceed through the relative/step-parent placement process without involving a licensed agency or requiring a home assessment, unless requested by the birth parent or the courts.

The current legislation requires that a licensed agency process private-direct adoptions, including the provision of a home assessment to the court. This process is costly and intrusive and may delay permanency planning.

Safeguards would be built into private-direct, relative and step-parent adoptions by requiring people seeking to adopt to file information on any previous involvement in child protection or criminal activity with the application to adopt. The courts could request a home study if it was felt that one was warranted by the circumstances.

So in recommendation 7.2, where we are making many, many different rules or recommendations as to how we can best ensure the placement of a child, we flip-flop and go almost to the entire opposite in recommendation 7.5. So where we have had some very, very stringent controls in all other types of adoptions that we allow in this province, we certainly in this particular case don't have these stringent guidelines. So one of the problems that we have with recommendation 7.5 is that it is almost a do-it-yourself process when it comes to adoption.

Now, I had a meeting with a constituent roughly a month ago, and with that meeting this fellow had just celebrated the first anniversary of his adoption of a child, and he had gone to the point of telling me what type of a process it was that he and his wife had to go through in order to adopt this two-year-old boy, and it was extremely stringent and it was thorough. At the point where it was not determined yet whether the person was going to recommend that they be allowed to adopt this child, the process was so intrusive that

he and his wife were almost ready to pull out of their request to adopt. When this was all done, what the worker and what they went through was quite the opposite. When she finally indicated that they could adopt this child, everyone broke down and cried. The worker informed them that this was certainly part of the process and part of what she had to do in order that that child was going to be going into a loving environment, a safe environment, an environment that would nurture this child and help it develop as all of us would hope.

So in that particular case I could fully agree with recommendation 7.2, yet in 7.5 we have a situation where we could have a young parent who puts her child up for adoption – and it can be arranged through the family – and there's absolutely no screening as to what type of a home this child is going to. We don't have any background on the adoptive parents. Usually this would be a friend of the family or perhaps a distant relative or a relative, and we are putting children into an environment where we don't know that they're going to be safe.

Those are some of my major concerns so far that I have seen with Bill 24, and I think that it is something that we certainly have to look much more closely at in Committee of the Whole.

So, Mr. Speaker, at this particular time I would like to take my seat and listen to other members speak on this very important bill. Thank you.

10:10

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a second time]

Bill 12

Financial Sector Statutes Amendment Act, 2003

[Adjourned debate March 11: Mr. Magnus]

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 12, the Financial Sector Statutes Amendment Act, 2003, has not been in our possession for very long. We are waiting for more stakeholder participation to be delivered to us. So with that and given the hour, I would like to adjourn debate at this time.

[Motion carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some very good progress tonight, as always on Mondays. With that, I would move that we now call it adjournment time until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 10:13 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]