

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 15, 2003**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2003/04/15

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2003-04**

Executive Council

The Chair: Are there any comments or questions to be offered with respect to this? The hon. Premier.

Mr. Klein: Thank you. Mr. Chairman and hon. members, I'm pleased to appear before this committee to discuss the Executive Council 2003-2006 business plan. Programs under the Ministry of the Executive Council include the office of the Premier, Executive Council, and the Public Affairs Bureau.

I'd like to begin my remarks this evening with a brief overview of the programs covered under Executive Council as well as its goals and plans for the coming year. Executive Council provides support to cabinet and its committees such as the standing policy committees. It also includes my office here in Edmonton and the southern Alberta office in Calgary as well as my deputy minister's office. Another program under Executive Council is support for policy coordination, business, and strategic long-term planning for the government as a whole. Staff in this area will continue working to ensure that ministers across government are working together effectively following a variety of cabinet processes and that the needs and priorities of Albertans are reflected in the government's long-term strategic plans.

Another area that falls under Executive Council is the protocol office, which looks after provincial government ceremonial events and visits from senior international dignitaries. Yesterday, for instance, we had the high commissioner for India and the Canadian ambassador to Germany visiting the Legislature. In addition to performing those duties, the office also continues to provide protocol advice to government offices, community groups, the private sector, and individual Albertans who may have questions about protocol requirements for their special events.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, the Executive Council provides administrative support to the office of the Lieutenant Governor and the Alberta Order of Excellence Council, for which the Lieutenant Governor serves as chancellor. Those administrative support services will continue to be provided. I'd like to also add that we're all looking forward to having Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor healthy and back on the job as soon as possible, and I'm sure that all members of this committee join us in wishing her a full and speedy recovery.

Mr. Chairman, I'd now like to turn to an overview of the projected spending for Executive Council for 2003-2004. Spending for Executive Council is forecast to be \$18 million, up roughly \$1 million or 6 percent from 2002-2003 levels. I should also add that the budget for Executive Council and the Public Affairs Bureau has been virtually unchanged for the past 10 years. During these past 10 years Alberta's population has grown 18 percent, and we've seen the development of a whole new area of on-line communications thanks to the Internet. So this year's modest 6 percent increase will be divided between a number of initiatives to improve information access for Albertans, and I'll detail those programs for committee members shortly.

Another part of the increase will go to salary increases for bureau and Executive Council staff. These increases are being seen in all ministry budgets and are in line with increases generally given to all public service employees. Members may note that the total full-time employees for the Public Affairs Bureau is forecast to increase by four, for a total of 131 full-time equivalents in 2003-2004. These additional staff members will ensure that key information access points such as Alberta Connects and the Service Alberta call centre, formerly known as the RITE centre, are adequately staffed to meet the growing demands of public users.

Before I turn to the Public Affairs Bureau's business and their business plan goals, I'd like to also draw members' attention to a change in forecast revenue for the bureau through the Queen's Printer bookstore. Revenues are expected to decrease to \$1.2 million this fiscal year. That's down from \$2 million last year, and one of the main reasons for the drop is that we're now past the bulk of sales for the *Revised Statutes of Alberta*. This was a major project that I think went on about seven years for the Alberta legal community that generated increased revenues. Now with the project completed, revenues are returning to normal levels.

Members should also note that forecast revenues for future years are lower due to an increased availability of free legislation through the Queen's Printer's Internet site. Again, the Internet has its advantages, but it has its disadvantages relative to our ability to generate revenue. The Queen's Printer is also noting a trend among legal offices to simply order individual pieces of legislation through the web site as needed rather than ordering those large volumes of print copies. The Queen's Printer staff will continue to adapt products and formats to ensure that the legal community receives the legislative resources it needs in the most convenient and most cost-effective format possible.

Mr. Chairman, I'd now like to talk about some of the goals and strategies listed in the 2003-2006 business plan for the Alberta Public Affairs Bureau. Sometimes people who work in the Public Affairs Bureau are simplistically dismissed as spin doctors. That's partially because many people are either politically inclined and want to characterize them that way or because many people simply aren't aware of the many different kinds of jobs that PAB staff do. These are jobs that indeed are important to all Albertans. I'll give you one example. Some of our communications people deal with as many as 35 media calls per day. Those media calls don't come from the so-called legislative press gallery. They come from media throughout the province, from rural media to inquiries from national media, and they want to get correct, up-to-date responses to those inquiries. That's essential so that media are reporting the facts accurately on government initiatives and programs.

But there's much more to the work of communications staff than media inquiries. Working hand in hand with ministers and ministry staff, communications staff in all departments are substantially involved in helping Albertans get important and helpful information that they need to conduct their day-to-day business. Communications staff in Seniors, for example, work hard to keep seniors informed about programs to help them. That's an entirely exclusive constituency, Seniors and information for seniors, a huge job in itself.

In Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Mr. Chairman, communications staff provided essential support in publicizing farm aid programs, last year, for instance, during the drought, and indeed there's a tremendous amount to communicate in agriculture. I can tell you that when I attempt to learn about the various agricultural programs, my eyes start to glaze over. There's just a tremendous amount of information to be communicated about agricultural programs.

In Children's Services I'll give you another very good example. Communications staff were directly involved in organizing and hosting the annual Great Kids awards. This is a program, Mr. Chairman, that honours young people who make outstanding contributions to their communities.

In Transportation we hear the ads and read the results of the press releases on a daily basis. Communications staff work hard to promote highway safety. It's a day-to-day issue. In Sustainable Resource Development communications staff are at the front lines when Albertans need to know about forest fire activity. Indeed, they're right there with the forest firefighters.

8:10

In Learning communications staff assist with the promotion of available scholarship programs and other financial aid, to name just a few of the things that are dealt with under Learning. In Government Services communications staff help out to promote and raise awareness of consumer protection laws and rights. In Environment communications staff are a vital part of the work Environment does to promote energy conservation in Alberta and to tell Albertans about all of the programs that are carried out under the Department of Environment. So these are just a few examples of the value and expertise that the people of the Public Affairs Bureau bring to the job of communicating with Albertans.

The three core businesses for the bureau include helping government ministries communicate with Albertans, providing Albertans with two-way access to government, and publishing and selling Alberta's laws and other materials. Under core business one, an initiative that will receive new funding is the creation of a corporate communication strategy for the government. This strategy will ensure that public information programs are co-ordinated across government and that Albertans are getting the information they need about the programs and services that affect them. The initiative includes efforts to ensure that government communications reach diverse Alberta audiences such as youth, new immigrants, multicultural communities, persons with disabilities, and rural Albertans.

The initiative also involves a cost-effective and co-ordinated advertising plan to ensure that Albertans know how to access information about important government initiatives, programs, and services. In conjunction with this initiative bureau staff will also begin work to revise the corporate visual identity for the government, and this will be the first update for the visual signature in over 30 years. Don't ask me what that signature is going to look like at this particular time, because they're still working on it, and God forbid that I should be involved. Thirty years. It's maybe time for a change. The current plan, of course, is to have the updated signature ready to coincide with the 2005 centennial year.

So when you look at the very wide range of communications programs that take place across government every year, it's easy to understand the need for ongoing improvements to communications co-ordination.

Mr. Chairman, the allotted time for my portion of this debate doesn't allow me to list all of the areas covered by government communications activities, but I can tell you that they cover virtually every Alberta government program and service offered to the public including health care; Alberta's learning system; support programs for farmers; services for children and families; economic and fiscal updates; infrastructure, roads, and capital spending; crime and safe communities; seniors programs; workplace safety; parks and sustainable resources; and security issues and emergency preparedness. While the content of programs and services being communicated may vary, the goal of the communications is always the same, and that goal is to ensure that Albertans can quickly and easily

access the information they need about those government programs and services that matter most to them, whatever they may be.

That's why another portion of this year's funding increase will go to ensure that key information access points are able to keep pace with growing public usage. For example, dollars will go to help improve services offered to Albertans through the toll-free Service Alberta centre, as I mentioned earlier, formerly known as the RITE centre, and the toll-free phone and e-mail services through Alberta Connects. While members of the committee may be familiar with Alberta Connects, Service Alberta, formerly the RITE service, will be a new term. In fact, the RITE telephone centre has been renamed since this committee last met, and members may know that Service Alberta is a combination now of telephone and on-line information resources designed to answer Albertans' questions about the government programs they use most often. The former RITE telephone centre is offering Albertans the same high-quality service under its new name. We know that the service is popular because the Service Alberta operators handle approximately 1.1 million calls each year. Another 5.4 million callers use the direct-dial option to complete their calls. So this gives you some indication as to the number of inquiries and the number of people who are phoning in to find out about government programs and services.

The Alberta Connects service is also growing. Last year it received over 20,000 calls and 17,000 e-mail requests for information on a number of initiatives including farm drought assistance, the heritage fund survey, climate change public consultation, and the new Traffic Safety Act. Work will begin this year to increase the speed and efficiency of both the Service Alberta call centre and Alberta Connects so that Albertans can find the information they need even faster. Efforts will also begin to increase public awareness of these valuable information resources.

Increased funding will also be used to improve the Alberta government home page. This time last year I remarked to this committee that Internet usage in Alberta was growing rapidly, and I think it's safe to say that the trend shows no sign of slowing down. The Internet has become an integral part of any public communications initiative. Members might be further interested to know that hits to the Alberta government home page have almost doubled from a year ago to more than 12 million in 2002-2003. The government web site is an important source of news and information for Albertans and allows them to respond and ask questions of their government. The site has played a central role in addressing the government's implementation of health reform, recommendations and communications around the G-8 summit in Kananaskis last summer, and of course our position on the Kyoto protocol last fall. So all of these statistics underscore the importance of continued efforts to make sure that the government home page provides the information resources Albertans increasingly expect to find.

Work will continue to make sure that the home page meets public needs. Initiatives this year will include looking at ways to make it easier for the visually impaired to access the page. A facility will also be added to the government home page that provides consolidated listings of public consultations taking place across the province so that Albertans can learn about and participate in the various consultation opportunities.

The Internet is also playing a role in communications planning for the Queen's Printer bookstore, which is the third and final bureau core business I'd like to discuss today. As I mentioned earlier, Albertans are making increased use of free legislation materials through the Queen's Printer web site. Queen's Printer staff will continue their efforts to improve service available through the Queen's Printer web site. This includes the initial steps to publish the *Alberta Gazette* free and on-line. This will not only increase free

public access to information; it will also reduce administrative and print expenses for the government.

So, Mr. Chairman, that concludes my introductory remarks on Executive Council's business plans for 2003 through 2006. Thank you.

The Chair: Before recognizing the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, I'd ask the committee if we could have your consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

8:20head: Introduction of Guests

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

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly the 9th Hermitage Scout group. They're from my constituency of Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, and they are here to tour the building and to observe the sitting this evening. They lucked out because the Premier is here with us this evening, so it is quite an honour for them to be here. The group consists of eight group leaders, and they are James van Lieshout, Teresa Black, Brett Symington, Lori Symington, Brent Galipeau, James Toupin, Lisa Wickman, and Steffni Ault. There are also some helpers, Stacie Reinhart and James Galipeau, as well as 14 Scouts and Cubs. They are seated in the visitors' gallery, and I'd like them to rise at this time and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It gives me great pleasure to rise this evening and introduce to you two constituents of mine Mr. Brock Comartin and C. J. Stav. Brock is one of those great Albertans who is very generous with his time as a volunteer. At this time he's volunteering as a Big Brother, and his little brother is C. J. Stav. Would Brock and C. J. please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Legislature.

head: **Main Estimates 2003-04**

Executive Council (*continued*)

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to have an opportunity to participate once again this year in the budget debate on Executive Council. I'd like to thank the Premier for his opening speech and would like to add the Official Opposition's wishes for a speedy recovery for the Lieutenant Governor, as the Premier stated earlier in his comments.

Interestingly enough, in his opening comments the Premier talked about people sometimes viewing the Public Affairs Bureau in simplistic terms, and I would like to reassure the Premier, the chairman, and all of the staff from the Public Affairs Bureau that we never underestimate them. There is nothing simple about being a spin doctor for this government; I'll tell you that. Like I said last year, if we could just have the amount of people and these exact people who are here tonight for one month, Mr. Premier, you'd be in trouble. I'll tell you that much. Just for one month is all we need them, never mind all of the rest of the people in that staff.

Mr. Klein: I'm going to hold you to that.

Ms Carlson: Absolutely. Loan them to me for just 30 days. That's all it would take, and we'd see some significant changes. They're good. They're going to make us look really good; I'll tell you that much. Look at what a great job they've done over here. Look what they had to work with. I know who to trust in this government, and it's the public servants. As often as the Premier says, "Trust me," it's them I trust. That's where my money goes. They do a great job.

The Provincial Treasurer doesn't like those comments, but it's very true. They do an amazing job. Just take a look at what they did with this latest advertising campaign about the budget, Mr. Chairman. We see ads about something that isn't really talked about in the budget at all, and that's the paying down of the debt. We see fancy charts, no graphs. Graphs were pretty good because they represented all the spending, and now we see charts in there that take some poetic licence with scale. They're interesting to look at and a very good example of what this Public Affairs Bureau can do. But I don't want to talk about the Public Affairs Bureau too long, Mr. Chairman, because I know that my colleague for Edmonton-Riverview is chomping at the bit to get into that particular topic.

What I would like to do for about approximately the first half hour this evening or at least 20 minutes of it is focus on the Premier's talk about Executive Council's role in policy co-ordination and strategic planning. I would like to ask him some questions about parliamentary reform and fiscal management systems that we don't see this government going in the direction of. We certainly would like to see what his comments are in terms of why this government doesn't put them into their strategic planning process. We think that one of the biggest problems with the system is the system itself and that with a little democratic renewal we could see some way better legislation and perhaps some better planning processes put in in the long run on a strategic basis and start to build more trust in the electorate for politicians, for politics, and for the system.

The first one I'd like to talk about is free votes. We had a little taste of that last night and today in question period, and we saw a little bit of the Government House Leader trying to throw his weight around, but I would like to have the Premier's opinion on free votes in general, about initiating them to a greater degree. Not on money bills, because I understand that the government needs to have some solidarity around budget issues, but most of the other legislation that hits this Assembly, particularly with this big of a majority of government members, would I think face some healthy tests and healthy review if we had a freer process in the Assembly. I know that the Premier talked today in his media availability about five minutes from each member in this Assembly on most subjects being too much time, but it is important, I think, for members of the public and members of the opposition to have some understanding of how the decisions were made for bills being brought in and not only what cabinet thinks of them but also what members who support the government's position who are not in cabinet think about it, in five minutes if that's what you want to allow.

So a random selection, maybe two or three people, five minutes each, explaining how the government got to their decisions and their position in an open and accountable manner and then allowing for more free votes within the system. It doesn't matter now when you've got such a big majority, but it could be helpful to your members in the long run. You could never face the challenge on the doors from us or any other opposition to talk about caucus whips and party solidarity and party discipline. To be able to say that we have lots of free votes in this Assembly on key, critical issues I think wouldn't be a bad idea. So if the Premier for a few moments could tell us what he thinks about that.

Mr. Klein: Well, the question, Mr. Chairman, was relative to free

votes, which has absolutely nothing to do with my budget, but I guess it has something to do with politics and the way government conducts itself. I would remind the hon. member that there was a free vote not so long ago.

An Hon. Member: Two years ago.

Mr. Klein: Two years ago? Only a few days ago, and that free vote was a vote on the firefighters' bill, a private member's bill which was passed by this Legislature and a good example of a free vote on a bill that turned out to be a productive and worthwhile bill and an exercise that was a good exercise. I'm glad that the opposition members voted freely along with government members in support of that particular bill.

Mr. Chairman, if the hon. member is talking about the resolution relative to the Electoral Boundaries Commission, I will explain what I explained in question period today, that contrary to the statement that was made by that hon. member, the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, I do not run an autocratic or dictatorial caucus. That's not my style. Basically, when we sit down as a government to discuss an issue, a difficult issue, we say: okay; what is the consensus of caucus? On this particular issue not everyone was pleased, but we were given advice, good advice, that we would likely not get anything better by convening another commission to conduct another electoral boundaries review. Some members, however, are adamant in their opposition to this, and that's fair enough, and we said: feel free, then, to vote according to your conscience and according to the wishes of your constituents. That indeed is going to be done and was done relative to the resolution and I suspect will be done relative to the legislation when it's introduced and finally debated.

8:30

So, Mr. Chairman, free votes are something that we condone and we encourage if the situation is right and if there's a caucus consensus that there ought to be a free vote. I don't tell caucus. I don't tell these members, "Well, we're going to have a free vote on this" or "Damn it, we're going to ram this through. This is a government bill, and you're going to vote for this or else." That's not the way we operate. We operate freely. I don't know how, as I said before, the Liberal caucus operates, nor do I want to know. I don't want to be a fly on the wall relative to the Liberal caucus, but I can tell you that I have known of some leaders of the Liberal Party who have said: you vote this way or you're out of here. Right. I get that from former members of the Liberal party, and that's: it's either my way or the highway, and you vote my way or you get out of here. Well, that's not the way I operate. Maybe it's the way they do, but it's not the way I operate.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to thank the Premier for his comments. Of course, we expect all private members' bills to be free votes. My comments were more general in relation to government bills, but we certainly got his political answer for this evening. I would like to remind the Premier that he's the one who told me – and it's listed in his documents – that this department deals with policy co-ordination, business, and strategic long-term planning. So democratic renewal and long-term planning and strategic directions are the context within which I'm asking these questions. I'm not asking them specific to any one particular instance in the near future or the near past but in general in terms of looking at where this government is headed for a strategic direction in the future.

My next question is on MLA working committees. We've talked for a long time in this Assembly about improving the system by having all-party committees, and I know that there is at least a little

support for this concept on the other side of the House here. We think that all-party . . . [interjection] Well, perhaps it is only one or two people who occasionally have a fleeting thought that it might work, but I think that there is some evidence to indicate that all-party committees have not been unsuccessful in this House in the past. I know that over the past 10 years I've sat on a few of them. I don't think Public Accounts works very well at all, but I think the Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee has worked very well, and I think that that's a committee where you can see that on occasion opposition members bring something to the table in terms of new ideas, in terms of different perspectives on looking at things, in terms of ways to work co-operatively.

Now, I don't think any minister or committee chair in that committee has ever been sandbagged by an Official Opposition member while I've been here. We have tried to work co-operatively. We know out front that we're not going to win any votes, but we also know that if we work in a co-operative fashion, we can have some say in what happens, that we can have some opinions brought to the table that might not otherwise be heard by government, and that is a healthy way to run a government. It just makes you guys better. It makes you stronger in the long run and gives the people a better government.

So we are strongly in support of MLA working committees that would be all-party committees because we think that they would help with accuracy and efficiency of government programs. It would also speed up some of the discussions that we have in the Assembly. If you share the information with all members, members agree on what the contentious issues are and set those aside for dealing with in the House, work through some of the smaller issues, you get a better piece of legislation and you get better ideas, and there's nothing wrong with doing that, we think.

A lot of people think that Official Opposition members have access to detailed background on bills and legislation coming forward in this House. That isn't the case. If we work with a co-operative minister, we get briefings on bills. On private members' bills often the members will give us briefings, but otherwise we hardly get any information at all. In fact, members of the general public often have greater access to information than we do. If we're informed about the issues, it makes the debate more relevant, more important, and certainly more interesting. So we think that that would be a very good idea. We think that this strengthens the role of MLAs in general and certainly think that it would be a good idea.

Perhaps, Mr. Premier, you would think about looking at it in terms of one standing policy committee. Add one or two opposition members, and see what happens. Try it for one session. What would be the harm in that? If we see better legislation, if we see more streamlining, if we see more co-operation, if we see up front the setting aside of the contentious issues for debate in here, I think we're going to see a better working government. So if we could have your comments on that.

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Chairman, the hon. member brings up a very interesting comment. Again, this has absolutely nothing to do with my budget, nor does it have anything to do with the business plan of Executive Council or the Public Affairs Bureau. Again, it has something to do with the traditions of the Legislature, of parliamentary tradition.

I'm not trying to inflate the importance of government, but the simple fact is that under the system we have, people elect individuals who belong to a particular party. If those individuals have more than the individuals who belong to another party, then they form the government and they in turn are charged with developing policy and delivering programs and services. That is the parliamentary

tradition. You have the government, and you have the opposition. The government is charged with developing policy, and part of that policy development includes the standing policy committees, committees that go through in detail issues surrounding a particular proposal or a particular piece of legislation or regulation or program that might be proposed by an MLA or a special interest group or indeed just an individual to really vet in a responsible way the pros and the cons of a particular program, service, policy, or regulation and bring recommendations to cabinet. That is the role of government. That's why they were elected to government and not to the opposition, so that they could develop policy, and that is consistent with the traditions of parliament.

Now, if the opposition wants to amend and reshape the way the parliamentary system works not only in this province but in Canada, then I would suggest that they go about it another way. There are various parliamentary conferences, I understand, to which members of the opposition are invited. Perhaps they can stand up and say: we need a change in the parliamentary system in Canada. Tell that to the Prime Minister. Start right there at the top, you know, and change the parliamentary system in Ottawa. You can start by promoting an elected Senate. You know, that would be a good step. If you want to change the parliamentary system here, then I would suggest that you use the proper and appropriate forum to do that and not this Legislature, particularly not the business plan of Executive Council.

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

8:40

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My questions are relating to the budget specifically and the increase in the budget numbers. I'm looking here at last year's set of business plans, Budget 2002 business plans, and on page 155 it actually lists expenditures for the last few years and targets for the next couple of years. The target for ministry expense for the combination of the Executive Council and the Public Affairs Bureau in 2002 for the 2003-04 year was just a hair under \$15 million, \$14,994,000. What we're seeing here in a budget proposal – and the Premier can correct me if I've made a mistake here – is that rather than coming anywhere close to that target, say \$15 million, we're just a hair over \$18 million, which is, well, a substantial overshooting of the target. I'd say about a 20 percent overshooting of the target in one year if I'm doing the math correctly in my head. I'm wondering if the Premier has any comments on why the target for this year that was set out last year is being overshot by such a large amount of money.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, I'm on page 155. We see the office of the Premier and Executive Council. Maybe we're reading from different documents, but I don't see those target dates. I see targets for 2004-2005 of \$18,035,000, '05-06 for \$18,035,000.

Dr. Taft: I'll stand up and review it again.

Mr. Klein: I'll sit down.

Dr. Taft: Okay. The whole point, I assume, of a multiyear business plan is to look ahead the next couple of years and make some workable targets. The target set last year – and I could send this over by page if it would help – for 2003-04 was \$14.994 million. We'll say \$15 million. So last year we were saying: okay; looking ahead to 2003-04, we would spend combined \$15 million. Instead, what we're having here is a proposal to spend 20 percent more than that, which is \$18 million. In other words, we really overshot the

business plan as laid out last year, and I'm wondering – maybe if he can't explain it now, I'll refer that to his staff.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, the problem is that I have before me the business plan going from 2003 to 2006 and this year's budget. You know, I don't have last year's budget in front of me.

I don't have the information in front of me, but my officials have sent down some information, Mr. Chairman, with the explanation that there is a \$2 million comparable transfer from Health and Wellness for the Alberta Connects program. This is not new money or an increase. It is simply funds transferred from another department.

When the Alberta Connects program started three years ago, the funding was in Health because the focus of the program was on health communications. Since then, the focus has expanded to incorporate cross-government communication initiatives and issues, so it makes sense to transfer those dollars to the Public Affairs Bureau. Now, not having the breakdown – that is, the numbered information – before me, I would have to accept that as a logical explanation for the \$2 million difference.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. There's still a million dollars missing in that explanation, but perhaps they can account for it in subsequent notes. [interjection] Sure. Thank you.

I do need to note that the actual expenditures of the Executive Council and Public Affairs Bureau in 2000-2001 were \$13.75 million. We're now up to \$18 million. So it is a pretty rapid growth over three years. Any explanation of that would be helpful.

Now a handful of other specific questions. At some point in follow-up to this debate here this evening could the Premier please provide some details on the classifications and job categories of the 130 or 135 FTEs of the Public Affairs Bureau? I don't know how many people that would total, maybe 175, 200, whatever. It would be interesting to know how many are directors and how many are this and how many are that.

The cost of a new visual signature is going to undoubtedly come up for some debate. I'm sure that the Public Affairs people have already anticipated that. These kinds of procedures, if they're done the way a major corporation would do them – and I suspect they will be here – are multimillion dollar undertakings. There's the whole business of developing and testing a new visual signature and then the very substantial expense of implementing a new visual signature. So I'm wondering if there is a budget allocated for developing and implementing the new visual signature.

Mr. Klein: Interesting. I don't know, Mr. Chairman, if there is a specific budget allocated for the development of the visual signature or whether this is work being done collectively or by a few assigned within the department to do this. I will attempt to get that information as to whether there is a budget specifically assigned to this.

Relative to the other question, Mr. Chairman, I'd be very happy to provide the breakdown relative to both the Public Affairs Bureau and the Executive Council. The full-time equivalents for Executive Council in 2003-04 total 181. The office of the Premier's full-time equivalent staffing for 2003-04 totals 47, and I'd be glad to list those staff if the hon. member so wishes. The office of the Lieutenant Governor includes three administrative support staff. With respect to the PAB and the specific question, the Public Affairs Bureau's full-time equivalent staffing for 2003-04 totals, as I mentioned, 131. Four additional staff have been added.

So 78 full-time employees help government ministries to communicate with Albertans. They supply professionals to government departments to develop and implement communications programs.

They provide communications planning and consulting to support government programs. They co-ordinate government communications to and from Albertans on priority areas for government initiatives and during public emergencies. They provide specialized writing and editing services to government. They create and implement a corporate communications strategy to ensure that public information programs are co-ordinated across government and Albertans are getting the information they need in the most cost-effective way possible. That involves 78 FTEs.

8:50

Thirty-four FTEs provide Albertans with two-way access to government. This involves managing Service Alberta, formerly the RITE call centre, to give Albertans toll-free access to government. It provides Alberta Connects call centre support for major government initiatives. It involves managing the two-way flow of information through the Alberta government home page. It involves providing technical support for major government news conferences and announcements. It involves providing research and implementation support for new communications technologies and Internet-related consultative programs to departments. It involves managing the provincewide distribution of news releases. That involves 34 FTEs.

Eleven FTEs are responsible for publishing and selling Alberta's laws and other government materials. Specifically, they are charged with publishing and selling Alberta's laws and other government materials and operating the Queen's Printer bookstores in Edmonton and Calgary.

There are three FTEs in the managing director's office. Now, I don't know if these are referred to as directors or executives. I'm getting a signal that they are not. I know that there is an executive director or a director of the department who has deputy minister status, but the director's office staff looks after overall management of the Public Affairs Bureau.

There are five FTEs on the human resources and administration side of the Public Affairs Bureau charged with managing the human resources and finance needs of the Public Affairs Bureau and also charged with developing business plans and budget preparations, performance measurement co-ordination, annual report development, FOIP administration, central bureau reception, and central bureau reception services.

That's about all I've got on the Public Affairs Bureau.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A number of other questions here. There certainly appears generally to be a marked increase in the amount of advertising undertaken by this government: the campaign around the Mazankowski report, the Kyoto campaign, the Healthy U advertising, and so on and so on. I am wondering if somewhere or other there's a total figure allocated for all the advertising undertaken by this government. I'm wondering if the Premier might be able to indicate to us how that's organized. Is all of that advertising managed through the Public Affairs Bureau whether it's for the Department of Health and Wellness or Environment or whatever, or is that handled individually by departments? How are the advertising buys managed, and how much in total is paid by this government to the buyers for their services? I assume that the government has an advertising buyer who handles that. I'd be curious to know how much that is worth. Who manages the advertising campaigns? In other words – and the Premier would know this exceedingly well, I'm sure – the whole process of developing and implementing an advertising campaign.

So there's a series of questions there about the millions of dollars, maybe even a few tens of millions of dollars now spent by this government on advertising. The Premier is welcome to comment now, or again I'd be happy to take his responses later.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, I can answer some of those questions. Certainly, major advertising and the agents who handle advertising, the advertising agencies, are selected by tender, I would think, for most of the projects. I'm receiving a nod in the affirmative. I don't know what these agencies charge. I used to know what they charge, but that was many, many years ago when I used to buy advertising. I don't know what they charge today – and I'll attempt to get that information for the hon. member – nor do I have a total amount that we spend on advertising in a given year or what it's anticipated we will spend in 2003-2004, and again I'll attempt to get that information.

I can advise the hon. member that all advertising endeavours by the various departments are co-ordinated through the Public Affairs Bureau, but certainly it's up to the department. If it's Sustainable Resource Development or Learning or Government Services or Finance or any of the other ministries, if they feel the need for an advertising campaign and they know that there's a message that needs to get out, then that is co-ordinated with the Public Affairs Bureau.

Dr. Taft: All right. I look forward to some more detail in writing subsequent to these questions.

My next questions actually follow up on the Premier's comments about the Public Affairs Bureau staff working with staff in various departments. Indeed, my understanding is that many Public Affairs Bureau staff are assigned to departments throughout the government, but at the same time as the Public Affairs Bureau staff is assigned to a department handling communications, some of the departments have their own communications staff. So, for example, Government Services has a few communications staff it pays for, and the Public Affairs Bureau has some of its staff assigned to Government Services. At least that's how I understand it. If I'm wrong, I can be corrected on that.

I'd be interested to hear from the Premier, also serving as minister responsible for the Public Affairs Bureau, some comment on who controls the communications staff of the various departments. So does the communications staff of Learning report to the Deputy Minister of Learning, or do they report to the Public Affairs Bureau director assigned to Learning? Also – and I don't expect the Premier to have this figure at his fingertips – how many communications staff work for the government outside the Public Affairs Bureau? They're scattered throughout the government. That would be an interesting figure to learn perhaps in a written response.

Mr. Klein: Perhaps in a written response, but I would be very surprised if the Public Affairs Bureau didn't retain the services of outside public relations and advertising experts from time to time and for specific projects. How much we spend I don't really know.

Relative to communications directors, they are charged to the Public Affairs Bureau but I think report directly to the ministers if they're assigned to a department, but any public relations campaign or advertising campaign that is planned is co-ordinated through the communications director with the Public Affairs Bureau.

Relative to the other information, I'll attempt to get that information for the hon. member.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

9:00

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Premier, it's always a delight to have you with us when you present your budget for Executive Council and the Public Affairs Bureau. I just have a couple of questions, but first I would like to give you and your people some kudos. I really believe the RITE line, the RITE centre, what will now be called I think you said Service Alberta, does an outstanding job for Albertans. It certainly connects constituents and parts of our constituency to each other, and though we all over a period of time hear from constituents, I only hear good things about the RITE line.

If you would just reiterate for me, did you say that there had been 1.1 million calls last year? With going to the concept of now Service Alberta, basically what will change, and will it require a larger budgeted amount? Also, I think we can be very impressed. In Alberta we've come a long way, I think, in a short time, and I'm sure we will move farther ahead yet on the whole computerization and technology, and I was just wondering if your people would have any idea how many hits on the government home page we have from outside of Alberta. We always talk about putting dollars into tourism and this type of thing, but I do believe people now are often using the Net to seek a lot of things they used to find elsewhere, and I do want to compliment you on your home page.

One thing – and I will sway a little bit here. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie got more out of the budget and into other things. I feel very honoured and privileged to be a standing policy chair. I think the concept and this approach is very good for all members. I am wondering, now that it is some years old and stood the test of time, if you know of other jurisdictions that have implemented this over a period of time.

One other thing before I sit down. I just was wondering: for yourself, your office, the Lieutenant Government, do the security provisions come out of your budget, or in fact is that out of the Solicitor General's?

Thank you.

Mr. Klein: Okay. Security for the LG and security for Executive Council I believe comes out of the Solicitor General's budget because this is handled by the security detail in the Legislature. It's the same detail that oversees the operations of CAPS, which is the court and prisoner services, I guess it is, and that all comes under the Solicitor General.

Relative to how many hits we receive from outside the province, I really don't know, but certainly the government's home page is available for all to see who have access to a computer, and I wouldn't be surprised if there are many hits on the Internet, especially from people who want to or are planning to travel here, to have a holiday here, maybe set up a business here. There's a wealth of information on the Internet. As a matter of fact, you could spend all day, all week, weeks, months on the Internet finding out about various government services, programs, and opportunities here in Alberta.

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

Dr. Taft: I have some stuff on staffing, but I . . .

The Chair: Okay; the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I wondered if I might ask the Premier a couple of questions about the performance measures in the business plan. I look at performance measure 1, "public satisfaction with government communications in priority areas", and it's 63

percent. That's really not very good. I look back at the Premier's annual report, where there's a bit more detail about the performance measure, and it indicates how they arrived at this 63 percent. They indicate that they do it by "telephone interviews with 1,003 adult Albertans conducted" – and they tell you when they conduct it – "randomly selected from across the province." I guess my question is: is that the best strategy to get at this particular measure? Will you ever reach the 75 percent goal, given that you randomly select from the population? There must be differences in people who have specific issues that they're dealing on with the government.

I know that the theory is that that should be randomly distributed through the population, but I still have some questions about: is that the best way to find out if the public is satisfied with the communications in the priority areas? I wondered if there had been other ways of trying to secure that knowledge. I think it's a useful performance measure, but I guess I'm not convinced that that's a true measure of what's happening out there in terms of public satisfaction. Again, as I said, I wonder if it'll ever get up past that, given that kind of methodology.

The other one with the same kind of concern is number 2, and that's the public satisfaction with access to information. Again, if I go back to the Premier's annual report, that measure is taken exactly the same way. I wondered if there shouldn't be some way of actually tracking some people who are using government information and then taking that kind of a measure.

Fundamentally, my questions are about the performance measures and how useful they are to the government in trying to really get at what's happening.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, those are good questions indeed, and, you know, statistical information is only as good as the question that is asked and the truthfulness and how the question is posed. In order to get a true response, the question has to be framed in such a way as to elicit a true response, so respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with communications in the areas they see as a priority for the province. In this particular case, they were free to define their own priorities rather than being limited to a set of predetermined areas. This change ensures that the question is inclusive and relevant to all respondents, so the lower result of 63 percent satisfaction is the result of the question format being changed. With that change in the question format comes a change in the results. The question is a much more significant question, it's a much broader question, and it brings about a different result than the previous question. Certainly we would strive to achieve 75 percent, and that's why the target is 75 percent.

Now, you might want to ask: why 75 percent? Why not 80 percent, or why not 90 percent? Well, Mr. Chairman, it doesn't matter how good you are; 75 percent is deemed to be about, you know, where you're going to be, which is not bad. So, in other words, one has to assume that 25 percent of the people are going to be antigovernment. That's not to say that they're going to be pro-Liberal, but they're going to be antigovernment, and we found that out. You know, no government in the world, I think, gets consistently above 75 percent. There are always people who have a bone to pick with the government, so 75 percent is a good target figure.

9:10

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

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Premier, first of all, I'd very much like to compliment two aspects of your staff, and one is also the Public Affairs Bureau. I think they make sometimes the questionable and the opaque very understandable and

clear to many of our residents of Alberta. I'd also like to make a couple of comments about the Service Alberta call centre. A lot of the comments that I hear coming out of rural Alberta are on what a useful service that is and the ability of some of the staff that you do have in their quick response time.

I do have a couple of questions that I would like to present to you. The first question, Mr. Premier, is on page 136 of the Executive Council's estimates on line 2.0.5. The Service Alberta call centre shows a budget of \$815,000 in 2002-2003 and \$1,043,000 requested for 2003-2004. Can the Premier please tell the committee why there's an increase in the Service Alberta call centre budget of more than \$200,000?

The second question I have, Mr. Premier. You had mentioned that the hits had doubled on the web page, and I guess this may be crystal balling a little bit, but do you feel that, with the advent of technology and of course the usage of technology, that may take some pressure off communications staff and the Service Alberta call centre?

Thank you very much.

Mr. Klein: I'm sorry; I'm being inundated with paper here. The last question had to do with my thoughts relative to an anticipated use of the Internet? Is that correct?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Premier, I guess what I'm asking is: when we talk about the doubling of hits on the web page so that we have more people using the web sites and using the home page, in the future do you think that that's going to decrease the need and the use for communications staff and maybe the need and the use for the Service Alberta call centre?

Mr. Klein: I don't know if it's going to reduce the need for the Service Alberta call centre. Perhaps it will because as you know, technology tends to replace a lot of functions that were done by a human hand and human mind. That seems to be the way of the future. More and more is being done on the computer, especially as people acquire personal computers. I look right here or there or over there and I see all these laptop computers, and I see the PalmPilots here and the BlackBerry there. Most of this work is now being done on computer, and MLAs are accessing most of their information by computer. Before, they used to pick up the telephone or write a memo and ask for that information to be retrieved for them. Now they're retrieving all that information by themselves and for themselves, and I'm doing the same thing because it's convenient and it's quick. So perhaps down the road it will, but that is the way of technology.

Relative to the specific question – that is, the increase in the budget of the Service Alberta call centre – as you know and as I explained in my initial remarks, the Alberta call centre is operated under the Public Affairs Bureau and was formerly known as the RITE service. I forget what the acronym is.

Mrs. Gordon: R-I-T-E.

Mr. Klein: Yeah, I know that it's R-I-T-E, but it stood for something. I know it was brought in during the Lougheed years. It was a tremendous service at the time and has been a tremendous service ever since. That service provides toll-free access to government by simply calling 310-0000. Once connected, of course, Albertans can access information on government programs, services, and initiatives.

Now, callers have the option of directly dialing the number they wish to reach or having an operator assist them with their questions or their inquiries. As I mentioned, the total number of calls received

by the Service Alberta call centre averages 6.5 million calls per year. That's a phenomenal number of calls. Of that number, the direct-dial portion of the call centre handles approximately 5.4 million calls a year, while the operator-assisted portion handles an average of 1.1 million calls a year, still a phenomenal number of calls. Those call centres, as I mentioned, are located in both Calgary and Edmonton.

As for the increased budget allotment to Service Alberta, much of the money will be used for the four additional full-time equivalents I spoke about earlier and to increase the efficiency of the services offered. Mr. Chairman, this is a service that will continue to see an increased demand, so it is imperative that we develop effective practices to increase the quality and the speed of the service that we provide.

I think it's also important to note that Service Alberta agents are also utilized during special announcements and government initiatives to answer inquiries via the 310-4455 comment line, which is also a fairly new service. These include communication projects such as the Kyoto protocol, which generated a tremendous amount of phone activity. All you have to do in government is make a comment, and you will get lots of reaction and people will phone; believe me: the war in Iraq, the Alberta government's position vis-à-vis the United States. I can tell you that the one situation that caused no end of work for the RITE staff, all the communications people in the Public Affairs Bureau, and the staff in my office was the Vriend decision. As a matter of fact, we had to replenish our fax machine about every half hour during that particular debate. So, you know, you name it and an issue can be created, and when an issue is created, the phone lines start to buzz. Believe me.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to speak to the estimates of the office of the Premier and Executive Council, and it's a pleasure to have the Premier in the Assembly tonight. I think it would be a lot more fun in here if we had the Premier on a regular basis, but I know he's got the province to run.

I did want to focus a little bit on the Public Affairs Bureau estimates, Mr. Chairman. I noticed that the budget for the Public Affairs Bureau is being increased from \$17 million to \$18 million, so that's a significant increase. I think that many of us read the hon. member from Edmonton's book which focuses a great deal on the Public Affairs Bureau, and I think it enhanced public awareness of how that organization operates. It's clearly a centralized organization which reports to the Premier's office, and it has the advantage for the government of ensuring a more consistent message getting out to the public.

9:20

Now, it's interesting, Mr. Chairman. I had a look at the number of spin doctors employed by the Public Affairs Bureau, and there is in fact a significant increase. You know, everybody has spin doctors, but this leaves us feeling rather outgunned. The total number of directors in the Public Affairs Bureau in 2001 was 48 and in this budget is increased to 56, so that's across two years of course. The number of public affairs officers has increased from 85 to 98. The total increase for spin doctors in Public Affairs Bureau over the last two years is from 133 to 154, which is a net increase of 21.

It's interesting that a couple of the departments have seen the biggest increases in spin doctors. Particularly, the Department of Energy has had an increase of four public affairs professionals, from 14 to 18, and I think that would certainly be accounted for by some of the problems that the department has had to deal with. Health and Wellness has stayed pretty much the same. Learning has gone up by

a couple. Innovation and Science has gone up by a couple, and I find that interesting because there's not a lot being announced from that department. Human Resources and Employment is up four.

So across the board, Mr. Chairman, there is a significant inflation in the number of communications professionals in the government, and I think it outstrips the growth in the government itself. It's the one area where the government is loath to cut and reduce and impose quotas and, I think, for very good reason. The department itself is a cornerstone, in fact, of the political strategy of the government.

I'm interested in the Premier's remarks about the comment line, and I know that government does generate a lot of calls. I would be interested in knowing if the comment line information is collated and collected and whether or not it's publicly available or whether or not it's just available to the government. I appreciate that some comments often generate lots of calls from citizens, but I think the Premier should take some comfort in knowing that he no longer has responsibility for regulating cats, because that in my experience is the number one issue at the municipal level for generating comments. You can get thousands and thousands of calls about cats. You can raise taxes, and you'll get a couple of hundred calls. If you bring in a cat bylaw, you'll get thousands. So it's funny what sets the public off.

I wonder if the Premier can comment on a communication strategy for the future. One of the concerns that we in the New Democrat opposition have had is an increasing tendency of the government to focus on the federal government as the bad guy. I don't know what is exactly behind that, but I just suspect that it's more fun to talk about the foibles of the federal government than to talk about the foibles of this provincial government. I note on the issue of Kyoto that Public Affairs and the government actually whipped up quite a firestorm of concern about Kyoto, but when Kyoto was passed, it suddenly subsided. In fact, we had members of the government privately saying that they knew all along that the federal government, true to form, would pass the Kyoto resolution in the House of Commons but weren't really expected to do anything serious about implementing it. I was concerned that that particular campaign – and I'd like to know the costs of that campaign to date – whipped up a lot of anger and resentment against Ottawa in this province and, I think, needlessly so, because once it was passed, the government acknowledged that Kyoto was not in fact the mortal threat to the Alberta economy that they had let on.

Similarly, the Wheat Board has been an issue that the government has focused on. It's interesting, Mr. Chairman, after all of the debate and hand-wringing and attendance at demonstrations and people going to jail and so on, that of the districts for the Wheat Board falling entirely within the province of Alberta, they all elected pro Wheat Board, pro one-desk selling representatives on the Wheat Board. That is a clear message, I think, that the government has been offside, with wheat farmers at least, on this issue, because when they had the democratic right to elect their own directors, they picked people who were in favour of one-desk selling and supporters of the Wheat Board.

Similarly, Mr. Chairman, the government has been making a big deal about the gun registry, and I would just make a couple of points. I think that it's fair to say that Canadians and Albertans are disgusted with the \$1 billion cost associated with that gun registry. It's a massive overrun, and I think everybody has concern about it. But I would note that provinces like Alberta have contributed to those costs by refusing to co-operate with the federal government. Notwithstanding, when I was still in the municipal level, I remember that one of the solicitors general took a poll of Albertans' opinions on the gun registry and found that in fact a majority of Albertans at that time – and this was a number of years ago, I admit – supported

the gun registry. Again, I think the government is offside with many Albertans and particularly urban Albertans, who now comprise the majority of the population in the province.

I'd be interested in whether or not there are independent budgets that have been established for communications plans or PR blitzes with respect to any of these issues. We know that this was the case on Kyoto – and I'd like to know the total amount to date – the Wheat Board, the gun registry, and in fact even Senate reform, another issue, I think, that these days puts more Albertans to sleep than Sominex, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to know as well what the government's plans are for communications on these four issues, which I call the fed-bashing four, and I'd like to know if the government has allocated money within the existing budgets that we're considering to deal with those issues.

That concludes my comments, Mr. Chairman, and I would thank all members for their rapt attention.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, I'm more than pleased to respond. Some of the questions, of course, again have absolutely nothing to do with my budget or the budget of Executive Council or any of the departments.

Certainly, there was an advertising campaign conducted – and those dollars will be available in public accounts – relative to the Kyoto protocol. This protocol had and still has the potential of costing the Alberta economy literally billions and billions of dollars. It's an unfair, thoughtless protocol. By the way, it is just that. It is not the law of this land by any stretch of the imagination. It is a protocol which by the way – and the hon. member knows this – is not even a protocol yet because one of the major signatories has not signed on. If Russia does not sign on to the protocol, there is no protocol at all. It's dead.

9:30

So, Mr. Chairman, when he tries to imply that it is the law of the land, he is misleading people. It is not right. It is not the law of the land. It is a protocol. It's not even an international accord. It is a protocol; simple as that. It is not the law of the land. You know, a protocol or a thought can be changed with a new Liberal leader, and soon enough there's going to be one, and perhaps he'll have a different approach to this ill-conceived and thoughtless idea as to how to address global warming and to reduce greenhouse gases.

I find it interesting that the hon. member alludes to the Wheat Board and the gun registry. You know, again he's not entirely correct when he talks about the gun registry. The majority of people are saying that they want gun control. They want control of firearms in order to keep firearms out of the hands of bad people. But when you poll people relative to the intrusion of the government into the rights of people to protect and own their property, then you will find a different attitude, and that's what gun registration is all about. It's about private property and the right to private property. Big difference between gun control and gun registration and the way it's being administered and the boondoggle the federal government has created, the 1 billion dollar plus boondoggle the federal government has created. So, yes, you know, if the hon. member has given me a platform to bash the federal government, they deserve to be bashed on these issues. And you know what? This isn't costing anything other than the time of the Legislature. Nothing.

The Wheat Board. Well, I can understand where this hon. member is coming from because he loves to have the state control everything. That is the philosophy, and that's . . . [interjection] Controlled by farmers? In a pig's patoot. You know, it's not controlled by farmers at all. It's controlled by the government, and it discriminates against Alberta and Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

All it does is create a socialistic monopoly, which he loves. No. It's inherently unfair. It's a bad law. It's an outdated law, an archaic law that was brought in under the War Measures Act to make sure the Canadians didn't starve prior to the Second World War.

Mrs. Nelson: Just after the Depression.

Mr. Klein: Just after the Depression. Things have changed. Well, they've changed for us. They haven't changed for the socialists.

And the Senate. Well, you know, at least the NDs say that there ought not to be a Senate. We're saying: if there's going to be a Senate, at least it should be a fair Senate and it should be effective and elected and really representative of the people. Right now it's nothing but a reward program for the person who happens to be the Prime Minister of the day. That's all it is, a tool to foster patronage. That's all it is. But the socialists like that. They like it.

You know, I don't know where the hon. member was – perhaps he was listening on the box – when I said that sometimes people who work in the Public Affairs Bureau are dismissed simplistically, by simpleminded people I should have added, as spin doctors. [interjections] Not by the Liberals, no. Not by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. She stood up for the public service employees of this government. But this hon. member insists on referring to them as spin doctors because he isn't aware – he isn't aware – of the many, many different kinds of jobs that PAB staff do. He started out by being wrong. He started out by saying that total full-time equivalents are 181. Well, that was a 2003-2004 estimate. Actually, there are 177.

Mr. Mason: I said 154.

Mr. Klein: You said 181.

Mr. Mason: No, I didn't.

Mr. Klein: You did too.

I would like to go through – and I think this is very important because he made some very disparaging comments about members of the Public Affairs Bureau. He implied that they are nothing more than spin doctors, government lackeys. First of all, they help government ministries to communicate with Albertans.

Mrs. Nelson: Absolutely.

Mr. Klein: Right. They do this by supplying professionals to government departments to develop and implement communications programs. They do this by providing communications planning and consulting support to government. They do this by co-ordinating government communications to and from Albertans on priority areas for government initiatives and during public emergencies. It's very important. They do this by providing specialized writing and editing services to government. They do this by helping ministries purchase advertising services. They do this by creating and implementing a corporate communications strategy to ensure public information programs are co-ordinated across government and Albertans are getting the information they need in the most cost-effective way.

Yes, the hon. member pointed to a budget increase of \$977,000 for this particular activity. There is a reason for that budget change. The budget increase of nearly a million dollars is to develop and implement a corporate communications strategy that increases public awareness of the Alberta Connects telephone and e-mail service. This is a program that goes to the heart of what ordinary Albertans, to use a favourite ND phrase, expect in terms of gaining access to their government.

Ms. Carlson: Settle down, Ralph. You're going to have a heart attack.

Mr. Klein: No, I'm not. I go on the treadmill every day.

Indeed, there has been an increased workload in updating the Alberta logo, adding an on-line public consultation facility to the Alberta government home page, and looking for ways to make it easier for the visually impaired. I think this is very important: for the visually impaired. He would deny the visually impaired access to government services; that's what he's implying. And, of course, salary increases that apply to staff across government: the NDs certainly don't have any problems with applying salary increases to public service employees. I know that for sure.

Now, there was an additional \$348,000 increase in the budget, and this is to provide Albertans with two-way access to government services. This involves managing the Service Alberta call centre to give Albertans toll-free access to government, providing Alberta Connects call centre services for major government initiatives, managing the two-way flow of information through the Alberta government home page, providing technical support for major government news conferences and announcements, managing the provincewide distribution of news releases – and believe me; those news releases come from all over, including some of the ND rags that, you know, are prevalent in some of the urban centres – providing communications technology support to Executive Council and Internet consultation to departments.

So it goes on and on, Mr. Chairman, and to bring it down to those simplistic terms that are so easy because they elicit the five-second sound bite, because I don't think they're capable of 15 seconds, to something that is as simplistic as "spin doctor" – it's much more complex than that. It's much more involved than that. Indeed, these are dedicated, committed public service employees, talented, professional employees, and they're a lot more than spin doctors. I'll tell you that for sure.

9:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Alberta is renowned around the world for many areas of excellence including our Premier, and, Premier, it is really good to have you here with us tonight. Another area where Albertans excel is in athletics and in particular the game of hockey. Tonight as we discuss Committee of Supply main estimates for the Executive Council, the Edmonton Oilers are discussing their superior skills with the Dallas Stars. More notably, however, the Red Deer Rebels are in the seventh game of an exciting WHL playoff series with the Medicine Hat Tigers, and in an equally exciting playoff series in the Alberta Junior Hockey League, the Camrose Kodiaks and the St. Albert Saints are battling each other for the provincial championship in the seventh game. Tonight Albertans will celebrate and salute the talent and dedication of coaches, players, and organizations who work together as a team, use discipline to achieve their goals, and represent all Albertans nationally and internationally.

Mr. Chairman, not unlike our hockey teams the government of Alberta must work together as a team, use discipline to achieve our goals, and represent all Albertans in all that we do. Whether it's Great Kids awards, that recognize and honour our kids who make outstanding contributions to our communities, or the Public Affairs Bureau, that strives to be a centre of communications excellence, the Executive Council works diligently to provide open communications with Albertans. As our population increases and the levels of interest increase, open communications are even more important for

Albertans, and as a result of open communications I am pleased to be able to ask my question this evening.

Premier, on page 137 of the estimates under the Statement of Operations by Program, the ministry revenue for the 2003-2004 estimate of \$1,200,000 on the revenue side is considerably lower than the 2002-2003 comparable forecast of \$2 million. Could you please let us know why this estimate is significantly lower than the previous year? That's page 137 under Revenue.

Dr. Taft: You already answered that.

Mr. Klein: Yes, I did answer. The hon. member is absolutely right. The discrepancy is due to the Queen's Printer revenue being down, and as I explained earlier, there's been a budget reduction of \$406,000, or a 21.3 percent decrease, in revenues due to completion of the *Revised Statutes of Alberta*. If you'll recall, there was about a seven-year program to revise all the provincial statutes. That program has now been completed, and most of the revised statutes were obtained by the legal profession last year, so there's less of a demand. It's due also to a lot of the legislation, regulations associated with the legislation being available on the Internet. Indeed, as I was coming into the Legislature this evening, the hon. Minister of Justice was accessing some regulations associated with a piece of Alberta legislation on the Internet. I would suspect that many lawyers are now accessing those regulations on the Internet, which has resulted in a decline in revenue to the Queen's Printer.

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

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Once again I want to congratulate the Premier because I think his comments are clear evidence of my point that we do not need this increase in the number of staff positions in the Public Affairs Bureau. It's obvious this Premier doesn't need a spin doctor. When the opposition stands up and asks legitimate questions about an increase in communications staff in his office, he can actually turn it around into the opposition wanting to take services away from the blind. Now, this man does not need a spin doctor, and I think we could cut one right here, and the Premier would be fine.

I do want to indicate that I recognize that these are skilled professionals and that all parties use so-called spin doctors or communications professionals. The concern I have is twofold. One is the expansion of the number, and the justification for that hasn't been given.

The second aspect that I have a concern about is what they're actually focusing on. It's clear that communication of legitimate information that Albertans should know about their government and its policies is important, and I'm not attempting to challenge that in any way, but I did mention a number of issues where I think these professionals are being utilized for clear partisan political benefit of the government that leads to a sense of disunity in the country and in this province and that the government is doing that to divert attention from its own problems, which are multiplying, Mr. Chairman. Particularly in the areas of electricity deregulation, gas prices, education funding, and so on the government is increasingly finding itself under fire from individual Albertans.

One question I asked that the Premier did not respond to is whether or not the aggregated information from the comment line is going to be available to anyone besides the government. Is it going to be public information? Will opposition parties in the Assembly have access to this information, or is it strictly going to be used as strategic information to benefit the government alone?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, the question is an interesting one, and I wish I could provide the answer, but I can't because I don't know. I know that in my own office we have never used that information. I know that when there is a hot issue and phone calls come directly to my office or to Alberta Connects, we get an indication of how many people are calling. We sort of get a general breakdown of whether people are for the issue or against the issue, but I don't recall ever seeing a compilation of all the comments, and I don't know how that is made available. I don't know how it ties in or relates to the protection of privacy legislation, but I will endeavour to find an answer as to how that information is treated and whether or not it's publicly disseminated.

9:50

The other question again goes back to the Public Affairs Bureau. I guess, Mr. Chairman, I could sum up the Public Affairs Bureau by reading the mission statement because I want to put to rest this notion that the Public Affairs Bureau contains nothing but a bunch of spin doctors. Certainly, the people who manage the RITE lines and the Alberta Connects operation are not spin doctors in any way, shape, or form – they are simply there to assist Albertans in getting the information they require – nor are the people who work as communications officers in the Public Affairs Bureau. They are there to do a job, and as I mentioned in my initial remarks, they deal with a multitude of issues for a multitude of departments.

I outlined, for example, that the Public Affairs Bureau itself, just the communications people, probably receives at least 35 calls per day from media of all sorts, including national, international media, rural newspapers, you know, radio stations, and that's just generally. Then you break it down by department. I'm sure that those interested in children's services or agricultural services or justice or finance or you name it – there are individual calls to those communications officers directly involved in the departments, and that probably adds up to hundreds more calls each and every day, and you have to have talented, professional people who are knowledgeable so that they can answer intelligently the questions that are put to them.

You look at the vision overall for the Public Affairs Bureau: the bureau "strives to be a centre of communications excellence and one of Albertans' preferred choices for news and information about their government's policies, programs and services." That is it in a nutshell. You look at the mission of the PAB: "The mission of the Public Affairs Bureau is to help the government" – and that's what makes the hon. member mad; that's what makes him mad because it is to help the government, the duly elected government – "in its ongoing dialogue with Albertans by providing quality, coordinated and cost-effective communications services." Again, I underline "the government" because it says in the mission statement "to help the government," not the NDs but the government. It doesn't say to help the New Democratic Party or the New Democrat opposition or the Conservative Party or the Liberal Party. It says, "To help the government," and it just so happens, as I explained earlier, that under the democratic process and the British parliamentary system this party happens to be the government.

In the business plan the PAB outlines strategic priorities.

The strategic priorities identified in this plan will increase the coordination and efficiency of communications from the government as a whole and ensure Albertans enjoy quick and convenient access to the information they need. A key priority is the development of a corporate communications approach to ensure Albertans receive timely and coordinated information from their government. From their government.

The Bureau will also begin to revise the corporate visual identity for government, updating a visual signature that is over 30 years old. I mentioned that in my opening remarks.

Other initiatives include ensuring Albertans have access to information in all priority areas, improving electronic access to government information and further developing available e-communications resources such as Alberta Connects and the Alberta Government Home Page. [The PAB] will also review Queen's Printer Bookstore operations to ensure full public access to legislation while maintaining efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

That in a nutshell identifies the priorities, the mission, and the vision of the Public Affairs Bureau.

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

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Before I get to my question, I do have a brief story I'd like to pass on to the Assembly that occurred Sunday, and I know it relates directly to Executive Council. I was at the Edmonton Oilers' hockey play-off game on Sunday night, and the Premier and his deputy chief of staff were sitting behind me. Midway through the third period a number of visitors from Toronto approached us and asked us if they could take our Premier back to Ontario with them for the people of Ontario so that he could lead that province as he has led our province so well in the last 10 years. We informed the well-intentioned individuals that an autograph will have to suffice as we do not want our Premier to go anywhere for quite some time, thank you very much.

My question is from page 139 of the estimates of Executive Council. It indicates that the office of the Premier has 50 full-time equivalent staff for 2002-2003 and 127 in the Public Affairs Bureau, for a total of 177. Executive Council staffing has remained the same for 2003-2004, but the bureau's full-time equivalents have increased by four, bringing it to 131. What are those additional four FTEs to be employed to do? I know that the Premier has elaborated quite a bit with regard to the 181 FTEs allocated in Executive Council, but if he has missed any, I would certainly be interested to hear.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. [interjections]

Mr. Klein: Well, I hear a lot of chirping from over there about the question being asked, but I'm glad the question was asked, because the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands has all his information skewed. It's not the right information. He must have got it from the phone book or someplace. I don't know where he got it. The NDs do not have the correct data on the number of PAB staff. They're using discredited data compiled, as I said, from the phone book or someplace. Maybe it's the government phone book; I don't know. For the record, the PAB is adding four FTEs – you alluded to that – four full-time employees, all of whom will work the Service Alberta phone lines. That is a wonderful service, formerly the RITE service. That is a wonderful service to simply provide information or to steer the caller to the appropriate department to gain the right information.

Ms Kryczka: I didn't think I would have time to speak this evening before time was up. First of all, I just want to say that I'm pleased to be able to say anything at all. My first question or comment was actually answered, Mr. Premier: what does Public Affairs provide in supports to communications branches of various departments?

I was just proofing a document a little while ago. We are immensely enlarging the profile and the involvement of Senior Citizens' Week activities this year. I know that the Seniors department has excellent staff in their department. Well, you would have seen in the House a week or so ago the best ever poster for Senior Citizens' Week, and the activities are certainly exciting. I have a question. Does the Seniors 1-800 line receive support and advice from Public Affairs? It's a very valuable service to Alberta's seniors.

10:00

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-West, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for not less than two hours of consideration for a department's proposed estimates unless there are no members who wish to speak prior to the conclusion of the two hours, I must now put the question on the proposed estimates for the Department of Executive Council for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004.

Agreed to:
Operating Expense \$18,035,000

The Chair: Shall this vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed?

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Chair: Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply rise and report and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004, for the following department.

Executive Council: operating expense, \$18,035,000.

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

Some Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed?

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Second Reading

Bill 28

Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, 2003

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 28, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, 2003.

It is seldom that FOIP legislation would arouse such excitement, but at this time anything could happen. The proposed amendments

flow from the final report of the Select Special Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act Review Committee. The report was tabled before this Legislature in late 2002.

An amendment is being made to protect personal banking and credit card information. The amendment will state that it is presumed to be an unreasonable invasion of a third party's personal privacy to disclose their personal banking and credit card information. Mr. Speaker, another amendment to the act will give the Information and Privacy Commissioner the discretion to refuse to conduct an inquiry after considering all the relevant circumstances. This will reduce the time and resources that are currently spent on inquiries that are simply unnecessary.

Criteria are currently set out for excluding public bodies from the application of the FOIP Act. For consistency the proposed amendments will make the criteria for excluding public bodies from the act the same as the criteria for including them. Consequential amendments will be made to the Traffic Safety Act to allow for regulations that will establish criteria for releasing motor vehicle registry information. The remainder of the amendments to the FOIP Act are housekeeping in nature.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, I also would like to move to adjourn the debate on Bill 28. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 35 Tobacco Tax Amendment Act, 2003

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

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to stand today and move second reading of Bill 35, the Tobacco Tax Amendment Act, 2003.

This bill will make several changes in the legislation governing the collection of tobacco taxes in the province. The proposed amendments will provide a level playing field for tobacco consumers and retailers in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, since the introduction of higher tobacco taxes last year, the purchase of tax-paid tobacco has dropped dramatically. While many Albertans have in fact chosen a healthier life, a small part of the reduction is due to increased sales of tax-free tobacco at the duty-free stores and through the Alberta Indian tax exemption program. As a result, the Alberta government is losing millions of dollars in potential tax revenues. The amendments will set appropriate limits on the amount of tax-free tobacco that can be brought into Alberta and further improve our ability to ensure that any tobacco purchased tax free is for personal consumption only and not for resale to others.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, the intent of raising tobacco taxes was to create a healthier province in which we all enjoy living, and it's working. The intent of this amendment is to close the loopholes, that are now being abused by some, in order to further discourage smoking and thus ensure that we continue down the road to a healthier Alberta.

I urge all members of this Legislature to give Bill 35 their full support. Thank you.

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

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 35, the Tobacco Tax Amendment Act, 2003, in second reading. As we understand the object of this bill,

it's twofold. First, we see the legislation closing some loopholes that currently are allowing tobacco products to enter the province tax free. The changes in Bill 35 would see Albertans pay taxes on cigarettes that are imported into the province. Secondly, the changes proposed in this legislation would further discourage smoking amongst Albertans, we hope, because a cheap source of cigarettes is eliminated and thereby increasing the financial incentives not to smoke, so we think that those things are all good.

When we take a look at the background for this bill, we see that in the 2002 budget the Alberta government decided to substantially increase tobacco taxes to discourage Albertans from smoking, and we saw cigarette taxes rise from about \$1.75 to about \$4 per pack, and the taxes on loose-cut tobacco were equalized at this rate. Also, taxes on cigars rose by the same percentage as taxes on cigarettes. We had that debate here in the Legislature the other day when one of the members from Calgary talked about his friend – or perhaps it was himself – who's importing cigars from Manitoba now cheaper after paying the freight than he can purchase them here. So that is specifically what this particular bill addresses in terms of closing that particular loophole.

So what happened back in 2002 is that over the short-to-medium term the government believed that the increase in tobacco tax would result in increased government revenue. The revenue goes straight to the general revenue fund, therefore enabling the government to have access to more money to spend on anything they wanted. When the government proposed this significant increase, some Albertans raised concerns about it, particularly with regard to black-market cigarette activities that this tax might create. Amongst those people were the Official Opposition, and of course what we thought would happen did in fact happen. People talked about the black market for tobacco products in Alberta growing significantly because smokers who did not want to quit would begin to look for bargains, and we saw examples of that in this House. Since the high tobacco taxes have been implemented, the numbers of Albertans purchasing tobacco products have decreased, and the number of Albertans who import illegal cigarettes and tobacco products, that you do not have to pay taxes on, is on the rise.

10:10

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

According to a study conducted by the government's own department, the Finance department, cigarette sales declined 18 percent in the first three months after the tax hike. As of October 31, 2002, cigarette sales had declined by over 21 percent. In comparison, Stats Canada has reported that cigarette smoking in Canada over the same period is only down 8 percent. So the statistics confirm that encouraging the price of cigarettes to go up discourages smoking amongst Albertans, and this bill is a move forward in terms of trying to further decrease the number of Albertans using products by providing a level playing field and making them uniformly expensive for everybody. So it hopes to provide a further disincentive for smoking cigarettes, as we see it.

The government predicted that the \$18 per carton increase in the price of cigarettes would boost illegal sales and bootlegging, and they had budgeted an extra \$1.5 million for enforcement. As we understand it, part of the money was used to increase the number of tobacco tax inspectors to 20 from five. Tax-free sales are only permitted to natives with an Alberta Indian tax exemption card, but inspectors have uncovered a number of illegal sales since the taxes came into effect. As of the end of November 2002 tobacco tax inspectors had seized many cartons of cigarettes, well over 200. Twenty-seven people were charged and 13 were convicted, paying a total of \$7,500 in fines.

Recently, Albertans have found that they can dodge the tobacco

tax by purchasing their cigarettes from the United States and over the Internet. On-line sales have seen big increases since the government increase in tobacco taxes, so this legislation looks at closing that loophole by requiring all cigarettes that arrive through the mail to have taxes paid on them before they can be removed from the post office. This is only possible as a result of a deal made with the federal government to allow postal agents to collect this tax. Additionally, many Albertans have started to travel over the border to the States in order to bring cigarettes back to the province tax free, and the claim is being made that some Albertans are making several trips every day, Mr. Speaker, and bringing back their personal limit of tax-free cigarettes each and every time. So, once again, this bill attempts to stop this by allowing customs officers to charge a fee equivalent to the tobacco tax before the products can be brought over the border.

There were several sections of the Tobacco Tax Amendment Act debated in this House last year but for some strange reason never proclaimed into law. So as we see this bill, we've got some questions that we hope will be cleared up for us when we get to committee, and subject to the answers that we get, it looks like we're going to be able to support this bill. Firstly, of course, we believe that any initiative that will reduce tobacco consumption is a good thing, reducing tobacco consumption, regardless of what they're smoking and how they're smoking it. Definitely there is lots of scientific proof to determine that smoking is harmful to health, and of course by reducing the number of smokers, we reduce health costs, and reducing health care costs is in everybody's interests, and that's definitely a very good thing.

We want to eliminate tobacco products that are available on the black market and ensure that there is fairness for both users and retailers of tobacco products. So the issues that we need to have answered are: why were there sections of the Tobacco Tax Act that had been passed by this House not proclaimed into law? What was the delay in making these pieces of legislation into law? How do the changes proposed in Bill 35 affect the unproclaimed changes that are currently on the record? What guarantees do Albertans have that the changes proposed in the bill will eventually become law?

The amount of tobacco products that are not marked for tax-paid sales that a person in Alberta is allowed to hold has decreased from 1,000 grams to 200 grams. So if you could give us the reason for the decrease and why 200 grams was chosen and how they expect the changes to affect the current practices.

When the government put the tobacco tax in place in 2002, they allocated 1.5 million more dollars for increased enforcement. Why didn't the government just put the changes proposed to Bill 35 in place instead? Do you expect the changes proposed in this bill to save money with respect to enforcement costs? If so, how much? If not, why not? Now that the changes are in place, will the tobacco tax enforcement costs return to the previous levels? If not, again, could you tell us why you're making the changes then in the first place?

We want to know why section 7 doesn't come into force with the rest of the act. If you can tell us why there's a delay in that. We'll get into that in committee in more detail, but generally if you can give us a reason before we talk about it in debate, that would be good.

So these changes require some significant co-operation with the federal government. We hear this is a government that doesn't like to co-operate with them too much, so if you can tell us how that little plan is going to unfold, we'd appreciate it.

My last question has to do with how taxes will affect companies like FedEx and Purolator who are now making deliveries. What's going to happen with the recovery of the charges on those packages?

Does, in fact, Alberta have jurisdiction in those areas, or does that require some other kind of issue? Do you see any problems with NAFTA with regard to the changes being made here?

So, Mr. Speaker, if we could get the answers to those questions when we get into committee, we'll be quite happy. With those comments, I'll take my seat.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill 35. I just have a brief comment. Members may know that I did not support the legislation that was introduced a year ago to jack up taxes on tobacco, and that is notwithstanding a long personal history of promoting antismoking measures at the municipal level of government, where I'd always been a strong advocate of things which would reduce tobacco consumption. I believe that tobacco consumption is a major driver of our health care costs, and I think that effective means to deal with smoking and to reduce it are very important.

The problem with the legislation that was passed at the time and which this legislation amends is that it was essentially a tax grab. It wanted to increase the government's take from tobacco without allocating those additional revenues to programs to help people to quit smoking altogether. In other words, the government is only doing half the job and, in fact, has an ongoing benefit from the continued sale of tobacco products. So what I would like to see – and it's not here in this amending bill – is some provision that this money should be earmarked for smoking cessation programs and various other programs that would reduce the amount of tobacco consumed by Albertans.

The other point I'll make is that low-income people disproportionately are smokers relative to the population as a whole. Particularly in parts of my constituency there are a lot of low-income people and a lot of people who smoke, and a strictly financial approach to smoking reduction in my view is unfair and discriminates against the low-income people, who have a harder and harder time being able to afford the tobacco products. That burden does not fall equally and fairly. So it's a very one-sided approach. It's an approach that is ultimately designed to increase government revenues, and I have a difficulty with it.

10:20

I have some questions relative to the bill. I find it interesting that the government of Alberta will now effectively impose duties on tobacco products coming across its border. Since we don't have customs locations on the Saskatchewan border or B.C. border, then I'm interested in how the government would intend to enforce this. I notice that there are exceptions in the act dealing with the importation of tobacco through the mail and the use of postal agents and customs officials and so on of the government of Canada to enforce that, and I am again curious how the government would see this being enforced through the mails in a practical way. It's great to say that, you know, legally you owe this money if you import it, but is it in fact going to be an effective piece of legislation?

I guess it gives rise to the last point I'd like to make, which is that surely we need to have some sort of national approach to this question. Rather than just Alberta jacking up its tobacco taxes, it might be an idea to have a national approach to tobacco, a national tobacco reduction strategy, and perhaps the government could take that up once they've finished resolving issues around gun control, the Wheat Board, and so on. Perhaps they might engage in some actual constructive federalism with other provinces. You know, for

that matter, you don't even have to deal with the federal government in the first instance. You could talk to other provinces. Let's move towards harmonizing tobacco taxes in this country and develop a co-operative approach that not only imposes taxes on tobacco but puts the revenue from those taxes to work in helping people with tobacco cessation programs and so on instead of just punching people who may be addicted to tobacco but don't have the financial means to afford the high taxes. That's a rather crude and unfair approach, Mr. Speaker.

So with those questions in mind, I'll take my seat. Thank you.

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

Mr. Cao: I call for the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a second time]

Bill 32
Income and Employment Supports Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to

move second reading of Bill 32, the Income and Employment Supports Act.

First, I'd like to thank the MLAs for Edmonton-Castle Downs, Calgary-Bow, Calgary-East, Cardston-Taber-Warner, and Edmonton-Norwood. This new legislation is a direct result of the outstanding work that they did on the low-income review.

Too often people are skeptical about consultations and reports and wonder if any action will come out of it. Bill 32 is proof that the process works. We have listened to the voices of hundreds of people who participated in the review process. We have listened to stakeholders and people who work on the front lines and, of course, with the clients, and now we're taking action.

But by way of action tonight, Mr. Speaker, I would like to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:26 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

