

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, May 15, 2003**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2003/05/15

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Our Father, keep us mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work give us strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure and honour today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a woman who is familiar to all of us. She is seated in your gallery. Joan Gabert served as a police constable with the Edmonton Police Service for over 25 years, and then she came to the Legislative Assembly security staff in 1996. She's retiring; today is her last day with us. She and her husband will be splitting their time between Vancouver Island and their home in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. I know that all hon. members wish them well. Joan, we thank you for your good work in the service of this House. I now invite Joan to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is also my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly Mr. Gordon and Meldia Weisgerber. They are the proud parents of page Erin Weisgerber, who is unfortunately leaving this Assembly and I'm sure is going on to bigger and brighter things as she progresses with her education. I would now ask the proud parents to please rise in the Speaker's gallery and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this bright spring day it's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce 75 equally as bright, intelligent, and hardworking students from the Percy Baxter school in Whitecourt. Accompanying them are eight adults, and they're seated in the members' and public galleries this afternoon. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have some visitors here today sharing their visit with the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky and myself. We have Trenton Perrott, who is the manager of the Prairie Gallery in Grande Prairie; Derek Hall, who is with the Grande Prairie Live Theatre; and Lisa Ryan, who is with the Grande Prairie Public Library. They're in the public gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure

to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 34 of Alberta's brightest and best from the heart of my constituency, 34 children from John Wilson elementary school, the grade 6 class. They're accompanied by their teacher, Mrs. Pederson, and parent/teacher helpers Mrs. Hill, Mrs. Douglas, Mrs. Young, and Mr. Harsch. I would like them to all stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure today that I rise to introduce the Official Opposition's incredible research team. They've done an excellent job for us this session, and I would like them to rise as I give their names: David Schaaf, Laurence Miall, Kirsten Odynski, Aaron Roth, Alex Ragan, Rachel Peterson, Elaine Jewitt-Matthen, and our summer STEP student, Kevin Elliott, and our student with the Quebec/Alberta exchange program, Sonia Nadeau. She's studying political science at Laval University. I would ask all members of the Legislature to recognize these young people who have contributed so greatly to the democratic process in Alberta.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of our Assembly four fine individuals: Master Lin Ho, a leader of our Buddhist community in Castle Downs; her brother Mr. Chee Liaw; Mrs. Yun Liaw; as well, all the way from France, Chanmaly Kasisavanh. I would ask them to rise and receive the usual warm welcome of our Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a distinct privilege to rise on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, the Minister of Community Development, and introduce his constituent Mr. Harcharan Dhaliwal, along with two guests from India, Lali Sandhu and Uday Sandhu, who are seated in the members' gallery. I would ask if they would please rise and we would share our warm welcome with all of them.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions today. The first is Ms Lorie Grundy, who is seated in the public gallery. Ms Grundy is a registered nurse. She worked many years at the Cross Cancer Institute. She has four daughters, one of whom is studying in India and three who are still in Edmonton. They are exemplary citizens and fine students.

The other introduction is Lorie's daughter Hayley Grundy, who is becoming well known to many people in this province as a real advocate for public education. I would ask Lorie and Hayley to please rise and receive the warm welcome of all members here.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm truly delighted to rise and introduce to you and through you to the Legislative Assembly two of my constituents. Dwayne Van Straten is a teacher at T.D. Baker junior high school. Last Sunday, May 11, he was in Spain to participate in the world long-course triathlon championship held in Ibiza, Spain. There were over 900 participants from all over

the world, 40 of them from Canada. This triathlon included a four-kilometre swim in the Mediterranean Sea, a 20-kilometre bike ride, and a 30-kilometre run. While biking, Dwayne was pushed off the road by another competitor and sustained fairly serious injuries. In spite of all that, he picked up his bike, repaired it, and continued. He finished the triathlon ranking fifth among Canadians and 150th internationally and 20th in his age group in spite of this accident. His wife, Sharon Gingara, is accompanying him today, and she is an accomplished athlete in her own right. She just finished her first marathon in Vancouver about 10 days ago. Both of them are, I think, seated in the public gallery. I will now ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, with your permission is of four parents from the Mill Woods area: Cheryl Depeel, Evelyn McGill, Jennifer Henneberry, and Joni Schootstra. These parents are very concerned about the continuing underfunding of their children's education. In addition, they are likely to lose the nonprofit day care at Grant MacEwan Community College in Mill Woods because of the same cuts. I'll ask these visitors to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40head: Ministerial Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Emergency Services Personnel

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to talk about the importance of emergency services in Alberta and what the government has been doing to recognize our dedicated Albertans. Many of us in this House just came from the inaugural presentation of the Alberta emergency services medal, which took place during the lunch hour right outside here on the Legislature steps.

The Alberta emergency services medal was established to pay tribute to proud Albertans, outstanding full-time, part-time, and volunteer members who have committed 12 or more years of their careers to emergency services in Alberta. This medal is the first of its kind in Canada. This medal also recognizes emergency services that have never, ever before been formally recognized by our province.

The eight disciplines that were recognized today are the Alberta Fire Fighters; EMS, Emergency Medical Services; the fire service dispatch; Emergency Medical Services dispatch; Search and Rescue; Emergency Management Alberta; the Alberta fire commissioner's office; and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. So as you can see, in addition to recognizing the frontline personnel that physically come to our aid during emergencies, this medal also honours those individuals who make things work behind the scenes, the dispatchers who handle emergency phone calls calmly and professionally. Their work goes on many times unnoticed. It also recognizes local directors of Disaster Services, who shoulder much of the responsibility for making sure their communities know how to prepare for, respond to, and recover from major emergencies. It honours our provincial staff who, among other things, develop fire safety programs for children, help communities establish municipal emergency plans, and protect our province's forests and wildlife.

Today we recognized 350 exceptional individuals and true Albertans for helping to protect others. In the selfless dedication that they have demonstrated in their careers and in their volunteer contributions they have made an impact on lives each and every day. To these men and women commitment means always being on call, always being available when they are needed, and to them it means

doing the best you can possibly do every call every day. It means going the extra mile and giving your all. For their 12 or more years they were recognized today as individuals that have been protecting our families and our friends, asking for nothing in return other than the satisfaction of knowing that they've helped others.

I was pleased to see so many members of this Assembly here today recognizing those very true Albertans, and I want to say, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of all Albertans that we thank Alberta's emergency services personnel and their families for working selflessly every day to maintain a sense of safety and security for all Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today's ceremony honouring 350 staff members of Alberta's emergency services was a most fitting recognition of the efforts of some of Alberta's finest citizens. These men and women are never far when Albertans need their help most. Whether they are fighting fires, tending to the injured, or performing silently behind the scenes, these people represent the best facets of humanity: bravery, commitment, integrity, and compassion. While most Albertans wouldn't know these people by their proper names, they do know them by another name. They call them heroes.

On behalf of all Albertans I would like to congratulate all medal winners on their achievements, their commitment, and their selfless dedication to others. To all emergency services personnel I say: well done and thank you.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, with your indulgence I would request unanimous consent from the Assembly in order for us to respond to the ministerial statement.

The Speaker: Hon. members, and for those who are viewing, every time this procedure comes to the floor, my office gets questions as to why we have to go through this. Well, the reality, for all the people in television land who happen to be watching question period, is that in order to be a recognized political party in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, you must have a minimum of four seats, and the request now comes from a representative that does not have that. So in order to participate in Ministerial Statements, there must be unanimous consent granted by the Legislative Assembly.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank members for their courtesy in allowing me to add my thanks to Alberta's dedicated and hardworking emergency services workers. The medal recipients are indeed deserving of their awards. At the same time, these deserving recipients would be the first to acknowledge that they would not have been able to receive these awards if not for the efforts of their coworkers. Emergency response services are the very epitome of teamwork. Only by working together and being able to rely on other members of the team are emergency response personnel able to do the courageous work that we as a society call upon them to do. Whether it is running into burning buildings to rescue a trapped child or even a pet, attending victims at an accident scene, or dispatching an ambulance to the home of a frail senior citizen, we depend on these dedicated professionals.

On behalf of my caucus colleague and New Democrats across the province I salute all of today's award winners and the dedicated work of all emergency response personnel across the province. Thank you very much.

head: **Oral Question Period****Electricity Deregulation**

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, even though most recent changes to deregulation were just passed in this House a month ago, the Minister of Energy is pushing to have them implemented by June 1 of 2003. Rapid change will create uncertainty in the marketplace, and consumers still haven't been told what these changes mean for them. I didn't think it was possible, but this government's deregulation boondoggle is about to go from bad to worse. To the Minister of Energy: why is the Minister of Energy recklessly rushing to implement the new Electric Utilities Act by June 1 when it was passed in the House just one month ago?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, Bill 3 was a combination of two and a half years of strident consultation with involvement from every party involved in the electricity discussion. This also included the Member for Edmonton-Highlands being placed on an Internet notifications group. This bill has been consulted on widely. It has been consulted on throughout the industry. It is a result of stakeholder input. It's a result of the Premier's council on electrical issues, their extensive discussion and their extensive input.

Mr. Speaker, this is not a surprise to anybody in Alberta, and in fact what we have done over the past two and a half years is we've consulted, as I've stated, and we've put in the three pillars that deliver a market model. One is the export market policy, that ensures that Albertans are benefited by exports and that they are not harmed by either having to pay for transmission costs or for power that they could otherwise use. They must be served first. Secondly, the market policy clearly puts a level playing field into Alberta, has facilitated the entry of another competitor, delivers clear and transparent regulation to the market model. Lastly, the transmission policy. The transmission policy is, again, an outcome of the Premier's council on electrical issues. It is critically designed to ensure that Albertans have open access to the lowest overall cost generation.

So it's a plan. The policy course is there. The pillars are up. The next step is an extensive consumer education program.

Dr. Nicol: To the minister: when is that consumer education program going to start so that consumers can find out what their rights are when they're faced with marketers?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I was just on a telephone call regarding that campaign before question period, at 1 o'clock, and we can assume that we'll have something out earliest toward the end of May and certainly in June and then reappearing again extensively in the fall season. The folks in Alberta trust the government for their information, and we want to ensure that they get it.

1:50

Dr. Nicol: Again to the minister: how can the minister expect Albertans to provide informed input into your regulations for the new act when you're only giving them three to five days for turnaround on their responses on those new regulations?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the regulations are simply an embodiment of the legislation. They have been discussed with the group since the act was assembled last October, November. I have not received any specific complaint relative to the regulation process.

Education Funding

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, in 2001 the horse racing industry asked the

government for an investment of \$87.1 million over three years. Over the last three years the government has given that horse racing industry \$87.9 million, more than what it asked for. The government has defended this move as an investment in Alberta's economic development. To the Minister of Economic Development: in the long-term development of this province is it more important to invest in horse racing or in education?

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, clearly, Mr. Speaker, the question being asked is posing two different streams, but I'd like to answer the question in this way. Without economic drivers creating any kind of wealth, other than government intervention we don't have the money that we need to spend on the policies and the planning and the education and the health care that we so cherish in this province. So I would answer the question in this way to the hon. member. If you don't focus your business on generating revenue, you end up having none to spend. Clearly, in this province we have generated a massive amount of revenue through these programs, very worthwhile industries, so that we do have the best health care system and the best education and the best roads in the country. I would support anything that invests money in developing new revenue sources so that we can continue providing Albertans with the best services in Canada.

Dr. Nicol: To the Minister of Learning, Mr. Speaker: what do parents have to do to get the same commitment in their children's schools as this government gives to the horse racing industry?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, in the K to 12 system this year – this year – there was a \$191 million increase.

Dr. Nicol: To the Minister of Finance: how can the minister justify to parents in Edmonton and Calgary that they will be paying more in property taxes and still lose teachers?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, you've heard our Minister of Learning talk about the concern of Edmonton and Calgary and all school districts day after day in this House. He's also said that when their budgets come forward, he's prepared to work with the school boards to deal with some of the pressure points. The opposition is bent on trying to make a case that there isn't a co-operation between the two entities of the school boards and the Ministry of Learning. That is just, quite frankly, not the case. We have heard what Albertans have said. We put a 4.7 percent increase in our budget this year. In 2005 we will spend over \$5 billion in Learning in this province for a population of just over 3 million people. We are committed to education, as we have exemplified in our budget planning process. We've brought a balance into this province which I believe is the right balance, and I would really ask the opposition to support the government in working with the boards to make sure that we look after the children for the future.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Calgary public, Calgary Catholic, Edmonton public, Grande Prairie public, Red Deer public, Elk Island public, St. Albert Catholic: all school boards from across the province in financial trouble and letting teachers go. Yet all we hear from the Minister of Learning is: don't worry; we'll talk to them. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. How many more school boards must sound the alarm before the minister stops talking and takes some action?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I believe there has been a good example of what has happened with the passage today of the Calgary Catholic budget. For a school system that has roughly 45,000 children within it, they announced today that there would be a decrease of 11 teachers. Obviously, any decrease is certainly significant, but it isn't to the same magnitude as when we're talking 450 teachers, which was announced here. I think the obvious question is: how can Edmonton Catholic do it with no teacher layoffs, with exactly the same amount of dollars? How can Calgary Catholic do it with 11 teacher layoffs? These are some of the very critical issues that we are talking about and asking the school boards.

Again, Mr. Speaker, there are two ways that you can govern. You can just say quite simply, "Here's the money; go do with it as you wish," or you can actually ask: "Are you spending prudently? Are you spending in the right place?" Those are some of the questions that we're asking school boards.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister: given that the minister claims that boards are adequately funded, why are so many boards reporting just the contrary?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, what happened in this year, as everyone in this Assembly knows, is that there was roughly a 14 percent increase in arbitrated costs. There have been some other costs, and indeed one of the things that I certainly have told the school boards that we will have a very important look at is the operations and maintenance costs, things like that. So we are talking to the school boards. We're hearing their side. For example, I had a meeting with the two Lethbridge school boards, who were concerned because their surpluses were going to be eaten up next year.

So, Mr. Speaker, the situations are different all around the province. What we're attempting to do is help each individual board make its way through this 14 percent settlement that was done last year, and hopefully we'll have positive results from that.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is the minister trying to convince people that things are going to get better when school boards are laying off and cutting teachers right now?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I go back to what I had said previously in this House. The budget of Calgary public is preliminary. I understand that the final one is going to come down next week. The budget for Edmonton public was announced. Interestingly enough, in Edmonton public's budget there is a balance, but there's no mention, for example, that they took their AISI funds, fired the teachers that were on AISI, and put AISI into professional development: 9 and a half million to 10 million dollars. So there are a lot of large questions that still remain. We could just simply settle, as the hon. member is asking, and say: okay; well, that's what it must be.

Mr. Norris: Not good enough for Alberta.

Dr. Oberg: You're right; it is not good enough for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the opening of the spring sitting on February 18, Albertans have been hoping for solutions to two pressing problems: the school funding crisis and sky-high, skyrocketing utility bills. Yet here we are three months later with the budget debate behind us, and Albertans are worse off now than they were then. As evidence of this, the president of the

Alberta School Boards Association is telling this government that all 62 school boards will be facing cutbacks and deficits come next year. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. With oil and gas revenues sending the budget surplus to the \$3 billion mark, why was the minister not able to find the financial resources necessary to avert a crisis in Alberta's classrooms?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, this year in my budget there was a 4.9 percent increase, and that increase was all to things to do with learning. To give an example, the teachers' pension fund went up by a little over 10 percent, very close to 11 percent, included within my budget. The K to 12 system went up about \$191 million. The postsecondary system went up around \$45 million to \$50 million. So there has been a significant amount. Even in Alberta \$191 million is still a lot of money. Those are taxpayers' dollars.

There has been a significant amount of money that has been put into the education system. Over the past four years we've seen a rise of anywhere between 25 and 30 percent given to the school boards, so there's a tremendous amount that has been given. What we have to recognize is that in Alberta we have the highest paid teachers. Our students do the best of any place in the world, and I believe that those are two very important things that Albertans are asking us to continue. Mr. Speaker, as a government that believes in some of these, that believes in the outcomes of our children, I believe that this outcome will certainly continue.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How is this minister able to stand in this Assembly day after day saying that all is well when the reality of school board after school board announcing deep cuts to programs and staff should be moving him to take immediate action and take it now?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, there's a bit of a fallacy out there about 62 school boards going to be in a deficit position. Quite frankly, in the last two and a half months I've met with some 20 school boards. Sure, things are going to be tight, but part of being a school board trustee, as well, is to manage a budget, manage taxpayers' dollars, and that's what the school boards are doing. Many school boards are making some difficult decisions, but on the whole they are making their decisions with the best interests of students in mind. I fully expect and I fully know that they will continue to make their decisions with the best interests of students in mind.

2:00

Dr. Pannu: My final question to the minister, Mr. Speaker: how much larger do class sizes have to grow and how many more young teachers have to leave Alberta before the minister steps outside his message box and realizes that there is a financial crisis in our schools?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, when it comes to a financial crisis, I'll just reiterate a little bit about the money that's gone in. I talked about the \$191 million. We also put in \$60 million to pay the teachers' unfunded liability this year, \$60 million that by definition went directly into the classroom, directly to the teachers. This year alone \$191 million dollars went into the K to 12 system in my budget. There's been probably about a 25 to 28 percent increase in funding to school boards over the last four years. This year alone the hon. Minister of Infrastructure announced 27 school projects. Twenty-seven school projects. There are six new schools in Calgary

alone. There's a \$51 million school going to be built just down the road in Edmonton. So there's a tremendous amount of dollars that are going into education, going into learning.

I will say that we continue to work with the school boards. Many school boards have put forward their fiscal issues, and I'm not belittling their situation at all. Many school boards are tight, but we're working with them to ensure that they will make the decisions that are in the best interests of all students.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Bingo Industry

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Many volunteer groups rely heavily on proceeds from bingo to sustain their valuable activities. However, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission is currently proposing revised terms and conditions to the bingo industry which would guarantee a return of 15 to 24 percent to the sponsoring charities. My question is to the Minister of Gaming. Is the minister not concerned that many bingo associations will find this guarantee impossible to meet and will therefore cease operating?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2001 this government accepted a recommendation that charitable groups that work at our bingo association halls receive a guaranteed return for their effort. This past January the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission started a review with the bingo association halls and the charities of draft terms and conditions regarding among other things the charitable return criteria.

The charitable return criteria in the draft terms and conditions, Mr. Speaker, is based on sales which recognize and deal with attendance, player spend, and prize payout. According to the 2001-02 statistics 17 associations are in the range of meeting the criteria as drafted with an additional 16 associations within 2 percent of the range. If associations were in compliance with the 65 percent prize policy on regular and special games, 35 associations would be in the range of meeting the criteria as drafted with an additional nine within the 2 percent range.

At the end of April the consultation with the bingo associations came to an end. The AGLC is currently reviewing the feedback, and I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that in any event the AGLC, as we go forward, will be working with the bingo halls to ensure that they improve their returns.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you. My only supplemental is to the same minister. Given the valuable work that charities perform with bingo proceeds, why is the minister proceeding without the endorsement of the volunteer bingo industry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In this particular case I think it's agreed between government and the representatives of the bingo associations that it's very important to ensure that the maximum return is received by the charities that work at the bingo association halls. We have done a substantial consultation. In fact, I would suspect we have probably heard from pretty much every charity that

works at the bingo halls at this particular point in time. There is not unanimity within the associations. However, the AGLC will be making its preliminary recommendations and reviewing that again with the bingo associations before there is a finalization, and that will occur in the weeks ahead.

I think, Mr. Speaker, the important thing to remember about this is that this ministry through the AGLC is responsible for establishing policy and for regulating the bingo industry and for managing and controlling the electronic gaming. We are committed to working with our stakeholders, but at the end of the day the decision must be made by this government through this ministry and the AGLC with respect to those matters.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Natural Gas Prices

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Although it is the middle of May and the weather has warmed up, many Albertans are still trying to pay last year's astronomical natural gas bills. Just yesterday the president of ATCO Ltd. told Albertans to prepare for the worst because, quote, the natural gas bubble has burst, leading to higher gas and electricity bills for everyone, end of quote. My first question is to the Minister of Energy: why is the government's natural gas rebate program triggered by a provincial election instead of the price of natural gas that consumers see on their monthly bills?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member knows full well the history of the Natural Gas Price Protection Act. He knows all about it, and to make this kind of preposterous leap is just his usual character.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the same minister: will this government's review of the flawed Natural Gas Price Protection Act involve input from the public, or will it be conducted again behind closed doors like so many other energy policies that have already failed consumers in this province?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, there will be the usual, a good, diligent review of this act, as has been stated in the House and as will be carried out by this government.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. I hope that review is not conducted in a ballroom in Banff.

What is the minister telling Albertans concerned about high natural gas prices? Is it going to be double the seasonal average now that the price is that high, or is it simply going to be the advice that it's too warm to wear a sweater?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, when someone's character is called into question, it's difficult to respond. However, given this House and the respect that I have for it, I will try and answer the question as I perceived it to be asked. We do live in a North American marketplace. We have seen the tremendous benefits from the increase of natural gas prices from royalty collection, and we also know that it hurts homeowners.

We also know, Mr. Speaker, that it hurts seniors, and we know that these increased utility costs hurt low-income Albertans, so one of the things that was responded to, and responded to very clearly and appropriately, in the past was the program for seniors and for

low-income Albertans. Not one of those particular individuals who were in need or who needed the assistance of this government failed to receive that assistance. I think it's a hallmark of this government that it sees areas where there's true need and it responds appropriately, and it will continue to do so despite the insults and the usual catcalls from the opposition.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Postsecondary Education Participation Rates

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The benefits of postsecondary education are well documented. As education levels rise so does economic prosperity and quality of life. Statistics Canada suggests that 80 percent of new jobs require postsecondary education, so it is clear that higher education is essential to our young people. Despite the stated policy of our government that we are committed to helping Albertans achieve higher education, our participation rates for postsecondary education are significantly below the national average. For example, the January 2002 HRDC/Stats Canada report *At a Crossroads*, which I will table later today, showed Alberta to have the lowest postsecondary participation rates in Canada for 18 to 20 year olds at 42 percent. My questions today are to the Minister of Learning. In a progressive and prosperous place like Alberta how does the minister explain why more students in our province don't pursue postsecondary education?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

2:10

Dr. Oberg: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is an excellent question. First of all, I think there are a lot of reasons why students out of high school, 18 to 20 year olds, don't necessarily go to a postsecondary system right off. In a very hot economy, as we have in Alberta, what I often see and what we see here is that many students go into the job market first and subsequently come back. I will say that Alberta has the highest percentage of people with university degrees and postsecondary degrees of anyplace in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I have not read this report, but usually and typically what happens is that when they talk about postsecondary participation rates, they always forget one thing. That one thing is very important here in Alberta, and that's apprenticeship. In Alberta we consider apprenticeship as postsecondary. We have 40,000 students that are employed in the apprenticeship industry each and every year. It's extremely important. We have 10 percent of the population and 20 percent of the apprentices in Canada.

So I believe, to make a long answer short, there are a lot of factors: first of all, the hot job market; second of all, the reporting mechanism that is here; but most importantly and most significantly we continue to push our students for postsecondary education, whether it is apprenticeship, whether it is degrees, whether it is diplomas. It's extremely important, and I would encourage all grade 12 students, all students in our K to 12 system to look at a degree or a diploma or an apprenticeship for their upcoming careers.

Ms Graham: Mr. Speaker, given that I will be tabling the report later today – and perhaps the minister will have a look at it – I'm wondering what steps he has taken to ensure that our young people do enter studies at the postsecondary level.

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the important things that we do is on the student finance side. What we do on the student finance

side is we ensure that those students with the highest needs have accessible dollars to attend the postsecondary system.

Mr. Speaker, one of the things that we did is we looked at the number of students that were turned away from the top six institutions in Alberta, and what we found is that by far the majority of students who had the marks were accepted into other institutions. What had actually happened is that these students had applied to more than one institution. There's a very, very small percentage of the students who had the marks that were not admitted into our postsecondary system.

So there are a lot of things that are happening in Alberta from the financial point of view, varying programs in Alberta to ensure that students are attracted, and I will say that our postsecondary system is absolutely, one hundred percent second to none in Canada.

Ms Graham: I have a final supplemental, Mr. Speaker. Given that, as the minister mentioned, affordability of postsecondary education is so very important to prevent barrier to access, are you, Mr. Minister, prepared to act on my motion, Motion 506, which was passed in this Assembly this spring urging government to find new and innovative ways to help students finance their postsecondary education?

The Speaker: One of the honoured traditions in a parliamentary system is that members should not be pressured into voting in any way, either directly or indirectly, so I think we'll pass on that question.

Private/Public Partnerships

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the draft report for the minister's symposium on schools says with respect to P3s, and I quote: Alberta's experience is marked by modest success and spectacular failure. It goes on to say, and I quote again: the province should adopt a coherent policy on P3s. But in spite of the spectacular failures of P3s in the past and the total absence of P3 research, policy, and planning that this report identifies, this government has committed itself to using P3s to the tune of \$1.4 billion. To the Minister of Infrastructure: shouldn't this minister have conducted his research and fully developed his P3 policy before he committed Alberta taxpayers to spending \$1.4 billion on these projects?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I don't know where on earth this member is coming from. To say that we're committing taxpayers to \$1.4 billion or \$1.9 billion or whatever number as far as P3 is concerned is just absolutely false, and I wish that they would quit these kinds of misleading comments and creating nothing but a problem out in the communities. The fact is that there's not even one – there's not even one – P3 project since we started talking about this new system before us today. There are some P3s that are working out there in the health care system, have been there for years. There are other examples of P3s, but the kind of nonsense that he talks about relative to a P3 is probably the kind of P3s that would not pass the test. The fact is that we are setting up and have set up a very good outside committee that would be assessing any type of alternate financing, which would include all P3 projects that we might talk about. When one comes, we will then have something to talk about, but certainly to say that we've committed the taxpayer to over a billion dollars is just totally wrong.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what assurances can this minister give the people of Alberta that his P3s aren't going to be just another spectacular failure?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, we've gone through this many times, but maybe I'll try to do it more slowly today. We have consistently said that if there is a proposal that comes forward, we will assess it. We have a committee within the department that will assess it. We then turn it over to an outside committee that will go through the total package, will bring the lifetime cost back to present-day values, compare that with what it would be if in fact we did the project ourselves.

There are a number of things in a true P3 that I'm sure that the member would have great difficulty understanding but I know that Albertans won't have any problem understanding, and that is relative to things like having a project started and completed more quickly, having the risk off-loaded to the private sector, to have the ability to have people that are experts in operating structures do the operation, and some of those kinds of things that will have to be figured in when you look at the total cost. That's why the Treasurer has set up an outside committee that has expertise in all of those fields to make absolutely sure that the deal is the best for the taxpayer.

Mr. Bonner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I certainly don't have any trouble understanding all the comments in the minister's draft report.

To the same minister: when is he going to develop his own research and policies on P3s, or is he simply planning to drift into a disaster like our electricity deregulation?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the only people that are drifting into disaster are right over there. The fact is that on the report that the member is referring to, back in December of 2001 we conducted a school symposium. Out of that school symposium, which some 450 people participated in, we developed a group of subcommittees. The report he's referring to is just one of the reports from a subcommittee, and it's a draft. I haven't even seen it yet because I believe it's maybe even today and tomorrow that the committees are working on the draft, and then there will be a final report coming to us. But the fact is that we have been working and doing a lot of research on P3s, and when – when – a proposal finally comes to us, we will be ready to report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:20

Health Care Services

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question today is for the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. Many of my constituents have expressed concern about difficulty in obtaining health care services. In spite of yet another large increase in health care spending by the province this year, wait times in emergency departments seem to be getting longer, and the time it takes to get an appointment with a family physician is also growing. Since more money, more frontline staff, more physicians are not helping the situation, what is the minister doing to deal with this very important concern?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, over the last eight years we've doubled our health care budget to some 7.3 billion dollars. Currently we are spending \$20 million a day on health care, and notwithstanding these significant amounts of investment in health care, there continue to be issues with respect to access. Now, we've said all along that money alone will not solve access issues. There are a number of different solutions that need to be taken in tandem in order to have an effective solution. We have worked with the Department of Learning in terms of increasing the number of seats relating to health

care professions in our province. We currently have some 12,000 seats in postsecondary institutions for various health care professions. We have recruited aggressively with respect to physicians, as an example. Over the last three years we have had a net increase – a net increase – of 600 physicians in the province of Alberta, bringing our total to nearly 6,000.

Emergency wait times continue to be an issue notwithstanding the best efforts of both the Capital health region and the Calgary health region, the two largest health regions in the province. Between the two of them they deal with some 600,000 emergency room visits each year. But because of the need to deal with other ways of delivering primary health care and not relying simply on emergency rooms to do that, we have made significant efforts and invested significant moneys in primary health care reform, Mr. Speaker. Just last month some 16 million dollars was announced by the government for primary health care initiatives that will reduce the number of unnecessary visits to emergency rooms by providing individuals with another access to primary health care other than emergency rooms. Also, of course – and I've spoken about this many times in the House – the Health Link line, which will be made available throughout the entire province by this summer, has demonstrably reduced the number of unnecessary visits to emergency rooms in those areas where it has been implemented.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that a large percentage of those people who visit hospital emergency rooms do not really require hospital care, what is the minister doing about increasing the number of 24/7 medical clinics and thereby reducing the pressure on hospital emergency departments?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of ways of helping to address this issue, some of which I've already talked about. Certainly, expanding primary health care through the \$16 million that I announced late last month will go a long way towards doing that. Improving access in rural areas will go a long way to helping relieve the pressure that exists in large urban centres. Helping Albertans prevent disease and injuries and promoting wellness will help reduce the overall demand upon our acute care system. Doing a better job of dealing with chronic diseases – and people will be well aware of the announcements that were made with respect to a provincewide diabetes strategy earlier this month.

So, Mr. Speaker, all of these elements will be a very important part of improving our emergency room wait times. There's no single fix for this, but the focus on the promotion of wellness, training of more professionals, finding better ways to deal with the issues relating to access to primary health care will all be a part of the solution to this important issue.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the minister mentioned the Health Link line, some of my constituents called me and told me that they had to wait 25 minutes to get an answer. Could the minister address this situation?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly Health Link has demonstrated itself not only to be very effective for providing 24-hour access to doctor approved, nurse delivered advice; it has also proven itself to be very popular among Albertans. Last year the Capital Health Link line received close to 400,000 calls, over a thousand calls a day. In Calgary the Health Link line has received up to 800

calls a day. The number of calls will continue to grow as the program is expanded throughout the province.

Mr. Speaker, as at April of 2003 seventy-one percent of all the calls to Health Link were answered within two minutes. By June 2003 that response rate will improve so that 80 percent of calls will be answered within two minutes. In order to achieve that, we are training 10 to 12 new nurses each month, and we are increasing the number of full-time equivalents providing that important service.

Air Quality at Holy Cross Hospital

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, my questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. Will the minister inform this Assembly what he has learned about his department's testing for toxic mold at the Holy Cross hospital?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, what I've learned is that that member has been trying to mislead Albertans, mislead this House, and in fact it looks to me, what I think has happened, that he's even misled the privacy commissioner of . . . [interjections] Whatever.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, point of order.

Mr. Lund: The fact is that I told the member on Monday and I told him again on Tuesday that the testing that was started in the Holy Cross hospital was never completed.

The Speaker: There was intervention there on a point of order. There was use of a certain word three times. This is going to lead to a major flare-up at the conclusion of question period.

The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's just very important that we get this all on the record.

To the same minister: does the Department of Infrastructure have in its possession any lab results that speak of toxic mold at the former Holy Cross hospital?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I really take exception to this member continually trying to discredit the staff in my department. Yesterday he made comments like: has the department simply lost them? You'll find this on page 1621 of *Hansard*. What this has done is it has created a great deal of hardship as far as the department staff is concerned, and I think that member owes particularly one of our staff, Sandy Fisher in Calgary, who was in charge of trying to find a place to house the Court of Appeal – in fact, the person that started this testing just yesterday sent an e-mail to us, and I will read the one very important sentence: "Sandy Fisher is aware that I did not complete our report for the Holy Cross Hospital as the decision was made for the Court of Appeal not to move into this building."

The Speaker: I will ask that that be tabled, please, at the appropriate time.

The hon. member.

2:30

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If people read carefully, they will see that he did not answer the question, so I will repeat this for the record. [interjections] Could we get order, please? Thank you.

The Speaker: Order will come, hon. member, when the hon. member recognizes: no preambles on supplementary questions. The question, please.

Dr. Taft: Is the minister saying that his department has never had possession of positive tests for toxic mold at the Holy Cross hospital? Yes or no will do.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, once again I will put on the record what has happened. The fact is that when we were looking at locations to house the Court of Appeal, the Court of Appeal asked Mr. Tang Lee to do an air quality test, and clearly, as this shows, the tests were never completed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Electricity Prices

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today the spring Legislative Assembly will come to a close. During the session gas bills went through the roof, and electricity deregulation continues to rob customers blind. Energy consumers will look at this session with its three months of speeches and wonder why it is that they're worse off than ever before. To the Minister of Energy: after three months of debate, petitions, letters, and hard-luck stories, how come consumers are still stuck with record-high energy bills?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the bills that are being sent out in Alberta today reflect real-time pricing. They reflect the marketplace of the day. There is no debt attached to those from a Crown basis. We're seeing policies: an export policy, a market policy, a transmission policy that continues to bring on new generation. We also see ourselves in a time, in an era, where, as the chief executive officer of ATCO reported yesterday, natural gas is at an all-time high.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, can the minister produce a single power bill of an individual Albertan whose costs for electricity are lower today than at the beginning of this session?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, we don't get into the habit of collecting power bills that are higher or lower. We haven't even gone out and asked for them. I'm sure they're around. In fact, I've seen bills that are in fact lower than they were prior to deregulation. What this member seems to conveniently forget is that prior to 2001 power was at 19 and a half cents a kilowatt-hour as opposed to the 4 cents and 6 cents that it is now.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, can the minister identify a single municipality with lower power costs as a result of this government's efforts during this session of the Assembly?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are 384 elected jurisdictions across Alberta, and we've listened and talked to them. They haven't come up and said: gee, could you compare one against the other, pit municipalities against each other? We think that this is one great province with one great government, and we'll continue to look at it from a broad Alberta perspective.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Education Property Taxes

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At a recent seniors' conference held in my constituency where the hon. Minister of Seniors and I were invited as guest speakers, my constituent seniors asked me to bring to the government's attention three points. Senior citizens

have no objection to paying education taxes. While incomes of seniors are effectively fixed, their education taxes keep increasing alarmingly because it is based on increasing market values of their own residences. Number three is that our government's health care policies encourage our Albertan seniors toward aging in place in their own homes. My question today is to the hon. Minister of Learning. Could the Minister of Learning look into the increase in education tax creeping up against the fixed-income seniors?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to municipal taxation, my department is involved in the setting of the mill rate. This year the mill rate was frozen, which meant that if you had a \$100,000 house this year and if you had a \$100,000 house last year, you would pay exactly the same taxes. If your house value went down, you paid less. If your house value went up, you paid more. When I set the mill rate, it is a type of thing that is set for the whole province. It is not set for one particular group of people.

Mr. Speaker, I would believe that the hon. Minister of Seniors could probably answer that question more accurately as it specifically applies to seniors.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplemental question is to the hon. Minister of Seniors. Given that my constituent told me that her pension increased 1.6 percent this year while the city assessment of her property increased by 10 percent for property tax and education purposes, could the minister look into this increase in property taxes and cost of living affecting fixed-income seniors and develop a better aging-in-place policy in tandem with the Minister of Health and Wellness?

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to hear the member reaffirm that seniors have been and are still willing to pay their fair share in this society. Having said that, as I've mentioned previously in this House, I'm very concerned with seniors close to our thresholds who are succumbing to the increasing costs of rent, property tax, utilities, health care, and all sorts of associated items.

In direct response to the property tax issue, I would like to have discussions with the AAMD and C and the AUMA to either freeze taxes as they apply to seniors or find some method to ensure that the increases aren't escalating at the rate that they are. I know how taxes are set, and I do know that property taxes, both municipal and sometimes the education portion, are accelerating far beyond the ability of the seniors to absorb it in their budgets.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we wind down, it's really a pleasure for me today to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly a special mayor, from the town of Picture Butte,

who has come up here to do some work with the AUMA today. Mr. Jon Stevens has an extensive financial background with the banks and after his retirement from the bank became a mayor for the town of Picture Butte. His nephew Jason has brought him over to the Legislature today, and if you look about five or 10 feet to the left, you'll see maybe some familiarity, a family face. Mayor Jon is the brother of Barney Stevens, who is one of the staff with our Sergeant-at-Arms. I would like to ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Constitutional Reform

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Albertans have never been shy about discussing and questioning our place in Confederation. Albertans have never been shy about proposing changes to our Confederation for the benefit of all Albertans and indeed of all Canadians. However, often our eagerness for positive change has fallen upon deaf ears, upon wary and unconvinced provincial governments and an uncaring and unconcerned federal government.

However, Mr. Speaker, the winds across the country are starting to blow in a different direction, and they're blowing in our favour. Recent events have presented a window of opportunity for Alberta to be a bold leader and reach out to our colleagues across all of Canada and try to bring about necessary and beneficial changes to Confederation not only for our own interests but for the interests of all of the provinces and of all Canadians. While each province may have its own specific interests, a common frustration is developing. The provinces are sick of federal encroachment in areas properly under and affecting provincial jurisdiction. The provinces are tired of federal policies such as the Kyoto protocol, the federal gun registry, and the Canadian Wheat Board.

2:40

Mr. Speaker, in Newfoundland and Labrador we now have cod fishermen soon to be out of work because an inept bureaucracy in Ottawa felt that it knew how to best manage that province's resources. The Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador has now called for constitutional change to give that province more control over its own resources. In Quebec the election of a new federalist Premier has afforded us the opportunity to work with a powerful leader and friend, one concerned with changing Confederation for the better rather than running away from Confederation, as his predecessor did. We are likely to soon be graced with a new Liberal Prime Minister in Ottawa, one who at least acknowledged that provincial and regional alienation is real and has at least expressed an interest in change, however timid that interest might be.

With these developments in mind, now is the time, Mr. Speaker, to reach out to our colleagues. Now is the time to persuade our colleagues why we need Senate reform. Now is the time to show why the provinces need a say on treaties that affect provincial jurisdiction. Now is the time to start meeting regularly, formally or informally, with our colleagues to build a consensus. The time for constitutional renewal is now.

Democracy in Alberta

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the people of this province treasure democracy as a pillar of our society. From Medicine Hat to High Level, from Fort McMurray to Waterton, Albertans have spoken loud and

clear that the principles of democracy, transparency, and accountability are staples of our system of government. Yesterday the government introduced a motion which would propose to create an elected, effective, and equal Senate for our country. Let there be no doubt that the Alberta Liberal caucus, the Official Opposition of Alberta, fully supports and endorses a triple E Senate for our country, but while the government promotes democracy to others, they are also sending the message to Albertans and all Canadians: do as I say, not as I do.

We have seen stunning examples from this government that there is indeed a democratic deficit in our province. Under this administration elected bodies such as school boards have been fired by the government, not by the people who elected them. Regional health authority elections were scrapped barely a year after they occurred, and the members of the boards who were elected were fired, not by the citizens of Alberta but by the minister's office. Now democratically elected students' unions face the chopping block of this government with Bill 43.

Shell legislation is brought forward in this Assembly which allows the details of government policy, which affects all Albertans, to be made in the back rooms and behind closed doors. Standing policy committees, who receive in excess of 600,000 taxpayer dollars, are largely affairs which are closed to the public and nongovernment representatives. There is no lobbyist registry in our province. Neither is there whistle-blower legislation. I could go on and on, Mr. Speaker. This government has created a democratic deficit. If we are going to advocate to others that democratic government must be revitalized, we must ensure that our own backyard is taken care of as well. Otherwise, no one will take the effort seriously.

Thank you.

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

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is truly blessed with the splendour and richness of the land, with the positive, can-do attitude of its citizens, with the free enterprising spirit of its businesses, and with a high quality of living. I must say that all of these do not just happen. Many other jurisdictions and places around the globe having similar or even better geography cannot achieve what Albertans have. The question is: why? To me it is the positive leadership in government, in businesses, and in families. It is the dedication of the government to take on challenges, to make changes for an even better Alberta. When other jurisdictions are rowing through rough waters, Alberta is hovercrafting calmly over the waves.

Our public mortgage debt came down from around \$22 billion a few years ago to around \$4 billion at the moment. Now Albertans can easily visualize the mortgage payoff day. Alberta has successfully for the last 10 years stayed the course of spending within its means. I still remember standing in front of the Legislature with my colleagues witnessing the symbolic cutting of our province's credit cards. Those are the outstanding achievements of the past. Most recently, in our spring session I saw another landmark, the Alberta sustainability fund, which provides steady and reliable sources for public funding.

Talking about funding, where else in the world but in Alberta does public spending keep increasing, from about \$15 billion a few years ago to \$20.8 billion this coming year, for a population of just under 3 million? If anyone thinks or talks about government budget cuts, they are not talking reality. Mr. Speaker, Alberta has a spending problem; more specifically, sharing the public dollars. May I say

that Alberta has pizza-sharing syndrome. Indeed, our Alberta pizza keeps growing from 15 inches to 20 inches, but those partaking in the pizza still see their own slice as small.

Thank you.

Role of the Opposition in a Parliamentary Democracy

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, an outburst by a member on the government side of the House claiming the opposition is always negative, a government member who complains publicly that all the opposition does is criticize, and the outright hostility that meets opposition questions when those questions make government members uncomfortable demand that this Chamber take a serious look at the role of the opposition in our democracy.

The devaluation of opposition activity is a grave concern, for without an opposition democracy disappears and authoritarian governments take over. As Gerald Schmitz notes in his article on Opposition in a Parliamentary Democracy, the roots of our system go back to Athens. Self-government was based on the notion that the minority could by peaceful means seek to persuade the majority to their point of view and that citizens are both the rulers and the ruled.

Much has changed. For example, now elected representatives speak for the population. What is constant, however, is the principle that government only governs with the consent of the governed. Once that is accepted, it follows that the minority accepts the right of the majority to make decisions as long as there is respect for the minority to disagree with these decisions and propose alternative actions. That is what seems to be so difficult for some members to understand. Our democratic system exists only as long as Albertans are able to speak both through the government as well as through the opposition. The very legitimacy of the majority is made possible through the existence of a voice for the minority.

Prime Minister Lester Pearson captured well the argument I'm putting forward. Speaking of the opposition, he said:

They rightly insisted on their right to oppose, attack and criticize, to engage in that cut and thrust of debate, so often and so strongly recommended by those concerned with the vigour and health of Parliament and the health of democracy. I cannot forbear to add, however, that the application of this procedure has, in the past, been occasionally resented by those who are cut and thrust at.

Last fall the Premier of Alberta also acknowledged these comments. We would like to see some changes in this Legislative Assembly this fall.

head: **Statement by the Speaker**

Sessional Statistics

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we go on to the next point in the Routine, we're currently in the 25th Legislature, and I thought the hon. members might appreciate some of these statistics.

In the First Session of the 25th Legislature, which was the spring session of 2001, the Assembly sat on 25 different days but also 17 evenings for a period of 42 sittings and during that time accumulated 9,152 minutes in the House, or 152.53 hours. In the spring sitting of 2002, which was the Second Session, the House sat on 37 days but also 26 evenings for a total of 63 sittings and sat in the House for 12,395 minutes, or 206.58 hours. In this current spring session, the Third Session of the 25th Legislature, we are now on our 46th day, but we've also sat 31 evenings, for a total of 77. In terms of the total hours, to last evening at 5:30 it was 252.83 hours, a total of 15,170 minutes.

So in the First Session, 2001, a total of 42 sittings; in the Second Session, 2002, 63 sittings; and in the Third Session, 2003, to date 77 sittings.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I present on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry an approved petition with 860 names of Albertans who are petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to acknowledge that the maintenance and construction costs of schools, hospitals and roads are part of the provincial debt and to consider splitting the budget surplus between the monetary debt and the infrastructure debt.

Thank you.

2:50head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice of a motion that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

There being no motions for returns, there are none to stand and retain their places.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mr. Lund: I'm really happy to table this e-mail from Tang Lee.

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

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of the report *At a Crossroads* by Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, January 2002, which is a comprehensive survey of Canadian youth 18 to 20 years of age as at December 1999 as to their educational participation, their completion rates, and their labour market participation. This report at page 46 suggests that Alberta students of this age group have the lowest postsecondary participation in Canada at 42 percent, which was the basis of my questions to the Minister of Learning today.

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

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have the required number of copies for a tabling on behalf of the hon. Member for West Yellowhead requesting the Minister of Learning and the Minister of Infrastructure to meet with the concerned parents of Grande Yellowhead regional division No. 35 over the school building space in Edson, signed by 132 concerned constituents.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite number of copies of six different reports, all relating to mold. The first one is entitled *Mold Neurotoxicity: Validity, Reliability and Baloney*. It is a meticulous and detailed debunking of the latest and fastest growing fad in the personal injury litigation business, that being the toxic mold scare. It's authored by noted debunker Dr. Paul R. Lees-Haley. It's taken from the Quackwatch web site.

The second article is entitled *Experts Taking Issue with "Toxic Mold"*. It's along the same line as the first report. It takes issue with the words "toxic mold," which it calls an "alarmist term originally propagated not by scientists but by either the news media or trial lawyers."

The third report is from the Toxic Mold Resource Center. It talks

about toxic mold such as penicillium and advertises that there are "numerous toxic mold testing companies, that provide a wide range of results."

The fourth is from the Environmental Law Advisory, a monthly update on law policy and strategy, outlining how exposure to mold is one of the fastest growing areas of litigation, how it's being blamed for everything, how mold is everywhere from bread, cheese, wine to penicillin, and that despite conflicting and incomplete scientific data, juries are handing down verdicts anyway.

The final two, Mr. Speaker, are on a new technology called electro-osmotic pulse technology, which for an operating cost equivalent to one 60-watt light bulb is easily and dramatically drying out large government buildings, basements, and other institutions, thus solving the problem. If I could, Mr. Speaker, a fast quote from the fifth article: "Clammy, smelly, dank, and unhealthy. But enough about politics. We're talking basements here – specifically, a new way to keep them dry."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, I have my answers to the questions from yesterday in question period.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a copy of an announcement that Pro Coro Canada's executive director, Miki Andrejevic, has received one of the Queen's golden jubilee medals.

The second is another release, on Bottom Line Productions, which was one of Edmonton's first independent arts management and public relations firms. They're celebrating their 10th year in the arts business in Edmonton.

Thank you.

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

Dr. Taft: Yes. I have three tablings, Mr. Speaker. The first is at the request of the author of the letter, Gerald Zagrosh, who runs the Pain Elimination and Tissue Regeneration Clinic. It's a letter that was sent to many MLAs in which he explains his theory and approach to eliminating pain.

The second: the appropriate number of copies of the teachers' arbitrated settlement agreement, which was never tabled in this Legislature and which I've been asked to table. It's the one that has led to the current situation with funding and teacher layoffs in the schools, and it says among other things that it will be up to the provincial government to determine how to deal with the reality of this arbitration as it makes its funding decisions for that year and beyond.

The third is at the request of the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry: 388 people who have signed a petition urging the government to acknowledge that the maintenance and construction costs of schools, hospitals and roads are part of the provincial debt and to consider splitting the budget surplus between the monetary debt and the infrastructure debt.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon. It is copies of a petition that was organized in the Manning district. This petition states:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to acknowledge that the mainte-

nance and construction costs of schools, hospitals and roads are part of the provincial debt and to consider splitting the budget surplus between monetary debt and infrastructure debt.
Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got one tabling. It's a letter from Kelly Duffin, president and CEO of the Canadian Hearing Society, that is dated May 14, 2003, and it is addressed to the Minister of Learning. I've been copied on this letter. The society is requesting the minister to intervene with the president's office of Grant MacEwan College to reconsider his decision to close the American sign language English interpreting program.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling pages 36 to 38 of a Calgary Catholic school district document, the 2003-2004 district operating budget, showing that the district's utility bill has doubled.

The Speaker: Hon. members, annually 12,000-plus people visit the Legislative Assembly in the capacity of visitors, and many of them do not have English as their first language. So to accommodate them and to make them feel a little more familiar and comfortable with the Assembly, we've created a new booklet called English as a Second Language: Field Trip Guide to the Alberta Legislature. I'm tabling copies here and will have one provided for all members. Members, there's a test included in the booklet.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am rising to ask the Government House Leader if he's bringing us back next week to deal with those bills that are still on the Order Paper.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It depends on progress this afternoon as to whether we come back next week. If we do come back next week, the Order Paper outlines a number of bills that would be available to us. We have very important bills like the Family Law Act, the Workers' Compensation Amendment Act, 2003, the Personal Information Protection Act, the Post-secondary Learning Act. So if we're here next week, we can anticipate dealing with those bills.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on a point of order.

**Point of Order
Parliamentary Language**

Ms Carlson: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I did rise on a point of order. I reference *Beauchesne* 489 and would also as an additional reference use the memo that you send at the beginning of each session to all members outlining decorum in the House and specifically language that is unparliamentary.

Beauchesne 489 specifically does reference language that's been ruled unparliamentary since 1958. In the exchange between the Minister of Infrastructure and the Member for Edmonton-Riverview

this senior minister in the government, who has been here way longer than me, who very well knows the rules, used the term "mislead" or "misleading," as you correctly pointed out earlier, three times in his very first response to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. Mr. Speaker, that is unparliamentary language, and we would ask him to withdraw those comments.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think what has happened this week relative to comments from the Member for Edmonton-Riverview is the issue that he's been raising over toxic mold, which we acknowledge and believe can be a serious issue. However, as far as I'm concerned, leaving an impression that in fact we had done testing at the Holy Cross hospital and that we had found mold and that we did not disclose that I was finding very offensive.

3:00

As a matter of fact, it started on Monday, and we'll find that in the Monday afternoon edition, May 12, of *Hansard* on page 1569. I'm not going to read all of his comments, but I do want to show how this has progressed to a point where I'm not sure of the motive. It is really concerning to me. He starts off by saying:

Now the Liberal opposition has learned that tests were conducted in the summer of 2001 for mold at the former Holy Cross hospital and that the results of these tests should be of concern to the public . . .

To the Minister of Infrastructure: given that exposure to toxic molds can lead to headaches, nausea, respiratory illness, bleeding of the lungs, and cancer, why have tests for mold at the Holy Cross hospital never been made available to the public?

That very statement would seem to indicate to me that there was mold found and that because it is harmful – and we're not arguing that situation – somehow we were allowing the public to be exposed to it.

Later in the same day he said:

Mr. Speaker, given that there are 42 long-term care residents as well as dozens of nurses, doctors, and other support staff at the Holy Cross, will the minister immediately release all test results for mold at that site? It seems the site failed the tests.

Well, Mr. Speaker, once again that would indicate to me that we were failing and that, in fact, there was a danger to the people that were in the facility, that their health was in danger.

In my answers to the member on Monday I clearly indicated to him that I was aware that there had been some air quality examinations proceeded with but not concluded to the best of my knowledge. I did not on that day have absolute proof that it had not been followed through to completion, but from memory I was remembering that, in fact, before we ever got very far down the way, for other reasons we had abandoned that site.

Then on Tuesday, May 13, on page 1620 we find in the first question to me the comment, "Yesterday the Minister of Infrastructure admitted that tests for toxic mold had been conducted at the Holy Cross hospital." I did not say that, Mr. Speaker. I did not say that there had been tests for toxic mold. Knowing full well, I explained it once again to the member that the tests were not completed. I knew by Tuesday that they had definitely not been completed.

He goes on with the second question: "Can the minister assure Calgarians that all appropriate steps were followed when the test results were obtained from the Holy Cross?" We did not receive any tests, because they were not completed. There were some samples taken and sent to a lab, but clearly there has to be much more work done to find if, in fact, there's anything that is injurious to health.

Then we go on the next question, and he says, "Your department

did the tests.” That is absolutely false. Our department did not do any tests. As a matter of fact, the way the process was working, for every building that we did an assessment on to see if, in fact, the Court of Appeal could be housed there, the Court of Appeal hired a person by the name of Tang Lee to do some tests. We didn’t. [interjection] Somebody over on that side said: we paid for them. Well, the fact is that after the testing was done, we got an invoice. The test would’ve been sent to the Court of Appeal.

Then he says, “I hope they haven’t lost the file.” It’s very discouraging to think that he would insult our good people that work for the Alberta government, our employees who are very conscientious and good, and to have a person stand up in the House and make those kinds of comments. He goes on, “Why has the department chosen to sit on the results, or have they simply been lost?” Once again, an insult to our staff that he would make those kinds of comments.

I can also tell you, Mr. Speaker, that the owners of the building had another independent group come in, and we do have a letter from them saying that in the results from their tests there were no toxic molds in the Holy Cross hospital. That was not of great interest to me, because the fact is that we were not going to go into that facility anyway, but I have since found that.

Now, this whole exchange in here for over two days has caused a great deal of concern for me and for the department. If there was something, then we wanted to make absolutely sure that it was cleared up. So you will see from the paper that I’ve filed today that we sent an e-mail to Mr. Lee and asked him that if he has any results, could he give them to us because we need those. He writes back, “Sandy Fisher is aware that I did not complete our report for the Holy Cross Hospital as the decision was made for the Court of Appeal not to move into this building.” That’s what I’ve been saying on Monday; I’ve been saying it on Tuesday.

So if my verbiage today created some great disorder on the other side of the House – perhaps I should’ve said: in my opinion, it misled me. If using the whole Assembly, then I apologize for that. But I really have difficulty when someone would stand in this House for two days and make comments that would make me believe that he is now casting an aspersion over me and my department and, in fact, out in the public, creating a real concern about the facility being safe.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, like I say, if it was a problem with my using the strong language that I used, I will say that I should’ve been more careful and said that I feel that I was misled. I find this just so offensive that we would have this kind of performance in this Chamber.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, do you have a comment with respect to this or not?

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, this issue is far from over, but I do understand the minister’s comments. I accept his apology, and as far as I’m concerned, that’s fine.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this is one of those situations where the usage of the words almost come to a draw. *Beauchesne* 489 very, very clearly says that certain words are unparliamentary, and then in the next section, section 490, it basically says that the expression is parliamentary. In terms of the documents that I provided to all hon. members, there are many, many examples where on some occasions they are ruled parliamentary and on other occasions they’re ruled unparliamentary, and everything has to do with the context.

3:10

I let this go because I think it was worthy of that. The bottom line is that the hon. minister has basically said that he apologizes for the usage of the words in their context. He may or may not have had to do that depending on whether there would have been a ruling in this case. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview accepts it. The one bottom line for me is that context means everything and that decorum is all-important.

I’m sure we’ll have a great opportunity over the next number of months, so I’m going to provide an assignment called homework to all hon. members: read chapters 10 and 11 in *Beauchesne*, please.

Now, if my eyes are correct, we have a visitor in the Assembly today who is one of the great parliamentarians of this country. I believe that that’s the Hon. Mitchell Sharp. If so, he has distinguished this country for decades in national and international work. Mr. Sharp, you honour us with your presence.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Motions**

Senate Reform

23. Mr. Jonson moved:

Be it resolved that given that the current process of appointing Senators offends Canadians’ democratic values, has deprived that House of political legitimacy and efficacy, and has prevented the Senate from being effective in protecting the interests of the provinces of Canada, the Legislative Assembly directs the government of Alberta to consult with Albertans on reforming the Senate through the following constitutional amendment; namely, by repealing sections 21 to 34 of the Constitution Act, 1867, and substituting the following:

21 (1) The Senate shall consist of elected members called Senators.

(2) Each Province shall be represented in the Senate by 6 Senators.

(3) Each Territory shall be represented in the Senate by 2 Senators.

22 (1) Subject to this section, the Senators representing a Province or Territory shall be elected by the electors of that Province or Territory.

(2) The legislature of a Province or of a Territory may make laws relating to the election of Senators representing that Province or Territory, including the method of election and the procedure for the election.

(3) Except in the case of by-elections, and except in the case of the first election held pursuant to this section, the election of one-half of the Senators representing a Province or Territory shall be held in conjunction with the general elections of members of the legislative assembly of the Province or of the Territory.

(4) Except as otherwise provided in subsection (6) and unless the office is sooner vacated, and except in the case of a Senator elected in a by-election, the term of office of a Senator representing a Province or Territory continues until the official announcement of the results of the Senate elections held in conjunction with the second general election in that Province or Territory after the election of that Senator.

(5) The first election held pursuant to this section in each

Province or Territory shall be for the election of all the Senators representing that Province or Territory.

(6) The term of office for one-half of the Senators elected from each Province and Territory at the first election held pursuant to this section in each Province or Territory continues until the official announcement of the results of the Senate elections held in conjunction with the next general election in that Province or Territory.

(7) In relation to the Senators representing that Province or Territory, the legislature of a Province or of a Territory may make laws establishing which Senators subsection (6) applies to.

23 (1) Subject to this section, a person is qualified to be a candidate and to be elected Senator if the person is eligible to be a candidate and to be elected as a member of the House of Commons.

(2) A person is not qualified to be elected as a Senator or to remain a Senator if the person

- (a) is a member of the House of Commons or of the legislative assembly of a Province or of a Territory, or
- (b) is a Minister of the Crown.

(3) If any question arises respecting the qualification of a Senator, the question shall be heard and determined by the Senate.

24 (1) A Senator may resign his or her seat by delivering a resignation to the Governor General.

(2) When a Senator resigns his or her seat in accordance with subsection (1), the seat immediately becomes vacant.

25 (1) A by-election to fill a vacancy in the Senate representation of a Province or Territory need not be called if

- (a) the vacancy occurs during the last year of the legal life of the legislative assembly of the Province or of the Territory, and
- (b) the term of office of the Senator who vacated that seat would have expired with the announcement of the results of the Senate elections held in conjunction with the next general election in the Province or Territory.

(2) The term of office for a Senator elected at a by-election shall be for the balance of the term of the Senator who vacated the seat.

26. The Senate may establish its own procedure for the election of the Speaker of the Senate and for the conduct of the Senate's business.

27. Subject to section 53, bills proposed to the Parliament of Canada may originate in the Senate equally as in the House of Commons.

28 (1) Where a bill is presented to the Senate after being passed by the House of Commons, if the Senate

- (a) votes against passing the bill,
- (b) passes the bill with amendments that are not acceptable to the House of Commons, or
- (c) fails to vote on the bill within 180 days after it is presented to the Senate,

the bill may be brought before the House of Commons and if again passed by the House of Commons, with such amendments made by the Senate as are concurred in by the House, the bill may be presented to the Governor General for assent, and when assented to has the same force and effect as if passed in that form by the Senate.

(2) In a bill presented to the Governor General under this section, the words of enactment shall be amended by striking

out any reference to the Senate.

(3) An alteration to a bill to give effect to subsection (2) is deemed not to be an amendment of the bill.

(4) This section does not apply to a bill referred to in section 30.

29. If the Speaker of the Senate or of the House of Commons rules that the subject matter of a bill is wholly or partially within section 94A or 95, the bill may be re-passed by the House of Commons under section 28 only if

- (a) the percentage of the members voting who vote to pass the bill is greater than the percentage of Senators voting who voted to reject the bill or pass it with amendments, or
- (b) the Senate fails to vote on the bill within 180 days after it is presented to the Senate.

30. Where a bill is presented to the Senate after being passed by the House of Commons and the Speaker of the Senate or of the House of Commons rules that the bill

- (a) directly affects in any way, including by taxation, the natural resources of a Province,
- (b) authorizes the expenditure of federal funds in areas of provincial jurisdiction under sections 92, 92A and 93,
- (c) is binding on a Province, or
- (d) declares a local work or undertaking to be of the general advantage of Canada or for the advantage of two or more Provinces

if the Senate votes against passing the bill or passes it with amendments not acceptable to the House of Commons, no further proceedings may be taken on the bill.

31. Appointments to the Supreme Court of Canada and to the Federal Court of Appeal have no effect until they are ratified by the Senate.

32. No treaty shall be ratified by Canada unless the Senate has authorized Canada to ratify the treaty.

And be it further resolved that given that the Constitution establishes Canada as a federal system of government in which the sovereign powers of the Crown are divided between two separate but equal orders of government and that the federal Parliament is comprised of two Houses, the House of Commons, which is designed to reflect the democratic principle of representation by population, and a Senate, which is designed to reflect the federal nature of Canada, and that Canada is a parliamentary democracy that has constitutionally enshrined the democratic right of every citizen of Canada to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons and of their Legislative Assembly, the Legislative Assembly directs the government of Alberta to initiate discussions with the government of Canada and the governments of all other provinces and territories leading to the reform of the Senate.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, the resolution signals Alberta's intention to engage in consultations on meaningful Senate reform. Previous measures the government has suggested for Senate reform have been dismissed by some as halfhearted and piecemeal. We have taken these criticisms seriously. As such, we have included a proposal for a constitutional amendment within the body of the resolution. Previous measures we have suggested did not contemplate amending the Constitution to reform the Senate.

The resolution calls for the Assembly to direct the government to engage in consultations with other provinces, the federal government, and Albertans on how to reform the Senate based on the constitutional amendment proposal in the resolution. The constitutional amendment proposal is based on the report of the 1985

Alberta select special committee on upper House reform and a draft prepared by Alberta officials during the 1992 constitutional negotiations. Simply put, Mr. Speaker, the proposal calls for a triple E Senate, one that is equal, elected, and effective.

Mr. Speaker, in our federal system the Senate was designed to represent the provinces' interests in Parliament. The current Senate lacks a democratic foundation and therefore is not performing its function. Under Alberta's proposal Senators would be elected and not appointed by the Prime Minister alone. There would be six Senators representing each province and two representing each territory, and a reformed Senate would have veto power over any legislation affecting the powers of the provinces.

Some might wonder why we are introducing this resolution at this time. We need to look back no further than Quebec and its idea for a council of the federation or Newfoundland, where a royal commission is examining that province's place in Confederation, to realize that provinces continue to feel frustration with federal institutions and federal/provincial relations. The federal government has failed to recognize this continued disenchantment and has not accepted its proper leadership role in addressing these issues. Mr. Speaker, if it takes opening up the Constitution to achieve a better functioning Confederation, then we should do it.

In the meantime, Mr. Speaker, the government will be advancing the three intergovernmental initiatives the Premier has been advocating for, those being annual first ministers' meetings, involving the provinces meaningfully in negotiations over international agreements, and appointing Senators from provincial nominee lists. We will bring these ideas as well as this resolution forward for discussion at the Western Premiers' Conference in June and the annual Premiers' Conference. I will be advancing the resolution at the intergovernmental level as well with my colleagues across the country.

This resolution gives Albertans, Canadians, and governments the opportunity to seriously consider comprehensive reforms of the Senate. A reformed Senate, one that is elected, equal, and effective, would provide a balance to the House of Commons and force the federal government to make better decisions on a day-by-day basis. However, this is not going to be an easy task, but with respect to such an important issue, Mr. Speaker, the effort – every effort – is certainly worthwhile and needed to be put forward.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would at this time adjourn debate on this motion.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: **Third Reading**

Bill 40
Appropriation Act, 2003

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to move third reading of Bill 40, the Appropriation Act, 2003.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, just on a point of order or perhaps you could provide some guidance. On the motion of the government that was just adjourned, it has no force and effect as the policy of this Legislature unless it's ultimately passed. Is that not correct?

The Speaker: The debate was just adjourned. We're coming back to it on Monday.

The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak this afternoon to third reading on the Appropriation Act, 2003. I just have a few comments in terms of a summary of the process and the allocation of dollars that we've seen as we went through Committee of Supply and second reading on the appropriation and committee on the appropriations.

The thing that I reflect back on as I followed the debate and participated in some of it is the idea that we need to be more explicit on how we develop our budget processes on a needs base. I don't mean here that we just have to go out and give people or give agencies what they ask for. What I'm talking about when I say that we need to make sure that the budgeting process is needs based is I'm suggesting that what we have to do is look at, in effect, modeling expenditures in each one of our departments where the costs are built around how we deal with putting together appropriate delivery systems for those services. We have to make sure that these delivery systems are targeted toward a particular degree of efficiency or effectiveness in carrying out the mandate of that department.

I'd give an example in the sense that we've heard the minister as recently as question period today talk about how some school boards seem to be making due with their budget and some can't make due with their budget. Well, what are the characteristics of those school boards that can and the ones that can't? These are the kinds of things that need to be brought into the budgeting debate.

Hopefully, the education commission will address some of those when it reports this fall, but that's the kind of thing that we need to be more transparent about when we talk about our budgeting process so that Albertans understand what the base of the expenditure pattern is rather than just that it's up 9 percent or it's up 2 percent or it's down 5 percent from last year. That's not enough for Albertans if we want to be able to go out and say that these are the criteria and this is the basis under which the budget was put in place.

I guess the other thing that we have to look at is how we deal with the budgeting process in terms of stability. I want to really congratulate the government and the minister this budget system for putting in place their stabilization mechanisms. It's important that as we go through this process, we look at some of the terminology we use, and I think that for Albertans' sake we need to kind of standardize some of that terminology that we're using so that they understand what we're talking about. If we can make it so that it fits with common usage, then we would be better off as we talk about all of our different funds, the function of those funds, like how they're going to be used and what they'll be used for and what their purpose is. This is one of the things that when we look at the new fund that was created this year called the sustainability fund, in effect it's a stability fund. It's not a sustainability fund. Sustainability has got to do with the ability to continue a trend as opposed to taking out the ups and downs of a cycle.

This is the kind of thing that we have to make sure that we build in because in the context of the questions that have been asked by Albertans this year, Albertans do not see the education budget as sustainable. Yet when they look at it, funding for that education budget, especially in the last six years, has been rather stable. It's been growing without a lot of cycles in it. So this is the kind of thing that we need to make sure that we work out.

3:20

I guess the other comment that I want to talk a little bit about in terms of the budget is: how do we measure the process we go through here relative to Albertans in setting our priorities? One of the big things we've heard as the Official Opposition as we've gone through the budgeting process this year is that there doesn't seem to be an appropriate priority given to funding for education. Mr.

Speaker, I will say that that has been by far the biggest area of concern in terms of the actual dollars for the budget because it's the one where we really see significant threats of cutbacks from the status position. If we look at it, you know, in terms of what Albertans are telling us, they see that education funding as really providing appropriate opportunities for all youth, and they see that as we limit the system, the perception is that young Albertans that learning doesn't come quite as easy to are the ones that are suffering; they don't quite get the full support in the classroom that they should be getting. So they're asking: what is going on there?

In the health care area the only real concern that's been expressed regularly to me anyway has been the issue of access. Once they're in the system, most Albertans are reasonably pleased with the care, but they still see the waiting lists as being an access issue. So that's another priority that we need to start to address.

The other area of concern that's come up with the budgeting process this year that a number of Albertans have talked to us about is: how do we develop a sustainable infrastructure program? I think the new program that's here now, especially with the catch-up money that's been put in over the next three years and if we can manage to keep the budget in the billion-dollar range in the Ministry of Infrastructure, should be sustainable as long as we have the catch-up dollars in the other areas. I think that if we can get that message to Albertans, that will help. It may take a number of years for the catch-up to occur, but we've heard a number of people submit petitions that have asked for some kind of a public statement that if we do have surpluses, there'll be some allocation, and they're suggesting 50-50 between catch-up on the infrastructure and pay-down of our fiscal debt. I think we have to look at that, especially in terms of the fact that some years more of our debt matures, some years less of our debt matures. To put an absolute on it, we need to make sure that there's a trend there that reflects where we're going and that we're willing to commit to the fact that that infrastructure debt has to be caught up.

I guess the other thing that we need to look at in terms of some of the budgeting processes is: how do we deal with uncertainty? How do we deal with risk? I know the sustainability fund that the government has created this year is kind of a reserve pool for unplanned risk, but if we're going to make sure that that is manageable over time, I would ask and suggest to the Minister of Finance that next year in the business plans we may have some actuarial data on the real risk items that are in the budget like the ag programs, like forest fires, like the disaster payments, support for municipalities, say, in extreme weather so that we can, in effect, see where and whether or not the long-term stability and workability of that budgeting process is in place. I think that's kind of where we need to go on that.

The other one is that if we're going to continue to build our budgets, we need to in effect make sure that Albertans understand how we do that budgeting process, how we come up with the numbers that are given to ministers. I am not a real fan, Mr. Speaker, of the idea of saying: well, it's just a 10 percent increase over last year. That leads to percentage expectations. You know, you gave us 10 percent last year; you should give us 10 percent this year. We've got to be able to make sure that our budget changes are based on true economic factors like indexes of appropriate costs for that ministry, demographic changes that affect that ministry, economic cycle changes that affect that ministry. I'd like to see some of those things built into the budget planning process for next year and the business plans for next year.

I guess, Mr. Speaker, in a way what I'm talking about is sending signals about what we'll be looking for next year in the budget as opposed to making strong comments about the adequacy or inade-

quacy of this year's budget. When we get to third reading on the appropriation bill, we all know that there's not too much more we can do to change a line item in the budget.

With that, Mr. Speaker, my caucus told me that if I took my 90 minutes, they were going to walk out on me. So with those few comments, I would like to say that I think we've all enjoyed the debate that went on for the budget process. We've really brought out some differences of opinion about where public expenditures should be, and we'll see over the next year how Albertans react to that.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We would hate to see another walkout of the Liberal caucus, especially if it was initiated by the Liberal leader.

Mr. Speaker, in the hopes of keeping people glued to their chairs, I would like to rise and speak to third reading of Bill 40. There are many aspects of this bill, I think, that bear quite a bit of close scrutiny. I'm going to restrain myself, as the Leader of the Official Opposition has well, in terms of going over them in any great detail, but I do want to raise a number of points, and then I'd like to come to the most significant point, which I believe has got to be the education issue.

Now, if you look at the priorities contained in this budget, Mr. Speaker, you'll see that in fact there's real disconnect between what we believe are the priorities of Albertans and what the priorities of the government are. So, for example, this budget contains \$95 million for corporate tax cuts, and we already have some of the lowest corporate taxes in the country. You know that it reminds us of one of the old songs "how low can you go" and still be able to adequately fund those services that Albertans hold dear.

You also have an increase in property taxes of \$64 million. Now, it is correct to say, as the Minister of Finance has said in question period, that this is not a change in the mill rate for the provincial tax and is due to an increase in the overall assessment and that it is an increase in property values plus any new property that is developed that produces this increase, but of course it is in direct contradiction to something contained in the budget a couple of years ago that said that not the mill rate but the total take from provincial property taxes would be frozen. This is a promise contained two budgets ago that has been broken. Now the minister is saying: well, we're freezing the mill rate. Well, that's not what she said two years ago. So the result is that because of rising property values, people's property taxes are going up this year, and that increases the revenue of the government. It is in any reasonable person's assessment an actual increase in taxes contrary to the Premier's promise made repeatedly, including in this Assembly, that taxes in Alberta were going nowhere but down. Well, they just went up, Mr. Speaker.

3:30

Of course, another government priority is the \$37 million for horse racing, and the government likes to talk about, you know, the importance of this for agriculture and so on and so on and all of the poor people that are employed by this industry and so on, but, Mr. Speaker, you don't see that kind of subsidy for other industries in this province, and you don't see this kind of program to provide income support for low-income Albertans in any other area.

McDonald's Corporation pays lots of people lots of low wages, and it's apparently in some financial trouble, yet you don't see the government rushing to give direct financial support to the fast-food industry. I need to be careful. I don't want to give them any ideas,

but I think I want to just make it perfectly clear that I oppose direct financial support for McDonald's just as I oppose giving \$37 million for the horse racing industry. This is a direct contradiction of a fundamental promise that the government gave many years ago that they would not be financially supporting business, that they would get government out of the business of being in business and they wouldn't be picking winners and losers. Well, they picked one here, and horse racing is the winner, but lots of other Albertans are the losers because that money could have been spent on things that are actually important to people.

The government has broken another promise, Mr. Speaker, in that they have changed their policy on transmission lines. Now, the Minister of Energy has pointed out correctly that this was a decision made by the AEUB, that the cost of new transmission in this province would be split 50-50 between consumers and the industry, and he's overruled this decision. He made the announcement in Banff, not in the Assembly, and the AEUB read about it in the papers, and that's not a good way to do business even if there is a good reason for a policy change. The minister has I think confused the issue – let me put it that way – by suggesting that the cost would be only a billion dollars and that it would be spread over 20 years, but the reports that we've produced and tabled in the Assembly show that the cost may be as high as \$3.5 billion and may be paid for in as little as seven years.

The minister has also confused the issue by suggesting that the consumers will pay for the full costs in any event, and that's not correct either. It's not correct. In a regulated industry, as transmission still thankfully is, application needs to be made to the board for those costs that would be included in the rate base. The regulator then makes the decision about which costs are allowed and which are not. If the costs are allowed, they are added to the rate base that is paid for by consumers. If they are not allowed, then they cannot be added into the rate base. The rates do not go up to cover those costs, and the company making the application must pay those costs out of their own pocket.

So to suggest that his decision makes no difference in the end, that consumers will pay everything in the end, is categorically untrue. It is false, and it is something that I think the minister should be ashamed of himself for suggesting to this Assembly and to the people of Alberta because he as the Minister of Energy needs to know how regulation works. I know he doesn't like regulation, but I certainly think that it's incumbent that he know how his own system operates. All of this has allowed rapidly rising utility rates in the province, Mr. Speaker, so these are all priorities that the government seems to have.

Now, let's look at what we think the priorities of the public ought to be. Well, certainly public education is an important one. I'm going to come back to that one, Mr. Speaker, but I also think that lowering tuition in this province is an excellent idea, and that's not included in the budget. It ought to be. Only 65 percent of Albertans are satisfied that postsecondary education is within the means of most Albertans. A tuition freeze at this time, in our estimation, would cost only about \$40 million.

One of the government members today in I thought quite a good set of questions to the Minister of Learning talked about the lack of participation of Albertans in postsecondary education. We have the lowest rate in the country, Mr. Speaker, and that is not, as the minister would like to indicate, just because we have a hot economy. It is due to sky-high tuition fees in this province, and I think that that's something that the government, again, needs to admit.

Another thing that we would propose, Mr. Speaker, is the elimination of health care premiums. We've costed that. That would be \$913 million to do that. That's certainly of more value to

Albertans, I think, than some of the corporate tax cuts and subsidies for industry that have continued.

Now, Mr. Speaker, before I go any further – and maybe my clock could be stopped – I would like to introduce an amendment to this budget, and I'll make that available now if someone would like to distribute it. [interjections] What?

Dr. Taft: We are delighted. We're laughing with delight.

Mr. Mason: Are you?

Mrs. Nelson: Are you serious?

Mr. Mason: Yes. We would have been happy to do this yesterday.

The Speaker: Hon. member, I have a copy of the amendment. Read it into the record and proceed.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Then I will move that Bill 40, Appropriation Act, 2003, be not now read a third time because the Legislative Assembly believes that inadequate provision made for the education of children will result in a crisis in schools.

I see we have some divine support there. Mr. Speaker, I am getting indications all over the House that I'm number one. May I proceed?

The Speaker: The hon. member has never been interrupted. As far as I can understand, two minutes have been lost in the hon. member's speaking time, so please proceed.

Mr. Mason: Oh. I'm sorry; I thought that my clock would be stopped.

The Speaker: Oh, no. The member has the floor.

Mr. Mason: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for that information at this point.

Mr. Speaker, what I want to indicate is that we do not believe that this budget should be passed. We believe that this budget fundamentally fails the children of Alberta. It fails schools, and we have seen the widespread evidence of a crisis. We have teachers being laid off by the hundreds and not just at a couple of school boards but in most school boards. We have all kinds of indications that important programs are being cut. Even in Grant MacEwan the signing program for the deaf is being cut, and it's one of the very few in Canada. We see schools being closed. We see every, every indication that there's a fundamental crisis in education, and this budget doesn't address it.

The Minister of Learning has talked today. He admitted there was a 14 percent increase in wage costs, which make up the greatest portion of school board costs, and his department has only given a little bit more than 4 percent in the budget. So, obviously, there's a huge gap between what the government has provided to the schools and what the schools require. Then on top of that, they have to pay these soaring utility costs, which are entirely the responsibility of the government. They've created a crisis for almost every sector of Alberta's community with their asinine deregulation of electricity that they refuse to admit is wrong and go back on. Then there's the cap on grade 10 credits. So, fundamentally, Mr. Speaker, this budget does not mean that the interests of Albertans are being addressed in the key policy area, the priority for the people of Alberta.

3:40

We consider this amendment, Mr. Speaker, a motion of nonconfi-

dence in this government, nonconfidence in their policies with respect to education, their absolute failure to deal with the real issues facing people, and their reluctance to admit mistakes, which is a characteristic of this government. We need to send a clear message to this government, and I hope members of the Assembly from all sides would vote with us so that we can have a new government in this province, one that actually puts forward the interests of students and recognizes the fundamental importance of education to the future economic development and prosperity of this province, something this government has absolutely failed to do.

So, Mr. Speaker, on that point, I will be pleased to take my place and urge all members to vote with us against this budget and have a new government. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the amendment.

Please remember, hon. members, that at this stage in the proceedings relevancy of contents is extremely important.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In regard to the amendment that is being presented to the Assembly by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, certainly whenever one looks at the state of public education in this city and across this province, when we consider that up to a thousand teachers may be laid off in this province in the next number of weeks as school boards prepare for their September budgets, I think all members of this Assembly should take another look at Bill 40 and see if something can be done for public education. Certainly, something has been done for the horse racing industry in this province in the last three budget cycles, and not enough, in my view, has been done when one considers public education.

To be brief, Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, let us please remember that teachers have one of the most important jobs in all of our province, and that's transmitting the collective knowledge that has been gathered and assembled for generation after generation to our young citizens, who someday are going to be not only running this province but – it was put so well on a CBC radio interview yesterday afternoon by a former minister of education of this province when he stated that when he is 85, the students who are currently in the public education system will be looking after his interests, whether it's his financial interests or whether it is his health care or developing social policy. They will be the leaders of tomorrow. It's important that we heed the words of the former minister of education, and I believe the gentleman was also representing the district of Edmonton-Highlands at one time. I heard that conversation on CBC radio, and I thought it was most appropriate.

So I would urge all members of this Assembly in the interests of public education to support this amendment as presented by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. Thank you.

The Speaker: On the amendment, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to strongly speak in support of the amendment to Bill 40 that's just been introduced and spoken to by my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Highlands. There have been many disappointments in this session with respect to the government's legislative agenda on deregulation of electricity and natural gas and in designing and pushing through the Legislature special bills to ease Direct Energy and other companies into the market while it's been ignoring the real challenges that Albertans face with respect to the declining opportunity for postsecondary education and the declining quality of education for the K to 12 children in our schools.

Even on the government side there's a recognition but behind closed doors that there's a problem in the area of education, that the underfunding is causing serious problems. Mr. Speaker, I just want to read into the record a letter written by one of the government backbenchers that he wrote to the chair of Edmonton public schools. It's dated May 6, 2003. The member is Edmonton-Castle Downs. With your permission I'll just put it on the record of the Assembly.

Dear Mr. Fleming:

I had the pleasure of meeting with the Riverview Coalition. The meeting started at 8:00 pm, and ended just after 11:00 pm. This group represents 18 schools in the Edmonton region. They were unanimous in determining that the following issues negatively affect the ability for children to learn.

Staffing: Teacher and other staff layoffs are looming, and many have been told not to . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, please. I do believe we've got a point coming up here. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

**Point of Order
Relevance
Imputing Motives**

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A couple of points. First of all . . .

The Speaker: No. What are we doing? Do we have a point of something here or what?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Yes, Mr. Speaker. A point of order based on relevance, based on *Beauchesne* 459.

The Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Also, under Standing Order 23(h), (i), (j), Mr. Speaker, imputing motives to a correspondence and misquoting a correspondence out of context to the members of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, we're dealing right now with a budget which has very little or nothing, I would suggest to you, to do with any and all correspondence that I may have sent to the chairman of the Edmonton public school board. Even though I have interrupted his reading of the entirety of the correspondence, I have allowed him to read far enough to indicate that I say in that correspondence that I have met with a group who feels in a certain manner about our learning system, and in no part of this correspondence does it indicate that I also concur with the thoughts of that particular group. So that is something that ought to be on the record.

However, notwithstanding the fact of what the letter may or may not say and how the member chooses to interpret or, particularly in this case, misinterpret the letter, it has no relevance whatsoever to the amendment that is before us at this point. It has no bearing on the budget of this government. It has no bearing on the policies of learning in this government. I am not a minister of the Crown. Therefore, any of my correspondence to any chairman of any board has no bearing whatsoever on the finances or the policies of our Department of Learning. Hence, the member is definitely out of order in proceeding with that line of speaking.

The Speaker: On the point of order, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would make the point, first of all, that we are not dealing just with Bill 40. We are, rather, dealing with an amendment to Bill 40 which says that we not read it a third time because the Assembly believes that inadequate

provision has been made for the education of children and will result in a crisis for schools. So with respect to the hon. member's point on relevance I would argue that it is clearly relevant to the motion. *Beauchesne 459* says that "relevance is not easy to define," but in this case, clearly, I would argue that it was directly on the point.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker . . . [interjections] I'll just wait for the hon. members' conversations. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands has the floor on a point of order.

3:50

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Section 23(i) says, "Imputes false or unavowed motives to another member." I didn't hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona do any such thing. He merely was reading the letter completely and not misrepresenting it in any way as representing the personal views of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. So I would argue that there clearly is not a valid point of order here.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are currently in the debate on an amendment to Bill 40. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has the floor to speak on an amendment. The chair was listening very attentively to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the subject that we're dealing with proceeded to quote from a letter in his possession, a letter that appears to have been signed by another hon. member in the House. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona proceeded to read the letter, as I understand it, at which point in time the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs stood up on a point of order and summarized what the letter said and basically talked about imputing motives. He didn't know what would be coming.

Well, the difficulty that the chair has is that the chair has no idea what's coming. All the chair knows is that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has the floor. He has a legitimate right to speak. He wants to quote from a letter in his possession. As uncomfortable as it may be, we all sign our names to letters, and if other people read them, well, so be it. There's nothing that the chair sees here at the moment that would raise or cause a point of order. There may be later if certain motivations or imputations may be given, at which point in time the hon. member who feels that he has been impacted, affected, injured may rise on a point of order, but at the moment the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has the floor.

Debate Continued

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I resume reading verbatim the letter precisely because I was afraid that if I tried to summarize it, I might be accused of misinterpreting. I leave it to the House to interpret the letter, so I will proceed. I think I was interrupted when I started talking about staffing, so I'll start there.

Teacher and other staff layoffs are looming, and many have been told not to expect positions for the next term. Some libraries are being staffed by parent volunteers, who have a lack of experience in running libraries. Library staff in schools have had their hours cut, and are not able to cope with work demands. Some staff are required to teach classes that they do not have experience with, i.e. phys ed teachers teaching mathematics, etc.

Textbooks and course materials: Many textbooks contain extremely outdated information and are being photocopied, or students must sign up to borrow them. There are no financial resources for photocopying and/or paper. Classes such as drama are cutting back on the number of students, due to lack of funds to operate a larger class. Technology resources such as computers are cost prohibitive to purchase and to operate.

Space and Infrastructure: There is not enough physical space for students; and a lack of desks in some classrooms. There are also significant repairs required in some schools, for which there is no money available. In some schools, the situation is so bad, that the health and safety of the children may be compromised. Increasing vandalism in some schools is a consistent problem, and raises costs as well.

Fundraising: Parents are finding an increasing burden of fundraising. Many of the funds from these ventures are being used to purchase items such as computers, software, band instruments, and library books, which are viewed as necessities and not luxuries. In one instance, fundraising money is being used to pay the custodian salary.

Classroom size: Class sizes are increasing rapidly. Many classrooms with special needs students do not have teaching assistants. Split grades are becoming more common, and in one particular case, they are now discussing whether to have triple split, such as K-3. Their solutions to the funding problem were interesting, to say the least, and are as follows:

- increase property and other taxes.
- have each school identify their funding needs, instead of having the school board determine the funding needs.
- use surplus funding.
- have a one time bailout for those boards which carry a deficit.

They believe that the Learning Commission report will be too late to prevent dire consequences for education in Alberta.

There were other issues that were also discussed. However, I have covered the general picture that was painted to me last night. I have agreed to meet with them again in September, to discuss any updates and changes to their concerns.

It is signed by the member that I mentioned before, Mr. Speaker.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, again, based on Standing Order 23(i), I must reiterate that this member is imputing motives to a correspondence that is being taken totally out of context, and I find that to be offensive. What this member is reading is a correspondence that was sent to the Premier of this province, our Minister of Learning, and then also copied to the chairman of the board upon his request which is a summary of what this member, myself, had heard from a group of interested parents. At no time do I ever agree with the content of what they believe. At no time have I ever validated anything that they have stated that they believe. All I have done is simply reiterated what it is that I have heard, without editorializing it at all.

In his preamble to reading this letter, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has indicated that there are some backbenchers in the government who also agree that there are problems with our learning system. I don't have the benefit of the Blues, so I'm relying on my memory right now. He substantiates the fact that there are some members in the backbenches of government by reading this letter. That is simply false. If one reiterates what one hears without agreeing to it, one cannot be then construed to be in agreement to it. He is misleading this House, and he is imputing false motives to myself.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, I think it's best to hear from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. This seems to be something going back and forth. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, basically the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs believes that you're imputing his motives.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, we are faced with strange circumstances. I want to reiterate the fact that I read the letter precisely because I didn't want to implicate any new meaning into it. This is a report about a meeting. Parents' concerns are listed here, and I want the House to have the benefit of information on what parents think, and that's all this letter is used for from my side, not to impute any motives to anybody or to imply any agreement on the part of the writer of the letter with the concerns expressed by the parents.

These are the concerns of the parents. These are not concerns of parents who come only from these 18 schools. These are concerns of parents all across this province. That is the point to be made, that there is a genuine sense of crisis felt by parents, by teachers, by school boards with respect to the problems caused by continued underfunding and insistence on the part of the Minister of Learning and of the Premier of this province to say: everything is fine; there's no problem with this.

This motion before us, Mr. Speaker, speaks to that very crisis and is an attempt to give the government another opportunity to fix the problem before this House votes on the budget itself. It's a reasoned amendment. It's an amendment to fix the problem. I want to assure the House that we, my caucus and I, will be very happy to come back next week, two weeks from now if the government is willing to take this particular direction back from this House, fix particularly the education part of the budget, and come back and seek the approval of this House. We'll be very happy to come back and oblige.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:00

The Speaker: On the amendment, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you. On the amendment . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. members, there's not going to be a filibuster on points of order in this Assembly this afternoon. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs stood up and very clearly made a statement. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona stood up and clearly said that he was not imputing any motives to anybody and basically said that he was only reading the letter for information and ascribed nothing to anything. That was stated. That's what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs asked to have clarified. That's what the chair heard the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona give, that there was no imputation of anything. There was no agreement considered that the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs was agreeing with what he had written, that he was just simply giving a report on what had happened. That's what the chair heard the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs say and ask to have clarified. That point escaped us.

We're now into the amendment, and the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View has the floor.

Debate Continued

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With regard to the amendment and reasons why we should in fact not read the third reading of the appropriation bill, which I find absolutely astounding after spending a month and a half on the budget – we're on the last day, the last gasp for the last air on this, and now we're playing this game.

So I want to go back, and I want to talk about the Learning budget, because we have in fact out there at this time a Commission on Learning, that has been gathering information from one end of this province to the other. Absolutely everybody that wanted to have

had an opportunity to appear before the commission, to answer questions in a workbook, to do it on-line if they so chose, to send it to their MLAs and have the information come forward to the commission through their MLAs. The commission is currently in the last stages of their work, which is to come up with consolidated recommendations that will in fact be presented to government later this summer and will find their way coming back through the standing policy processes, through cabinet, through agenda and priorities, through all of the areas of government that will impact the future budget next year.

In the meantime let's talk about this year, just for those people who aren't actually aware of the magnitude of the money that is going into Learning this year. Excellence in learning continues to be a top priority of Albertans and their government. Base program spending by the Ministry of Learning will increase by \$219 million, or 4.7 percent, to \$4.9 billion in 2003-04. By 2005-06 Learning's base program spending will reach \$5.2 billion, a \$542 million, or an 11.6 percent, increase over the next three years. That was in the budget documents, you know, the ones that we've already debated for a month and a half.

The renewed kindergarten to grade 12 funding framework will provide school boards with flexibility to address student needs and local priorities. Alberta's Commission on Learning is consulting with Albertans on improvements to ensure that our basic education system maintains excellence into the future. The commission provided a status report in February 2003, and the final report is expected later this year.

The postsecondary system is implementing the Campus Alberta vision that will improve co-ordination among institutions to address the continuing need for a well-educated workforce in Alberta.

Base program funding for public and separate school boards will increase by \$147 million, or 4.9 percent, in 2003-04 fiscal year and by 3.6 percent and 3.9 percent for the following two fiscal years. By the 2005-06 fiscal year program funding to public and separate boards will reach almost \$3.4 billion, a three-year increase of \$388 million, or 12.9 percent, over that same time frame. School boards operate on a school year basis that runs from September to August, and over the past two school years school boards received significant funding increases to help pay for teachers' salary settlements and other board priorities.

For the 2003-04 school year base program funding for public and separate school boards will increase by 3.7 percent, and that includes a 2 percent increase in basic grant instruction, a 3 percent increase in student transportation grant funding, funding for estimated increases of .25 percent in overall enrollment and 8 percent for students with severe disabilities, \$29 million for school technology upgrading as part of a three-year \$61 million commitment.

In addition, a onetime \$20 million allocation is being provided to school boards in 2003-04 to purchase classroom resources. Basic instruction grants are targeted to increase by 2 percent per year for the following two school years. Contribution to the teachers' pension plan will increase over the next three years by \$54 million, or 22.4 percent, to \$294 million – remember; this is for the teachers' pension plan – because of increases in teachers' salaries and lower than anticipated investment returns on the pension fund.

Over the last three years \$1 billion has been provided for school facilities under the new century school plan, and the Ministry of Infrastructure will support a further \$450 million in capital projects over the next three years including \$226 million for school expansions and new schools and \$224 million for school preservation. I really just wanted to make sure that you were aware that these provisions for this year are in here now.

Are there problems in education under the learning system? Yes.

I believe that there probably are some, which is why in fact I totally supported and endorsed the fact that there's a Commission on Learning out there studying this now to come back with recommendations for government on ways that we can not only deal with education issues but also make sure and ensure for the future that it is in fact sustainable, because that is part of what matters here. If we wanted to talk about areas where I think we should be dealing with something, I would hope that we could find some money in the next year, more money for infrastructure because we need more schools in a province that's growing. That's my pet peeve. We all have them in here.

I happen to have a riding with over 50,000 people. It's growing at an extraordinary rate. One part of my riding is growing at 18 percent; another part is growing at 6.5 percent. It is very difficult to even anticipate what schools we need and where we need them, because nobody knows who's going to move into the eight new subdivisions that are being built right now. Are they going to be old or middle-aged people with no children, or are they all going to be in their mid-20s having children? So it's difficult until people actually move into those houses to know what we need. We're always behind on the construction side in my riding.

Mr. Lund: Thirty-three percent of your . . .

Ms Haley: Well, 30 to 35 percent, Mr. Minister, are in portables, and, you know, that's stressing me out just a little bit. So, yeah, I'd like to see some changes too, but it is hard to do everything for everybody all of the time at exactly the right moment in time.

When my sons were in school, going back a few years, there were problems and issues at that time, and we're kidding ourselves if we say that there weren't. There will be issues. If you went back and looked at headlines 10 years ago, health and education were the big ones, 20 years ago health and education were the big ones, and 20 years from now it's going to be health and education, because nothing is ever going to change. No matter what we do, we're always going to be just a little bit behind where people think or need us to be, but it's not because you don't try. We try endlessly.

As an MLA I take my role very seriously. I try very hard to represent the needs of my constituents, whether it's the public education side, whether it's the Catholic education side, whether it's the needs of the private school people, whether it's needs of the home schoolers, needs of the virtual school. I take it all seriously. To come up with what I believe honestly, member, is a frivolous amendment at this point I find horrendously offensive. This is a \$20 billion budget. Which part of it would you like to not have go forward? You want something more for education, but at the same time you're willing to risk everything on Infrastructure, Transportation, Learning, on Community Development, changes to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, and I'm willing to bet that they wouldn't be very happy with you today if this budget were tabled for another six weeks or eight weeks and they couldn't get their increases. Which other ones would you like to blow off? Maybe Aboriginal Affairs, Seniors? Have you got a pick? You know, maybe we should deal with Economic Development and not have any more economic development engines in this province.

Frankly, it's 10 after 4 and I'm tired. Okay? I've had three months of this stuff, and I'm tired of it. I want us to be serious about this. It's a serious budget designed by serious people who are trying very hard to do the very best job that they can for all Albertans. So I'm going to suggest to my colleagues that perhaps we should just defeat this amendment, vote on the budget, and let's go home.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, you are

under Standing Order 29(2)(a) and (b) now, the question and answer period. Five minutes under the rules of the House.

4:10

Mr. Mason: Okay. Given that the hon. member is tired and ready to go home, I won't put this as a question but as a comment. Further quoting from the letter from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, because the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View made a great deal about the Commission on Learning and how it was going to solve all these problems, the parents, according to this letter, say, "They believe that the Learning Commission report will be too late to prevent dire consequences for education in Alberta." I just wanted to put that on the record.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Haley: It's my shot back. You know what? We've done an awful lot of consultation with Albertans, whether it was the Future Summit, the agriculture summit, which now is rolling out programs designed by people in agriculture. We had a school symposium. We had health roundtables years ago. We have done our very best to consult with all Albertans from one end of this province . . . [interjection] You started this, buddy. We've tried very hard to make sure that Albertans' viewpoints are represented and heard throughout this entire province.

Now, this Commission on Learning. Whether you want to trivialize it or whether there's a comment in here that it's not going to be quick enough for dire consequences, let's try and remember, hon. member, that we're spending close to \$5 billion on education right now. It's not chump change. We've got over \$7,000 per student inside schools right now. Maybe just once in a while we need to be asking the school boards: excuse me; are you sure you're adequately putting those resources in areas where you need them? Maybe as a province we have too many options. Maybe there are not enough kids in some classrooms. I don't know all the answers. That's why we've got a Commission on Learning out there, to try and come back with those kinds of answers, with serious recommendations so that we can seriously try to do a better job for all of our children today and into the future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the question and answer period.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question to the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View: would the hon. member consider it appropriate to reduce the \$37 million that's been set aside for racing industry renewal in the Gaming budget and put that money into public education?

Ms Haley: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again we manage to find ways to mix apples and oranges. As I last recall, if you were on the racing track and you were actually participating in games going on and you were playing slot machines or the Sega games or you were betting on horses, that is the only way that the horse racing industry can actually access this money: if people go there and actually spend it there on the basis that it is for horse racing renewal in this province.

I would like to remind you, just for the heck of it, on an agriculture side that there are hundreds of thousands of horses in this province. It is an enormous industry all by itself; ask somebody who has owned and managed and lost money on quarter horses for decades in this province. I can tell you that horse racing is a renewable resource in this province.

The way that this was set up was not to take away anything from anybody but in fact to enhance the revenues coming in to the

racetracks so that they could then disburse that money back out and we could have better horse racing, better barns, better everything for an industry. So if you've got a problem with that, then perhaps you also have a problem with money from bingos going to charities, because in a lot of ways it all balances out. At the same time, we have over a billion dollars in revenue coming in from gaming of all kinds in this province that benefits health, benefits education, benefits commercialization of technology. You name it, it's there for it, and I think we should be really happy that we have a system that allows for this kind of diversity.

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

Dr. Taft: On the amendment.

The Speaker: Okay. No additional questions?

Dr. Taft: I didn't see anybody else stand up.

The Speaker: That's true. On the amendment.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I won't take long, but it is I think crucial for me to stand up and speak in favour of this amendment. I've listened to the comments that have gone on around here, but I know that in my constituency no issue comes close to the concerns that I'm hearing every day about the loss of teaching positions at schools, about the decline of school buildings, about the concerns that parents bring to me every single day about what they see as a deteriorating education for their children. These are urgent issues. Sure, we can listen to the Commission on Learning, but by the time they report, hundreds and hundreds of teachers across this province will be out of work. It will be too late. The crisis will have hit. So this is a matter of urgency. We need to deal with this now.

If we look at the causes of the problem as laid out in this budget, we have a 14 percent arbitrated settlement for teachers' wages, an arbitrated settlement, legally ordered. Fourteen percent is up. Four hundred and fifty teachers losing their jobs is down. Up and down. So we have a gap in between. We have 450 teachers in one school board losing their jobs. They have been named. They know their names; they've been given their slips; they're gone at the end of this school year. This is a very, very serious problem.

So I think we do need to support this, and I think we need to revisit this budget on this particular issue. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on the question and comment segment.

Mr. Mason: Questions and comments, Mr. Speaker. I would like to just briefly make a comment. I appreciate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview's support of the amendment and just indicate to members of the House that when the government knew that there was a 14 percent arbitration award for teachers and that teachers' salaries make up the bulk of the school boards' budgets, it was clearly an indication of lack of planning on the government's part to come up with a 4 percent amount for school boards. The government easily could have anticipated this problem. As a result, I believe that the government should not enjoy the confidence of the House and that this amendment should be passed and that we should deal with things from that point.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on the question and answer segment, sir.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Following from Edmonton-Riverview's comments and as commented on by Edmonton-Highlands, one would be led to believe that there was a 14 percent increase in teachers' salaries which was met by a 4 percent increase in the budget, which is of course patently wrong. The 14 percent increase in teachers' salaries operated over three years. The last increase was 2 percent, which came into effect either March 1 or April 1 of this year; I don't remember exactly which date. So there's a 2 percent increase for this year on teachers' salaries with a 4 percent increase in the budget.

But as the Minister of Learning has explained several times in this House, over the last three years, over the context of that arbitrated award, 4 percent plus 2 percent on teachers' salaries alone, 3 and a half percent, 3, and 2, on the global budget. The overall context, as the Minister of Learning has explained, adds up to more than the 14 percent that they're talking about. So the comments should be clarified to say that no one should be under the illusion that there was a 14 percent increase this year and only a 4 percent increase in the budget.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, just a comment on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview's very strong support for the amendment. Perhaps rather than asking a question, I'll just make an observation. I think the Minister of Justice really again, as is the case with the Minister of Learning, is playing a numbers game here. It's clear that 4 and 2 percent . . .

Speaker's Ruling Question and Comment Period

The Speaker: Hon. member, this whole intent was to have a question and answer with the original member who was last talking, and that was the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. The option for the hon. Government House Leader was to ask a question of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview. So it would probably be more appropriate for you to ignore the hon. Government House Leader at this point and focus on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Debate Continued

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview is: is it not the case that the 4 and 2 percent that the Minister of Justice talked about was not adequate to meet the 14 percent increase that the arbitration award gave to the school boards? As a result of the fact that that 14 percent increase was much larger than 4 and 2 percent would have provided to school boards, the school boards have gone into a serious deficit situation. Would you agree, hon. member?

4:20

Dr. Taft: Yes. I'm happy to respond. Am I out of time?

The Speaker: Hon. member, please. It confuses the chair. Repeatedly, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview said that he would participate in the question and answer period. He's changing his policy today?

Dr. Taft: Actually, Mr. Speaker, I changed my policy some weeks ago under unrelenting harassment from the Member for West Yellowhead, who drove me over the edge. I had to respond to his questions. Having broken my rule, I'm sunk now.

To the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, the fact is that we can debate here and play the numbers games however we want. The hard reality is that in the classrooms, in the big cities at least, hundreds and hundreds of teachers are losing their jobs. In fact, in

Edmonton public my understanding is that it's 450 teachers plus a significant number of other support staff. The reality out there in the classrooms is that parents are feeling a crisis in Edmonton and Calgary that the teachers are gone. The teachers are leaving in substantial numbers. So, yes, I think the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona is quite right in his point.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm just wondering if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview is aware that Alberta Learning has provided . . .

The Speaker: I'm sorry, hon. member, but the time for this segment is now over.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on the amendment lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:22 p.m.]

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

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

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 38 visitors: 30 grade 6 students from Sunalta elementary school along with five parents and three teachers, including the principal, Alex McKay; Mrs. Sue Harvie; Mrs. Marie Forester; and parents Mrs. Anne Mueller, Mrs. Heather Scott, Mrs. Barb Scott, Mr. Daniel Gackle, and Mr. Tony Mysyk. These are some of the brightest students and best teachers in Alberta. I'd ask that they rise now and receive a warm welcome from this Assembly.

The Speaker: To the students: you've come at a very interesting time in the life of the Legislative Assembly. We're having a vote, a big vote. The bells were rung so that the other members could come back. So you'll see them come back in a few minutes, and then I'll ask the members to vote. There's a law being made here.

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

The Speaker: Hon. members, those who are not in their chairs, please remain standing where you are, and you'll be exempted from the voting. The Clerk will not see the three that have been identified by the chair.

For the motion:

Blakeman	Mason	Taft
MacDonald	Pannu	

Against the motion:

Abbott	Hancock	Oberg
Ady	Hlady	O'Neill
Amery	Horner	Ouellette
Broda	Jacobs	Rathgeber
Calahasen	Johnson	Shariff
Cenaiko	Klapstein	Snelgrove
DeLong	Knight	Stelmach
Dunford	Lougheed	Tannas
Gordon	Lund	VanderBurg
Goudreau	McClelland	Woloshyn
Graydon	McFarland	Yankowsky
Griffiths	Nelson	Zwozdesky

Totals:	For – 5	Against – 36
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[Motion on amendment to third reading of Bill 40 lost]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance to close the debate.

Mrs. Nelson: No.

[Motion carried; Bill 40 read a third time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I move that pursuant to Government Motion 5, agreed to February 19, 2003, the spring sitting of the Assembly stand adjourned.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'd like to take this opportunity to wish all hon. members a safe and restful summer.

[Motion carried; pursuant to Government Motion 5 the Assembly adjourned at 4:37 p.m.]

