

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Thursday, April 6, 2006

1:30 p.m.

Date: 06/04/06

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with a great deal of pleasure that I have this opportunity to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly the grade 6 class from the Bentley elementary school in my constituency. I have to apologize to them that because of the turmoil in the building today I wasn't able to spend much time with them. They're in the members' gallery along with their teachers and group leaders Mr. Mervyn Leidl, Ms Diane Scarlett, and Mrs. Wendy Friesen. I would ask them now to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have 24 guests here today from the Kneehill Christian school in my riding, which is just outside the industrious village of Linden. There are 24 guests, made up of students and teachers and their helpers. In addition to the students, we have Miss Terri Miller, Mr. and Mrs. Les Klassen, Mr. Bert Boese, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Baerg, and Mr. and Mrs. Lorne Toews. I'm not sure which gallery they're in. There they are in the public gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise and introduce some special young guests from my constituency. We have with us this afternoon students from the Evansview school in Evansburg along with their parents and teacher helpers. I had the pleasure of joining this very bright, young group of Albertans for a photo this afternoon. I'd ask my guests now to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour today for me to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly three very special guests: Brendalee Loveseth, who's a legislative assistant; Mrs. Lois McLeod, who's been my constituency assistant from Little Bow for 14 years; and my wife of – holy cow, Mary – 36 years. Would you please rise.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure again today to introduce to you and through you to all

members of the Assembly a group of bright, young kids from the Clive school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Robert MacKinnon, and I believe this is his 17th or 18th trip down here to the Legislature with children from the Clive school. With him are parent helpers Mr. Vince Landry, Mrs. Hanne Giles, Mr. Abe Klassen, Mrs. Paula Law, Mrs. Carol Law, Mrs. Rachel Stahl, Mrs. Kathy Walker, and in addition to these helpers there's always the bus driver, Mr. Robert Smith. I'd like to ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm just delighted to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly five visitors from the Edmonton Seniors Centre who are joining us in the public gallery. I'd ask them to please rise. We have Mrs. Joyce Cwyk, Ms Hilda Doyle, Ms Elizabeth Doktor, Ms Thresa Ramsay, and Ms Evelyn Morrison. They are standing now. I'd ask you to please give them a warm welcome to the Assembly.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of students from my constituency of Innisfail-Sylvan Lake. Visiting us today from Innisfail is a bright group of 46 students in grade 6 from the Innisfail middle school along with their teachers, Judy Bourne and Mary Schatz. Within that group I would also like to give a special welcome to parent helpers Trevor Lawrence, Tina Reid, Michelle den Dekker, Eva Looker, and Mike Wilkie. I think they won't be in until later, but I wanted to give them a great welcome anyway.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After years of mismanagement and inaction by this government the Peace Country health region and, in particular, the Queen Elizabeth II hospital in Grande Prairie is facing a crisis. They're short 75 health professionals, which is affecting core hospital services, including medical units, surgery, orthopaedics, psychiatry, the emergency ward, and long-term care. This government's disregard for rural Albertans has become so apparent that even the government's hand-picked chairman of the Peace Country health authority says that he is receiving only nominal response to the very real crisis he's facing. To the minister of health: what action is the minister taking to end this crisis immediately?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, the Department of Health and Wellness has been in close communication with the people in the regional health authority of Peace Country. We recognize that there is a crisis there where people are not having the support that they would wish to have. I responded to it somewhat yesterday in a previous question relative to some of the shortage of physicians and the health care professionals. We are looking at a relationship with another health authority to in fact second on a temporary basis some professionals there to bridge the gap so that the Peace Country health authority can function as fully as possible to assure patient safety.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that

this crisis, as the minister confirms, has been developing for years, can the minister explain how this government failed to prevent this crisis from developing?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, while the hon. member opposite would like to believe that this is something that's been going on for years, it is, in fact, a function of a number of things: workforce, yes, but also some very unfortunate situations that are best discussed in a private situation when you're talking with human resource personnel. We do not in this House discuss why a member of any staff left. If there are personal reasons, we honour that. So there are a number of people that have had other options, other relocations for personal and private reasons.

Beyond that, Mr. Speaker, it's a challenge, and I guess the good news about the Alberta economy is that it's robust, that it's attracting a number of people, and it's put a lot of pressure on the infrastructure both in Northern Lights and Peace Country. We're doing our best to provide recruitment for those situations. It is not a statement about any lack of due diligence relative to rural Alberta. One more fact: since 2004 we've had a 3 per cent increase in physicians in rural Alberta, which is significant.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: when will this minister recognize what the chairman of the Peace Country health authority recognizes and what a number of Tory leadership candidates have already recognized as well, that the third way must be dropped?

1:40

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I have to believe that there isn't a member of this House that doesn't want us to proceed with the many policies in that document of the health policy framework that say that we are working towards access and sustainability. There have been one or two policies that, admittedly, have actually been confrontational, obviously, to the opposition, that have been queried, not slammed but have been queried, by people who have asked for more detail. I think that rather than throw the whole thing out, as I hear on the other side that they would like us to do, we should actually keep trying to advance towards sustainability, accessibility, and at all times doing what we can to support a strong public health care system.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Cabinet Appointments

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier loosened another notch in the government belt to further extend an already bloated cabinet. The creation of yet another minister position brings the total now to an unbelievable 25, almost half of the members of the caucus. Ironically this comes just a year after the creation of another cabinet spot designed specifically to help streamline government. My questions are to the Minister of RAGE, Restructuring and Government Efficiency. Was the minister consulted on the efficiency of restructuring cabinet to include yet another ministry? Was he consulted?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member across knows quite well that the appointment of cabinet is entirely in the Premier's purview.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of RAGE.

The Speaker: It's called Restructuring and Government Efficiency.

Dr. Taft: The Minister of Restructuring and Government Efficiency. Okay. Thank you. To that minister: is it the minister's position that a larger cabinet is a more efficient cabinet?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member said earlier in the first question, that's in the complete purview of our Premier.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Restructuring and Government Efficiency: can the minister tell us if he or any of his ministerial counterparts will be acquiring an associate minister to help further the efficiency of this government?

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, again I will have to say that that's under the complete purview of our Premier.

Sale of Edmonton Ring Road Land

Mr. Bonko: Yesterday in the House the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation referred to the \$1 land deal to the Galfour Development Corporation, owned by Mr. Joseph Sheckter: "You have to understand that it was a large parcel of land [and] in order for the government to get a portion of it, of course, they had to strike a deal." Mr. Sheckter did more than strike a deal; he hit the jackpot. My question to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation: why was the \$1 buyback price needed to strike a deal when Mr. Sheckter had already been overpaid \$6 million for the land, according to the Provincial Treasurer at that time?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that if the member would go back and read *Hansard*, he would see that, in fact, when you buy large blocks of land, as I explained yesterday, the person that is selling the land – if you were going to define exactly what you needed, it would have to go through the whole subdivision process. So what happens: the whole parcel is bought. Incidentally, likely they will bring up another parcel because in fact there were four parcels, totalling about 800 acres. The way the process works: the government took title of the whole parcel. Part of the deal was to then subdivide out the area that we needed for the ring roads and give the other back to the person that we purchased the land from in the first place.

But, Mr. Speaker, in case the second and third questions have something to do with the current value, I must caution that I can't get into this too deep because the fact is that there's currently a civil lawsuit. So if that's where they're heading, then we cannot get into it.

Mr. Bonko: To the same minister: why was the surplus land given back to Mr. Sheckter's company for less than a penny per acre when the government's own independent appraiser valued the land at \$45,000 an acre?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, obviously the member has never purchased land – obviously he hasn't – and probably has never purchased anything more than a bicycle. The fact is that it was part of the agreement to sell that we would subdivide and purchase the land that we needed for the ring road, and then the seller would take posses-

sion of the remaining parcels. That's exactly what happened, and that is what was in the original agreement to sell.

Mr. Bonko: Why didn't other landowners who had their lands expropriated for the ring road receive the surplus land back at pennies per acre? What made Mr. Sheckter so special?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, of course, there are different ways of purchasing land. There's the method of negotiating, and then there is the ability to expropriate. That's another way. There can be a negotiation subject to the expropriation, which basically means that the initial price would not be established but would be established at a later date. In this case there was a negotiated agreement, and the other parcels that may have been purchased along the right-of-way could have – I'm not sure, but they could have – been expropriated. In the case of expropriation, they only expropriate the land that they need. They don't expropriate the whole parcel. So that's the difference. Perhaps, if they need even more information on this sort of thing, they should put a written question because this is a fairly complex area.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, before I begin my question, I wonder if might ask for some guidance from the chair. I understand that the appointments to the Executive Council are entirely within the purview of the Premier, yet I would like to ask questions related to that. Can you advise me how to proceed, please?

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party is a big boy with a lot of experience in this House, and the hon. member knows full well how he should proceed, so continue.

Mr. Mason: Actually I don't, Mr. Speaker. I asked the question legitimately. Well, then, I will proceed as best I can.

The Speaker: Hon. member, I have no idea what question you want to raise, so how can I give you any advice? So proceed and we'll find out.

Cabinet Appointments

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, yesterday's cabinet shuffle was disappointing but hardly surprising for those who have watched this struggling government for some time. First, one of the most intelligent and loyal ministers in this government was unceremoniously dumped from cabinet. Second, representation of Edmonton, of women, and of youth was overlooked in favour of cronyism. My question must apparently go to the Deputy Premier. Were there no qualified women available in the caucus to be appointed to cabinet? Were there no qualified women?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I will again remind the hon. member that appointments to cabinet are not a matter of House debate. You may debate the choices; you may debate policies in those areas, but they're really not a matter of debate here.

However, I do take exception in the preamble to the dumping of a minister because in my knowledge of the events a very talented minister with a great deal of integrity stepped down from cabinet.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Jumped before he was pushed.

To the Deputy Premier: were there no qualified Edmontonians in the Conservative caucus available to be appointed to the cabinet?

1:50

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier has the floor.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of very talented people that may not be entirely in Edmonton but are in the capital region. I will point out that the minister of health is from Sherwood Park, an overpass away, in the greater metro region. Of course, we have the Minister of Education, again a very talented and dedicated Edmonton minister in the cabinet. I might also say that a number of MLAs from this region play a very major role in a number of committees. I would point out members of the Agenda and Priorities Committee, the Member for Sherwood Park, the Member for Edmonton Mill Creek. We have the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, again, a member of that committee. So to suggest that this city has been overlooked is entirely without foundation.

I would be very dismayed if this hon. member tried to in any way through his comments impinge on the very, very good working relationship that we have with the mayor and the council in this city and the best interests of all the people in this city.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, after the next election they're going to have to go to Wainwright to find a representative for Edmonton.

Was there no qualified member of the caucus who is under the age of 45 years that could have been appointed to this cabinet?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to offend the members of this caucus by asking them their ages.

You know, I find one thing very curious in this hon. member's line of questioning. He spoke about qualified women. Half of the women in our caucus sit on the front bench. Half. Now, I am looking at the ND caucus and seeing that there are no women.

The Speaker: In response to the hon. leader's original question to whom he should direct the question, it seems to me that he followed the correct procedure.

The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Health Care Guarantees

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first question in a very, very, very long time is to a very capable woman, the minister of health. Madam Minister, the Prime Minister of Canada, the government of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, and the Alberta Medical Association have all endorsed the concept of care guarantees. I know how much you care and why you care for the public health system, so could you tell me how you plan to deal with this concept of care guarantees?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of ways that I plan to deal with it. It is a good question because in the last few weeks and months there has been significantly more said about care guarantees. I know what the Prime Minister is urging us towards, and that is more timely access and making sure that we look at benchmarks as things that are firm commitments by health regions of the country to advance the case of public health care delivered in a timely way and making no excuses about lapses.

I would like to just say that we've taken to caucus the outline of a plan. I will be going further with care guarantees as a plan to caucus. I intend to talk to the Minister of Health for Canada more about the expression of interest in this concept as he has identified both through the Prime Minister and in the throne speech.

Further, in discussion with Senator Kirby this morning I have talked to him about what kind of targets and planning we can do to make sure that we bridge from a situation where care guarantees are an aspiration of the federal government to something where it's practically possible because of resource planning, because of human resource planning, and things that we can do at the provincial level.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much for that answer, Madam Minister.

Care guarantees have the ability to make the government and RHAs accountable for access, which is, realistically, the number one health care issue in Alberta. When can we expect this idea to be made public and to be taken public for discussion?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I hope soon. I can't give a date, but I would hope that sometime this spring we will have an answer. Clearly, in the letter that our Premier just received from the Prime Minister of Canada, he identified that the health planning that was done in the policy framework was laudable and that many of the issues in that framework were things that he commended us for, acknowledging that the primary responsibility for the province was in health care delivery. So I hope in the next few weeks to be able to bring a plan to caucus and be able to advance it by discussing it further with the College of Physicians and Surgeons and the other health care professionals.

Mr. Speaker, I would hope that by the end of June we would have at least made some statement about our support or the qualification of any support level for care guarantees for more timely access.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

How will you deal with the new federal minority government on this issue when they face tremendous pressure to enforce the Canada Health Act? In many ways the care guarantees may be the compromise that is needed to ensure compliance with the Canada Health Act.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, during the last election I noted with interest that all of the parties – whether they were the winning party, the successful Conservative government, or the Liberal Party that is now in the opposition or the NDs – had advanced the issue of care guarantees. I think that what I would first illustrate to the Minister of Health is our interest in being co-operative. I would show the success of the work improving access times in the hip and knee replacement project, the fact that we've advanced at least \$15 million more this year for improvements on the coronary artery bypass grafts, on mental health, on prostate and breast cancer, and on cataracts. I would illustrate how we are advancing, at least philosophically and practically, towards a position of shortening the wait times and hope that he would understand that what we are attempting to do is to meet those kinds of targets.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Sale of Edmonton Ring Road Land (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week we revealed that this government had sold 260 acres of prime residential land in southwest Edmonton for \$3. Today we learned that there is

yet another parcel of land sold for \$1. After 35 years in power this Progressive Conservative government has so many skeletons in the closet that the PC flag should be the Jolly Roger. My first question is to the minister of infrastructure. If the \$1 buyback was only part of the original agreement when this government purchased these parcels of land, why are the remaining details not registered on the title?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I didn't explain well enough the process, and maybe I need to go through it a little slower. The fact is that if an individual or a company, an entity, wants to sell a portion of the land, then they have to have it subdivided. If the government wants to take only a portion of a parcel, then the easiest way to do it is to buy the whole parcel, take out whatever is necessary for the government need, and then return the rest of the land to the seller.

Mr. Speaker, this was the agreement. That's the way it was struck. In fact, I get a little nervous when we start talking about the value of it because, as I indicated earlier, there is currently a lawsuit against the government over these parcels.

Incidentally, yes, there are four parcels. It's about 800 acres – I'm doing your research for you – and we gave back about 290.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:00

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister of infrastructure: who now owns this latest parcel of land that was sold to Mr. Sheckter for a dollar? Who owns it now?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there was nothing sold for a dollar. Absolutely nothing. There was land returned to the seller, and in order for that transaction to be legal, you have to have a dollar. That's the process. In fact, I've got no idea who currently owns it. Nor do I care who owns it. That was returned to the seller, and there have been transactions, I'm sure, with that land. What the member should be doing is praising the Lougheed government for thinking about buying these corridors because if we were to go and purchase those properties today, we'd be paying several times what was paid back then.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how many times did this government meet with Mr. Sheckter before agreeing to this buyback for \$1 of all these parcels of land? How many times did you meet with him?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, this was 20 years ago.

Mr. MacDonald: Eighteen years ago.

Mr. Lund: I don't care if it's 20 or 18; it's in that neighbourhood. That was before I was in this House. That was before our current Premier was in this House. So to say that it's this government is wrong.

As a matter of fact, there are a number of things that we've done since then. For example, when we purchase land today, it's gazetted. Back in those days it was not gazetted. That's one of the things that we did as a government, and it's the right thing to do. It's open and accountable. There's nothing shady about this at all.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Trans-Alaska Pipeline

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my understanding that presently the state of Alaska and their main oil companies and explorers in Alaska are having a talk on a major pipeline that's going to affect Canada. That pipeline is going to go from the north of Alaska down to the southern part, across Yukon, into B.C., and into our Alberta territory. Now, I'm very interested to know if that pipeline is going to be a line that goes straight through Alberta or if it's going to hook into our hub. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Can you tell this Assembly: what is Alberta doing in connection with the Alberta hub or the bullet line that's being proposed from Alaska?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to be able to stand and respond to some of the last questions that the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne will have in this House for some time.

It's been the Alberta position for some time and will continue to be that the Alberta hub is at the central point of our policy and direction. We would welcome that there be more resources from the north, that they be developed, but the Alberta hub, being the central point, is going to be the formation of our direction. We will not support a bullet line coming into this province and exiting straight out. That will not be something that we will support. That's being communicated to all parties – the producers, the state of Alaska – and to all other provinces.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, again to the same minister: if there's not going to be a bullet line and they're going to be hooked into the Alberta hub, what advantages can our petrochemical industry see for having this volume of gas coming into our province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our position on the Alberta hub actually makes a lot of sense for the producers from the north. They, too, have acknowledged the tremendous economic advantage of connecting into the Alberta hub. It provides access to multiple markets instantly once it arrives here. You're going to be able to utilize excess, spare capacity of existing pipelines to take it to differing markets. We will ensure that there's take-away capacity of Alberta gas to ensure that it's not stranded. The point which he mentioned is that access to the liquids for the petrochemicals so that there's a long-term supply is very vital to ensure that we have a long, prosperous opportunity for the petrochemical industry in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister again: given that the Alaska economy is as hot as the Alberta economy, where is the labour pool to build such an enormous line, and where is the labour pool to help develop that petrochemical industry here in Alberta?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, I hadn't realized that the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne was volunteering to go back to being a welder on that line. We'll need a lot of welders. We're going to need pipefitters. We're going to need many people to help. It's not just that; there's the pipeline from the Mackenzie Valley as well. That's the challenge. It's a wonderful challenge to have. We have

so much activity in the oil industry, and clearly it's not just confined to Alberta. The Alaska pipeline is going to put a tremendous stress on additional labour, certainly, access to labour from Alberta and across the country and also qualified people from around the world. We're going to have to ensure that the training is part of it.

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

Health Care Reform Public Consultation

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 23 more than 400 Albertans attended a public forum on health care hosted by the Alberta Liberal caucus in Calgary, a strong indication that Albertans care about the future of health care, that they are hungry for genuine consultation. There were no government members in attendance despite the invitation that was extended to the Premier, the health minister, and all government MLAs on March 8. To the minister of health: why does the minister continue to refuse to attend or hold public town hall meetings?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, some time ago, at the end of February, we announced that throughout March we would be conducting stakeholder meetings, that we would accommodate members of the public who came forward and asked to have an opportunity to be heard. Many of those, in fact, were heard either through MLAs who made arrangements in their constituencies or by invitation from the people that called my office. We have had an opportunity to evaluate what was said during the health policy framework. Could I reflect through the last few years on the consultations that were extensive and exhaustive on the Mazankowski report? Many of the policies from that health policy framework are an outgrowth of those. So it's not as if we have not consulted.

Mr. Speaker, we have not tabled legislation at this point. We have got some indication of how many Albertans feel about the policies, and we'll look forward to a complete analysis of that and then act in due course.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister of health: given that the minister only provided Albertans with a vague policy framework, leaving Albertans desperate for details, will the minister commit to transparently collaborating with Albertans before legislation is forced through?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, we have every intent of indicating to Albertans exactly what we've heard in the consultation process.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. At what point will the minister provide real answers to the questions from doctors, seniors, rural Albertans, and even her own members?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, on Friday morning I will be meeting with some physicians on the issue of opting in and opting out. We have never said that we wouldn't still entertain, as we always do, comments from the public. It's just that we have not had any plans for further public consultations. So we continue to get that feedback.

Mr. Speaker, I have spent an extensive amount of time doing follow-up with every one of the larger groups who did pose ques-

tions. We will continue to respond to them. When we're ready, in due course we will bring forward the plans of this government in response to the people on the health policy framework.

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

Contaminated Sites Cleanup in Calgary

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our Calgary-Fort constituency covers the largest industrial park in Calgary, and its surrounding living environment is of critical importance to the daily living of my constituents. My question today is to the Minister of Environment. Given that the Lynnwood Ridge contamination cleanup in my constituency has still not been started, dragging on for four years, too long, and missing too many construction seasons, my constituents become impatient. Can the minister update us on this action of speedy cleanup and when it will start?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My approach would be simply: damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead. To the hon. member, I know that his residents – we all value this environment. Our ministry actually acted very quickly in terms of issuing protection orders relative to this site. As you know, the protection of water and the protection of our citizens was top of mind. But after the order was issued, for the benefit of this House and Albertans I want to say that there were over 225 homes that were impacted, and Imperial Oil took the proper approach. They bought over 200 of those homes. There are about 20 homes that are in fact remaining, and my ministry is working closely with their officials to ensure that they continue to enjoy the protection of our water and the environment, that I know they enjoy, in the hon. member's constituency.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Given another situation in the southeast corner of the community of Ogden, where the seepage of cleaning chemicals from the large rail yard was discovered two years ago contaminating underground water, can the minister update us on this cleanup as well?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, one of the key planks of our Water for Life strategy is exactly that: protecting underground water. In fact, I might say that the air quality tests that have been completed in all the buildings that have been affected, of course, have come back in a very positive manner. I might also say that we've required Canadian Pacific Railway to install leading-edge technology to preserve air quality, remove any contaminants, and also monitor the groundwater to ensure that contamination does not leave the area. Now, my ministry continues to work closely with the Calgary health region as well as with CP Rail and will continue to do so in protecting the residents in this area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the same minister. There's another situation in the northeast corner of the industrial park where there was a recycled-oil plant demolished by fire. Now it's found that it has contaminated the land there. I will ask the minister to update us on that cleanup as well.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is making reference, of course, to the Hub Oil site, which now does not pose any threat to residents. My ministry has, in fact, an action plan from Hub Oil in terms of putting land back into use, and that could include commercial and industrial activity. Once we, the Ministry of Environment, are satisfied with Hub Oil's plan and it meets our very, very strict environmental standards, full implementation of this plan will be carried out. I do expect that the plan will be finalized before the end of this year.

To the hon. member: all three sites which the hon. member has mentioned are being cleaned up according to very strict specifications of Alberta Environment, and I want to say as Minister of Environment that our responsibility is to ensure that every Albertan enjoys the environment we've been blessed with.

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

Fort McMurray Infrastructure Needs

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At Tuesday's municipal council meeting in Fort McMurray a regional councillor confirmed what the Alberta Liberal caucus heard during our latest visit to Fort McMurray, that there's deep concern that the Conservative leadership race could hurt the region's infrastructure priorities. He's concerned that Fort McMurray's interests will be pushed aside or overlooked. Yesterday in budget debate we were pleased to hear the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation state, "We're building a new bridge across the Athabasca." Could the minister please provide the residents of Wood Buffalo with a specific timeline as to when this project is going to be completed?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, it's very difficult to assess exactly the dates because, of course, there are a number of variables. It's going to be a very expensive project. We have already committed to a number of major projects in the Fort McMurray area, and of course it will depend a good deal on availability of labour, of materials, of money as we move forward. I can tell you and the people of Fort McMurray that it's on the radar. It's in the planning, so it will eventually happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the soaring construction costs in Fort McMurray, why didn't this government boost the interest-free loan that it offered them when this year's budget was announced because the loan amount is not adequate anymore?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the whole thing with budgeting by the provincial government is a case where you have to look at what is the most critical need, at what has to be done across the province. We can't just focus on one area. Yes, we know that there's a huge, huge demand, a huge need in Fort McMurray and surrounding area, but we are doing things like twinning highway 63. We are finishing the work on highway 881. It's going to be paved all the way. There's a number of other projects that we're funding in that area. The bridge is going to be built. I can't tell you exactly when, but we will build it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that Fort McMurray desperately needs more land for residential development and given this government's willingness in the past to make substantial land deals for a dollar or two, will it offer Fort McMurray the same deal in the Timberlea area rather than charging them market value?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's reasonable that the Minister of Municipal Affairs deal with this question given that the loan referred to in the earlier question is actually a Municipal Affairs loan. I want to make it clear that that loan has not been drawn upon yet, that we're working very closely with the city council in Fort McMurray, and that we will continue to work with them as their needs progress. With respect to the land, we've been monitoring the situation for some time. Seniors has got a very good plan in place. Again, Municipal Affairs is working with the council, continues to work with the council, and is committed to stay on this file as long as is necessary. I can assure the member and I can assure the people of Fort McMurray that we will not allow their situation to fall off of our radar screen. I can assure you of that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Royalty Rates

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams has a lot of good advice for Progressive Conservatives in Alberta. He said, and I quote: how can we ask our citizens to continue to bear the burden of high oil prices and turn to companies making billions of dollars and give them tax incentives and breaks on fuel prices? That is not to mention the burden of high utility costs, disappearing water, and dead-end energy planning for the future here in this province. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Given that our fire-sale royalty regime is so far out of step with the going rate paid everywhere else in the world, will the minister now commit to royalty rates that give Albertans fair payment for our energy assets?

Mr. Melchin: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the assertions are completely false, the answer is no.

Mr. Eggen: Well, considering, Mr. Speaker, that hundreds of millions of dollars of Albertans' money will fly out the window while the minister waffles on royalty reforms, why can't the minister impose at least a modest increase in the royalty rates now based on windfall profits that are currently being enjoyed by energy companies?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, you have to remember that our royalty regimes have been put in place in response to the very unique and specific characteristics of our resource. We have some very small-producing conventional wells, a fraction of the volume of many areas of the world in our conventional sources. They come with still some very fixed costs and operating costs that are very expensive. When you look at the economic rent, that's what royalty regimes are designed upon: to ensure that we get our fair share of the economic rent or the excess profit. That has been accomplished in our structure. We have one of the highest cost producing areas of the world. Oil sands is the highest cost area. The largest amount of dollars invested is required to get into the oil sands. All of these factors have to be taken into consideration in designing royalty regimes, which our province has been overwhelmingly successful in, creating more economic activity than any other place in the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask the minister when he and the EUB will then get tough on energy companies to ensure completeness and accuracy of volumetric production data on the royalties that we should be collecting now based on the regime that we have now.

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General raised the issue of volumetric data in his last report, and I'd like to comment that, yes, we have accepted those recommendations. The EUB has already put a directive out on that that has been in place as of January 1 of this year if he wishes to refer to the directive. Furthermore, there are many ways to ensure that the level of risk is very, very, very minimal in potential loss of royalties. Given the complexity of the industry, the multiple joint venture kinds of partners, the multiple parties reporting on the same level of activity on any one well reduces the risk to a very minimal amount. The structures put in place will continue to ensure that Albertans do collect all the royalties as required.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

2:20

Rural Policing Services

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's true that our province's booming economy is the envy of every province in Canada, not to mention across North America, but our healthy economy also attracts criminal activity and not just to the big cities. Criminal networks are spreading out into rural communities and setting up shop. My questions today are for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. In Budget 2006 you announced the addition of 80 new RCMP officers. Where will these officers be stationed?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, yes, in Budget 2006 we did add 80 new RCMP officers to work on the front line, which actually complements the additional 130 that were announced in last year's budget for front-line policing. We don't do the operational side of where they will go. That's the assistant commissioner of the RCMP, Rod Knecht, that will make those decisions. There are a number of areas that they have to look at: criminal caseload, population growth, and those types of issues that they have in their communities. They look at all of those, and they'll make a decision on where to deploy those in one of the 104 detachments we have throughout a very large geographic province. But if the hon. member has a concern regarding any one of his communities in his constituency, I'd be more than happy to speak to him about that.

Rev. Abbott: Very, very perceptive. Given that the small community of Breton in my constituency recently lost an RCMP position, how can they qualify for the criteria for placement of one of these new officers?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, I'd be more than happy to speak to the member, but, again, obviously the municipality of Breton may want to speak to the assistant commissioner. There are other opportunities as well, though, to enhance your local police service through an additional contract with the RCMP through

Canada. So those options are all open, and we can explore those in any community throughout the province as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: would the minister please provide an update on the Alberta police and peace officer training centre and advise how RCMP would utilize this facility?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With regard to the police and peace officer training centre, we're moving forward with that program. We actually had to ask the municipalities for additional time for our review committee to go over all of the submissions that we did receive. I think that we were a little astonished with the number that came in. We're working on all of them right now. We hope to have a short list selection by some time in the first part of May, and as we move forward, obviously, we'll be notifying those municipalities. But the plan is in place. We're progressing on the plan to take that before Treasury Board. We're refining the business plan right now, and we'll be taking that to Treasury Board in the next short while.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Specialized Drug Court

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The war on drugs has been a colossal failure. No one is winning. On the supply side drug dealers and organized crime are destabilizing the world, and on the demand side our sons and our daughters are literally dying. The war on drugs just simply fills our prisons to overflowing with offenders with substance abuse problems, and we desperately need other solutions such as drug courts. My first question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Will the minister report on the progress of the Edmonton drug court, and also tell us whether Alberta Justice is supporting a new drug court in Calgary?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a good question. Last year the federal government indicated that they were prepared to entertain pilot projects with respect to drug courts across Canada and solicited applications from courts that would be interested in holding or setting up a specialized drug court. In Alberta we had two applications go forward. One was from Edmonton; one was from Calgary. I'm pleased to say that the federal government at that time chose the one in Edmonton. I believe that there were other ones from other parts of the country that were also selected. The Edmonton drug court is in its initial stages. I think it is too early to make any determination with respect to it, but it is a pilot project. We are monitoring it.

I think it's important to understand that the reason that the federal government is involved in a drug court is because this is the one area where the federal government is responsible for the prosecutions. The prosecutors in a drug case are federal Crown prosecutors. Our involvement as a province is to provide support through the provincial court judges, the facilities, and through to the staff that would be in the court at the time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. B. Miller: Yes. My supplementary question is to the same minister. He didn't answer the question about Calgary. There seems to be a lot of interest in Calgary about the setting up of a similar drug court. Would Alberta Justice support that?

Mr. Stevens: Certainly, Mr. Speaker, we're interested in discussions with the people in Calgary who are interested in pursuing this. As I indicated in my initial answer, there was an application at that time. But additional resources are provided by the federal government relative to a matter which is in large measure, through the prosecution, dealt with by the federal government. I would say to the people in Calgary: contact your MPs; contact the federal Justice minister. I'm happy to work with them to try and arrange for the same kind of support for Calgary that Edmonton got so that we can have a pilot project down there also. I'm perfectly accepting of having another specialized court if we can provide the resources on our side.

Dr. B. Miller: On the same subject. There are so many of our inmates in prisons that have addiction issues. My question is to the Solicitor General, minister of public safety. Will the minister provide mandatory drug treatment programs for offenders in our prisons before they are released back into our community?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, we do provide programs in our centres for those individuals that do have addictions, and there are a number of programs for them. Obviously, not all offenders go into our correction facilities once they are sentenced. Some of them are released on conditional programs. Some of those programs do include drug addiction programs, whether it's through the John Howard Society or whether it's through some of our other stakeholders that we utilize within the community. So not all of them pertain to just our correction facilities. We do have programs as well in there, but I'd like to remind the hon. member that it is difficult because the average length of stay is only 34 days in a correctional facility. Those are some of the issues we have to deal with. While they are in our facilities, we do deal with the issues, and we do have doctors and psychologists and specialists that are there to assist them.

Vignettes from the Assembly's History

The Speaker: Hon. members, very shortly I'll call on the first of a number of members to participate, but first of all our historical vignette of the day. Today four members of the Alberta Legislative Assembly will be appointed to the cabinet, or Executive Council of Alberta, for the first time. Their tenure as a minister will begin immediately upon the administering of the oath of office.

Such, however, has not always been the case in Alberta. If you had been appointed to the provincial cabinet following the 1905 election and you were re-elected in the 1909 election, you could continue to hold a cabinet position. However, if you were an MLA appointed to cabinet for the first time in the post-1909 period, you had to return to your constituency and be re-elected in a by-election. By way of an example, D.M. Marshall was elected as a Liberal member for Olds in the general election of March 22, 1909. He was nominated for the position of minister of agriculture, returned to his constituency, and then was re-elected in a by-election held on November 23, 1909.

This practice was to continue following the general elections of 1913, 1917, and 1921. It was discontinued following the election of 1926. During the time between the elections of 1909 and 1926, 14

such by-elections were held. Five were held in the post-1909 period, one was held in the post-1913 period, three were held in the post-1917 period, and five were held in the post-1921 period. All new appointees were successful in their by-election bids and subsequently served as ministers of the Crown.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:30 **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: I'll call upon the Minister of Restructuring and Government Efficiency.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that I've introduced this group before, but they weren't in the House. Now they've arrived, so I'd like to welcome them. They're 46 students from grade 6 at the Innisfail middle school in Innisfail, and they're accompanied by their teachers, Judy Bourne and Mary Schatz. With that group I would also like to give a special welcome to parent helpers Trevor Lawrence, Tina Reid, Michelle den Dekker, Eva Looker, and Mike Wilkie. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

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

Tartan Day

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise in this Assembly today in recognition of Tartan Day. The 6th of April marks a significant anniversary for Scots across this province, this country, and many parts of the world. Tartan Day is celebrated to commemorate the signing of the declaration of Arbroath, the Scottish declaration of independence, on April 6, 1320. This declaration has been recognized around the world as one of the earliest statements of the rights of humanity to a peaceful, productive, secure, and well-governed life and has become the standard for freedom from oppression and for responsible government.

Also, it's the day to recognize the tartan as a symbol of Scottish culture and clans, providing Scots with a visual symbol of their heritage. Tartan Day offers us the opportunity to recognize the important influence of Scots to the progress of civilization and good government.

Moreover, it allows us the occasion to celebrate the significant contributions made by Scots in our province. From the first contacts of Alexander Mackenzie in the 1780s and the arrival of the fur traders in the north to the coming of missionaries in the south, Scots have played a major role in the formation and progress of our province. Our province has seen significant Scottish influence on almost all areas of life. From early exploration and settlement, government, business and industry, or cultural life Scots have played a vital role in Alberta. Our first Premier, Alexander Rutherford, was even of Scottish descent.

Mr. Speaker, in view of the contributions of Scots to this province, past, present, and future, I ask all hon. members to join me to celebrate Tartan Day.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Finola Hackett

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am particularly proud to rise today to recognize the achievements of a very young constituent of Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville who is a true champion. Ms Finola Hackett at the ripe age of 14 and from the fabulous town of Tofield beat out 28 finalists and 160,000 other students across Canada to become the two-time – I repeat: the two-time – National Spelling Bee champion.

Finola, in true Alberta style, beat the representative from Ottawa by spelling the word "dghaisa," which, of course, we all know is a small sailboat from Malta. What makes this so phenomenal, Mr. Speaker, is that I tried to find the word in the *Oxford* dictionary, and it's not there, so how this young girl knew how to spell the word . . .

An Hon. Member: You didn't know how to spell it.

Mr. Stelmach: Maybe that's the problem here.

Finola is a very talented individual in both music and dance. Her family is on their way back from Ottawa. I'd just ask all members to join me in congratulating not only a great ambassador for the town of Tofield but also a true Alberta champion, Ms Finola Hackett.

Thank you.

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

Calgary Infrastructure Needs

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a time of strong and rapid economic growth within our province. Our healthy supplies of energy resources along with an overwhelming demand for labour have made Alberta a very popular place to call home. All across our province we're experiencing an enormous increase in population as our strong economy continues to attract hard-working and free-enterprising people from all over the country.

As an MLA from Calgary I just want to focus on the Calgary example. All my MLA colleagues from Calgary witness this growth. The Calgary population will increase by 50 new Albertans every day. This represents a severe challenge to Calgary. It is imperative that we are able to address the needs of the growing population by maintaining a quantity and quality of public services. In order to ensure that the citizens are getting the most reliable services possible, it is important that the local authorities and institutions receive appropriate funds from the government, taking into account the estimated growth of population.

As another example, as Calgary continues to grow, there is increasing pressure on the city's infrastructure. There are now close to 60 per cent more the number of vehicles on Calgary roads today than there were 10 years ago. That's about 30 more vehicles added each day, contributing to the considerable traffic congestion throughout the city. Roadways, schools, and health care facilities have all continued to experience the stress of accommodating more and more people.

Mr. Speaker, I feel that it is important to sustain the progress of our economy and promote Alberta – Calgary, Edmonton, and elsewhere – as the finest place to work, live, and raise our families. I believe that this can be accomplished by funding which goes along with population growth.

Thank you.

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

National Daycare Program

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The prairie giant Tommy Douglas said that the ultimate test of society was not how its members relied on themselves but how we care for each other. Health care was pioneered by New Democrats, accepted by Conservatives, adopted by Liberals, and paralleled by Social Credit governments. It is not a partisan but a human issue that grows out of a recognized need for us to take care of each other.

In earlier days religious denominations provided help to their members in time of need. In our day this function has been assumed by society as a whole. Child care is a new issue for our generation. It comes from two causes: more families with two parents in the workforce and many families led by a single adult. Few families can afford private child care. Like health care and education earlier, the first initiatives in child care were undertaken by churches. By the 1990s the need was part of the election platform for the Liberal Party of Canada. It took another decade for the national child care agreement. This was achieved by bargaining a variety of agreements between Ottawa and the provinces and territories.

Now a new government in Ottawa plans to scrap the agreement and replace it with a tax credit for parents and incentives to business. It says that it wants to provide greater choice, yet choice was written into the agreement by Alberta's government. There is nothing to stop the Conservatives in Ottawa from introducing their tax credit and keeping the earlier plan, nothing except attitude, a belief that we are not our brothers' and sisters' keepers and that the best society is one where self-reliance is the prime virtue, everyone for himself or herself.

That was the attitude that sank the *Titanic* 94 years ago: a society that boasted new luxuries for those who could pay and space in the lifeboats for those who could get there in time. It took disaster to establish a principle that seems obvious now, that of lifeboats for all. This is a principle of caring that needs to be learned by those who are steering our ship of state.

Health Care Reform

Mr. Mason: The provincial government's third-way proposals to implement two-tier health care are the most radical changes to our health care system in a generation. These proposals will inevitably lead to the deterioration of the quality of the public system, higher costs, and longer wait times. As Albertans become aware of these effects on their health care and their quality of life, opposition has grown, and no wonder. The rural areas of Alberta are already struggling to keep their doctors and other health care professionals. The third way will worsen the situation, leaving thousands of Albertans with far worse health care. Astoundingly, the government has done no research into the impacts of the third way on rural health care.

The government has repeated the claim that within 25 years health care will consume the entire budget of the province. However, there is no indication that the Minister of Health and Wellness has conducted any research to back up these claims. It's an unsubstantiated claim designed to frighten Albertans into supporting more private health care. At the same time, the government refuses to implement proven cost-saving measures within the public system, such as a pharmaceutical savings agency proposed by the NDP that would reduce costs by \$75 million a year in the first year alone.

2:40

During the 2004 election Albertans were told by the Premier that he had no plans to privatize health care and that an election was not the time to discuss health care policy. As a result this government

does not have a mandate from the people of Alberta to dismantle our public health care system. The government has an obligation to Albertans to clearly set out their plans for the health care system and seek a mandate from the people of Alberta in an election before proceeding. Anything else is both deceitful and undemocratic.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we move on to the next order of the Routine, there is a very distinguished Canadian, if my eyes are serving me correctly, in the members' gallery, and I would like to have him rise. Mr. Jim Edwards is a former Member of Parliament representing a constituency here in Edmonton, a former member of the national cabinet, and I believe currently chairman of the University of Alberta. Welcome, sir.

head:

Presenting Petitions

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition signed by 294 individuals who petition the Assembly to urge the government to "recognize the financial burden borne by postsecondary students in this province, and to take action by implementing a significant rollback of tuition fees."

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise to submit some petitions. The first one is from 221 students from the U of A, and it reads:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to recognize the financial burden borne by postsecondary students in this province, and to take action by implementing a significant rollback of tuition fees.

Similarly, on behalf of my hon. colleague from Calgary-Varsity 213 signatures from the University of Calgary for the same petition. That brings the total to 3,702.

Also on behalf of my colleague from Calgary-Varsity another petition urging the government of Alberta to "consider increasing funding in order that all Alberta Works income support benefit levels may be increased."

Thank you.

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

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table a petition with a hundred signatures on it calling on the government to abandon its plans to implement the third way health care reforms, for the Assembly to defeat legislation allowing expansion of private hospitals, private insurance, and allowing doctors to work in both the private and public systems, and to oppose any action by the government of Alberta to contravene the Canada Health Act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two petitions to table today. The first is another instalment of the petition that urges the government of Alberta to immediately provide funding to enable municipalities and the RCMP to hire 500 additional community police officers. This is 150 signatures.

I also have a petition with 114 signatures calling on the government to abandon its plans to implement the third-way health reforms, for the Assembly to defeat legislation allowing the expansion of

private hospitals, insurance, allowing doctors to work in both the private and public systems, and to oppose any action by the government of Alberta to contravene the Canada Health Act.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table a petition with 98 signatures calling on the government to abandon its plans to implement the third-way health care reforms, for the Assembly to defeat legislation allowing the expansion of private hospitals, private insurance, and allowing doctors to work in both the private and public systems, and to oppose any action by the government of Alberta to contravene the Canada Health Act.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today to present a petition from people, all resident in the city of Calgary, all with, you know, very high incomes, I understand, to the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, now assembled. "We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to consider increasing funding in order that all Alberta Works income support benefit levels may be increased."

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by 302 students petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to "recognize the financial burden borne by postsecondary students in this province, and to take action by implementing a significant rollback of tuition fees."

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday, April 10, I will move that since there are no written questions appearing on the Order Paper, there will be none required to stand and retain their places.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday, April 10, I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

head:

Introduction of Bills

Bill 208

Protection of Fundamental Freedoms (Marriage) Statutes Amendment Act, 2006

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce a bill being the Protection of Fundamental Freedoms (Marriage) Statutes Amendment Act, 2006.

Mr. Speaker, the most important right in a free society is the right to disagree with and to criticize government policy. Bill 208 would strengthen this right.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 208 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Bill Pr. 1

Burns Memorial Trust Amendment Act, 2006

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill Pr. 1, the Burns Memorial Trust Amendment Act, 2006.

This bill will amend the Burns Memorial Trust Act to allow for the trustee to determine the amount of trust income to be distributed to beneficiaries provided that the amount is not less than the amount prescribed in the regulations under the Income Tax Act of Canada for disbursement quotas for private foundations.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 1 read a first time]

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

Bill Pr. 2

Mary Immaculate Hospital of Mundare Act

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Mary Immaculate Hospital of Mundare Act.

This private bill will repeal and replace the original act of 1962 and update the corporate governance provisions of the original private act.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 2 read a first time]

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A number of tablings of letters from individuals. The first is from Stewart Millman, noting that our private system is the most expensive per capita system in the world and the most inefficient.

Next is from Jonathon Lytton, who is concerned that allowing physicians to jump between private and public systems will achieve precisely the opposite of what the people of the province need.

The next letter is from Matthew Smith, who notes that to standardize the referral procedures and invest in a province-wide system to manage health care referrals is more successful, and "seriously, invest in disease prevention."

Next is from Donna Sahuri, who notes the conflict of interest in having doctors work in both systems and wonders, "Whose best interest would it be to provide proactive medical advice to avoid these surgeries?"

2:50

From Danny Sutherland, who notes, "If the current health system is so unsustainable, then why are we receiving \$400.00 cheques?"

From Frank Meunier, who states, "We Canadians are proud of the fact that anyone – no matter what their economic status – can receive quality care."

From Elisa Sereno-Janzen and Tim Janzen. They believe, "It is time for Alberta politicians to think of those of us on the middle and bottom of the totem pole of our economy."

A form letter that is signed by a number, but two specifically: Janet Carruthers and Elizabeth Loeffler.

Thank you.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the Government House Leader to share with us the government business for the week of April 10 to 13.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It would be indeed a pleasure to do that. On Monday, April 10, in the afternoon we will deal with private members' business, which normally includes written questions, motions for returns, public bills and orders other than government bills and orders. On Monday evening from 8 to 9 we will continue with private members' business in the form of motions. That would be Motion 506. At 9 p.m. we will go to Government Bills and Orders, and in Committee of the Whole we should be able to address Bill 15, the International Interests in Mobile Aircraft Equipment Act; Bill 16, the Peace Officer Act; and Bill 20, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, 2006.

On Tuesday afternoon we'll deal with government bills and orders, specifically Committee of Supply, that being day 6 of 24, and the item under discussion will be the Ministry of Environment as per the Official Opposition's request. Tuesday evening at 8 we will deal with Committee of Supply, day 7 of 24, so to speak, and that will be the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. Assuming things go well and we have time, we would very much like to look at second reading of Bill 28, the Local Authorities Election Amendment Act; Bill 24, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act; Bill 25, the Securities Amendment Act; Bill 26, the Mandatory Testing and Disclosure Act; and Bill 27, the Vegetable Sales (Alberta) Act Repeal Act.

On Wednesday, April 12, under Government Bills and Orders we would look at Committee of Supply, day 8 of 24, and consider estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education. Wednesday evening we will look at day 9 of 24 and in Committee of Supply discuss the estimates of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. There being time thereafter, one would hope to get to Committee of the Whole on Bill 10, the Engineering, Geological, and Geophysical Professions Amendment Act; Bill 14, the Health Professions Statutes Amendment Act; Bill 21, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, and otherwise as might be indicated on the Order Paper.

Thursday, April 13, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders we would do day 10 of 24 under Committee of Supply and consider estimates for the Ministry of Children's Services, and that should be it for that week. There may be other stuff on the Order Paper that could get attended to. We'll see. Thereafter, I'm anticipating that the House would adjourn for one week for Easter and return on April 24.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2006-07**

Human Resources and Employment

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Orders the first hour is set between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister for Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to move the 2006 estimates for Human Resources and Employment. In addition, I'd like to introduce the staff that are here with us today, who will be taking notes and helping me throughout the process: Ulysses Currie, our deputy minister; Alex Stewart, assistant deputy minister of corporate services; Duncan Campbell, senior financial officer, finance and corporate services; Shelley Engstrom, director of financial corporate services; Dale Silver, assistant public service commissioner of PAO; Erin Johnston, executive assistant of PAO; and also, of course, Donna Ballard, my executive assistant.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

I would also like to take a moment at this time to thank the other 2,000 or so staff that we have that work very hard for our government to deliver services to the public. Thank you very much.

Alberta, of course, is in a very fortunate position, Mr. Chairman. One of the challenges we face is managing the growth and opportunities our strong economy brings. Human Resources and Employment will continue to meet the needs of today while taking steps to ensure that Alberta's prosperity continues in the future.

To make the best of our opportunities and to address our challenges, Mr. Chairman, I'm asking for \$790,278,000 to support the work our ministry requires. The ministry, of course, includes the Department of Human Resources and Employment, personnel administration office, Alberta Labour Relations Board, and the Appeals Commission for workers' compensation. The workers' compensation, which is an independent, employer-funded organization, is not included in the ministry's business plan.

Alberta's economy is hot. In 2005 our unemployment rate continued to be the lowest in the country at 3.9 per cent. Our success is a national good-news story, and Albertans should be proud of what they have accomplished by working hard. It is a good time to be a worker in Alberta. In 2005 the average Alberta wage increased to \$21 per hour. I'm sure you have noticed that help wanted signs are popping up all over.

Employers are having a tough time finding and keeping workers. Human Resources and Employment has just wrapped up consultation on a proposed strategy to guide labour force development over the next 10 years, and this is short- and long-range strategy. I expect to release this final labour force strategy this fall; however, we are also taking action now to deal with the short-term issues.

In 2006 and '07 Human Resources and Employment will dedicate close to \$294 million to programs and services to address skills and labour shortages, an increase of approximately \$25 million over what was spent last year. This includes, of course, investing in skills training, offering services to job seekers and employers, and providing supports to working people, such as the Alberta child and adult health benefits. We will help more Albertans take training, bringing the total to over 30,000 people. For example, an estimated 5,000 people will be helped with their tuition and living expenses while they learn a trade, training in occupations experiencing labour shortages will be available to 4,000 people, and 1,200 people will be able to take self-employment training.

3:00

I have always said that our priority is to help groups underrepresented in the workforce to get the skills and support they need to get jobs and keep jobs. This year Human Resources and Employment will invest over \$6 million in aboriginal training to employment, an increase of \$4 million. By partnering with aboriginal communities in the private sector and training institutions, we expect 1,300 people to obtain new skills. We will also continue to provide specialized services to people with disabilities, young people, immigrants, and older workers.

This fiscal year Human Resources and Employment will invest over \$45 million, which is an increase of \$6 million, to implement strategies under the Alberta government's immigration policy. English as a Second Language training will be expanded, allowing a total of 3,500 people to benefit; 1,300 foreign-trained professionals will be assisted to get the Canadian work experience they need to fill job vacancies; and we will work with professional associations to assist in timelier foreign credential recognition.

Human Resources and Employment spent less than expected on training in the last year. We have made program changes to help us meet our targets this time. As you know, we no longer have welfare offices in Alberta. We have now 59 service location centres across the province, where we help both job seekers and employers, and of course 19 of these 59 centres are colocated with the federal government. We also help people over the phone and the Internet. In 2006-07 we will increase funding to job placement services to enhance and expand our services.

Throughout the province our staff are developing innovative ways to partner with business and the community. Just a couple of weeks ago Human Resources and Employment worked with community groups in Red Deer to hold a job fair, which attracted 88 employers and more than 2,000 job seekers.

The nature of the work done in our offices has changed considerably in the last decade. Once our people enter the workforce, Human Resources and Employment wants them to be safe on the job. Phase 2 of Work Safe Alberta is under development and will continue to identify new opportunities to reduce injuries in Alberta work sites. We will focus on youth and industry sectors with poor safety records. Since we implemented Work Safe Alberta, the lost-time claim rate has been reduced from 3.4 per cent in 2000 to an estimated 2.4 in 2005. This is a 24 per cent drop, a record low, and means that there were 10,000 fewer work injuries last year compared to where we would have been had we not improved the system. Claims fully funded by the workers' compensation have dropped by \$285 million per year, which means additional dollars for the employers.

I am committed to building on this success. This fall I held a minister's forum on workplace safety to consult with stakeholders on a new three-year strategy, the workers' compensation health fund, a workplace health and safety program, contributing in excess of \$12 million to support Work Safe Alberta. In 2006-07 workers' compensation will contribute an additional \$2 million. As a result, Human Resources and Employment plans to hire more occupational health and safety officers and other staff who will work with stakeholders to ensure our workplaces are safe. As part of Work Safe Alberta we are also developing a road safety at work strategy, working with Alberta Education to enhance workplace safety resources in schools, and promoting best practices.

Despite our hot economy there are Albertans who have significant challenges that make it difficult for them to get jobs or keep jobs. These not expected to work clients will see their financial assistance increased by 5 per cent starting May 1 of this year. This will bring the total spending on financial health and other benefits for this

group to more than \$151 million. Close to 12,000 Albertans will benefit from this rate increase. For example, a single parent with two children will receive an increase of \$51 per month, raising the family's monthly financial assistance to \$1,030 per month.

Human Resources and Employment is also increasing the support available to individuals and families who are making a fresh start after leaving abusive situations. Our budget requirement to help people in transition, in other words people who are between jobs or already working, is lower in 2006-2007 due to Alberta's strong economy and our success in helping people move back into the workforce. In fact, an average of 26,900 households received financial assistance in 2005-06, compared to 28,935 the previous year. This is a decrease of more than 2,000.

If our caseloads had remained at the same levels as they were before the welfare reforms which were commenced under this good Premier and our government in 1992, the government would have spent an additional \$600 million per year, or a total of \$8 billion since 1992. That's a lot of money saved, Mr. Chairman, and that money, of course, was directed to other high-needs programs. During my answers, I may expand on that particular area. As a result, this year Human Resources and Employment can commit more money to supporting employment and training. While the total amount committed to helping people in transition has decreased, I want to make it clear that we are not decreasing the amount of assistance that we provide to these individuals and families. In '06-07 we expect to spend \$138 million on financial health and other benefits for people in transition. Of course, people who are between jobs also benefit from our investment in employment services.

I'd like to take a few moments now to discuss the personnel administration office, better known as PAO. Maintaining a strong public service is very important to Alberta because without a strong public service and good employees our system of government would probably not operate. PAO works with ministries by developing and implementing progressive corporate human resource strategies. Our government faces the same challenges as other employers in Alberta. We are trying to find and keep talented employees in a labour market where there is a lot of competition for workers. Our demographics show that 40 per cent of the executive managers in our public service are over the age of 55; 27 per cent of all management employees are eligible to retire by 2007 and 2008. It is important to invest today to maximize the impact of those changes and make sure that we have a strong public service for tomorrow.

This year the PAO budget is increasing by \$4.1 million to approximately \$17.7 million. This additional funding, of course, will benefit all ministries across the government. Three million dollars is going to an executive and senior managers' development initiative so that as current leaders begin to retire, there are people with knowledge and skills needed to move into their roles. The remaining increases will be used to support other human resource initiatives to ensure that our public service is an employer of choice with a quality work environment and quality employees.

I would like now to turn my attention to the Appeals Commission for the Workers' Compensation Board. The commission is independent from the Workers' Compensation Board. It hears appeals from workers or employers on decisions of the review bodies of the Workers' Compensation Board. The operating costs of the commission are paid from general revenue and then reimbursed from the workers' compensation accident fund. An increase of \$1.4 million in the commission's budget will help decrease the number of days it takes to process these appeals.

3:10

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, in 2006-07 Human Resources and Employment will build Alberta's workforce and continue to help

those in need. Over \$790 million will be invested in Alberta's people, skills, and workplaces and in building a strong public service.

I have presented the highlights of where these dollars will be invested. I look forward to comments and questions from the hon. members, and I will try to answer as many questions as possible. If there are any questions that I can't answer today, of course the staff are here to take notes, or we'll read the Blues and answer in writing.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I must compliment the minister on a professional and well-delivered report on a very, very important department of this government. This ministry, indeed, is important. In fact, along with Education and Advanced Education it is one of the most important when we look to the future of Alberta. It does cover skills development. It does cover people in need. It does cover labour relations and personnel administration. It does cover WCB. It does cover the Appeals Commission. It does cover so much, but much of it deals with how we work and how we develop our workforce. The minister mentioned that there is a major push to have a final report on the labour force strategy for this fall, and I welcome the moves that are being made in order to at least look at this.

One of the greatest problems we have seen in my short period in this Legislature is the fact that there is not a lot of information on the labour market that has been provided to really give a true picture of how the labour market operates in our province and in our country. So often – and I've said this before – we've relied on certain studies that have been done by certain organizations, which are good organizations, and they do them in good faith, I'm sure, but perhaps they will do a survey of large employers, and those large employers will say that they will need lots of employees. It's sort of like going to do a survey in a grade 3 class and asking them how much candy the grade 3 kids will want in the next year. Of course, they'll say they need lots of candy. They'll always need lots of employees, in the same sense, when you're talking to large employers.

Some of the studies are very good. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business has come up with some that I think are quite comprehensive and deal with a lot of smaller businesses, and they look at the needs. One of the interesting ones in the CFIB studies, of course, is the fact that one of the problems is the ability to pay for new employees. What that underlines for small businesses in our Alberta market is the clear fact that much of the demand side in our market today is being driven by \$60 to \$70 per barrel oil and similar high levels of pricing in gas, because of those high levels, the incredible amounts of wells, incredible amount of exploration, and incredible amount of pipeline work and other activity that we see in the conventional oil and gas industry.

We also see down the road an incredible amount of need in the oil sands industry. We're seeing right now in Fort McMurray the development of projects which we knew were coming for five years, which we have had approved for quite some time, which we knew were in development for a long time. Obviously, we didn't have the labour market things that we needed for Fort McMurray in place for that area for now. We're going to have a greater problem down the road as our actual needs increase. I'll get back to that a little later. But the need for good statistics which really look at the actual supply side and how we can also affect the supply side is absolutely important in the development of this ministry.

Now, I'll just touch on a number of the line items in the ministry. We have many, many different types of projects that are coming up

that will need skilled employees, that will need people to work and who will actually have to have their skills and trades and other types of professional qualifications developed and put into the proper perspective and proper force for our economy.

Just to look at a number of line items – and I'll go through them, starting on page 276 of the government estimates. Some of these will just be questions as to the nature of the changes in the spending.

I look at 2.2.3, youth connections. I see a budget increase in 2.2.3, but if we look at the actual spending of the 2005-06 forecast, it shows as a decrease. Why is that?

I look at the basic skills and academic upgrading, and I don't see a significant increase in that. You know, we're seeing a lot of need to bring those basic skills up.

One that gives me some consternation is the decrease in the disability-related employment supports. If I could have some understanding of why there is a decrease at all in 2.2.6.

The STEP program, 2.2.7. I see that the budgeted amounts are the same and stayed the same although the budget was not at all nearly taken up last year. I think that the STEP program opens up some opportunities, and I know it'll close fairly soon. You know, I look to some of the initiatives such as the one put forward by Ruth Kelly, the past president of the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, to provide summer employment for aboriginal students. If this could somehow in the short term be looked at to ensure that the STEP program could be made available to employers in this area, this would be of great benefit, I think, to many aboriginal students to get into the workforce this year.

I look at 2.2.8, the self-employment training. Again this was an area where the monies were not spent from the budgeted year, so the budget is much reduced. I talked to many people in my constituency, and self-employment and small businesses are areas where I think we could see some major effort put into publicizing the things that people could put forward to be self-employed.

I appreciate the comments of the minister in his opening statements on supporting people in transition, but I still wonder why these income supports are so decreased in much of 2.4. In reality, some of the supports across the board do not reflect the fact that many of these supports did not go up for many, many years.

3:20

Just moving on to page 277. You know, I look at some of the professions and occupations. It's one of the things that, as legislation is put forward in this House, often does not get very much publicity, but it's very important to those people in those professions. Being in opposition, I of course take the responsibility seriously to speak to these professions and to try and understand some of the varying needs that are targeted by this legislation, which affects how our economy works in a big way quite often.

I was at a rally here some few weeks back with people who are very, very concerned about the upcoming veterinarians' amendments. They are stakeholders, and they complained that there was no government representative that would come out. You know, I'm very pleased, most often, with the employees from Human Resources and Employment, and many of them do an excellent and very professional job. It would be very nice to see, when there is a request for consultation, a request for government representatives – it doesn't have to be politicians or MLAs or the minister – at least some help and some information from those that provide some understanding from the government.

Again, you know, I seem to have run into that somewhat with the bill regarding engineers and engineering technologists. It seemed to drop off the radar screen for a bit. Some things were problematic, I think, for both organizations, APEGGA and ASET, the association

that represents the engineers and the one that represents the engineering technologists, on how that developed. I'd like to see the departmental representatives work very, very closely to try and deal with some of the issues that these organizations have. Some can be very difficult and almost need the wisdom of Solomon to try and take care of, but they are indeed very important for the tens of thousands of people working in these occupations.

The Labour Relations Board, item 4. I've heard tremendous criticism of its operations over the last year and a half. Some people, well-respected lawyers, have called it the Christian Labour Association implementation board or the CLAC state union board. The impression of fairness for some reason does not seem to exist. This is supposed to be just like any court, where the reputation of the adjudicator, the reputation of the board, the reputation of what in fact is a labour court should not be in question as an independent and impartial arbiter.

In looking at item 5, the personnel administration office, there are indeed many challenges, and I touched on those in some questions in question period and on how the ministry will look at it. I've had some people in the government who have come to me quietly and questioned what the government is doing in its own demographic in its attempts to actually bring aboriginals into the workforce in the government, in attempts to increase its access for people with disabilities, its access for people who are nontraditional perhaps – I don't know if nontraditional is the right word – nontraditional employees for the Alberta government.

WCB has made some improvements. I think there always is a need for greater improvement in WCB. It's an area of great controversy. It so often is an organization that touches on people's lives when they are reduced from being productive citizens almost immediately, at least in the severe cases, to those who all of a sudden have no income and may have no prospects and, in the very difficult cases, go through endless appeals and difficulties with some of the caseworkers. Many, many of the caseworkers are very professional, very good, but you run into the odd ones, and somehow I don't know if there are all the proper safeguards in place to ensure that indeed all of the caseworkers are taking the best interests of the people who look to workers' compensation as their fallback. All workers, indeed, look to that in many, many occupations because they have to deal with it because there is no recourse to the courts. This is the nature of workers' compensation.

I've had some of the people in occupations come to me, again, to look at improvements in how workers' compensation affects them specifically, and I think my colleague from Edmonton-McClung will speak to that. I hope he has time to get up. One for sure is the extension of the period for myocardial infarction for firefighters past the 24 hours to at least a week. Another would be the extension of that to other emergency workers, specifically volunteer firefighters, who are often in exactly the same situations that professionals are, and certainly with police and emergency personnel and other personnel who are involved in this area.

The clear need to look, though, in this next year to try and ensure that we take care of some of our labour-market problems I think is paramount. There's going to be great and increased controversy as we look for ways to provide personnel for the oil sands. There is a very well established interprovincial labour mobility system in place that has actually been able to supply most of the projects to date. There continues to be unemployment in other provinces.

I would ask the minister to look at some of the successes in the department in the past with engineers, to look at perhaps expanding past the engineers and into some of the trades areas, to look at the Pacific Northwest as an area to have greater provincial mobility for workers. This could provide economic advantage not only to

Alberta but also to our neighbours in the northwest states and the other provinces and territories as well in Canada.

The nature of our labour market will see huge ups and downs as price fluctuations, as projects, and as the nature of the workforce even within those projects moves up and down. There are cycles even in a major oil sands plant where, for example, all the insulators will be hired at the end, and there will be none needed at the beginning, so you'll have big unemployment in the province if all those projects go at once and need their insulators all at once. The same goes often with welders and such.

3:30

You get interindustry movement. Conventional oil and gas will often take rig welders, who are also often in demand in the pipeline industry, which is also very related to conventional oil and gas. Quite often these rig welders will move into industrial welding and can do so quickly. It makes for stats that are sometimes difficult to understand. Those things should be brought into flow in terms of how we train people and how we bring immigrants into the country.

The steep employment curve in conventional oil and gas – and it's not exactly a curve. It's been a cliff as tens of thousands of wells have been drilled in Alberta. This steep cliff is something that will cause some difficulty in the future because once all of those are drilled and the numbers for drilling drops off, suddenly we don't need all those people.

The Chair: Does the hon. minister wish to respond?

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I would like to thank the hon. member for his professionalism. As my critic he always handles it very professionally and is always interested in making it better for the employees out there. So I thank you for that and also thank you for some of the recommendations you've made.

To start with, you mentioned the labour force strategy, the short- and long-term, the 10-year strategy we're developing, and you're thinking of, you know, the positive sides on that. I would also hope that as the process moves forward, you would help us whenever you can participate in the process because I'm sure that you have some expertise in certain areas that we may not, and we sure can use your assistance.

You are right; there are real problems in identifying labour needs. I think it's something that probably should have started years ago, but industry and training institutions were doing their own assessments and determinations as to what jobs may become available and the types of training programs that may be developed in order to provide the labour force that was needed.

You are right; the oil sands industry is going to continue to provide thousands of jobs in the next 10 years by all indications. In fact, I think that within 10 years or less there will be over 400,000 jobs developed, and by all indications we may be able to provide, you know, 300,000. That would be a shortage of at least 100,000 employees. So, yes, we have to do a lot of work to ensure that we do meet the needs.

One other that you mentioned that's really important is the Youth Connections itself and some of the decreases in expenditures in that and also, of course, the decrease in employment disabilities and the STEP program not being fully utilized. I would suspect that the reason for that is the competition from the private industry, which possibly pays more. STEP has to pay minimum wage. Competition from the private industry probably hires a lot of these youth that used to work through STEP programs. On one side, it's positive. On the other hand, as long as we don't reduce the STEP program to

the point where it's not there anymore if the economy goes down. It's always hard to bring back programs. So we'll have to make sure that we do proper marketing, maybe more marketing in the STEP program to ensure that it's fully utilized. On the side of STEP for aboriginal communities or aboriginal youth, again, I know that's a real challenge, and we will definitely do more work on that.

One area you mentioned also, which is very important, is the income support and the lack of increase in providing more dollars for those people that are not expected to work. For the benefit of the members here and the public I'd just like to explain what has happened in the area of welfare reforms and how we're where we're at today because it is very, very critical.

Back in '92-93, when our Premier took over and started restructuring government, I was assigned as the minister of family and social services and aboriginal affairs. At the time the welfare caseload was about 97,000 cases, and 80 per cent of the people on the system were single people and couples without children, that were ready to go to work. They were using up most of the dollars that the high-needs area needed, like persons with developmental disabilities, aboriginal people, and also, of course, children's services, who were under this department. Our plan with the restructuring was to get those 80 per cent back into the workforce as quickly as possible through training. Today you see the welfare caseload down to around 25,000 cases. Only 12,000 of those are expected to work. The other 12,000 or so are not expected to work, and we need to continue looking at how we may assist those. It may be wise for some families to move into the AISH program because I think AISH may provide them more money and more benefits than being on Alberta Works. So we're looking at that very closely.

What has happened since the restructuring started in 1993 is that the original target was laid out to have children's services with its own separate ministry, and as part of the reforms, of course, today you see the hon. Children's Services minister, sitting next to me here, with a pretty large budget. The program I think is going well because those dollars are now concentrated on families and children. At one time those dollars were used by single people and couples without children, sitting on the system. The other part, of course, is the aboriginal section of the original department. Again, there is a minister of aboriginal affairs now, whose sole responsibility is to work with aboriginal people. The third one, of course, is persons with developmental disabilities, which now has its own ministry, also, with its own budget, concentrating on expending those dollars in those high-needs, targeted areas.

So I think that the social reforms worked very well because the money now is used by the high-needs area. That was the original plan back in '92-93, and I think it's worked very well. What we need to do now is monitor very closely for those 12,000 or so that are not expected to work. How can we further assist those people?

Another area that you mentioned was the professions and occupations. The veterinarians were one you mentioned that had a concern. The proposed bill, of course, in that particular area was pulled and, therefore, will not go ahead at this time. The other one you mentioned, of course, was the engineers and engineering technologists. We've been working with those two groups. Both did a presentation to the standing policy committee. There is a letter going out from our department to both of those organizations, suggesting as to how they may resolve the disagreement they have.

Of course, the other that you mentioned, which is very important again – and thanks for all of those recommendations – is the issue of the Labour Relations Board and its neutrality. We'll definitely have a serious look at that.

3:40

The PAO in relation to hiring more aboriginal youth in government. We definitely need to do a lot of work on that. I do get phone

calls from people asking me: how do I get on to be a government employee? I think we need to look at the field level mainly as to: how does a person, say in Athabasca, access a government job? There are challenges, and I think we can always improve that.

The Workers' Compensation Board. I would like to thank you for your comments. Yes, I think they've made improvements. The approval process, to start with, I think has improved quite a bit. Of course, the appeals process and the timeline it's taking to do appeals and stuff like that I think has also improved. I'd like to thank you for your positive comments on that. Of course, we'll continue monitoring the workers' compensation very closely in relation to firefighters, police, and other volunteers, and you can be assured that we will make adjustments in that particular area as required. Again, I could use your help in that area.

The other one, of course, is the mobility of workers not only within Alberta but also across Canada and maybe even into the U.S. You mentioned the northwest region, if that is something that we need to look at.

The last one you mentioned before the clock rang was the issue of immigrants and the need to possibly have more immigrant workers in Alberta. Of course, I am in charge of the Alberta immigration policy, which we announced last fall. Basically, that policy is designed to market Alberta. In the past what happened is that we worked with the federal government under their immigration policy. In fact, if an employer wanted to hire an employee through either the temporary foreign workers or through direct immigration, they had to go through the federal government.

As you're aware, the federal government's policies in the past have been to bring at least 250,000 people into Canada. The problem with that is that most of the people settled in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec, and a smaller percentage settled in areas like Alberta. In fact, through the normal immigration process, out of 250,000 I think that we got 16,000 last year, and 3,000 of those moved back to larger centres. The other part is that 50 per cent of the people that came through the immigration were professional people, and only 5 per cent were technical trades, so we need to make some adjustments there.

Now, I haven't met with the new immigration minister yet. I am in the process of setting up a meeting to try to find out what their policy is going to be and how we may improve the process. Through Economic Development, who is a partner in our immigration policy along with the Minister of Advanced Education and the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations, we are putting a process together that will actually go out and market Alberta. I won't be doing that; the Economic Development minister will. Once we go out and market Alberta and convince the individuals to come to Alberta, then what we'll have to do is ensure that the federal government's approval processes are in place to deal with them as rapidly as possible so that they can come here.

Another one, of course, that I've been working on is with an individual restaurant owner, in fact in Edmonton here, where they said, yes, we can bring family members that want to come here and work, but the criteria you have to set up as far as giving them a stable employee for a year was not there. In other words, they could spend money, bring an employee into Alberta, and the employee could leave immediately and go somewhere else. They're making some good suggestions as to how we could allow companies like that to bring people in, work, and stay at least maybe a year on the job before they can move on to another job. I think that's another thing we need to look at, more flexibility in that area.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In 20 minutes I'm sure we can cover quite a large territory.

Mr. Cardinal: We need your help.

Mr. Martin: Oh, I know that. I know that, yes, and you're about to get it.

Mr. Chairman, I want to first of all talk, not for a long time, about the labour laws in this province and, as we have an overheated economy, to try to find some balance in terms of the employers and the employees. Of course, we will come back, first of all, to what we know about some very terrible strikes that have occurred. The most recent one was, of course, at Tyson, where you had an antilabour employer that was bound and determined on a first contract to get rid of the union. The minister and I have had this conversation, and I would hope that he would not rule this out. Finally, the union was able to win there, and they did establish a contract, and they're now settled in that particular union, with Tyson being famous throughout the world for being antilabour, sort of Arkansas first laws.

The point that I would make to the minister is that these things come and go, and as surely as night follows day, there'll be another confrontation if we do not have first contract arbitration. It seems to be working well in all the other provinces except three, especially the major provinces that have large labour forces. I think, Mr. Chairman, that first contract arbitration forces both sides to negotiate. Otherwise, somebody else is going to come in with arbitration that one or the other may not like or both of them may not like. So I think that is a very important situation. I know the minister said previously that they would look at it. When I asked him questions, he said: stay tuned. So I'm staying tuned, but a reminder that we think this is absolutely crucial.

Now, I believe that in this province we have the most unfair labour laws, you know, in the country. I know that they like to say "the world," well, maybe the most unfair labour laws in the world or the universe because that seems to be what the government talks about all the time. But, Mr. Chairman, that in particular should be, I think, a no-brainer. Nobody wants to go through the Tyson thing again, I don't think, employers or employees, if they have common sense and want some way to do it. We certainly don't have to open up the whole labour code to do that. I would hope – and I will keep putting pressure on the minister – that he begins to look at that.

I know it's not going to happen with this particular government, but if I had my druthers, I'd do as other provinces have done. When you see these particular strikes – and I go back to the Gainers strike in the 80s where you had replacement workers walking across the picket lines – that leads to a very dangerous situation, Mr. Chairman. At some point I would hope that we would look at banning replacement workers because I think strikes would be settled a lot quicker.

The only other thing that I want to talk about in the labour laws that did come up, too, that I think we should look at comes back to what the hon. members talked about: the Labour Relations Board. There is a perception – and we must be clear about this perception – that it's unfair, that the Labour Relations Board is always going to come on the side of management. I think the most recent example of that was in the Finning situation. Well, we had the example going back with health care.

I remember being here in the Assembly very early on where there were the 24-hour unions, where companies could get out of union contracts by setting up spinoff unions for 24 hours. That was a major debate. I really worry about that tendency. It again deals with our friends CLAC. It seems that they are involved here all the time. The Labour Relations Board ruled, I think, correctly on Finning and

then reversed themselves with the bigger one, where you can set up subsidiaries as they did in Finning, where one company can say: well, we still own it, but we can go across the street or down the way a couple of blocks and set up another subsidiary, and therefore we don't have to belong to that same union. I think this is a very bad tendency that major corporations could start to do. Why did the Labour Relations Board rule that they still had union rights or successor rights to begin with and then turn it over? I think it's those types of decisions that always seem to go against labour that have people bothered. If people don't trust sort of the quasi-judicial boards set up and they believe that they're one-sided – and Finning was a good example – then you're not going to get the sort of co-operation that we need in this overheated economy.

3:50

I would suggest, Mr. Chairman, if we could begin to look – I hesitate to open up the labour laws, though, with this government because it could get worse for labour. I think those are really absolutely crucial things if there's to be some semblance of fairness. I think it makes good economic sense to have that fairness, too, as we're trying to bring skilled employees in. They want some fairness in the workplace, so I would suggest to the minister that he at least take a look at these sorts of things. Those are sort of big issues. At the very minimum I think that if the minister said that he was going to keep looking at first contract arbitration, that would at least be a start. I, for one, would applaud him over on this side if all of a sudden we were to see that.

Now, just moving along, another area in labour that doesn't fall in the labour code but is a real irritant is this division 8 with Horizon. Mr. Chairman, it bothers me that we can have this sort of act. I know it was used in the past. I believe it has been there in the tar sands. The minister can correct me, but it has probably been in the books for 30 years or so, but it was never used the same way it was used just recently to deal with the CNRL project. For the first time in 30 years the government is allowing an oil sands project to bypass normal collective bargaining with the construction trades, which guarantees working conditions, wages, and benefits for skilled tradespeople. In one case I know it has to do with overtime, I think going from double time to time and a half.

Mr. Chairman, again, I suggest that if we want to have labour peace, there has to be some fairness. I can't believe that with this other union, the union of convenience for employers, CLAC, waiting to be there all the time, this is fair. I would suggest that we need skilled tradesmen. We really do. We need to bring them in from other parts of Canada. We need to do all the things that the Member for Edmonton-Manning was talking about in terms of training. But if you have labour laws that people perceive as unfair, it's going to be very hard to get this.

Now, I know that this is not part of the labour code, but I doubt that there would be anywhere else that I am aware of in Canada that would ever have a section 8, this sort of bill, and for it to be used. I think that we'll regret that in the future. I'd hope that the minister would never use that again and would do something about getting good bargaining for us, getting good collective agreements. The building trades in the province have bent over backwards in the past to be co-operative on major projects, and, Mr. Chairman, I'm sure they would do it again, but you can't do it this way. You can't do it this way. Again, these corporations aren't exactly poverty stricken. They can afford to pay a decent wage. The Alberta advantage has to be there not only for the companies but for the employees.

I want to move from labour laws, though, into sort of the employment standards debate. I know that there's been a review. I think, from my understanding of my conversations with the minister, that

we're still under review and that there won't be any announcements until next spring, perhaps, but I would like to throw out some things.

I was shocked, and maybe the minister was too, and I would like him to comment about the compassionate leave. It seems that, Mr. Chairman, we're the only province that doesn't have compassionate leave for people who are looking after relatives that are I guess dying. They can't take time off. There's no such thing as compassionate leave. This is certainly not an Alberta advantage that I think we can be proud of. I would ask the minister for his thoughts on that.

As I understand it, compassionate leave works much the same as pregnancy and parental leave. A person is allowed to return to the same job after time away. I'm told that workers in Quebec and Saskatchewan can receive up to 12 weeks of compassionate leave. The Liberal government in B.C. has changed its employment standards; it gives eight weeks. Of course the federal government has it. So I'd like to ask the minister if that's part of the review for employment standards. If not, it should be, I think.

The other comments I want to make on this are on child labour, Mr. Chairman. In this overheated economy we can't take 12-year-old kids. It's time for them to be kids. If the parents need money, that's a different issue. That should not be part of the employment standards. I would hope – again, I know the minister has made comments about it – that we look at this whole situation of child labour. I think it's wrong. I think it can lead to safety concerns. I think there are all sorts of problems. Surely employers in the fast-food industry or wherever they are can afford to do better than that.

That leads me to – and I just have one question, and I'm not sure the answer to this that minister can allude to – the employment standards if we're looking at night work. I remember in Calgary a few years ago a young woman was killed at work. Are we reviewing that whole situation? I know it happened under a federal act in Ottawa recently. Is that being reviewed, and are the standards there for people that happen to work alone at night? It's a very dangerous situation in cities that are growing. They're not the same cities that they used to be. We know that those things are there. So I'd ask the minister if that's part of the review.

The other part of the review, Mr. Chairman, that we really have to look at is the whole idea of farm workers having no employment standards. Now, nobody is suggesting that people who work on a farm are those one or two people that are there periodically. We're not talking about this. We have a growing agribusiness in this province, and for an agribusiness to not even have to go by minimum employment standards, to me, is absolutely ridiculous.

I use the example – and I've used it with the minister before – of the most recent strike at Tyson, UFCW. On the one side of the road you had people fighting, admittedly, to keep a labour union, fighting for a labour union; you had people with the same company right across the road that didn't even have employment standards. Now, does that make any sense at all? Surely, we've got to get away from this idea.

If it's a family farm, we could say one or two employees or whatever. But we have a growing agribusiness, and surely, Mr. Chairman, they should be part of the labour code. I think that's a no-brainer. If you're talking to people – you have to convince the others – talk to them about Tyson: one, a labour union; across the street, employees without even employment standards. I think that says it all. So I would hope that that would be part of this review, and I'd look forward to it.

Mr. Chairman, the other area I want to talk briefly about – there's a lot we could talk about with the WCB, but we don't have that amount of time – is the Appeals Commission. The minister had some interest in that. We keep getting more and more calls into our

constituency office. I don't think I'm speaking for anybody here. The WCB and the Appeals Commission take a lot of our time. We've increased the staff over there, but there are still six months delay on the Appeals Commission. Justice delayed that long is justice denied. Now, there are other problems with the Appeals Commission about who they're hiring, and the minister knows that a lot of them are coming right from the WCB. Some people believe that there is still that culture of denial there. There seems to be a preoccupation with people moving from one step into the other. Surely we can do better with the Appeals Commission in terms of the delays, and I wonder if the minister can give us an update on what's happening there. Why are we increasing employees from 33 to 50, yet the length of appeals is still longer and longer. Perhaps he could talk to us about that.

4:00

In the remaining time I just want to quickly turn to Alberta Works. The minister has alluded to this. It's nice, yes, that there was a 5 per cent increase, but I would suggest that in this day and age, especially if you live in the major cities – I think I have figures here that if you have one child and yourself, you'd make 900 and some dollars. I would just ask any Member of the Legislative Assembly if they could live on that. The minister has alluded that the people that he wanted are not there now. I think he said that roughly half of the 25,000 are people that can't work and never will be able to work, and a lot of those people are falling through the cracks. I mention that because I've talked to the minister before about the Winspear fund, a private fund that's really picking up this sort of work.

Just let me give the minister two or three examples here of how these people are falling through the cracks and are having to go to people like Winspear. It's nice that they do it, but it shouldn't be their responsibility. They have other things to do. Just a couple of examples, and these are the type of people that I think the minister wants to help.

Here's a disabled student who registered for courses at Concordia College, a grant of \$400 that they handed out. This young woman is a student at Concordia College. She was registered in a career development program but was unable to work during the summer break due to health problems. She had to make a deposit to secure her courses for the next term when her student loan would kick in. Income supports would not pay for this. Now, this is a person that is trying to pull herself up, if you like, and get to work. Surely, that's what we would want them to do. That's the type of things that are happening. Even the 5 per cent increase is not going to deal with this.

Here's another one. A young woman on income support wanted to take courses at Olds College. This young woman was on income support as an unemployable client. She was registered in a career development program but was unable to work during the summer break. Her counsellor felt that the Olds program would be useful to her training program and would help her explore future job options. It would be a one-time occurrence. Income support would not cover that. Again, precisely, Mr. Minister, the type of people that you want to help, trying to help themselves but not getting that little extra.

Another one here: a grandmother with the custody of grandchildren needed to relocate. They gave her a grant of \$700. This woman was married for many years and raised four children. She has legal custody of her grandchildren. Her husband became involved with addictions, and she left him. She had found accommodations and paid the damage deposit. She works for \$7.50 an hour. Social assistance would not help her because her income exceeds \$750 per month. She was in need of assistance to pay the

first month's rent and to help pay for the groceries until her next paycheque as she had used her available money to pay the damage deposit. Again, a person trying to help herself, Mr. Chairman.

Finally, one other one: a grant of \$500. This woman was on income support of \$635 per month. Her rent was \$600. So she's meeting her rent costs but not eating properly. It was not taking care of her personal needs. She was malnourished and very depressed. So her social worker was working to get her support increased and help her find work. These are surely the types of people that we should be helping. These are people trying to help themselves, Mr. Chairman, and I think we really need to take a look at that.

Let me just conclude. The minister talked about the labour review. Correct me if I'm wrong. I thought he said that they would be coming back with this by the fall. I would hope that one of the things he would look at – and I only have 20 seconds here – would be with the Minister of Education. If we're going to deal with people, that dropout rate is one of the major concerns that we're going to have in a labour review in this province.

I think that I'm near the end of my time. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Those are good comments, of course. I know that the hon. member and I have worked together on issues like this for, I guess, over 10 years now, maybe longer. We do share similar concerns about the needs of people that are not expected to work, or the high-needs area of our public out there.

The first area he mentioned was in relation to the first contract arbitration. Yes, that is an important area, and we've discussed it back and forth. I've asked my department to pull all the other contracts that are in place. The last one I was reviewing – and the member and I discussed it – is the B.C. model. Yes, I intend to look at these models, and if there's anything that would be suitable for Alberta, of course, I'd have to take it through the process to start with: the standing policy committee, cabinet, full caucus, and then legislation if that is what's required.

When you look at the labour relations issue itself in Alberta, we do quite well. You know, there are, I believe, about 1,200 or so collective agreements; 99.4 per cent of the collective agreements were agreed upon without any major labour disruption. It's very unfortunate that the Lakeside Packers situation went the way it did because everyone gets hurt when that happens: the workers, the community, the industry also. I did tour that plant. Some improvements have been made; no doubt, more will be made. The local union member, of course, was there with us, and I gave him my card along with my cell number where he can phone me any time, 24 hours a day. If he thinks as a local union representative that there is something wrong, that the company is not living up to their commitments, he would call me immediately, and I would go down there immediately to sit down again with the local union rep and also the manager from the company. So those doors are open, and I hope that he does call me if there's a problem. You know, if you're talking to them – I'm sure they call sometimes – make sure you let us know because I have no problem going there.

At this time they feel that things are improving and that, you know, the company is doing some changes. I guess that, unfortunately, maybe it took some form of a strike to improve the situation. If that's what it did, then that's good. Hopefully, we shouldn't have to have a strike to improve working situations in industry.

The other item you mentioned, of course, is division 8. As you're aware, that was used a number of times in Alberta in other locations

before. At this time because there is a legal challenge filed already, I won't comment on it here. But I will ask my staff to look at the Blues and *Hansard* and give you whatever comment we can within our rights without getting in trouble with the law. So I promise you that we will do that.

The employment standards, of course, as you're aware, are under review. You know, the process is under way, and definitely compassionate care is being considered as part of the review. The review, no doubt, will include the youth workers you mentioned and the night workers, et cetera. So far the government has received input from about 5,500 Albertans during the public consultation process. That also involved about 750 employers. We are currently analyzing all of the feedback we've received to date from the discussion guides and also the telephone surveys.

4:10

There are a number of employment standards that require further consideration. We anticipate that there will be follow-up with affected stakeholders on technical aspects of the code, and we are in the process of planning these consultation sessions. It's been 18 years since the last employment standards review. That's a long time. When the economy is booming like it is in Alberta, it's a long time. We intend to finish the process by March of '07, so hopefully, you know, if there's any legislative changes that are going to be required, we can do them at that time. It will also deal with the youth workers, of course, in the whole process.

The other issue you mentioned is the issue of farm workers. We've talked about that issue before. When you're talking about the farm operations themselves, farming is a very, very important industry in Alberta. A lot of farmers are struggling at this time. With the way things are set up, to implement new standards or conditions would probably create further hardship for the agriculture industry itself in Alberta. The hon. member and I have discussed the issue of the cookie factory, for example. Well, that might be a little different situation than the actual farm operation. It's something that, again, we'll review further and maybe drop you a note.

The Workers' Compensation Board, of course, is an independent body. We just have legislation. It's owned and operated by the companies themselves that pay into the compensation fund. Again, I will review *Hansard* and get them to respond directly to you, with copies of letters to myself. If there is anything we can do to improve the situation, of course, we'll continue working on that. That is our target: to ensure that when someone gets hurt, the application is processed as quickly as possible. I think that that's improved drastically because I remember that one time it took so long that the people had to go on welfare so that they could continue to meet their financial obligations and then had to pay back the system. That's not there anymore. It doesn't take that long now to approve a package, so that's a step in the right direction. I think that the backlog of the appeals process is also improving, but it can be better. You can be assured that whatever we can do, we'll continue working with the board and their staff to make it better.

The last item you mentioned, of course, is the 12,000 or so people we have that are not expected to work. Yes, I agree that we'll have to continue monitoring that situation closely and looking at how we may assist that particular group of people.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I've just got a few items that I would like to discuss to get some clarity on from the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. I guess, first and

foremost, I must compliment his staff for their diligence. Every time the staff from my offices phone him, they get back to us right away and certainly help us. Even though we have a flamboyant economy, we still have some issues in labour.

I guess I'm wondering about moving ahead on Alberta Works. What happens sometimes with some of the people that are caught in this position where they're trying to better themselves to move on so they become more self-sufficient is if they get their wages up just a bit, then there's a clawback or they are unable to get health benefits. So I would hope that what we would do for these people that are trying is that we would take a more collaborative approach to work with them.

Then on the aspect of your number one core business. As I review that and think about it, I know that, you know, it's very positive, and I appreciate that. I know that we're working on it. Alberta has a productive workforce that meets the needs of the economy today and into the future, but I guess what I'm really looking at now, being that labour is short in my region – and it's not only the skilled. We really need some help in some of the hotels and fast foods, where a lot of them now are willing to set up accommodations and everything else to have them come in and help them move along. So I'm just wondering how the minister is working on that issue with the federal government. I realize that it's not his portfolio, immigration, but I'm sure that he's working with Economic Development, too, to make sure that we get these people in.

Then, I guess, in co-operation with the aspect of the Minister of Advanced Education, are we enticing and working with some of the people on Alberta Works to try and move them into a trade? That is going to be another area that is going to make it awful hard on our regions now because I know a lot of our trade people are getting to the age of retirement.

One other area that I was wondering about too: the co-operation and the understanding we need with a lot of parents now, where their children are of the age that they don't need as much looking after. I know that we worked with the Yellowhead regional consortium to get some money out of the Advanced Education department to move forward to have a nursing program in our region. Therefore, they live in the area, so then they don't have to travel that far for their practicum, yet they can work in the area. So I'm just wondering if we're working with Advanced Education to look at some of these because we have a lot of people that with a little bit of enticement and that, we can get some of these people back in the workforce.

The other thing I want to thank the minister for is the aspect of the co-operation that we get in some of my aboriginal communities, especially with the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation in Grande Cache, where they are working with the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development on partnerships with the industry. So we've been able to move along on that aspect too.

The bottom line is: what I'm really looking for is help on the aspect of being able to look at the labour force we have now and where we can involve other people in the area. How are we campaigning to get that? I mean, when you look at your number one goal, that's where we need to move. I know that we've got competent staff in the region, but I think we need some stronger direction so that we can move that so that we can get more people in the workforce to help these different industries. It's getting to dire straits now. You're going through the major communities now. We've got so many people working in bush camps. Well, when you come into the local towns of Edson, Hinton, Jasper, Grande Cache, a lot of the facilities that have been open 24 hours now are closed because they can't get staff.

So if the minister can sort of give me some insight on what he's trying to do with our other departments and with the federal

government to try and alleviate and bring on more people that we can get into the workforce.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

4:20

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just very briefly I'll answer some of the questions, but some we'll do in writing. I'd just like to thank you for your concerns and your positive comments and good suggestions because it is a critical area. I think your area probably faces the same problems or the same challenges that most jurisdictions in Alberta are facing. You know, when you go back 15 years, it was completely the opposite. There were no jobs or very few jobs around. Today we are faced with too many jobs and not enough people, so I'd rather have the problem we have today because it's something that's positive, and it's something that I think we can handle.

You mentioned the Alberta Works and some of the policies we have in place in relation to clawbacks. Most of our programs are designed to encourage people to get back into the workforce. I'll get my department to look into that specific area of yours to find out if we are administering that office differently than any other office because we operate with just the opposite attitude. We'll do almost anything within our policies to ensure that transition takes place when people are ready to get back into the workforce. So, you know, I promise you that.

Of course, you mentioned the labour shortages, especially in hotels and the fast-food industry. Again, that's a challenge we have across Alberta. I think the labour force strategy, the 10-year strategy we are developing, will deal with both short- and long-term strategies.

We have to look at all the areas he mentioned, including immigration and the First Nations, and I'll give you an example. In Canada there are about 200,000 First Nations youth between 15 and 25 years old that could be trained and could be put back into the workforce. I am arranging a meeting with the federal minister of Indian affairs right now to talk about a couple of things: off-reserve housing for one, and the other one, of course, is the labour force strategy and labour problems we have. For the 200,000 youth that are there now, some on reserves, the unemployment is very high. It could run 70 to 80 per cent or 90 per cent, yet the industries are next door.

Where we've made changes and we've proven that when you do social policy changes like we have in Alberta, the unemployment rate of First Nations off the reserve is only 9 per cent. Yet if you go to a reserve next door, it's 80 to 90 per cent, so there is something wrong. What I believe is wrong – and this is what I'll be talking to the minister of Indian affairs about: to look at changing the social and economic policies on the reserves like we did in Alberta.

You can see. When you go back to '92-93, which I mentioned earlier, the welfare caseload was 97,000, a \$1.7 billion budget, 5,400 staff. We had welfare offices all over the place, and 80 per cent of the dollars at the time were being used by single people and couples without children that were ready to go to work.

You mentioned assisting people to get back into the workforce. I think Alberta has done well because the caseload today in Alberta – we have no welfare offices, we have 59 employment centres and 19 co-locations with the federal government, and the caseload of employables and trainables is almost nil. So they are back into the workforce. A lot went through training programs.

It's not only my department that does it. Advanced Education was heavily involved in it right off the bat. In fact, we used to put through sometimes 35,000 individuals that were on assistance at one

time through training programs, and they've become independent and self-sufficient. So I think that portion as far as the opportunity to train more people that are on assistance is limited because I think most of them have gone back into the workforce. But we will continue working with the federal government, this time in relation to the aboriginal issues with the federal minister.

The other person, of course, we need to work with is on the issue of immigration. I won't repeat myself because I already mentioned the processes we have in place in relation to immigration.

One area I may not have mentioned was the issue of individuals – for example, if a restaurant owner, say, in Edson wanted to bring a member, say, from a foreign country to come and work for them, the policy that we have presently is that, yes, they can come and work. But as soon as the employee gets settled in with housing, health care, and everything else, they could leave that employer and go to another employer. Those are some of the things I think we need to look at to ensure that there is some protection for those people that can find employees in other countries and bring them down here. They cover all the costs, et cetera, et cetera.

So, again, thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few points here. First of all, I'd like to compliment the minister on being in the right area and being sensitive to the people that he serves in his department. I think it's commendable. I also would like to commend him on being open and able to listen to comments and give some reply.

Let me just comment first of all, then, that if I understand the mission of the department, it is to assist and support the clients that he deals with, the people he deals with. I was wondering if he would just tell us or answer the question of how the new approach to daycare will affect the clients that he works with. I'd be very interested. I think there are a fair number – and I may be wrong about this, and he'll correct me – of single women with children. I just wonder what the implication is there for them in terms of the support service you offer them.

The other thing I'd like to talk about just briefly is job placement and career development. The thing I'm wondering about here – and maybe you want to comment – is the training of your staff. I've listened to you answer questions, and you're suggesting that a lot of the staff are being put back into careers, vocational. The implication is that you're looking at vocational counselling, career development, and that kind of thing. So maybe you could tell me about your staff's background because that intrigues me. Do they have counselling training that you're looking for? Do they have experience in testing, for example? Do they have experience in the world of work? That kind of thing. I'm just trying to get a feel for that kind of thing.

The other question I'd like to ask you – and I'm rushing quickly here – is to comment on the mechanisms you use in the department to interface with business: what kinds of things come about and the specific processes you may use for that. I'd be interested in knowing that.

The question, again, that I'd just mention that I'd like to also ask you is on youth employment. I noticed – and I'm not sure, Mr. Chairman, if I'm allowed to use the name of the company. Anyway, I noticed, getting coffee the last two or three weeks, that some young people are able to handle it very well, and for some people I think it's over their head. I think the member from the third party mentioned today child labour. What I'm wondering is if there isn't some way of doing work exploration and giving kids of that nature

– you may want to use some summer initiative. You may want to do it with other departments of government. I can think of – what's it called? – the ecology corps that they trained. I'm thinking more about a vocational setting and training for students that may be open, to be mature enough to go into these projects with small business. I think that would enhance the summer population, too, to be able to do something productive. Again, that takes money, and you know more about where you can get that kind of thing. But I think there's a need for that.

The other aspect I think, Mr. Minister – and it's a dream of mine – is that we look at the Edmonton region to develop what I'd call an exploratory centre for careers. I know that now we don't have the large vocational schools anymore, but I'm wondering if industry and government could meet and look at what I'd call an exploration centre so that people that you're dealing with and also some of our people that may go into apprenticeship programs in the schools could go in and get an experienced level of exploring what they may want to do in the future and meet people from industries. Maybe even like a career fair concept of some type.

4:30

Now, I guess apprenticeship is one other thing that I'd like to mention. I'm not sure exactly, again, how your department, sir, interfaces with schools, but I think that there's a lot more we could be doing in that area of schools, especially for kids that are not going to be in the academic stream. I think that we have to first of all – and this is not your area – have good career counsellors in our schools. In many of our schools that's lacking, and hopefully we'll see some change in that. I think there's a whole need to work with disadvantaged students in schools and make sure that they have access to some of the things that you talked about earlier.

I would just mention quickly one other comment. I don't know if this is the forum to do this, but I'll just mention it. One of my constituents was offered a job in your department, sir. Unfortunately, at the eleventh hour, after quitting her job with the city of Edmonton and then receiving a letter from your department that she had a job, about a week before she was to report, she was told that she didn't have the job that she was going to get. She didn't have it any longer. Now, I haven't heard from her lately. I'm just suggesting that in personnel practices, I think it's very important that there's a sensitivity here. This particular lady that I'm talking about was a single mother with a child, and maybe she had some experiences in her life that I don't know about. Maybe I could eventually come and see you privately when I hear from her and see how she's doing.

So I'll just leave those comments with you, sir, and hopefully I can hear a few of your comments. Thank you very much, and keep up the good work. I appreciate it.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much for your positive comments and compliments and, of course, the continued good working relationship between us. I appreciate that.

You mentioned the new approach to daycare and what impact that may have on our programs. Of course, what we do is that, number one, we don't claw back. If there's additional money provided to individuals under this program, we'll not be clawing back the money. In addition to that, we will monitor the situation very closely and determine what impact it has, if any. If it's a negative impact, then we'll have to look at a policy change. I don't mind doing that because that is a high-needs area. You know, both the daycare and also the day home concept works quite well because a lot of families use the day homes.

In relation to training of staff, from social workers to career counsellors, you're exactly right. It's a good point because it's not

mentioned very often. When we started back in '92-93 to reform the welfare system, we had 5,400 staff. A lot of the staff were trained social workers, and their role was to try and counsel individuals. In most cases the only time they had, because of caseloads, was to provide financial support. These were vouchers or welfare cheques. When we started reforming the system, one of the concerns that staff had – they said: “Yes, we can put people back into the workforce. Yes, we can reduce the number of clients we have, the number of files we have. But what happens to our job?” In '92-93 I promised: “Yes, years down the road you’re going to be a career counsellor, a job placement officer. Most of the clients you’ll be dealing with will be placed in jobs or training programs, and we’ll only provide the social supports that are necessary to ensure that people become independent and self-sufficient.” That’s exactly what happened. Now most of our people are trained career counsellors, and 85 per cent of the people, in fact, that come to our offices in Edmonton here are with the general public. Only a small percentage have some financial or social support programs.

So, yes, the criteria have changed. People are now career counsellors, job placement officers. Placement officers even do follow-up on a job. We’ve gone that far, even, for the hard-core cases. I can tell you one thing: the clients are much happier. Nobody wants to be on welfare. We’ve almost eliminated welfare in Alberta. Also, the staff: the staff are more positive when they see positive results, and I find the staff are a lot happier. That is one of the reasons, also, that I came back to this department. I purposely asked our Premier to bring me back here because I had some concerns in caucus, you know: you have no welfare caseload, but you’re asking for \$700 million to operate the department. My argument is: look, it takes all that money to keep people in transition to the workforce rather than getting back on the welfare caseload.

The other promise I made is to ensure that their jobs are protected as career counsellors, job placement officers, et cetera, et cetera, instead of handing out welfare cheques and vouchers. So I think that’s been really, really positive.

As far as exploratory centres for careers, that’s a good point. We need to do a lot more of that. NAIT has a number of programs right now where they go out into various areas to be exposed to welding, carpentry, and different programs. These are mobile units.

One of the things that’s popped up lately – and you’re exactly right on it – is the issue of vocational schools. Where the schools at one time had equipment for mechanics, equipment for welders, carpentry, cooking, and a number of other programs, for some reason – I don’t know what the reason is – a lot of those have closed in a number of areas. I don’t know if it’s finances or what, but it’s something I think we need to activate because when you look at the apprenticeship program, although the apprenticeship program is not under my department, the average age of a journeyman in Canada is about 51 years old. [interjection] Yeah, that’s right. Almost as old as me.

The average age of a person completing a four-year program to be a journeyman is 26 years old, yet if you go to a school in Athabasca in my constituency or Lac La Biche, that region, over 60 per cent of the students want to take technical trades. Why are we not, you know – if a person knows at grade 10 that they want to be a journeyman carpenter, why is it taking so long? Why is it taking from grade 10 until a person is 26 years old to get their first ticket? So we definitely need to improve that area.

The other area that was important and he mentioned, of course, is youth employment and stuff. That is a very sensitive area. The way we have it set up right now, of course, is that the employer and the family have to agree that the person can be employed in certain jobs. In fact, there has to be an agreement signed by the parent and also

the employer, and a copy of that comes to our department. If there is a complaint, then we’ll investigate. In fact, sometimes we’ll investigate without a complaint and have a look and see how things are going.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to participate in this budget debate on Human Resources and Employment. This ministry, as was mentioned more than once, is quite an important ministry, and its work is greatly appreciated by everyone in this House and the people that its services affect.

4:40

If you look at departments under this minister like Alberta Works, including employment training services, income support services, child support services, and health benefits, more notably the Alberta Blue Cross drug benefit list and the drug benefit supplement – and I can probably talk at length about that because I’m a pharmacist, as you know, but I won’t. Employment standards is another area, and workplace health and safety, immigration, labour relations, professions and occupations, labour market information for businesses, and all that stuff. Under the purview of this minister you also get certain boards: Alberta Labour Relations Board, as was mentioned, the personnel administration office, the PAO, Workers’ Compensation Board, and the Appeals Commission through the Workers’ Compensation Board. So it’s really quite an extensive and far-reaching department, if you will.

[Reverend Abbott in the chair]

I have to say that this whole business around Human Resources and Employment and the work that this ministry does is interesting to me. Having said that, I also find it sometimes difficult to fully comprehend. Honestly here, I’m trying to fully understand the ins and outs of this ministry, especially when it comes to programs that are geared toward the needy, the sick, disenfranchised, or disabled. Of course, what adds to the confusion sometimes from a layman’s standpoint, somebody who is new to this House, are situations or instances where one might compare programs under the purview of this minister to similar programs or others, like programs that are under, for example, the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, who in turn shares some of her responsibility with the minister of health. So you get this bit here, that bit there type of situation.

In light of recent cabinet changes and cabinet growth I actually looked at this this morning, and I’m, like: why don’t we consolidate these programs from all these different ministries into one central area? If you’re a person who is in need of care or you’re a person who needs to be looked after or cared for, there is one department. We can maybe rename the Department of Seniors and Community Supports to the department of seniors and community services and just have it as one collective agency that looks after all of these sort of holistically.

Some of those who need AISH are also afflicted with disability, and some of them are also trying to be trained and to get back to work, so it might be one person seeking support or seeking help from three different departments. Why not have it in one central area, providing that service collectively or holistically? This is definitely one of the areas that my colleague from Edmonton-Manning is looking at as the Official Opposition critic, you know, and it’s hopefully going to be part of our next platform in the next election.

Part of my intrigue again, Mr. Chairman, also stems from some work I did personally and town hall meetings that I hosted together with my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie. Under the leadership and guidance of our honourable and esteemed colleague from Edmonton-Manning we held meetings in Edmonton, Calgary, and Red Deer when the Alberta Liberal opposition was reviewing the employment standards. We met with many Albertans. Some were workers, be it unionized or not. We met with employers, mostly small-business owners. We met with students, and we even met with parents of children who are now allowed, as young as 12 years old, to join the workforce, sort of like cheap labour. This is a move that definitely was opposed. I know that the minister is faced with pressures, you know, and certain realities that he has to work with, but this is definitely a direction that my colleagues and I did not support. Anyway, I did learn a lot from those trips; hence, my interest in attending today.

Employment standards in particular must in my opinion be thoroughly and periodically evaluated, and they should be improved. We're looking at things like wages, working conditions, safety, the issues surrounding holidays, the relationship between the employer and the employee, and things like that. I realize that the hon. minister and his staff are trying very hard to address those situations. Like I said, it is not an easy task, but in my opinion a lot more can be achieved.

Most of my technical questions from today's budget estimates have already been asked by the previous speakers, Mr. Chairman, but one question in particular that I would like to elaborate on pertains to minimum wage. Even with the increase last year we're still in the bottom 50 per cent if we compare Alberta to the other provinces and territories. Surely, in this day and age and with our massive revenues and surpluses we can readdress this issue. I would suggest, personally, an annual review of minimum wage and tying it to market-basket measures and/or inflation. You know, you have many indicators that are readily available that would tell you what's fair and what's the acceptable minimum and so on. Perhaps we can even take it a step further and stipulate that it should not be lower than, say, 40 per cent of the Alberta average hourly wage.

I have printed some press releases from the ministry's website. I note here that on January 31, 2006, there was the Building and Educating Alberta's Workforce survey, which was conducted and, as it says here, "developed to guide Alberta's labour market development and investments over the next 10 years (2006-2016) to ensure individuals and businesses are able to compete within an increasingly global and knowledge-based economy." Now, this is wonderful, but that was really what triggered my colleagues and I to actually tour the province. We felt that an online survey was not adequate. We're faced with similar restrictions or similar objectionable practices currently as we discuss things like the third way, Mr. Chairman, where the consultation process was very limited and not open or accessible enough. So we feel that to do it online is only one way, not the only way.

We know that on March 10 the consultation process for that particular purpose was concluded. We know that the minister also announced that his consultation included certain meetings, and his communications people highlighted in that press release that 60 key stakeholder groups were involved. So I would be very interested to know which interest groups were involved, and I would appreciate receiving the results or the findings of that consultation. We think that if we're looking at 2006 to 2016, if we're laying the course and charting our path for the next decade, we definitely have to do a tonne of consultation here and involve as many people as possible, from employee and employer groups to chambers of commerce to parents of people who are in the workplace and so on and so forth.

So again we're urging the minister to not only rely on online consultations from now on and to share the results with the opposition and with the people of this province.

I talked about minimum wage, but I also have this press release, which was released on March 3, 2006, talking about hard-working Albertans creating thousands of full-time jobs, which is great. I am actually happy to be living and working in this province at this stage. It's amazing. But, again, my overriding argument will always be that a lot more could be done. Alberta's unemployment rate, as per this press release, "remained the lowest of all the provinces for the second year in a row," which is great, and "Alberta's average hourly wage continues to climb . . . an 8.7 per cent increase" from 2003 to 2005, and it now hovers at about \$21.39.

So back to my 40 per cent suggestion. If we do a minimum of 40 per cent of the average hourly wage and call that our minimum wage, I think that would not only be fair, but it would be applauded by everybody. I don't think it would necessarily add any unnecessary burden to the businesses we have in this province.

Another layer I would add, Mr. Chairman, is to expand something like the STEP program, the summer temporary employment program, which was designed to encourage students to work and encourage employers to hire people and subsidize that wage or salary as an incentive to small business. I always advocate for small business. It's also part of my experience as a pharmacist working in an independent store. Sometimes it is difficult to compete with the bigger firms or the more established companies. So why not look at this as sort of a tool to level the playing field and have more, you know, availability or more access to small business owners? So now they can attract, you know, energetic, educated, smart individuals rather than just competing with the bigger businesses on wages only. Some of those small businesses, of course, are family operated or owned, and it would really be difficult for them to compete.

4:50

Potentially, we can even think about the third way, as I mentioned, because once or if it is implemented against the wishes of Albertans, this disparity, this gap, between small businesses and the larger firms is going to get wider and bigger. You know, why would an employee apply to work in a small store or sort of a family operation when he or she can go to a bigger firm and get their private health insurance paid for by that firm? This is definitely going to be restrictive on small business, and we know that the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and people like that are looking at this. There are going to be implications and consequences, and I would urge the minister to maybe look at this from his department to see if maybe an incentive or a subsidy could be offered for smaller firms to be able to afford retaining or attracting employees.

Another issue was that when we discussed in this House extending presumptive coverage for cardiovascular events for firefighters, I and my colleagues in the Liberal caucus wanted to extend that presumptive coverage to a week instead of just 24 hours, but this suggestion was rejected by the government members. We could have compromised, perhaps, and settled on about 48 or 72 hours, but again there was no success there. We also wanted to extend the same protection to other emergency response personnel, like ambulance workers, paramedics, police officers in certain situations, but again we did not meet with support from the government side.

What was amazing, Mr. Chairman, however, or really puzzling is that the government didn't allow us to try to extend the same courtesy to volunteer firefighters, who work just as hard as their employed counterparts. So it didn't really make sense that, you know, if you're employed as a firefighter, you would get this, however small, 24 hours, but if you're a volunteer, then you don't get it. They do the same work, and they are faced with the same

threats and stresses. So again I would urge the hon. minister to revisit this whole issue and either himself or through a private member bring it back to the House and look at this, you know, with the same favourable eye as we did in the fall sitting. It's the angle of fairness and care.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your indulgence, and I thank you for this opportunity.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Cardinal: Yeah. Just very briefly. Most of the questions we'll put in writing for you. One area I'd like to ask you to assist is in relation to the STEP program and small business. Maybe you can, you know, provide some information, and we can sit down and look at what options may be available, just what thoughts may be there to improve the situation. There's nothing out of the question, you know. We can do that.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

The other area you mentioned that I just want to touch on briefly is the issue of providing a program for seniors, persons with developmental disabilities, children in high-needs areas. You mentioned that maybe, you know, one department or one ministry should provide all those services. At one time, when I became the minister of family and social services and aboriginal affairs – I mentioned earlier the caseload, the dollars spent, et cetera, under one ministry. We looked after family and social services, we looked after children's services, we looked after persons with developmental disabilities and also, of course, aboriginal affairs under that department.

The whole restructuring, then, was to go in the other direction, actually, where we'd, you know, take the people who are employable and trainable back into the workforce. While we did that, then we'd redirect the dollars and actually develop the Ministry of Children's Services, for an example, its own ministry with a budget that concentrates on dealing with children and families to improve the service to the people. The cost is about the same. The cost hasn't really increased that much. Then there are persons with developmental disabilities and seniors, who now have their own minister, their own budget, and they concentrate, again, on providing a really good service for those high-needs areas. Of course, the other one is aboriginal affairs. Now, it also has its own ministry, and that's a very high-needs area. They concentrate on providing high-quality services because it's a high-needs area. Then the department I operate now with Alberta Works and those other programs support people to get back into training and into the workforce. So I think that that has worked quite well.

No doubt, when you really look at the overall cost – when I took over as sole minister with those four high-needs areas, my budget then was \$1.7 billion. When you look at the combination of Children's Services, Seniors, PDD, my department, and the aboriginal affairs department, I don't think they run \$2 billion. I think it's less than that, yet there are four ministers and four departments concentrating on providing a good service for those high-needs areas. So I think it's working quite well. It's never perfect. You know, it's a challenging area, but I think that Alberta has done quite well in providing services to the high-needs area. I have to agree that there are pockets where we need improvement. Again, you know, the issue of people that are not expected to work: we need to monitor that very, very closely to ensure that what we are doing is right.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chair. There are some further items that I'd just like to touch on somewhat. The labour market strategy that the government is looking at has identified a need down the road, quite a ways down the road actually, a shortage of a hundred thousand people that we may need. I really haven't seen the absolute proof for that, and it seemingly is something that is far down the road, that you have to be very, very careful of.

Many of the members in this House were in Alberta when we went through the downturn in the 1980s and saw, I think, the construction portion of the Alberta gross domestic product drop from 12 per cent to 2 per cent. We saw the multinational oil and gas companies go elsewhere for various reasons, and the oil prices died. Basically, a lot of the activity ended, and there was no work. A lot of people that I speak to now are happy that there is lots of work right now but are very concerned that we might face the same thing in just a very few years. There really is not overwhelming evidence that we might need a hundred thousand. We may need more. I would just say that we must be very, very careful and prudent in looking at how we deal with our workforce.

Now, immigration is important. It is something that will determine the future of many businesses, will determine the future of many industries, and indeed will determine the future of Alberta. The use of temporary foreign workers is something that has become very distasteful and an issue for many workers, especially in the building trades, because many of them think that it's being used as something to further the interests of some employers who just want to avoid them.

The nature of trying to bring immigration in and then using temporary foreign workers brings about some inherent difficulties. The labour force strategy identified that retention in Alberta is a very real problem. Retention is something that is very difficult if you don't have certain factors in place for a worker, like their family here. Certainly, a temporary foreign worker will not have their family here, and they will get pressures to leave and will want to leave very quickly to see them and do those sorts of things. I heard the former minister of transportation talk about immigration at a west Edmonton business luncheon here just some weeks ago, and he's talked of meeting the leader of communist Vietnam. That leader in communist Vietnam said that he would love to drop 200,000 people on the international market and have them send home money because he had lots of unemployed. He said that they could be trained to build any project, and I'm sure they could. Vietnamese are very resilient and very intelligent and very capable people.

5:00

But I don't know if that would be the real solution for Alberta, to have those workers come in as temporary foreign workers. I expect we'll see an expansion in the provincial nominee program given some of the statements of the federal government. I think the provincial nominee program and to bring actual immigrants in is probably a much better way to do it because somebody who comes in with a family, somebody who comes in with the idea that they will be staying here and will be working and living and becoming an Albertan will work to have them stay here, will solve that problem of retention that has been identified as something that is so difficult for Alberta for some reason over the years in competition with some of the bigger cities that we see in the rest of the country and certainly in the continent, to be truthful.

The need to access some of our present unemployed and to deal with the problem of vocational training – and this deals with

education as well – is something that is of severe concern to many employers: numbers like over a million unemployed youth in Canada between the ages of 18 and 25. Some different figures are used for the apprenticeship starting age, but I've seen averages of the actual age being 25, and that seems to just be a total disconnect.

As has been mentioned by the minister, part of the problem is: why do we not have as much vocational training in our schools? I've spoken to teachers and administrators and principals, and they say that you can't get a tradesman to teach anymore because he's going to make a lot more out in the field. Maybe there's some need to combine some compensation programs somehow to deal with that.

There's need to somehow look at how we give incentives to our high schools and our junior high schools for vocational training because they're dumping their programs. For example, Jasper Place composite is not composite anymore; it's Jasper Place high school. We have these things which are working against vocational training.

RAP, the registered apprenticeship program, has worked nicely, some employers and some apprentices have told me, in a few trades but not in very many. A number of employers have told me time and again that they're just getting the dregs. They're just getting the outcasts and the people that don't want to work and maybe are problems. So they've rejected the RAP program. There are very few in that right now, so I think we have to somehow look at extending that past mechanics and extending it so that it actually works to attract kids somehow and to give some sort of incentive for them to be involved in there.

The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview mentioned the importance of first contract legislation, and I think there are economic arguments to move ahead on that. Certainly, in Alberta there has not been a high record of strikes. I think all Albertans have a can-do mentality and want to be working and don't want to be out on strike, and when they do so, they're doing so for a reason. Certainly, when you look at something like the building trades, I don't think they've had a strike or a strike in the oil sands or anything like that for a generation. Nobody as much as can even remember one. Some have been long in their career and have not even seen that. There's a commitment to build, a commitment to work, and a commitment to make things happen in our province.

I hear now, though, that there's beginning to be less of a problem with the jingle in the jeans, sort of thing. There's less of an incentive now because of the economics. There will always be people that will want to get a stake together, who will want to work, who want to work as much as they can. You know, a lot of the actual restaurants and other businesses in Edmonton and in other areas, being farms and such, have been started by tradesmen who got their stake together in the oil industry and in the oil sands and other areas.

Employment standards now puts a limit of 24 and four on the number of days a person can work, with 24 days on and four days off becoming a very overused way of scheduling work. I know some employers that actually do that and do far more than that and get away with it. To extend that, I think, would make things far more difficult in areas like my riding of Edmonton-Manning and, indeed, I think, all over the province where there's no parent at home for extended periods of time because they're working. A lot of these parents just don't want to be away that long. If we're setting up our workforce, I think we're putting in place a time bomb for lesser productivity just to take short-term needs into effect. I think most of those workers would rather not be forced because when they are in that situation, usually they're told, "That way or the highway," and there's no third way.

The labour costs are not, I think, a huge issue in Alberta. I look

at page 123, the Alberta advantage in the economic outlook there are 11 cities, and Edmonton has the lowest cost of many major cities in North America on this graph, and Calgary is number four. The actual labour costs have not been high.

Productivity in our economy is affected by and how we're going to be building some of these projects will be affected quite a bit by things such as hours of work. In employments and standards we have to look very, very carefully at it because we could cause problems in retaining workers who just don't want to be forced to work those types of hours. We don't really have the labour costs. They're not a huge problem in Alberta. It's odd because we have a booming economy, and there are quite a few people that would like to come here and work.

The immigration thing I'd touch on again. I think the Member for West Yellowhead had some very good statements on the problems that small business is having. We've got to be careful about not looking after those problems. Many of these small businesses are restaurants. I mentioned another time in this House how a very nice restaurant in my area has cut their lunch hour trade off because they just can't get a sous-chef. At the same time two sous-chefs I talked to the same day – one was actually a full chef – were heading out to the rigs. You know, they could make twice as much. That's the nature of this particular boom. The nature of that boom is that many of those people once those wells are drilled will be back into other areas, and it might not be a hundred thousand. They won't necessarily be drilling all those wells forever because there are only so many areas to drill, and we've got to be careful.

Some of the other areas that deal with productivity – I think productivity is something that we should always try and remember. Some people look at it as a difficult and a dirty word. The transportation issues in and around Edmonton: we will see some changes in where people are working and what jobs Albertans are working at.

A project just talked about recently, it's an Inco project in the minister's riding, will draw a lot of people who are presently working in Lloydminster and in Fort McMurray and that could have been working on some of the other projects. They will be drawn into those upgraders. There could be many, many thousands, and we may have a productivity problem because of transportation in the northeast of Edmonton and even in the Redwater/Athabasca area. We've seen it actually in the Scotford project. We've seen it in my riding at Christmastime, when everybody who are all working outside of the city right now came back to the city.

5:10

It's something that people call counterintuitive. The *Edmonton Journal* couldn't understand why jobs are down in Edmonton, 16,000 in its last report. It seems like everybody is working, and everybody is employed, and everything is up. Well, the thing that's happening is they're all in the bush. They're all at Lloyd, they're all at Fort McMurray, they're all in the Peace, they're all in the northeast Peace and B.C., and they do come back. Once many of them come back to work on the upgraders, we're going to see a change in the labour market, and we're going to see some real demands on transportation on the north side. Many of us saw that at Christmastime, when many of them had a week off, and that will be amplified and made worse. We, perhaps, should be looking at that as a productivity as well as a transportation item in the near future because this will be affecting those huge projects that will be taking place in Fort Saskatchewan, in Redwater, in the area northeast of Edmonton.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for

the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the following questions after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Human Resources and Employment for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007.

Agreed to:
Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$790,278,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It has indeed been a very pleasurable afternoon discussion. On that note, I would move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007, for the following department.

Human Resources and Employment: expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$790,278,000.

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

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

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bearing in mind the enormous progress that was made this week, mostly on estimates, I would move that the House stand adjourned at this hour, which we would call 5:30, and that we reconvene at 1:30 on Monday.

[Motion carried; at 5:14 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]