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The 27th Legislature
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The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, March 16, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, would you please remain standing now, and we'll participate in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau. Please join in in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly Her Excellency Gintė Damušis, ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania. I was honoured to host a special luncheon today in honour of Her Excellency's first visit to Alberta. Alberta and Lithuania have a solid trading relationship, and the Lithuanian community has strong roots in our province. We value the Lithuanian culture as one of the many cultures that greatly contribute towards our quality of life and help bring stronger communities and a stronger Alberta. I'm proud to say that the Alberta government is committed to creating a society where all people feel welcome and are included in all aspects of the life of the province. We are going to be richer because of our friendship and our historic trading relationship, and we hope to enhance that. I know that Her Excellency has had several meetings and will have others with many of my colleagues today. I would like to ask that Her Excellency please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, at the Clerk's table today is the Hon. Peter Milliken, Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons. Mr. Milliken is currently serving in his seventh consecutive term as the Member for Kingston and the Islands, a federal riding in the province of Ontario. He was elected for the first time on November 21, 1988. On January 29, 2001, he was elected as the 34th Speaker in the history of the Canadian House of Commons, and on October 12, 2009, he will become the longest serving Speaker in the history of that body, the Canadian House of Commons. A fuller biography of Mr. Milliken is located at each member's desk. Mr. Milliken has agreed to meet with any Member of this Legislative Assembly that wishes to attend a special seminar. It will be put on tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock for one hour in the Carillon Room.

Mr. Speaker, would you kindly rise and receive the warm welcome.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature 45 very special guests from Fort Saskatchewan elementary school, 29 visitors in the members' gallery and 16 in the public gallery. They're here visiting the Legislature, and I'm looking forward to our visit to Fort Saskatchewan elementary in the early part of April. The students are accompanied today by teachers Mrs. Beth Budd, Mrs. Shirley Cockburn, teacher assistant Mrs. Joanne Brown, and parent helpers Mrs. Amanda Peck and Mrs. Gail Davies. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have at least 14 more introductions.

The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature 39 visitors from the Greystone Centennial middle school out of Spruce Grove. They're a very keen group. They're here for the week at the Legislature, a great program put on by your office. They're very keen. They responded to my questions in the House in unison. They're accompanied by teachers Mrs. Katy Rogal and Ms Amanda Brouwer and parent helper Ms Michelle Westendorf. I believe they're in both of our galleries. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My students are from Sifton elementary school. There will be 28 of them. They will be accompanied by their teacher, Tracy Bradley, and teacher's aide Nancy Brown. However, they won't be in here until about 2 o'clock, but I'd still like to extend them a warm welcome today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today and introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a very special group of 48 grade 6 students that are here today visiting from the Wye school in Strathcona. I can say without a doubt that this class is one of the brightest in our constituency, and this has nothing to do with the fact that my son Jack is one of the students. They're accompanied by their teachers, Mrs. Tanya Jordan, Mrs. Corey Kropp, and Ms Lisa Schlegel, teachers' helper Mrs. Daniela Eskow, and parent helpers Mrs. Star, Mrs. Veeneman, Mrs. Flathers, Mrs. Johnston, and my lovely wife, Fiona Beland. They're seated in the public gallery as well, and I'd ask that they all rise to receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a friend of mine from Vermilion. Lorne Maier is the local ATA representative there. Like many teachers, he's very active in the community. He's a Rotarian, he's coached football, and he's always

made his classroom open for us to go in and speak to him. Lorne is here today with an interest in Motion 503. I'd like him to rise and please accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour today to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four friends, supporters, and constituents of Edmonton-Whitemud. First, Mr. Balbir Sharma and his wife, Rama, are very proud Albertans and have been so since 1981. Balbir worked as a draftsman for many years. He now volunteers as treasurer for the Council of India Societies of Edmonton, an umbrella organization of over 15 organizations. I might say that our own colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie was an executive member and past president of that organization. Rama also volunteered for nonprofit organizations in Edmonton. Their son, Dr. Sanjay Sharma, is a cardiologist here in Edmonton based out of two hospitals, including the University of Alberta hospital, where he was trained. His wife, Suvudha, has recently been appointed as a Crown prosecutor for the province of Alberta. Balbir, Rama, Sanjay, and Suvudha came down to the Legislature today to visit with the member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, and I had an opportunity to meet with them in my office. I want to thank them for their contributions to the volunteer sector in Edmonton and in Alberta. I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all the members of this Assembly Tracey Bowes from the Highwood constituency. Tracey is in the House today for the debate on Motion 503. It certainly is excellent that Tracey is so interested and has taken the time to come to Edmonton. Tracey is seated in the public gallery, and I would ask her now to rise and receive the usual warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly the executive director of Homeward Trust. Susan McGee is here with us. I want you to know that Susan is also the newest member of the secretariat, and we're looking forward to her wisdom, her passion, her energy, and just her involvement with the secretariat, as well. Susan, would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is part of *Rendez-vous*. I have the privilege of introducing to you and through you representatives from the francophone economic development council of Alberta. Since 2003 my department and Travel Alberta have been working with the council to develop a successful marketing strategy to attract visitors and tour operators from francophone regions, such as Quebec and France. The council has also worked with the province's private sector to develop a francophone Alberta tourism corridor. Here today are members of the council. I'd ask our guests to stand as I introduce them: Mr. Randy Boissonnault, president; Mr.

Frank Saulnier, CEO; Mr. Patrice Gauthier, development agent; and Mr. Roch Labelle, development agent. I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Chair of Committees.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a constituent of mine who is visiting the Legislature today. Mr. Chris Coleman is a special education teacher from the Irvine school in beautiful southeast Alberta and president of the Prairie Rose local of the ATA. He's joining us today as we discuss Motion 503. He has previously taught in Texas, where he saw first-hand the problems with high-stakes testing and the failures of the No Child Left Behind policy of the United States. He's here today to show his support for this motion, and I appreciate his dedication. Mr. Coleman is seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask him to rise to receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two Saskatchewan boys who, to Alberta's great benefit, decided years ago to move here and make Alberta their home. They are Dr. Roger Epp, dean of the Augustana faculty of the University of Alberta in Camrose; and Mr. Brian Hesje, chairman of the board of Fountain Tire and member of the board of directors of ATB Financial.

Dr. Epp has been a professor and an administrator at Augustana for some 19 years, and he's a distinguished political scientist with a special interest in rural Alberta and the rural west. Mr. Hesje, as I mentioned, is chair of the board of Fountain Tire, but he also has a very important connection to Augustana in that he is its most recently designated distinguished alumnus. I'll have more to say about him in a few moments in a member's statement.

Both Dr. Epp and Mr. Hesje are here in the public gallery, and I'd ask that they stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour today to introduce an intrepid group of young Albertans, the Carrington-Morris family. Eleven-year-old Mahala is a great singer and future superstar, and nine-year-old Jonah is a long-distance running champion and a superb orator. They both enjoy playing hockey and are both home-schooled by their parents. That's why they're here today, to learn a little bit more about how our Legislature works. They've enjoyed a great tour of the Legislature, and a couple of unexpected highlights, including meeting our fine Premier and the Speaker of our federal House.

Dr. Natalie Carrington and Dr. Greg Morris are their fabulous parents. They are accomplished athletes, and they are great servants of their community. Together they run the Diamond Valley chiropractic, acupuncture, and optimum health clinic in the foothills of the Rockies. They keep our hard-working Alberta ranchers and oil workers healthy, happy, and on the job.

One final note. Dr. Natalie Carrington was of invaluable assistance for every minute of my wife, Jennifer's, long labour, which resulted in the birth of our first-born son, Dawson, last April.

I would ask our fine friends, the Carrington-Morris family, to please stand now and accept the warm wishes of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this House a group of Edmonton Lithuanian members who are here honouring the visit of Her Excellency Gintė Damušis, who is visiting Edmonton, as you've learned earlier today. With us today are Erwin Kilotat, Andrea Smidtas, Al Smidtas, Marty Wilson, Adriana Podberskis, Gloria Bartkus, Rimas Siulys, Paul Stanaitis, and Nejolla Korris, who is currently being considered by the Lithuanian government to be appointed as honorary consul of the Republic of Lithuania to Alberta and perhaps western Canada. I would ask them to rise and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my privilege today to rise and introduce four constituents, that are also very close friends of mine from St. Albert, who are seated in the public gallery. These gentlemen have been close associates for over 30 years in quite a variety of activities. Perhaps the most memorable of them is our wine group called the Weinguts. Those of German tongue will recognize that to mean good wine. I would ask my guests Les Johnston, Joe Sombach, Lawrence Hermanutz, and Larry Wyatt to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Brier Curling Championship

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek and all members here to recognize the world's best men's curling team, Alberta's own Kevin Martin rink. Last night the Kevin Martin team defeated Team Manitoba and established a new record of 26 consecutive Brier game victories. The atmosphere in Calgary's Saddledome was electric as Alberta's all-star team of Kevin Martin and Ben Hebert from Edmonton and John Morris and Marc Kennedy from Calgary clinched the 2009 Brier.

On behalf of all of my MLA government colleagues I also want to salute and thank the Calgary hosts and organizers, who carried off an incredibly successful Brier. For nine straight days curling fans in Calgary and from across Alberta and the entire nation were treated to an amazing display of skill and sportsmanship as portrayed by all the Brier teams. Breathtaking shotmaking, perfect brushing and strategizing resulted in a legacy of great memories and excitement.

Mr. Speaker, we all watched proudly as Alberta rose to the top once again and as 700 local volunteers extended a warm western welcome to Calgary's Pengrowth Saddledome. Viewers from around the world also tuned in on their televisions to watch history being made right here in Alberta. This year's Tim Hortons Brier attendance topped 140,000 spectators, an amazing tribute to the sponsors and organizers and, of course, to the curling fans. Now we can all look forward to the next great week of curling excellence, the Roar of the Rings Olympic qualifying tournament in Edmonton this December.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Alberta Job Losses

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last month Alberta lost another 24,000 jobs, bringing the losses for 2009 to 30,000. Just a month ago the government projected 15,000 job losses for the entire year, averaging 50 per day. The reality is that 500 jobs per day were lost in January and February, 10 times what the government projected. To the Premier: how can Albertans be confident this government is prepared to deal with the economic downturn when it so grossly misjudged the severity of this economic recession?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, even if it's a hundred people out of work in this province, it's of great concern to this government. As I said before, what we're going to be doing is ensuring, when we deliver the budget, that there'll be supports to ensure that the people programs are in place and also invest significantly in infrastructure so that we keep the people working in this province.

Dr. Swann: The Bank of Canada has adjusted its policy to deal with the prospect of a longer economic downturn, yet this government persists in its rosy projections of job losses. Again to the Premier: what exactly is this government basing its job loss projections on?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I don't think these are rosy job loss projections. I don't know why we would use the word "rosy." I'm sure all Albertans want to contribute positively to the province. Year over year we've actually created more jobs in the province February to February, but we know that we are going to have some difficulty over the next year or so as the economy rebounds in our biggest market, and that's down south in the United States.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Speaker, thousands of Albertans are out of work, and on average only 1 in 4 is qualifying for employment insurance benefits, 1 in 4. It's clear that there are changes needed to the EI system. To the Premier: will he be calling on the federal government to make the changes to ensure that those who are unemployed are getting the support for which they've paid billions of dollars each year?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I already delivered that position at the Premiers' meeting, at which the Prime Minister was present. I said that Alberta has been through good fortune, through a good, robust economy contributing to Ottawa a net contribution of \$18.3 billion just last year alone. That is one – that is one – interregional transfer and a difference in policy. The other one is, of course, the EI benefits. We have to work more hours in Alberta to earn, actually, less benefit than those in other provinces. We're not discounting the fact that, you know, we are going to be seeing some difficulties, but the message I delivered to the Prime Minister is that unemployed families, whether they're in the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, or Alberta, are equally unemployed.

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

Support for the Oil and Gas Sector

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the government provided incentives for the energy sector to keep Alberta working. However, this covers one industry, leaving thousands of workers in other sectors without support from this government. To the Premier: why is the Premier choosing to support one industry when there are thousands of Albertans in other sectors losing their jobs? Are you picking winners and losers?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we're meeting with all industrial sectors. I'll tell you that the oil and gas sector is one that has probably seen the greatest drop in the commodity prices. Forestry has been having significant issues, and we're meeting, actually, with the forestry sector this afternoon. For agriculture my hopes are up. Fertilizer prices are dropping, fuel prices are dropping, canola is still hanging around that \$9 to \$9.50 a bushel, so there is some hope. Beef prices are stabilizing a bit although they're not anywhere near where they were two years ago. There are some bright areas in the upcoming economy, but certainly oil and gas and forestry will be going through some difficult times.

Dr. Swann: The construction industry has posted significant job losses in recent months. Unemployment in this sector has already exceeded 9 per cent in January, and half of February's additional job losses are in construction. To the Premier: will you be providing specific support to the construction industry as you have to the oil and gas sector?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, what we will be doing is continuing on a very robust capital construction plan in this province. As we entered this fiscal period, we spent about two to three times more per capita on infrastructure than any other province, and we'll continue to do that into next year so that we employ as many Albertans as possible.

Dr. Swann: Investment in green jobs provides short-term and long-term benefit to Albertans and per dollar creates more growth than investment in other sectors, including the oil and gas sector. To the Premier: why is this government not investing more in green projects, which will not only create more jobs but improve our international reputation and improve our environment?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, there's at least \$2 billion in carbon capture and storage, which is going to provide a number of green jobs, especially related to the construction of the pipeline. There's another I believe \$239 million in a program that's assisting ethanol and biodiesel production in the province, which has a double benefit: it would not only employ people, but it will clean our air. So there are a number of dollars going in. We do produce the most wind power in the province of Alberta compared to other jurisdictions. I also might say that all of that wind power that we're producing is unsubsidized compared to other jurisdictions that are actually using taxpayer dollars to support wind power.

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

Bitumen Exports

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. In the leadership race for the Tory party the Premier said, and I quote: shipping raw bitumen is like scraping off the topsoil, selling it, and then passing the farm on to the next generation. Yet the portion of raw bitumen shipped to the U.S.A. for upgrading is rising, and thousands of jobs are going south of the border in the process. My question is to the Premier. Why is Alberta's upgrading construction stalled while in the U.S.A. it's booming?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I didn't know that that was such a good speech. That's the second member that has actually referenced it here in the House.

As I said before when comments were made about jobs going south, if you look at the unemployment rate in the United States,

they're having similar difficulties to what we are experiencing in Canada. With respect to adding value to bitumen, we are looking at different processes. In terms of adding value, we know we have to add value to bitumen. We changed the policy significantly in terms of bitumen in kind; that's bitumen that all Albertans own that we can sell to a merchant upgrader. There are a few more details to work out, but we do want to increase the amount of bitumen upgraded from 60-some per cent to closer to 70.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Independent industry analysts are coming to the opposite conclusion. While Alberta is hemorrhaging hundreds of jobs a day, there's a boom in upgrader construction south of the border. For example, BP and Husky have created thousands of jobs in Ohio by building an upgrader there to process raw bitumen from Alberta. Once these upgraders have gone to the U.S.A., they're gone forever. Again to the Premier: does the Premier agree with a recent analysis by CAPP that the proportion of bitumen upgraded here is going to substantially decline?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we're, I believe, shipping about 1.3 million barrels of oil a day. If everything goes well over the next few years and our production increases to closer to 3 million barrels, that is a substantial increase in production but also a substantial task in adding upgrading to the increased production. That is what we're looking at. We're not anywhere close to 3 million barrels a day. I think the plan is 3 million by 2015, and we're working very carefully through policies that will ensure that we increase the amount of upgrading in the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Eight hundred Albertans a day in February were losing their jobs, yet Conoco and EnCana created thousands of jobs in Borger, Texas, by building yet another upgrader to process raw bitumen from Alberta. As with the plant in Ohio, once those upgrader jobs have gone to the U.S.A., they're gone forever. To the Premier: when will this government be taking real action to get Albertans back to work building upgraders here? What are the timelines?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, as I said, we're working on a policy to ensure that we increase the value of upgrading. There is, of course, the issue of ensuring that we do it in a very environmentally sound manner, find a balance. We also need a number of additional transmission lines to the areas where upgraders are going to be built. There are transportation corridors to be dealt with. But, you know, now, when the oil sands expansion has slowed down, all of a sudden attention is paid to the job loss. Unfortunately, that same attention wasn't paid to the job losses in the oil sands when the party opposite to me wanted to shut the whole thing down.

2:00

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, point of order, please.

The Speaker: The point of order will be recognized later.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Provincial Economic Strategy

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's a stretch to say that the Liberal opposition has cost anybody their job. You can't

say the same thing about this crew, though. Last month alone nearly 24,000 Albertans lost their jobs. The government remains paralyzed by denial and still says only 15,000 Albertans will lose their jobs. Either the government is misleading Albertans about what our economic future holds, or it's dangerously misinformed. Which is it, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Stelmach: As I said before, whatever the statistics are, whatever the projections are, it is of serious concern to the government. As in a previous question, we're going to do whatever we can to provide the dollars to support not only people programs but also investments in infrastructure so that we can keep people working.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, there were two other politicians who claimed that everything was just fine and that people should stop worrying. One was George W. Bush, and the other was Stephen Harper in the middle of the last election campaign. You'll remember that both of them were forced later to admit reality. Everyday Albertans need more than rosy, pie in the sky economic predictions to see them through this difficult time. My question is to the Premier. When will you offer some comfort to worried Albertans by unveiling a stimulus package that will keep Albertans working through this deep recession?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, our capital plan alone is \$22.2 billion over the next three years. I would say that that is quite a substantial stimulus package for Albertans.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, that's the same capital plan they had when things were good, and they've cut \$2 billion out of public transit.

Regular Albertans facing unemployment, sometimes for the first time in their lives, need more than empty promises from this government. What they need are good jobs so that they can care for their families. Again to the Premier: when will you admit the seriousness of the problem and give everyday Albertans what they need, a humane economic policy that allows breadwinners to keep a roof over their families' heads and put food on the table?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we're going to maintain the resources in our capital plan. One comment that I would like to make is that given today's economic climate – the fact that concrete is down considerably in price, steel is down, we're getting many more bids per tender call – I think we're going to get tremendous value for the dollars that we're going to invest in infrastructure. It will give us an opportunity to catch up with some of the new infrastructure, catch up with some of the maintenance that we have delayed over the last couple of years, so I think this is the opportunity to do the things that we need to do. I'm just looking forward to co-operation as we deliver the budget on April 7 and have the opportunity for the opposition to debate the dollars going in.

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

Heat Detectors for Garages

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The province has recently updated its building and fire codes to keep Albertans safe from the effects of fire. From my own past experience in the home building industry I know of three incidents when fires have started from an

attached garage. Initially it was agreed that the new code would include requirements for a heat detector in the garage. My questions are for the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can the minister please indicate why this was not included in the new code change?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The answer is that there is no heat detector on the market that works in extreme cold conditions. The change has been deferred until technology catches up. I need to also say that the new codes very much do include fire-resistant requirements for homes with attached garages.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is for the same minister. How soon can we expect industry to design the heat detectors?

The Speaker: Hon. minister, if you're that wise.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the heat detectors need to comply with the national standards, and they need to be effective. Currently there is no national standard. We are working with the national body to ensure that the testing does take place because we believe that this is very important for safety. We will continue to work with the national council. When the standards are developed, this province will be adopting the heat detectors for garages.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. The minister said that there are fire-resistant requirements for the garages. Can the minister please tell us what they are and their benefits?

Mr. Danyluk: Well, Mr. Speaker, we know that slowing down the speed of fires in garages is very critical. We have enhanced fire protection that we have put into the codes, one of them, of course, being to ensure that gypsum is put into those garages on all surfaces. These changes will make homes safer. Also, these changes buy time for individuals to get out of their homes and for firefighters to respond.

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

Temporary Foreign Workers

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last month another 24,000 Albertans unfortunately lost their jobs along with many temporary foreign workers who were working here. Although some temporary foreign workers are eligible to apply for EI benefits if they meet the requirements, like many Albertans they are not receiving them. To the Minister of Employment and Immigration: what are these workers supposed to do if they cannot draw EI benefits when they are unfortunately laid off?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite is asking a question that a lot of people are also

asking. We continue to work with our temporary foreign workers. We identify additional positions that may be available to them, and we will work with them to see if they can move into other jobs. But I think we need to recognize that the word “temporary” is exactly what it says, and if it’s impossible for them to move into other occupations, then there’s an expectation that they should go home.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. The minister has recently admitted that the province cannot track the 57,000 temporary foreign workers in the province. Why, then, is the hon. minister continuing to promote the flawed temporary foreign workers program when you don’t even know where any of those workers are or what they’re doing?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, we know that there are some issues with a few of our temporary foreign workers. I need to indicate to the rest of our members here in the Assembly that for the 57,000 that are in the province, the majority are here doing the work that they’re meant to do, and they’re providing a tremendous service to the province of Alberta. We do know where the majority are. We are still expecting some areas where we have labour shortages where temporary foreign workers are providing a very, very useful benefit to our province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There’s certainly no shortage from that side of the House, but other people say that there is.

Again to the minister: since the minister has no idea where many of the temporary foreign workers in this province are located, how can he possibly continue to recruit workers through the program when there are already thousands of unemployed people in this province ready, willing, and able to go to work?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, the member indicates that, you know, there are people willing and ready to go to work, and I don’t deny that. But there are still some occupations out there where we do have some definite shortages. One of them specifically – and I met with that particular group this weekend – is beekeepers. Before our people have the ability to hire temporary foreign workers, they must advertise right across Alberta as well as Canada. There’s no doubt that in the agricultural sector there are some huge concerns that we might close down the temporary foreign workers and they would not be able to operate their facilities over the next summer.

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

2:10

Bail System Reform

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The release of individuals charged with serious crimes has raised concerns about the bail system. My questions are for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. What is Alberta doing to ensure that potentially dangerous criminals aren’t being released on bail?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the hon. member may know, the issue of bail reform and the role of bail in our justice system has been a very important piece of what the Premier has talked about with respect to justice reform in the past year. As part

of our Safe Communities Secretariat we’ve developed a number of projects in the cities of Edmonton and Calgary where we have partnered prosecutors with police so that they’re working in tandem to ensure that we have the most effective bail packages available for the court to hear considerations with respect to bail.

Mr. Doerksen: A follow-up question, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how can Albertans be assured that, in fact, our bail system is as effective as it can be?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past year we’ve increased the number of prosecutors in the justice system. We’ve also increased the number of prosecutors that are arguing bail applications. In the past we have had police officers argue many of those cases, and we’ve made a decision in conjunction with the police that we think we can make more effective applications for bail to be withheld when we have Crown prosecutors making those applications. We’ve also introduced a system where bail applications can now be heard 24 hours a day in the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. We believe that that will ensure a fair hearing but also a very sound hearing and arguments that are being argued by prosecutors.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you. My final question to the same minister: how is the Minister of Justice working with other jurisdictions, particularly the federal government, to make the Alberta bail system more effective?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the end of the day it will be a judge’s decision as to whether or not to release someone on bail. But what we have been saying and the discussions that I’ve had with my federal counterpart are that we believe that the bail tests need to be changed. We think the Criminal Code needs to be amended so that there are more opportunities for reverse onus so that people who have demonstrated at one time that they are not prepared to honour a court order are not given the benefit of the doubt the second time and they’re not released on bail.

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

Public Education Exemptions

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the weekend the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit spoke publicly about proposed amendments to the human rights act. The amendments would give parents the right to dictate what is taught in public schools. The minister speaks of tolerance, but this amendment seems like an appalling step backwards. To the Minister of Education: does the minister support amending the human rights act to make it a fundamental human right for parents to exempt their children from science education and other teachings that may be contrary to their beliefs?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of

Education is under the fundamental belief that we're all born with a full basket of rights and that everything the government does in terms of enacting laws in the interests of the community diminishes those rights, hopefully for justifiable purposes. What I'd say to the hon. member is that we have rules in place in this province, both in the School Act with respect to religion and with mandated policy with respect to education with respect to sexuality, that a parent can choose to have their child exempted from such education if they don't believe it's in the best interest of their child from their personal value system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. The minister anticipated my next question. As a teacher for 34 years I know that parents already have the right to excuse their child from classes that are contrary to their beliefs, such as sexual education. Given that there is no need, therefore, for such legislation, will the minister commit to not supporting any amendment that would enshrine a parent's right to ignore curriculum?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to commit to anything of the sort. If the government brings forward legislation and I'm a member of the government and House Leader, I think it's my duty to bring forward legislation to support what the government does. What I have to say in terms of the formation of that legislation would be counsel that I would hold to myself.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. The last time I checked my calendar, Mr. Minister, this was 2009 Alberta, not 1929 Tennessee.

Given that parents already have the right to home-school their children or to place their children in private schools, what is the point of a public curriculum that is developed to provide a full breadth of education if this government makes key sections of it optional? Create your own curriculum?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, what's not optional in this province is that parents have the right to raise their children. They not only have a right; they have a duty and an obligation to those children to bring to those children moral values. It's not in the government's hands to dictate moral values to parents. What the government does is make sure that there's a good, strong public education system with a good, strong curriculum, and then parents can have the choice on certain areas, certain areas only, relative to religion and sexuality and whether their children should participate in those specific sections of the curriculum or not.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mountain Pine Beetle Control

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The forest industry continues to face many challenges, both economically and naturally. Alberta recently experienced severe cold winter temperatures across most of our forests. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Will this cold weather affect mountain pine beetles in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure the Member for West Yellowhead will agree with me when I say: thank God for global cooling. Cold temperatures have helped against the beetle, but precisely how much we won't know until this spring. We have computer models that predict, but I'd rather rely upon the field surveys of the dead beetles that we do in the spring. When those surveys are done, that'll be the basis for the next stage of our pine beetle strategy. I'll be happy to report the results of those surveys when they're in.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. How significantly is overwinter mortality affecting Alberta's fight against mountain pine beetles considering the work that is being done at other times of the year, such as increased logging and burning?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. The long-term health of Alberta's forests demands a long-term strategy. That's exactly what we have. Regardless of the impact of the cold winters, we will continue our healthy pine strategy. The goal there is to simulate a natural, age-balanced forest with younger, medium, and older aged trees. An age-balanced forest is much more resistant to insects and to wildfire. That's our long-term strategy, and we're sticking with it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the same minister. How many more cold winters do we need to end this threat to our forests, or is there an end in sight?

Dr. Morton: How many more cold winters do we need, Mr. Speaker? I say the more the better. Bring 'em on. Bring on the global cooling. The facts of this matter are quite simple: wood is good, cold is bold, and beetles are bad. I'd ask all hon. members to join me in wishing for another couple of weeks of minus 30 until we get to Easter.

Thank you.

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

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I want more cold weather, too.

Ambulance Services

Ms Pastoor: Last Wednesday the minister was anything but clear with his answers regarding the ground ambulance transition happening on April 1. There are three levels of emergency medical personnel, each with different levels of education. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: can the minister provide an exact answer? Will EMRs, EMTs, and EMPs all be given the authority to triage patients in the field?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, the exact answer I'm going to give to the member is the fact that on April 1 we will make a significant move in this province to ally our EMS system with our health system. Everything that has happened to date has been a smooth

transition. I would suggest that the member is trying to find something wrong with what's happening on April 1 and is not having a lot of luck.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Minister. If I don't have the information, I have no idea if it's wrong or right.

Does the minister not see a problem with having a doctor tied up on the phone with ambulance crews when Alberta is already facing a shortage of doctors?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, where I see a problem is with ambulance emergency medical personnel being tied up in emergency rooms for hours on end. That is our problem. That's what we are trying to fix.

Ms Pastoor: In response to a question regarding the types of facilities that nonemergency room patients would be diverted to, the answer was neither clear, open, nor what I felt to be transparent. Where will these people who require care but not emergency care go at 3 o'clock in the morning? What is the answer?

2:20

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have an outstanding health system in this province such that Albertans will receive health care when and where they need it. What we don't have is good alignment in the system. This is one initiative that this government is taking to align the system within health care. I would suggest to the hon. member that she should be patient, a little more positive with what's going on in this move on April 1. I believe that she will be pleasantly surprised and that all her worries will be put to rest after April 1.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Homelessness Initiatives

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Homelessness has been a major problem in Alberta for years, and this government has failed to address the primary causes. Indeed, in many cases it was their primary source. Today the minister of housing held a photo op to introduce a plan to end homelessness in Alberta, but it has no targets, no timelines, and most important, no money by which anyone can hold the government accountable. To that minister: without your government committing the funds necessary to do the job, how can you possibly claim that you'll end homelessness any time soon?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is correct. We did release a plan for Alberta ending homelessness in 10 years this morning in Calgary. I was pleased to have the secretariat, who prepared the plan, there at the release. I can tell you that we as a government strongly endorse the plan. We are adopting it in its entirety. The intent of the plan is to have a province-wide direction but also to work with the very good community organizations that have developed 10-year plans of their own. As I said, too, we have Susan McGee here – she's still here – who was very instrumental in developing the 10-year plan for Edmonton ending homelessness and who is on the secretariat.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, at least two of the cities, Edmonton and Calgary, have asked for, I believe, almost \$4 billion, and we've yet to hear anything on that.

Now, last month, as we've heard, 24,000 Albertans lost their jobs due to the recession, and according to anyone with any credibility, the recession is going to get worse before it gets better. Today the photo op touted a plan that includes no reference to the recession, that should have been right in front of the minister of housing at that time. To the minister: will the minister admit that her plan fails to contemplate or make any provisions for the tens of thousands of Albertans who are wondering how they are going to pay their mortgages or rent on April 1?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is a very, very good-news plan. Actually, it is. Hon. member, I can tell you this: if you had been at the second national homeless conference that was held at the University of Calgary, you would have very much heard about the principles that are in the plan. There are five principles. They are: better information systems; aggressive assistance to people that are homeless; co-ordinated systems, where all levels of governments work together to address the needs of the homeless; as well as more housing options, which we are accomplishing; and effective policies that will bring down barriers for homeless people.

Ms Notley: Well, of the 27,000 Albertans who lost their jobs this year, only one-third are eligible for EI, leaving the rest to rely on government income support of \$583 per month. Clearly, these are the people who are on the verge of a new wave of homelessness that the minister's plan completely misses. To the minister: will she commit today that these Albertans will not be told they have to sell off their retirement savings at record low levels or their automobiles or anything else before they can get help with rent? If not, why not?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, we have an excellent rent supplement program, Mr. Speaker, which is over a hundred million dollars helping 65,000 Albertans. Hon. member, you know about the affordable housing because we made an announcement in your area on Friday of \$1.9 million for affordable housing. That includes students, families, and individuals, and you know that that will help people.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Inspiring Education Public Consultation

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the last couple of weeks the Minister of Education has rolled out his plan for Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans. It was just a couple of weeks ago that the minister had the steering committee panel here and introduced them to the Legislature, and it was quite the impressive compilation of distinguished Albertans. I was wondering if the minister could share his methodology in selecting the members of that panel.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's important, when you put together a steering committee of this nature for this type of project, that you not go to representatives of organizations who bring, by the very nature of that term, representation but that you bring Albertans together who bring perspectives. So we looked across the province to get a dynamic of people coming from across the province from a geographic perspective and from a variety of areas within the province so that they could bring their expertise, their knowledge, and their passion to the task.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that inspiring answer from the Minister of Education. However, I'm deeply concerned that this panel has left out two very obvious participant groups as part of this discussion, one being members of our current youth here in Alberta, who are the ones being educated and the ones that are relying on this education. Can the minister comment on why that specific group was left off this panel?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, we have a parallel process happening called Speak Out Alberta. We had sessions in schools right across the province back in the October-November time frame and again in the February-March time frame. That will culminate in a conference in early May here in Edmonton. We'll be setting up, as I was mandated by the Premier to do, an advisory council for youth that will have an ongoing participation in discussion with the ministry and with the minister directly on issues pertaining to youth in the process. All of that input will go into the Inspiring Education process as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that answer as well, as the chair of the Youth Secretariat for the province. However, there is an additional group that I believe has been left out of this advisory panel, and that is business and industry, who very much rely on our education system to provide people with the skills and education that they require to be competitive on a global level. Can the minister explain how this issue is going to be addressed through this process?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wouldn't agree that business has been left out. I think one of the co-chairs, our own colleague from Athabasca-Redwater, brings a background and perspective in small business from his previous life. We also have Mark Anielski, who is a professor at the University of Alberta in business and advises businesses across North America, actually, and provides strategic counsel to business. John Masters is president and CEO of Calgary Technologies Inc., which helps entrepreneurs grow small- and medium-sized businesses. However, I have at the request of the co-chairs begun to look to see whether we might add additional business perspective to the council.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Emergency Room Wait Times

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The lack of progress on emergency wait times is more than regrettable. There's additional risk of complications and even preventable deaths, as physicians have been saying for months in Alberta. To the Minister of Health and Wellness. The minister through his annual report has targets and reports on issues such as the percentage of Albertans who consume at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. When will the minister commit to setting a suitable benchmark for average wait times for emergency room patients and report annually?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important that those who are involved on a day-to-day basis with the emergency departments are working with Alberta Health Services to see exactly what can be

done to ensure a smoother transition through our emergencies in our various health facilities. We have in the Department of Health and Wellness initiated the conference that the hon. member referenced about a week ago in this House. By the admission of some of the participants good progress is being made, but it is clearly something that needs to be improved.

Dr. Swann: It's about reporting, Mr. Minister.

In the interest of being open and transparent, will the minister commit to posting wait times for all emergency facilities on the Alberta wait-list registry?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess one of the concerns that I have about this whole wait time issue is that somehow there is an acceptable wait time. Wouldn't we be trying to get to a point where there wasn't a necessity to post wait times, where Albertans were accessing the system in a multitude of ways, not just in emergency rooms? There's this falsehood that somehow if you put an artificial wait time up there, that's the best we have to do. We can do better than that.

Dr. Swann: We're talking about reporting on progress, Mr. Minister.

One way to relieve the bottleneck in ERs is to ensure that there are enough beds outside of the ER to transfer patients. Why are we so short of necessary infrastructure in our health care system?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we may or may not be short of infrastructure. What we have is a system that, quite frankly – and I've said this on many occasions in the House – is not as efficient as it should be. Some of the beds that are being taken in our acute-care facilities don't necessarily need new infrastructure; they may need some provision of care. I could go through the same answer I've given several times to both the Leader of the Opposition and the Member for Lethbridge-East. It's all part of our action plan that is unfolding. This is not going to be fixed quickly, but we're going to fix it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

2:30 Farm Recovery Plan Payouts

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under the Alberta livestock and meat strategy program \$300 million was made available to livestock producers through the Alberta farm recovery plan 2. Producers received their first instalment in June of '08, and they were informed at that time that the second instalment would be mailed out to qualifying producers in January of this year. My question to the minister of agriculture: what is the status and timing of these payments being made under the second instalment?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The second benefit is on the way to the producers as we speak. As many of you know, the first instalment was provided to producers with no strings attached, but in order to be eligible for the second benefit, there were conditions that needed to be met: premise identification for cattle and for cattle producers and age verification. As well, we also require cattle move-in information by feedlots who feed more than 5,000 animals a year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, I'm hearing a number of concerns from constituents, not all from the cattle industry, that their second benefit may be a little less than the first. Can you explain, Mr. Minister, if this is the case and how this is happening?

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, Mr. Speaker, livestock producers told us they needed assistance as soon as possible. In order to do that, to get the cheques in their hands quickly, we estimated how many producers would be eligible. So we were able to provide immediate transitional funding for an additional 5,000 producers. If we'd waited to receive all applications first, producers' first instalments would have been smaller; instead, the second instalment is prorated. A total of \$300 million was approved, and \$300 million will be paid out.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that 5,000 got a payment, but how many producers complied with the requirements and will be getting the second instalment?

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, I'm certainly pleased to say that the AFRP 2 was a huge success, that we had an overwhelming majority of Alberta's livestock producers recognize the importance and the requirements, and they complied. More than 83 per cent of the 2008 calf crop has been age verified. It was an incredible accomplishment. But better yet, Mr. Speaker, in all 97 per cent of eligible producers complied with all the requirements and are now receiving their second instalments.

Plastic Bag Ban

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, this week Sean Graham, a grade 11 student, and Councillor John Vyboh of Fort McMurray proved that they were willing to take the lead on environmental issues. Now I'm hoping the hon. Minister of Environment will follow. The council for the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo moved a motion to draft bylaws for a bag ban. Will the minister commit to giving the rest of the nation something to be envious of by following suit?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, we've had discussions in this House on a number of occasions with respect to plastic bag bans. I've indicated before and I'll indicate again that municipalities are taking the lead on this and that we are certainly reviewing opportunities to implement on a province-wide basis, but at this point in time we are not proposing to do so.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. Recently this government stood by and watched virtually every city, town, and hamlet in the province make legislation banning smoking in public places. Are we expecting the same thing to happen now on plastic bags?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I have indicated that when you talk about reducing the waste stream, plastic bags are just one of thousands of opportunities. We've been encouraging Albertans and have a very successful program in place of Too Good to Waste and encouraging people to reuse their waste, to recycle, and I would encourage them to do the same thing with respect to plastic bags as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Yes. I've been encouraged to reduce, reuse, and recycle since grade 3 as well, but do you think we can get to banning plastic bags sometime in the near future here in Alberta? Let's take some leadership on that issue. Don't you think that would be better?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think I just answered the same question. Restated one more time, the answer is that we have that matter under consideration. At this point in time we do not have any plans to move forward with banning plastic bags.

Triprovincial High-security Remand Centre

Mr. Dallas: Mr. Speaker, almost daily we hear of gang-related violence and murders in communities across Canada. Here in Alberta we are not immune to the bloodshed. I was pleased to see that gang violence was one of the items discussed at the trilateral cabinet meeting in Vancouver last week involving B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan. My questions are for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. Mr. Minister, you attended the trilateral cabinet meeting in Vancouver, and I note with particular interest that a regional remand centre for gang members is being explored. Why would we explore such an option when we're building a new 2,000-bed remand centre here in Edmonton?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to start off by saying that we're always looking at ways to ensure that we can protect the citizens of this province, so we have agreed to look at the feasibility of a shared high-security remand centre for high-risk adult gang members. I want to say that gangs do most of their recruiting within remand centres across our country, and if we can keep them isolated in an area where they would be away from the general population and not allowed to do that recruiting, that would be a good thing. We also recognize that these gangs do not respect our provincial boundaries and travel interprovincially, so again it makes sense to take a look at an interprovincial remand centre.

Mr. Dallas: Well, again to the same minister: when might we expect to see movement on such a project as well as any other initiatives to tackle gang crime?

Mr. Lindsay: Well, Mr. Speaker, last week's trilateral cabinet meeting was a first step in that process. Further discussion on building such a facility will take place at this week's western Attorneys General and Solicitors General conference, which we're going to be holding in Calgary. The regional remand centre concept is only one area that we'll be looking at. We also want to see greater collaboration on intelligence sharing for example, also more co-operation between law-enforcement agencies. We're also going to start work on a memorandum of understanding so that we can effectively fight crime between our provinces.

Mr. Dallas: My final question. Again to the same minister: what assurances can this minister give Albertans that this government is still taking action to stop and prevent gang violence?

Mr. Lindsay: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I want to commend the excellent job that our policing agencies do across our province targeting and arresting gang members in our communities. I can also assure the hon. member and all Albertans that this government

is taking action on gang crime. A number of initiatives are under way to reduce and prevent gang crime in our communities, including the development of a gang crime suppression initiative. We're also moving forward on the establishment of four integrated gang enforcement teams announced by our Premier last fall.

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

Intrabasin Water Transfers

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In June of 2008 the Minister of Environment received recommendations on intrabasin transfers from the Alberta Water Council. They recommended that a new policy was needed. On November 8 the minister admitted that he had received the recommendations, that he was still considering them, and an answer was coming sometime in the new year. So to the Minister of Environment: can the minister tell us what the holdup is in his response to the Alberta Water Council's recommendations and when we can expect an answer? We're now three months into the new year.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the issue with respect to intrabasin transfers of water is that there are already numerous instances where such transfers are taking place and they have historically for a long period of time. It is very difficult to implement a simple solution to this very complex problem. As this member should be aware, we are engaging into a broad consultation with respect to allocation of water. Intrabasin and interbasin transfers obviously are important parts of that.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. The Water Act defines "basin" very broadly, with only seven basins covering an area of almost 700,000 square kilometres in Alberta. My question to the Minister of Environment is: will he change the definition of a major river basin to redesignate the three subbasins in the South Saskatchewan River basin?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely correct. Our policy is abundantly clear: we do not allow for interbasin transfers of water. As the member knows, any such contemplation requires an act of this Legislature. Once you get into subbasins, it gets very, very difficult to distinguish between subbasin rivers and subbasin creeks. The definition required to actually determine what is and is not intrabasin becomes much more complicated, so I can't give that commitment to this member.

Ms Blakeman: All right, then, to the same minister. He mentioned public consultation that he is already holding on this issue. Would he add to that public consultation the assignment to decide whether or not the three subbasins in the South Saskatchewan River basin should be reclassified into major river basins? This would solve a problem like we have with Balzac.

Thank you.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I'm not prone to making policy decisions on the fly in the Legislature. I'll take that under consideration, and we'll be announcing appropriate legislation in due course.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 102 questions and responses today. Our question period is 50 minutes. Out of interest, the length of question period in the Canadian House of Commons is 45 minutes.

In 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of five remaining members to participate in Members' Statements.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Provincial Plan to End Homelessness

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning Alberta became the first Canadian province to develop and approve a 10-year provincial homeless strategy. This 10-year plan, called A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years, was released earlier this morning in Calgary by Alberta's Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs and Steve Snyder, chair of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. It was only a little over a year ago that the Premier established the secretariat and gave them the mandate to deliver a provincial plan to end homelessness in 10 years. This plan, I'm pleased to say, represents the collective wisdom, experience, and determination to get the job done, and its public release and endorsement by the government is an important step forward in our goal to end homelessness and make our communities safer, stronger, and more sustainable.

Albertans care about our families, friends, neighbours, and those in need. Alberta's 10-year homeless plan is rooted in a set of principles that we all share. I will highlight just a few here: addressing root causes of homelessness is essential to ending homelessness; everyone has access to safe, affordable, permanent housing; and preventing and ending homelessness is a shared responsibility. Mr. Speaker, I want to commend our Premier and the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs for their leadership in developing this 10-year plan and moving it through government.

I had the opportunity to spend three days attending the national homeless conference held in Calgary a few weeks ago and to listen to people who are currently homeless. What I heard and what I learned is that homelessness is not simply a matter about housing; it's essentially about belonging. Our commitment to ending homelessness in Alberta is also about defining the character of our province.

Today is a great day, and I do believe that this plan will chart the way on our journey to end homelessness in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Brian Hesje

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Augustana faculty of the University of Alberta, originally Camrose Lutheran College, is an institution that's played a significant role in the lives of many thousands of Albertans and others around the world. In the coming year it will be celebrating its centennial. Over the last century the typical profile of an Augustana student has been that of a kid from the farm or a small prairie town. It started out as a high school for children of Norwegian Lutheran immigrant farmers and has evolved into a world-class liberal arts and science faculty of the University of Alberta known for its excellence in teaching and its small, intimate classes set in a beautiful, small city.

For many of those small-town kids Augustana was their springboard to greater accomplishments. I can think of no better example of that than Brian Hesje, who was introduced earlier today. He's Augustana's most recent recipient of its distinguished alumnus award. Brian Hesje grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan, and after a bit of a false start at a large university he decided to try Augustana,

or at that time Camrose Lutheran College. He has described his time there as a life-changing event. The rural community spirit and overall intimacy and culture of the school made him believe in his ability to make a difference. In other words, Augustana gave Brian Hesje confidence.

His accomplishments are too numerous to mention. I'll just say that he has a bachelor of education and a master of business administration from the U of A. He's a chartered accountant. He's currently chair of the board of Fountain Tire, which is recognized as one of Canada's 50 best managed companies. He's also a member of the ATB Financial board, the STARS board, and is past vice-chair of the NAIT board. His business philosophy reflects Augustana's belief that the spirit of co-operation so crucial to rural life invigorates human endeavour. What a wonderful role for us all and, in particular, those students who might be wondering if they can make a difference in their lives.

Congratulations and thanks to both Augustana and Brian Hesje.

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

Robin and Brian McKeever

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is blessed with truly inspirational citizens, including Robin and Brian McKeever. Robin was a member of Canada's 1988 Olympic cross-country ski team, and following in his ski tracks, literally, is his younger brother Brian. When Brian looks straight ahead, he sees nothing. He has Stargardt's disease and is legally blind, but that's not stopped him from winning four gold, two silver, and two bronze medals in previous Paralympic Games. He also won two gold medals last month at the International Paralympic World Cup, and that sets him up well for his bid to compete in the 2010 Vancouver-Whistler Olympics.

You heard right, Mr. Speaker. Brian McKeever could well become the first person in history to compete in both the Winter Paralympics and the Winter Olympics for able-bodied athletes. In the Paralympics Robin skis in front of Brian, but in the Olympics Brian would be on his own, honing in on other skiers, at least until he blasts past them at the finish line. Brian made history at the regular cross-country ski world championships in 2007. Not only did he finish the 15-kilometre race, he did so as the top Canadian, an impressive 24th.

The McKeever story strikes close to home for me, Mr. Speaker. Both of my grandfathers were blind. Many of my relatives live with many visual maladies, and each has gone on to do great things. Some of you may know that a climbing mate of mine, Eric Weihenmeyer, is the only blind person in history to successfully scale the summit of Mount Everest. He's ever gracious in crediting his teammates for his success, and similarly Brian McKeever has enjoyed great support from his brother Robin. But now Brian is trying to prove that blind and alone or not, indeed the sky is the limit.

I invite all hon. members to join me now in expressing appreciation to the McKeever brothers for their inspiration and in wishing them continued success.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Emergency Medical Services

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a nurse I cannot count the number of times I've seen overwhelming gratitude and respect for our dedicated emergency medical personnel. I was in a serious car

accident, and the time waiting for their arrival was terrifying. I can't describe that feeling of complete trust, that I let go of the fear and stress, and that I was safe when they arrived.

Now there will be an additional burden on these professionals. They'll be expected to perform triage in the field. These professionals will rise to the occasion, but we must examine the government's proposal very carefully before moving forward. Albertans need to know exactly who will be responsible for which decisions made by the emergency medical services.

In emergencies there's very little room for error. First, Albertans must know if all levels of EMS staff will be given the authority to triage patients. Emergency medical responders take a 160-hour course. Emergency medical technicians take 300 hours of EMT theory, a 40-hour hospital practicum, six hours of classroom instruction, and an eight- to 16-week ambulance practicum. Emergency medical technicians, paramedics, have all of this training plus the two-year program. Will triage authority be given only to those with the highest level of training? Rural areas have volunteer services. Will they be retrained?

2:50

My constituents ask where they may end up: doctors' offices, medicentres, or primary care centres. Clearly, the government is hoping to reduce ER wait times by decreasing the numbers presenting to ER. The government hasn't produced any evidence to show that wait times at ERs will change. In fact, the government finds it hard to admit that the problem even exists. ERs are clogged because patients are waiting for beds in hospitals. Seniors in those acute beds should be in long-term care.

Mr. Speaker, health care demands extreme attention to detail. Quick fixes may not help. Additional beds in and out of hospitals would be a good start.

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

Support for Victims of Sexual Assault

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today I attended a press conference for the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton. The centre is launching a campaign called March into the Light. This campaign seeks to increase the support and awareness for victims of sexual assault.

Today I learned that in Canada 39 per cent of women over the age of 16 experience a sexual assault at some point in their lives and that only 8 per cent of all sexual assaults are reported to police. These are just two of the many appalling statistics regarding sexual assault. Help is needed to improve and expand the services the centre is able to offer to children and adult survivors of sexual violence. The Sexual Assault Centre is inviting us all to light a candle, actual or virtual, and to make a donation to help improve and expand the support services for victims in need.

You can also support this cause by participating in their annual Take Back the Night March, where everyone will carry candles of hope. The march will meet at 7 p.m. at the Alberta Avenue Community Centre on – I don't have a date. Together we will reach out to victims and help to reduce the impact of sexual assaults on Albertans. Light a candle in the darkness. Dare to be aware.

Thank you.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Bill 23**Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2009**

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 23, the Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2009.

This bill introduces changes that are necessary to improve Alberta's assessment complaints and appeals process. These changes are a result of a comprehensive consultation with stakeholders and will result in a more understandable, effective, and accessible system for everyone involved.

[Motion carried; Bill 23 read a first time]

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

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I apologize. I guess I haven't had my morning coffee yet. I'm rising with respect to Standing Order 70(a).

Some Hon. Members: Bill 29.

Mr. Denis: Yeah, Bill 29, the Family Law Amendment Act. I'm rising with respect to Standing Order 70(a) . . .

The Speaker: I think we'll move on, then, to the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Bill 30**Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2009**

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 30, the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2009.

This bill will amend the Traffic Safety Act. The proposed changes include the following. A wording change related to the maintenance enforcement program replaces "cancellation" of an operator's licence regarding the maintenance enforcement program and defaults to "suspension" to address administrative processes resulting from the different definitions of terms. This change eliminates confusion and appropriately identifies those who fail to make support payments as suspended drivers.

The second one is investigator class. This creates a new class of investigators for the carrier and vehicle safety programs and driver training programs. These investigating officers will be dedicated to carrying out specialized technical functions under the Traffic Safety Act and its regulations.

The third one, peace officer definition change. This amendment amends the definition of peace officer in the Traffic Safety Act and clarifies the definition of peace officer to include the new classification as well as police officers created under the Police Act, including First Nations police officers. Mr. Speaker, this gives police officers who were inadvertently not included in the peace officer definition under the Traffic Safety Act the authority to enforce the act.

The fourth change is conduct of driver examiners, driving instructors, and the operation of driver training schools. This clarifies the authority to make regulations about the conduct of driver examiners, driving instructors, and the operators of driver training schools.

The fifth change is that administrative penalties may be levied in the case of driver examiners, driver instructors, and the operators of driver training schools. Mr. Speaker, this adds the driver examiners, driving instructors, and operators of driver training schools to the definition of regulated persons and thereby provides the further compliance tools.

These two amendments I just mentioned, related to driver training

and the operation of driver training schools, stem from a 2008 court case and legal advice from Alberta Justice.

The sixth change is the definition of intersection safety device. It clarifies the definition of intersection safety device introduced in the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2007. It is necessary to specify that these devices are capable of gathering evidence for traffic signal red-light infractions or speeding infractions or both. Without the amendment Justice believes that the definition may be interpreted that an intersection safety device may be able to gather evidence for a traffic signal red-light infraction and a speeding infraction.

The last amendment, Mr. Speaker, is the capping of vicarious liability of vehicle rental companies. Finally, this amendment adds vehicle rental companies to the list of businesses whose vicarious liability will be capped under the proclamation of the 2007 Traffic Safety Amendment Act.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, that was a rather exhaustive first reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 30 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 30 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: Back to the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont for introduction.

Bill 29**Family Law Amendment Act, 2009**

Mr. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I won't state the standing order this time. I request leave to introduce Bill 29, the Family Law Amendment Act, 2009.

This bill relates to the child support recalculation program, which will improve access to justice by offering a simple and low-cost way for parents to have their child support orders recalculated annually based on changes in the parents' income without returning to court. The proposed amendments respond to feedback received by this government in recent consultations and will improve the incentive for parents to provide their income information to the new program. This bill will better encourage parties to be open with the recalculation program and ensure that if they are not, Alberta's children will still receive the support that they deserve.

I, therefore, move first reading of this bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 29 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, we now come up against Standing Order 7(7). It's now 3 o'clock. If we want to proceed with the remainder of the Routine, we'll need unanimous consent. I will ask if all hon. members will permit the Assembly to continue the Routine. If you are opposed, simply say no.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

3:00

Bill 31

Rules of Court Statutes Amendment Act, 2009

Mr. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise again today to request leave to introduce Bill 31, the Rules of Court Statutes Amendment Act, 2009.

Mr. Speaker, the *Rules of Court*, which govern practice and procedure in the Court of Appeal and the Court of Queen's Bench in this province, are going through major revisions, and this bill will consolidate the authority for the *Rules of Court* in one statute, the Judicature Act. Most provisions relating to the enforcement of money judgments will be relocated from the *Rules of Court* to the Civil Enforcement Act and regulation. This bill will also make housekeeping and other consequential amendments to various statutes related to the new rules. If I ever decide to practise law again, I will have to learn these new rules as well.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 31 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 31 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table five copies of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness report. A Plan for Alberta represents a dramatic shift in focus from finding homeless people a place to sleep each night to providing homeless people with a place to live. This plan adopts a Housing First approach. This approach provides immediate housing along with the support services needed to break the cycle of homelessness.

Mr. Speaker, I do applaud our Premier for his personal leadership and for his commitment to end homelessness, and I thank the members of the secretariat for this wonderful plan. It's good news. I encourage all members in this Assembly to review the report.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a document to table today to the Legislative Assembly. It's the Alberta heritage savings trust fund business plan 2009-12. It's a draft from the heritage savings trust fund meeting that occurred earlier this morning in the Legislature Annex.

I don't have another tabling, but to the hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands: I would remind him that the Speaker of our Assembly has been elected in nine consecutive elections while you are still working on that. You should be proud of your record of seven. I guess Speakers very often get elected for a long period of time.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of 10 reports from long-term care workers indicating a variety of specific problems on different shifts that were

short staffed. These indicate that some residents did not receive their morning care until mid-afternoon, and once again scheduled baths were missed.

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on a purported point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under a number of sections of the standing orders, the usual suspects of 23(h) and (i), but I would also like to add to that (j) and (l). Section 23(h) reads, "makes allegations against another Member"; (i) reads, "imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member"; (j) refers to using "abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder"; and (l) says, "introduces any matter in debate that offends the practices and precedents of the Assembly."

I'm referring, Mr. Speaker, to the comments made by the Premier. You will have the advantage of the Blues, but they were to the effect of alleging that the position of the opposition has been or perhaps still is to shut down the oil sands altogether. I want to argue on two different lines, Mr. Speaker. One is a matter of truth, and the other is a matter of respect.

First, on the issue of truth I'm just going to cite a couple of examples that completely contradict the Premier. This, first of all, is from the election platform of the Alberta Liberals in the last election, page 16. I'll just keep this quote very brief. "Unleash 'the Western Tiger' by encouraging the building of bitumen upgraders in Alberta." I repeat that: "encouraging the building of bitumen upgraders in Alberta." Okay? It's a matter of clear print in the platform.

I will also refer briefly to the text of a speech that I delivered many times in the fall of September 2007 that was widely reported. The Premier has actually referred to it a number of times. I just want to make sure it's on the record. It's an outstanding speech, I think, Mr. Speaker, but I'll just quote from it very briefly.

In fact, there are at least three other upgraders of Alberta bitumen planned for the U.S. They're being built there for various reasons, things like lower costs and readily-available labour. I don't blame the companies. Everyone knows our economy – Alberta's economy – is overheated. Labour is scarce. Construction costs are skyrocketing. But it got me to thinking: Is this the best we can do? Or are we letting a tremendous opportunity pass us by? Is there a better way to build Alberta's future? I think there is.

That's one quote.

I will quote again, and this was in a very favourable context. I said that at an oil sands conference just last winter former premier Peter Lougheed said, "I just find it completely unacceptable that our resource involves shipping jobs down the pipeline with bitumen to the United States." In this speech I was agreeing with that position.

I will finish with a last quote here from that speech, which was known to the Premier.

Earlier this year, in discussing the potential flow of bitumen south to the US, the Canada West Foundation reminded all of us of a well-repeated insult. They said that shipping bitumen to the US for upgrading "would solidify Canada's embarrassing label as a hewer of wood and drawer of water."

We can do so much better. We can have a sustainable and secure economic future. We can solidify Alberta's place in Canada. Rather than just shrugging our shoulders and letting things go, we can think strategically. We can imagine the future we want. We can plan for that future. Corporations flourish by reaching out . . . by working together. Business gets it. So can government. Imagine what we can do with the resources we have here. Here in Alberta . . . I'd rather this prosperity benefit Albertans.

Those are two clear documentations of the fact that this caucus has stood strongly for developing the oil sands and that the Premier has known that because he has referred to this speech. Mr. Speaker, on that basis I would argue – and it’s clear in black and white – that the Premier in his comments has taken a position of falseness against us. [interjections] I would ask for order, Mr. Speaker. I’m getting a lot of heckling from the minister of health, and I’d ask for some order in this point of order.

The Speaker: Hon. members, would everybody listen attentively.

Dr. Taft: Thank you.

Secondly comes the matter of respect. Now, I raise this issue, Mr. Speaker, because the Premier made exactly the same or substantially the same allegation on November 3, 2008, and at that time it was also a point of order. That’s where I bring in 23(j) and (l) from the standing orders, because this is important. I believe that if you as Speaker do not come down clearly on this issue and enforce it, we are allowing a continual repeating of these points of order, continuing abuse.

I will say to you, Mr. Speaker – and I want to quote from your comments and from the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, page 433, which says, among various things: “The Speaker has ruled that the matter is a disagreement among Members over the facts surrounding the issue.” Well, there is no disagreement over the facts surrounding the issue. The facts are in black and white. I put it to you that by repeatedly raising this issue, the Premier is in fact undermining your authority and is using language of a nature likely to create disorder. If he repeatedly brings forward the same matter, the same deceit, the same lies, the same misrepresentation, and if he’s allowed to get away with it time and time again, then we will get disorder.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, I would also say that the Premier’s behaviour and comments offend the practices and precedents of this Assembly. This point of order has been raised repeatedly in the past. This Premier has repeatedly made the same false allegations, and I would challenge you as Speaker to come forward with a forceful ruling to make it clear – to make it clear – to the Premier that continuing to make blatantly false comments and imputing false motives and allegations to us is unacceptable. I would say further that if you do not make that ruling, we are inviting complete disorder in this Assembly.

Thank you.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the only thing I can think of is that the hon. member is trying to get himself unshackled from the dictums of his own leader, saying that there should be order in the House, because he wants to unleash disorder by exhorting you to make a ruling on an issue for which there is no good reason to do so.

First of all, I guess probably the only thing I would need to say is that his point of order is about making an allegation against another member, and in his first line he indicated that if there was any such allegation, it was against a whole caucus, not against a member. You’ve ruled on that so many times, Mr. Speaker. No member was singled out by the Premier. He basically pointed out something that I think has been apparent to every member of this House and many members of the public, and that is that the Liberal opposition time after time for the last three years have exhorted a viewpoint that, taken to its natural conclusion, would have had the oil sands shut down, and there would have been no bitumen for upgraders.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that the hon. member in his

questions this afternoon was talking about upgraders, and all of us in this House, I believe, and Albertans want the upgraders to proceed. They want to have the opportunity for bitumen taken from the oil sands to be upgraded here at home and the value added here at home, and that’s, I think, very fair.

But it’s interesting that in the questions raised today really about the building of upgraders, the Premier made a very valid point. There’s no point in having upgraders if you don’t have bitumen, and you won’t have bitumen if you put a significant constraint against, if you participate in the maligning of the resource that we have. That, I think, was the point that the Premier was making. It has nothing to do with an allegation against another member. No member was mentioned. In fact, I think the reference was to the position taken by the opposition caucus. There was no imputed or false or unavowed motive to another member. Indeed, the Premier was referring to positions taken by the opposition caucus over the past number of years.

You know, the hon. member talks about truth and respect and quotes himself from his various speeches to show that he has been talking about bitumen. Fair enough. I’m glad to hear because I hadn’t heard it before and I guess neither had most Albertans heard before the views that he was expressing, that he was so positive about the oil sands of Alberta and the value of those oil sands to the future of Alberta and the need to upgrade the bitumen here at home and create jobs and value for Albertans.

It appears we’re all on the same page, and we’ll work together going forward to create that kind of opportunity for Alberta, Mr. Speaker, but no one has had their integrity or their motives called into question here. It’s really a question of really, truly understanding the position of the Liberal opposition when on one day they attack vociferously the oil sands, which underpin the economy of this province, and the next day attack the government for not having upgraders in place to upgrade the bitumen that they wouldn’t want us to extract.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on this point of order.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. In addition to the speeches the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview quoted, we have pages and pages and pages of *Hansard* supporting the fact that we believe in the oil sands. Where the disagreement occurs, Mr. Speaker, is on the pace of development and the style of development. We’ve talked about environmentally sustainable development. You’ll not have heard – and you can search *Hansard* – a Liberal having talked about a moratorium. You will find examples where we talked about putting on the brakes as opposed to full speed. We’ve talked about economic, sensible development as opposed to the rate, but you will never find any suggestion that the Alberta Liberals are opposed to the sustainable environmental and economic development of the tar sands. That is the basis of this point of order. The Premier has impugned motive. The Premier has suggested that we are opposed to the development of the oil sands.

It’s a good opportunity that we have today for those members who have not heard this repeated to actually plug in the term “Liberal” as it connects with oil sands and do their research and their homework. You will see that we believe that this is sustainable if the proper environmental precautionary moves are taken. We have brought up concerns such as the 500 ducks dying in the tailings ponds. We have brought up concerns about leaching.

The Speaker: Try and zero it in very, very specifically to the point of order, okay?

Mr. Chase: Thank you.

The Alberta Liberals are on record as supporting the oil sands sustainably, economically, environmentally.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Oberle: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I'd just like to point out – and I'm sure you're aware – that the subject of the original point of order was not what the Liberal policy on the oil sands was. Clearly, there's some confusion around that, and I suggest we might not be able to clean it up today. The original point of order referred to 23(h), (i), and (j) and whether an allegation was made against a specific member. The member in his comments admitted himself that a sweep of the arm indicated a party across the House. I see three parties across the House. I suspect the Premier was indicating one of two of them. Whether the language was intended to or did in fact cause disorder in the House: I suggest that the tone of the question period, which was perhaps one of the quietest we've had in months, answers that question directly.

I submit that the ensuing debate, while useful, might help to clear up in some regard the Liberal position. It does nothing to speak to a point of order, which is frivolous, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, that was 16 or 17 minutes. Hon. members, our standing orders are very, very specific. We have Standing Order 23(h), which was alluded to by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, which says, "makes allegations against another Member," and (i) says, "imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member," and member is capitalized. There's nothing in 23 which refers to a party or a caucus or anything else. That order is raised when it deals with a member.

Now, in the question period, which was a very calm, quiet, soothing question period today, the Premier, in responding to a question that came from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, said the following: "Unfortunately that same attention wasn't paid to the job losses in the oil sands when the party opposite to me wanted to shut the whole thing down." We certainly had an opportunity to clarify positions of various parties in the House this afternoon. The chair cannot see any allegation against any member that was raised.

I'd just like to refer one more time to *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules & Forms*. If you go to order 409, basically dealing with oral questions, which really is the cause of most of the responses, unfortunately, if they get too long, the following should apply:

- (1) It must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate.
- (2) The question must be brief . . .
- (3) The question ought to seek information and, therefore, cannot be based upon a hypothesis, cannot seek an opinion, either legal or otherwise, and must not suggest its own answer, be argumentative or make representations.
- (4) It ought to be on an important matter, and not be frivolous.
- (5) [There] ought to be . . . some urgency.

The only reason the chair raises those again is because invariably they lead to the kind of responses you get. So, you know, if I'm going to start ruling on some of these responses, then I'm going to start ruling on a whole series of questions, and I suspect that nobody wants that to happen. There's got to be some flexibility in here.

3:20

The chair is concerned, though. The chair is very, very concerned that an hon. member would stand up on a point of order and say: if you, the Speaker, do not agree with what I'm saying, then there's going to be chaos in the House. Whoa. If that isn't threatening, if

that isn't intimidating, if that isn't exhorting, if that isn't pushing, I'm not sure what it is. The chair will not be pushed by any member of this House. If there are arguments to be made with respect to a point of order, they must be intelligent arguments, they must be factual arguments, they must be comprehensive arguments, and they must deal with the point.

This is not a point of order. There was no allegation made against another member in this House.

Before we move on, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a constituent, Mark Ramsankar, the president of the Edmonton public teachers local 37, who is visiting the Legislature today. Mr. Ramsankar has lived in Sherwood Park for the past 10 years, during which he has worked tirelessly to ensure that Alberta's educational system remains one of the best systems in the world. He is here today to observe debate on Motion 503 later this afternoon. He's seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House two friends, neighbours, and constituents of mine who are visiting the House today and have been up in the public gallery for a good part of the afternoon. George and Jan Armstrong from Bassano are a third-generation ranch family who've raised their three children in the Bassano area and have been strong supporters of the community for many years. Jan, a sonographer who works in Medicine Hat as an ultrasound technologist, and George, a rancher and a member of the Alberta Institute of Agrologists, have been strong community supporters, involved in hockey and a whole range of community supports that make our community very rich. I'd like to ask George and Jan to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Orders of the Day

Written Questions

[The Clerk read the following written questions, which had been accepted]

Service Alberta Request Wait Times

- Q4. Mr. Mason:
For the fiscal years 2005-2006 to 2007-2008 what was the average wait time each year for Service Alberta to process a person's request for a service or for information?

Government Environmental Inspectors

- Q15. Ms Notley:
In January, May, and September of the years 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008 how many full-time environmental

inspectors permanently employed by the government were permanently assigned to the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo?

Motions for Returns

The Clerk: Pursuant to Standing Order 34(3.1) motions for returns are deemed to stand and retain their places with the exception of Motion for a Return 16.

Environmental Inspectors in Wood Buffalo

M16. Ms Notley moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence between environmental inspectors in the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, their managers, and the government regarding the inspectors' workloads and ability to complete assigned tasks for the time period between January 1, 2006, and February 10, 2009.

Ms Notley: I'm seeking guidance. Is this my opportunity to outline the rationale for same?

The Speaker: Absolutely.

Ms Notley: Okay. Thank you. The reason we are pursuing this information is because we are of course trying to find out whether there are a sufficient number of environmental inspectors in the Fort McMurray area. As we've already discussed at some length in this House in the course of discussing the most recent point of order debate, this is an issue that's very important to Albertans and about which and around which there's a great deal of debate. On one hand, we have what many people see as the sole economic engine of the province, and whether that is or isn't the case, it's certainly an important component to Alberta's economic structure and success. On the other hand, we have some very, very serious concerns about the toll that that activity takes on our environment. So as Albertans we are looking to see with great detail whether or not the government is successfully balancing between the economic interests and the environmental, the need to protect the environment.

One of the issues that was raised in this House very recently was, of course, the issue of some charges that were laid against companies working in the area identified by this motion, and one of the allegations – granted, it's only an allegation at this point – was that in some cases the company in question was able to engage in environmental breaches for two or three years before the government was able to stop them. The key element to that, of course, and the reason why that was happening comes down to whether or not there really is any kind of comprehensive system of spot-checking or proactive monitoring going on in that area.

Now, we are concerned that, in fact, what's actually happening is that the staff working for the Ministry of Environment up there are actually way behind even their ability to respond to industry notification of incidents, which they're required to make under the act. In that case, they're not even keeping up with that work, and they have virtually no capacity to do any kind of proactive monitoring or safeguarding. This is a matter of extreme public concern and extreme public interest.

In response to estimates debate last spring I had previously received – and I thank the Minister of Environment for this – some information with respect to the number of inspectors up there in that area. I think that at one point there was a bit of confusion. There was talk about four inspectors and one investigator, and then there was talk about increasing that to eight, depending on whether or not they're operating under the oil sands group, but that group actually does a different job and doesn't actually monitor. Anyway, there

was a bit of confusion, but in any event there is a great deal of public concern about whether there are enough people up there.

What this motion does is ask for disclosure of discussion between these inspectors and their managers and their managers' managers on the degree to which they are able to meet their obligations under the acts which they are required to enforce, acts that arise from decisions made in this Legislature: the environmental enhancement act and the water protection act. We are concerned that they are not able to meet those needs and that the acts are not being properly implemented, and as Members of this Legislative Assembly we should be very gravely concerned about that fact. It is with this concern in mind that we ask to have more information about the degree to which the inspectors employed by the Ministry of Environment in the Fort McMurray area are able to meet the obligations of their job.

Thank you.

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, as you may have deduced by now since this motion for a return was not listed as one that the government is prepared to accept, I am going to be recommending to members that the motion before us be rejected. There are a number of very logical reasons for making that recommendation. I was struck by the member's presentation, in which she indicated that she speculates on what is actually happening and wants this motion to perhaps formulate in her own mind whether or not her speculation is real or imagined. I would suggest that I, too, speculate that the reason why we have this motion before us is because this member wishes to engage in a bit of a fishing expedition. For that reason among others, I would suggest that this is a motion that we should not and cannot accept.

I also want to point out that the motion itself is worded in a rather nebulous form. It's extremely broad and talks about environmental inspectors, and environmental inspectors include a broad spectrum of individuals. It could include employees of Alberta Environment, but it also could include the ERCB, the local health board, inspectors for the regional municipality, and other public bodies such as fish and wildlife.

3:30

Records that may form part of any kind of disclosure that this motion requests may include records that relate to open investigations and planning or details of prepared or announced or unannounced inspections. As I've often said in this House, this department engages in audits. Those audits can take the form of announced or in many cases unannounced inspections, so it would compromise the ability for us to do the important work that we do. It also could relate to an open investigation that could harm the effectiveness of the investigative techniques and procedures currently used or likely to be used in law enforcement, or it could reveal information relating to or used in the exercise of prosecutorial discretion.

In summary, the request is far too broad. It would involve other public bodies and likely encompass certain types of information which must be protected as identified in various legislation under environmental legislation, the Water Act, and the Oil and Gas Conservation Act.

As a result, Mr. Speaker, I recommend that the members reject this motion.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you. I have a contrary viewpoint that this request is extremely specific both in time and the information it's looking for, what it's questioning regarding the inspectors' workloads and abilities to complete assigned tasks. It's a very defined

time period, January 1, 2006, to February 10, 2009. It seems to me that it would be in the government's best interests to indicate that they have sufficient personnel on hand up north, where a fifth of our land is subject to either in situ or mining of our extremely important oil sands, if the government were to refute charges of dirty oil. It's very hard to refute dead ducks when there are 500 of them floating or sinking below the surface. The member here is saying that if the government is true to its claims of transparency and accountability, then we should be able to find out if the inspectors, in their own words, are able to carry out their assignment.

I also have a degree of sympathy for the Ministry of Environment because my understanding, unless the Environment ministry has received an increase of funding, is that their ministry operates on less than 4 per cent of the entire budget assigned to the various ministries. If the inspectors' workload is such that they can't do their job and if they can't protect the Athabasca River and if they can't carry out Lorne Taylor's hope for the water for life strategy, then this whole oil sands development is at risk not only from external attacks and accusations of dirty oil but from internal stewardship.

Therefore, very specifically, the time period January 1, 2006, to February 10, 2009, workloads and the ability to complete assigned tasks. If the report comes back in the full transparent disclosure and indicates from the inspectors, those who are on the job, basically expected on a 24/7 basis, that they're saying to us, "Help; we cannot perform our job; we cannot provide environmental security," then we need to be listening to those pleas. Unfortunately, if this request is denied, so is transparency and accountability.

The Speaker: Are there others who would like to participate, or should I call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to conclude the debate?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess, you know, the hon. minister has suggested that we're on a fishing expedition, and I would like to say that were I to go fishing, I think the last place that I would go fishing would be in water around the oil sands at this point. Notwithstanding that, we're not speculating. We had discussion in this House very recently about allegations levied by this minister's own staff, very clearly, that illegal activity was going on for two years, not caught by the so-called adequate monitoring. So it's quite reasonable for us to assume that that the monitoring is not going on as it should be.

With respect to what was characterized as the nebulous wording, I would just like to say that were the wording that much of a problem, we, of course, would be quite open to discussing ways to amend it in order to meet the public interests as well as the objectives of this Assembly, yet unfortunately that invitation has not been forthcoming.

Finally, as I say, I mean, we'd be also very happy if there were memos indicating that the workload was just okay-dokey and there was no need for additional assistance, but again we can't know that because it appears as though we won't be provided with this information.

I just want to renew my point that this is a matter of grave public concern and grave public issue. It is something that is discussed every week in this Legislature over and over and over again and also within the public. I think there is a significant obligation on the government to be a great deal more forthcoming in terms of the exact details around the efforts that are being made or can be made to protect the environment in the oil sands area.

I urge all members to consider supporting my motion. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 16 lost]

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 202

Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009

[Debate adjourned March 9]

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, did you have additional comments to make with respect to this matter?

Then I'll call on the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, when this bill was presented, I had a number of concerns about it, but I still sort of was on the fence in terms of the aye or nay. However, as I sat here and listened to some of the words that were said by my fellow members of this House, it became quite clear to me that I would be against it. The reason that that would be . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, you've already participated in this debate. You did it earlier. You're ineligible. You can't do it. Please sit down.

Well, we'll go to the next speaker, the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, on a rotation basis.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour today to rise and speak to Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, as proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays. Bill 202 proposes to create an office of municipal auditor general which would assist municipalities in conducting performance audits. As I understand this bill as introduced by the hon. member, it will allow the municipal auditor general to work with municipalities and financial auditors to conduct performance audits that could make recommendations for municipalities on how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of municipal operations. Bill 202 would require publicly accessible follow-up reports outlining actions taken on recommendations for improving business practices. The objective body of a municipal auditor general would assist municipalities to improve efficiency in their operations and create more openness and transparency for all Albertans.

Currently the MGA, or Municipal Government Act, defines parameters in which municipalities operate. Given that municipalities must fulfill numerous requirements set out by the act in regard to financial reporting and auditing, among these requirements is that Alberta municipalities must submit a financial information return as well as audited financial statements. The financial information return provides details on the overall fiscal position of a municipality within a given year as well as any transactions within that year. Mr. Speaker, further to this, the municipal financial information returns include information that is separated into operating, capital, and reserve fund categories. It also provides details of the municipal property taxes that are levied in that municipality. Furthermore, it outlines a municipality's debt, including current debt levels, total debt service charges, and total debt service limit.

3:40

Also required by the MGA, Mr. Speaker, is an annual submission of the municipality's audited financial statements. These financial statements must be in accordance with the generally accepted accounting principles as recommended by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants. The audited financial statements must include any modifications established by the minister through

regulations. These financial statements reflect the assets, liabilities, revenues, expenditures, changes in fund balances, and the change in financial position of the municipality. The purpose of both the municipal financial information return and the financial statement is to ensure the transparency of the fiscal position of the municipality.

Beyond the Municipal Government Act the 10-year MSI commitment by this government has provided Alberta municipalities with predictable and sustainable funding that helps municipalities to meet growth pressures. Keeping this in mind, I can see why the hon. member would like to strengthen the provincial and municipal partnership in the interests of citizens and taxpayers. However, sometimes in this House we try to create a policy solution that goes looking for an issue. Now, this might not be the case in this instance. However, I'm not convinced that we have appropriately defined the problem here, Mr. Speaker, and without clearly defining the problem, I cannot be convinced that this bill is the best solution.

Mr. Speaker, I can't help but think, being a member from the city of Calgary, that some of why this bill has come forward has to do with an issue of \$25 million footbridges. In speaking with a number of constituents as well as city councillors in the city of Calgary, we need to be very careful that we're not looking for a solution that is not going to address the issue of just making purely bad political choices. I don't think that that is the role of an Auditor General. I think we need to be very careful that we're not looking for a solution to a problem that, quite frankly, doesn't exist or where the solution is actually, rather, something different than what is being proposed.

I also have some concern about whether this actually deals with different sizes of municipalities in a different way. In fact, I think we have some school jurisdictions that have greater operating budgets than a lot of municipalities in this province. Would this be a requirement that we would want to put on school boards as well?

Additionally, since becoming a member of this House, I've become keenly aware of unintended consequences of policy decisions. We need to be careful that like our current provincial Auditor General – and I think we've seen this proliferation of the role of Auditors General, particularly some of the heroic work done by Sheila Fraser, the national Auditor General, and some of the stuff that she has been able to bring to light. We've also seen the expanding creep of the mandate of the Auditor General sometimes going beyond that of just performance auditing and getting into policy setting. I think we need to be very careful of that, Mr. Speaker. I don't want that to be an unintended consequence.

Beyond the last few comments that I've just made, it is a red flag that the AUMA does not support this bill. However, I'm sure that they and the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays and myself support the idea of increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of the allocation of taxpayers' money. Mr. Speaker, I believe that there is an opportunity to further define and accurately define the challenge that we are trying to address here and explore all policy options available for this issue.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to move that the motion for second reading of Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following: Bill 202, the Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Community Services under temporary Standing Order 74.2.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this amendment is being circulated. I do not believe there's such a thing as temporary Standing Order 74.2. There is certainly Standing Order 74.2. This Assembly codified these rules.

Okay. We have an amendment before the House. I'll wait a few seconds as it gets circulated to all the members, and those who would like to participate on the amendment, I'll recognize you. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity on the amendment.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: We're on the amendment. It's very specific.

Mr. Chase: Yes. I was just going to say, Mr. Speaker, that I'll do my utmost to speak to the amendment.

The Speaker: Well, you can be assured. The amendment says: referred to a committee. That's the only thing we're talking about.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. To read the amendment, as you so noted:

Bill 202, Municipal Government (Municipal Auditor General) Amendment Act, 2009, be not now read a second time but the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Community Services in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

I support the amendment, Mr. Speaker, because I do believe greater discussion is required. This particular municipal government bill, 202, is proposing basically a provincial regionalization power grab, the undermining of local autonomy, undermining local authorities . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, I'm going to make it very clear. This is referral to a committee. That's what we're talking about. We're not debating the bill now.

Mr. Chase: I understand that.

The Speaker: Okay, then. It's committees. It's the only thing you've got to talk about. Nothing else.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. That is why the sober second thought, the extra input that a committee provides is warranted. Therefore, I thank the Member for Calgary-North Hill for bringing forth this amendment.

Thank you Mr. Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to discuss.

The Speaker: Now, two hon. members – Peace River rose first and the hon. Deputy Government House Leader – both have their Standing Orders in front of them. The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I just want to get some clarification from the chair with respect to the standing order. As I understand, this is a referral motion under Standing Order 74.1.

74.1(3) Any motion made pursuant to this Standing Order shall be decided without debate or amendment, and if the motion is decided in the negative the Bill shall be ordered for second reading.

So I'm not so sure that we should be engaging in debate at this point.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the amendment was moved during second reading. It is debatable. If it was moved after second reading, it would not have been debatable. It's moved during second reading, and that's why we're debating it.

Hon. Member for Peace River, if you want to continue the debate on the amendment, please proceed.

Mr. Oberle: I guess I have the same confusion, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: No. There's no confusion. The clarification has been given by the chair. Please proceed on the amendment.

Mr. Oberle: In 74.1(3) it says "if the motion is decided in the negative . . . shall be ordered for second reading." How could we do that if we'd already had second reading?

The Speaker: Hon. members, I've already explained the process of how we deal with this. During second reading if there is an amendment, it's debatable. If after second reading a vote has been taken and an amendment comes in, in essence in committee, it's not debatable. We're in the process according to the rules that the members wrote. We're dealing with this. It's a very simple question. You have a question to refer it to a committee or not. It's debatable. It's an amendment.

The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East on the amendment.

Ms Pastoor: On the amendment, Mr. Speaker, indeed. I certainly would support this amendment. I'll be very brief. I believe that in my remarks when I spoke to this before, I had suggested that very procedure should happen, so I thank my hon. colleague for Calgary-North Hill for bringing that forward.

The Speaker: Others on the referral amendment?

Okay. I take it the hon. member from Calgary is happy with the procedure. We'll call the question on the amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

3:50

The Speaker: This matter is now referred to the Standing Committee on Community Services.

This is quite an unusual procedure. Hon. members, if such an amendment was done during a debate when there hadn't even been a vote on it, in essence you've got an ultimate guillotine that I'm not sure any members here in this Assembly have ever suggested they should have. Every bill would in essence come up for an ending of it without any debate.

Bill 203

Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and begin second reading debate on Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009.

The intent of Bill 203 is to define province-wide standards around financial contributions in municipal elections and to ensure comprehensive and timely disclosure of those campaign financial records. Amendments to the Local Authorities Election Act would see rules for the municipal level mirror legislation that already exists to guide provincial election campaign finances and federal election campaign finances. This will achieve consistent accountability and transparency and increase confidence in fair election financing at all levels in the province. To be fair, some municipal campaign rules already exist in the province today, but they are only implemented with local bylaws, they are inconsistent, and they are few. Only a handful of our approximately 360 municipalities have them.

Mr. Speaker, I would point out that other jurisdictions – Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec – have already created legislation

around municipal election campaign finance, and theirs are more restrictive and farther reaching than Bill 203. That being said, Bill 203's provisions would set fair and reasonable province-wide standards that I believe would be relevant for all Alberta communities.

I also believe that the fundamentals of this bill are strong, that it will be effective to protect the voter, the contributor, and the candidate. For example, the voter will be protected in several ways, including allowing them to be informed by giving them the ability to access full disclosure of who's contributing to any campaign and at what level, by limiting the size of donations, which will ensure that undue influence will not be gained by a small number of supporters making large financial contributions, by helping to encourage a wide slate of candidates, ensuring any citizen has a fair opportunity to run regardless of their economic status or the level of influence they have with potential contributors or by incumbency, and by prohibiting donor organizations in potential conflict or those owned or financially supported by taxpayers from using any part of their resources to contribute to political campaigns. It will also protect the voter by only allowing entities that have legitimate interests in Alberta to invest in political campaigns here and to influence our democratic process and, finally, by helping to ensure that elections will be run and won on broad-based support.

It will protect the contributor by ensuring that their donations will only be used for the purpose for which they were proposed to be used, the candidate's municipal election campaign, by giving them assurance that their input and support counts and that their investment can be just as valuable as the person next door's, and by protecting them from pressures or expectations to make donations that are more than reasonable.

Lastly, this transparency will also protect the candidate by minimizing or eliminating their exposure to unsubstantiated insinuations or allegations of undue influence benefiting perceived large contributors or unknown contributors, by ensuring that they will indeed not be exposed to indebtedness to large contributors, and by ensuring that they have a legitimate shot at winning an election. With a level playing field every Albertan has an equal opportunity to make a difference. They can be successful regardless of their wealth, incumbency, or their ability to network with wealthy or influential Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, to achieve this, Bill 203 has a few key elements: limit individual contributions to a total of \$5,000 within any campaign period, define organizations that would not be eligible to make municipal campaign contributions, define the campaign period for reporting purposes, specify the duties of a candidate, require that a candidate file a campaign disclosure statement within a specific period and automatically disqualify any candidate from elected office if they fail to file a disclosure statement within the prescribed time period, and require that any surplus exceeding \$500 be paid to the municipality and held in trust in an interest-bearing account.

Mr. Speaker, it is not the intent of Bill 203 to impose retroactivity of these provisions of contribution caps, full disclosure, or prohibited corporations on existing campaign funds. I think we all realize that those existing campaign funds have been built up in good faith and over many years and that it would be unfair and impractical to try and impose these provisions on those existing funds. Therefore, Bill 203 has a one-time transition provision that will allow candidates or potential candidates to declare and transition their existing campaign funds. Once declared and put into trust, those existing funds would be eligible for future campaigns without full compliance to the provisions of this bill.

Mr. Speaker, that outlines the intent and the key elements of Bill 203. It is also important to emphasize what Bill 203 is and what it

is not. Bill 203 is not an indictment of municipal elections in Alberta today or of municipalities or of municipal candidates. However, it is an affirmation that the legislation governing federal and provincial elections has proven very valuable and that they are working and working well. It is a recognition that a gap exists today, a gap in how we handle election campaign finance in Alberta. It is also a recognition that by filling in this gap, we can and should do for municipal elections what B.C., Ontario, and Quebec have already done, which is just what has been done through the strict provincial and federal campaign finance guidelines; that is, to strengthen the integrity of our democratic system and, more importantly, the confidence of voters in their hard-working elected officials.

Ultimately, Bill 203 will also increase the opportunity for all Albertans to get better informed, more engaged, and potentially run in the elections in their communities. To that end, Mr. Speaker, I'm looking for support from the Assembly for Bill 203. I look forward to the very important debate on this private member's bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to be part of debate on Bill 203 today. First, I want to thank the member for the work that he has done to bring this bill forward.

Mr. Speaker, we know that strong municipalities are the key ingredient to strong communities. The Premier and myself have reiterated that numerous times. I know that all strong municipalities also believe in accountability. Accountability and transparency are things Albertans expect for all municipalities regardless of size and all levels of government. Accountability is a priority for my ministry and for this province. Bill 203 is consistent with this priority. That is why I'm happy to support it.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has a sound election process in place. In 2005 the Local Authorities Election Act was strengthened after a major review. Another comprehensive review is anticipated following the 2010 municipal elections. In the meantime these changes suggested by my hon. colleague are welcomed and worthy of consideration.

The Local Authorities Election Act does contain rules about campaign finances. These rules also give local authorities the ability to pass bylaws on campaign expenses. Bill 203 strengthens and brings consistency to these rules. Disclosure and what happens to surplus campaign funds are specifically looked at. I look at the fact that it would also make these rules consistent across the province, improving accountability for all Alberta municipalities. I support these changes.

However, as this bill moves forward, there's one point that I would like to see further discussion on, and that is the issue of school board trustees. The Local Authorities Election Act applies to both municipal councillors and school board trustees. I would be interested in hearing from this member if this was something he considered when drafting the bill.

4:00

As I conclude my remarks today, Mr. Speaker, I would once again like to thank the member for bringing forward this bill. It brings attention to the importance of accountability and transparency, something we know Albertans expect from all levels of government.

Thank you again, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am speaking primarily in support of Bill 203, Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009. I have a reservation, which I will get to a little bit later.

What I am in favour of in terms of the transparency and accountability the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs brought forward, I would like to echo. I would like to see the type of control for elections throughout the province have a uniform set of rules, and this is what Bill 203 attempts to accomplish, to put requirements on municipal elected officials, whether they be school board trustees or councillors at the local level, aldermen, alderwomen, and so on. I would like to see the same types of rules that are being suggested in Bill 203 also be required of leadership races.

We've had an example in this province where the successful candidate failed to disclose where \$163,000 of donations came from. We did not get a strong sense of where that \$163,000 of donations went. Another leadership candidate refused to disclose any of the donations, never mind the amount received. We had no sense of what their total donations were. That is far from being transparent and accountable. What this does: the intent is to bring local municipalities into closer accountability such as we as elected Members of this Legislative Assembly experience in terms of the donations, the reporting. It also puts restrictions on how these donations can be kept, collected, and potentially accessed, utilized should that individual wish to run again.

Now, the difference for us provincially, at least, I would think, for a number of us, is that when we have been successfully elected – I know that in my particular case and that of members of my Liberal opposition our monies, whatever monies are left over after an election, go back into our constituency associations for their use and their distribution. The reality is that if we have saved a sufficient amount of money, that money can then be transferred during the next provincial election. Obviously, it's to our potential advantage, but also it provides a starting point for the next individual running in that particular constituency because the money is very carefully accounted for through the Elections Alberta process. Applying that kind of transparency and accountability to the municipal level would create a much more even playing field and give individuals who didn't have large corporate sponsorship an opportunity to compete on a more equal basis.

The fact that the money is held in trust for specifically the municipal election means that that individual couldn't potentially use the money they'd collected for representing their ward and then walk off with that pot should they decide to retire or should they, say, decide to run provincially, have several thousands of dollars collected on their behalf, which would then not translate back to necessarily good work for their entire ward but just for that part of the constituency that they might be provincially elected to represent.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I very much support the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater in terms of trying to after a fashion universalize the rules that are expected of elected members, whether it be as leader of the government, as leader of the opposition, or provincial MLAs, in this case municipal representatives.

The one area that I have a degree of difficulty with has to do with disenfranchising certain organizations, in particular members of a union. It seems to single out individuals who belong to a particular union from contributing to a candidate whom they believe will bring up issues such as a living wage. Reducing that degree of influence causes me a degree of concern.

I also would like to point out that when Prime Minister Jean

Chrétien was in power, he dramatically reduced the contributions that either individuals, unions, or corporations could provide. He basically set the federal bar in terms of disclosure, transparency, and accountability, and that is not a partisan circumstance. It's trying for transparency and accountability and taking away undue influence based on the size of your wallet.

Bringing accountability to local officials such as Bill 203 proposes I think brings them into line with already established provincial standards, and therefore I am very supportive of Bill 203.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss.

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

Mr. Denis: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this afternoon to speak on Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009, sponsored by the person to my left, the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater. In my past life I handled many matters of an electoral nature, and I often thought that laws like this should come in.

Just before I begin, I did have a constituent contact me about this, and he mentioned to me: "You know, today is St. Finian's Day. How particular that this would come out on March 16. His motto was to live as others did." This is quite consistent with that mantra, Mr. Speaker. I want to commend the Member for Athabasca-Redwater for bringing this legislation forward because it's really a long time coming.

Now, as my hon. colleague mentioned, this legislation brings us in line with rules governing federal elections in Canada as well as our own provincial elections in this province. Mr. Speaker, this bill will enhance the integrity of our democratic process for our municipal elections in four key areas: one, limiting the size of campaign contributions; two, dealing with surplus campaign funds; three, improving public disclosure; and four, prohibiting certain types of contributions.

First, I want to speak about the proposed limits on the size of the campaign contributions that this bill proposes. This proposed bill will cap the size of individual contributions at \$5,000. If you look at a comparison to other jurisdictions in this country, it makes sense to put a limit on these contributions. There may be some argument as to exactly where this limit should go, but I think this bill sets an adequate compromise between the two paradigms.

There already are limits in Ontario and Manitoba, specifically in Winnipeg. However, their limits are much more restrictive. The limits in Ontario, Mr. Speaker, are \$750, the same for Winnipeg except that that limit is doubled to \$1,500 for their mayoral candidates. Now, there's also a limit in place in Quebec, \$1,000, and the same thousand-dollar limit applies for our federal elections, roughly. I think it's about \$1,150.

Alberta's provincial elections limit contributions to \$1,500 to a party; to a thousand dollars to a constituency association, or \$5,000 as aggregate, as the Member for Athabasca-Redwater has corrected me on; and to \$2,000 to a candidate, or \$10,000 aggregately. As you can see, this brings us in line for municipal elections in this province, Mr. Speaker, with other jurisdictions in Canada but sets less restrictive limits, a trait that Albertans value.

4:10

Mr. Speaker, another main goal of this bill is how to deal with surplus campaign contributions. One thing that I've often thought of is that in a civic election we don't have parties in this province. I'd argue that there's nothing in the Municipal Government Act or our Election Act that prohibits parties from getting involved in

municipal elections, but it doesn't happen here. It does happen in B.C. and Quebec; it doesn't happen here. As such, there's no constituency organization. For example, if I were to retire after the next election and there's money left over in the Calgary-Egmont association's account, it would typically go on to the next candidate for the purposes of electing a candidate of a particular party in that association. But when you're running for alderman or mayor, there are no political parties, and that's why this bill is important.

The bill proposes that surplus campaign funds exceeding \$500 are to be paid to the municipality and held in trust in an interest-bearing account. If a candidate doesn't run in the following election, the money is donated to a registered charity, or it becomes property of the municipality.

Again, the proposition also brings us up to speed with several other jurisdictions in Canada. Ontario and B.C. have laws that are nearly identical to this proposition with the same threshold, \$500, Mr. Speaker. Manitoba also designates that excess funds are held in trust but does not allow a \$500 threshold to be deemed part of the candidate's personal expenses. In none of those jurisdictions are any candidates allowed to donate excess funds to a charity if re-election is not sought. Instead, the money in those jurisdictions is always deemed to be a donation to the municipality.

I find this to be rather absurd. Again, this bill deals with this. When people donate to a particular candidate or party, they don't want it to necessarily go to the government. That essentially becomes a tax. I'd argue it's an abuse of their own donations. The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater in his legislation has given an option to have a leg up on other provinces who have gone down this route, allowing people to have their money donated to a charity if they do retire.

Now, Mr. Speaker, for our provincial elections we have several different options for how we deal with surplus funds. As I mentioned earlier, you can have these funds held in trust until the next elections, or if a candidate is not seeking re-election, as I mentioned, they can be transferred to the party, transferred to the constituency association, or transferred to the Crown. I somehow don't think the last option is taken advantage of that often. Obviously, our municipal elections do not have parties, as I mentioned. Once again, though, we're falling in line with strong legislation on provincial election financing with respect to these surplus funds.

Mr. Speaker, the next main component of this bill deals with public disclosure. The proposed bill will mandate that a campaign account must be opened at a financial institution. The campaign would then be responsible for filing a campaign disclosure statement with the total amount contributed from all contributors, the contributor's name and address when total contributions are over \$100 for the campaign period, and, of course, a list of campaign expenses, similar to what any member of this House would have to have done within our campaign last year.

If we look at other jurisdictions, we can also again see that this change will bring us in line with Ontario, Quebec, and B.C. Manitoba, again, has similar legislation, but their threshold for providing the name and address of a contributor is \$250 as opposed to \$100, kind of a *de minimis* rule, wherever you want to draw the line.

Mr. Speaker, in our provincial elections we have that same provision, but the threshold is much more stringent at \$50 as a total contribution before the name and address of the contributor need to be disclosed. Federal elections have even further restrictions, with a threshold of \$20. That cannot be cash and necessitates that a receipt be issued. Also, any gifts over \$500 must be included. Once again, I believe this bill will bring our municipal election laws in line with other jurisdictions in Canada and increase the transparency of our whole election process.

Now, the fourth main component of Bill 203 is prohibiting certain types of entities from contributing towards candidates. The bill seeks to propose those entities who receive municipal funding in nonprofit organizations. This goes a step further than other jurisdictions in Canada such as Ontario, B.C., or Manitoba, who only have restrictions disallowing contributions from anonymous contributors. As well, Quebec only mandates eligible voters who are able to contribute in municipal elections.

However, our provincial elections already have strong legislation. No prohibited corporation or person normally resident outside Alberta or trade union or employee or organization other than as defined in the act can make any contributions to a party, association, or candidate. This proposed change is a proactive step, setting reasonable and province-wide standards for all of Alberta's communities. Mr. Speaker, this bill is an attempt to bring our municipalities up to speed with our provincial and federal finance laws and follows several other jurisdictions, as I have mentioned.

I do want to mention a couple of other things. It was referenced earlier that this is not retroactive. Legislation is typically not retroactive; it applies from one point forward. We're not doing this to try to punish anyone but, rather, to have a set point forward. A further note that I have here is that within the three months following Bill 203 coming into force, persons who intend to be candidates in the 2010 municipal general election must declare existing campaign funds, so it's not intended to be a punishment to anyone who is currently in office.

I mentioned earlier the positive duties of a candidate that it also defines. Also, interestingly enough, this piece of legislation, Mr. Speaker, talks about a campaign period. It defines what a campaign period really is. That can be somewhat nebulous in a municipal election campaign because it's usually held in October every three years. For the purpose of this legislation for a candidate in a general election the period of time from January 1 immediately following the general election to December 31 immediately following the next election is deemed to be a campaign period, and for a by-election, which, of course, has happened before, the period from January 1 immediately following the general election to 60 days immediately following the by-election.

One of the last items I want to deal with, Mr. Speaker, is the issue of voter turnout. Many members of all three parties in this House have talked about low voter turnout. I know that in my maiden speech it was something that bothered me. Well, the turnout in municipal elections is much worse than in provincial or federal elections. For example, in 2007 voter turnout was 27 per cent in Edmonton, 33 per cent in Calgary. In 2004 voter turnout was registered at 27 per cent in Red Deer, decreasing further again in 2007. I think that by setting better rules and by allowing more contributors and encouraging candidates to have more individual contributors, you're going to get more people involved in the process. When more people donate, obviously, I think more people are going to get involved. More people are going to vote.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Calgary-Varsity brought up that the federal Chrétien government had brought in some finance reforms. A lot of these reforms, though, were brought in just in the 11th hour, as the former Prime Minister was leaving. It was interesting that he did not bring them up before. He had 10 years to do so, and he didn't. Rather, this member is doing this on a go-forward basis without any ulterior motives and without... [Mr. Denis's speaking time expired] Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, you indicated to me that you wish to speak on this bill. Please, go ahead.

Ms Notley: Thank you. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act. I have to start by sort of noting with some amusement the irony of this piece of legislation being introduced, particularly as it's being framed so repeatedly already in relation to our provincial election laws.

I think that in general it's a good piece of legislation. What it attempts to achieve is good, and it's something that we should all support. But it is deeply – deeply – ironic in that it is being introduced in a Legislature and in a province where it will stand alongside our provincial election financing rules, which are not actually like what you see in other provinces. In fact, our provincial election financing rules are quite a Wild West sort of scenario, where there are nowhere near the numbers of rules and limitations and prohibitions that you would see in other provinces. Put another way, there is nowhere near the protection in our provincial election laws against, shall I say, the possibility for undue influence.

Of course, we've just gone through a very open process of certain members of the Assembly who happen to all be associated with a certain caucus within the Assembly having voted on committee to get rid of the Chief Electoral Officer after he made a range of recommendations about what needed to be changed in our provincial legislation, a good deal of those recommendations, of course, linking specifically to the problems with our election financing provincially. It's within that context, then, that I find this very good piece of legislation designed to put in place a very excellent set of rules for our municipal politicians coming here into this Assembly, but at the same time it's just deeply ironic that we're prepared to legislate for municipal politicians a set of rules that we are apparently not prepared to play by ourselves.

4:20

There are a couple of elements within this bill that I have some concerns with, having said that, generally speaking, it's good and the objectives it seeks to achieve are also good. Just a couple of points. You know, it would be nice to see or hear whether there was room for those to be amended.

The first point relates to the issue of how trade unions versus corporations are being treated under this legislation. Now, I appreciate that the language defining trade unions in this piece of legislation is very similar to the language used in the provincial act. The difference, of course, is that under the provincial act there is a lot more money that can be given. There's a much, much higher threshold before bodies which are donating money to political parties or to political candidates run up against the prohibitions.

This act attempts to significantly limit the financial contributions that can be made to candidates. I think that that's a good thing. But the difficulty is that it treats trade unions and corporations differently in that all sort of subsidiary parts of a trade union are for the purposes of this legislation being told that they have to be treated as one, yet the same thing does not happen with respect to subsidiary corporate entities.

My view of how it ought to work is that the trade unions ought to be defined in the same way they are defined under the Labour Relations Code. If there is a local that is certified at a certain employer through which there is a certain collective agreement, where that particular group of workers have come together collectively to negotiate a particular set of circumstances, and then that particular local as a group has decided that they want to make a donation to a particular candidate or campaign or party or whichever, then so be it. That's what they are. But to suggest that that local is part of the same local with a completely different employer in a completely different part of the province, where they've never

talked to those members, they've never discussed the merits of that particular candidate, they can't co-ordinate among themselves whether it's more important to give \$5,000 to candidate A in Calgary versus candidate B in Edmonton, that is, I think, an onerous position to put these locals into.

That's fine if we are doing it for everybody, but the same rules don't apply to corporate subsidiaries. They can make donations all over the place, depending on how they are organized and depending on how their subsidiaries are organized. To me, that's not a level playing field because what you're doing is putting in place a substantial rule which, I think, has merit – i.e., keeping the limit to \$5,000 over the course of the whole three years – but then you're applying it differently to two different potential donors. Ironically, one of those groups of potential donors happens to be more likely to donate to the governing caucus than the other group of potential donors, which is more likely to not donate to the governing caucus. That is on the face of it an inequality and inequity which, I think, needs to be corrected. I'm perfectly happy for it to be corrected by closing the loopholes for corporate donations so that everybody truly is limited to the \$5,000. But it's got to be one or the other. So that's \$5,000.

Again, it's interesting. You compare it to the provincial legislation. As an MLA for the riding of Edmonton-Strathcona I represent about a third of the number of people as the two councillors that represent my ward. It's interesting that my limitation that just as an individual MLA I can receive, I believe, is about \$30,000 to \$40,000 – I don't know the exact amount, but it's about that much – in total between the two elections, yet a candidate for alderperson could only receive a maximum of \$5,000 in that same period of time. That is, again, an interesting irony, that we've got those two different sets of rules in place.

The other concern that I have is that there was mention already about the expansion of prohibited bodies that can contribute, and there was a discussion about the issue of ensuring that nonprofit organizations who had received grants of some type from a municipality were banned from contributing to that municipality. Well, again, a perfectly reasonable approach to take. Absolutely reasonable. Lots of good reasons to put that prohibition in there.

But then I say: why just nonprofits? Why not for-profits? The fact of the matter is that there are circumstances under which for-profit organizations/corporations will receive money, grants, enter into business relationships in a variety of different ways – of course, the opportunity for that is expanding every day through this government's insistence on pursuing a P3 agenda – so there are lots of opportunities where those corporations do have a vested economic interest, a relationship with the government specifically, a direct relationship, are receiving direct funding. So why are we prohibiting a nonprofit group from donating, but we are not prohibiting a for-profit corporation, and we're not prohibiting that for-profit corporation from donating through a variety of subsidiaries in order to maximize their donations?

Now, I appreciate that you've put the \$5,000 limit in place, so it does bring it into a more reasonable conversation because the maximum sort of inequity is \$5,000. Well, it's more, depending on how many subsidiaries there are, but, you know, we're not looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars, as it is, for instance, under the provincial Election Act, but it is still a concern.

That is the kind of thing that I would like to see corrected as this bill is considered. Again, I would like to be able to say to municipal politicians who raise concerns about this that we're not in a position of, you know, one set of rules for us and another set of rules for them. I think that if we want to have some legitimacy in terms of talking to municipal politicians about how they should run their

elections, we need to very clearly say that we're looking at the same rules for ourselves.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my sincere pleasure to rise and join the debate on Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009, sponsored by my colleague from Athabasca-Redwater. I would like to commend the hon. member for bringing forward this very important piece of legislation.

I would like to know what election rules the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona is looking at or is abiding by. The maximum allowable donation to an individual constituency or individual candidate is actually \$2,000 in an election year, \$1,000 in a nonelection year, so it is not \$25,000 or \$30,000.

Ms Notley: It's \$10,000. Check the act.

Mr. Anderson: Well, to an individual candidate it is definitely \$1,000 in a nonelection, \$2,000 in an election.

Ms Notley: To a party it's \$100,000; to a candidate it's \$10,000.

Mr. Anderson: Luckily, as we know, we do not have parties in municipal elections, so it would be the individual candidates that are important here. I just wanted to remind the hon. member of that.

I believe that this legislation is long overdue and will strengthen our democracy and the democratic processes we have here in Alberta. Ultimately, the objective of Bill 203 is to bring municipal election standards in line with much of what currently guides our provincial elections in Alberta and allows for greater fairness in municipal election campaigning. This would include regulating the size of campaign contributions, creating clearer standards for dealing with surplus campaign funds, and requiring full public disclosure of all finances related to a campaign. As well, Bill 203 would prohibit entities who receive municipal funding and nonprofit organizations from contributing to municipal campaigns.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw the Assembly's attention to the manner in which this bill would regulate the size of financial contributions made to municipal campaigns. Fundamentally, I believe that this measure is essential and that it would help create a more level playing field for both candidates and the electorate during municipal elections. Regardless of financial means, campaign donations from individuals and groups would be limited to a maximum total of \$5,000 during a campaign period. I would suggest that this is a key component to fairness in free elections as it reduces the ability of large financial contributions to influence candidates and, perhaps, the outcome of a municipal election.

4:30

Further to this, individuals or groups who may not have the means to donate significant financial amounts may find that, in fact, smaller donations would have a greater impact in support of their preferred candidate being elected. In short, by regulating campaign donation size, donation amounts, Bill 203 would effectively provide a more equal opportunity for individuals or groups to make meaningful financial contributions to a campaign. Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that this may actually enhance the ability of candidates to raise the funds necessary to run a successful campaign.

At the end of the day Albertans are less inclined to become involved in municipal elections if they feel their contributions, financial or otherwise, will have a limited impact when compared to

massive contributions made by the community's more powerful and influential donors. Indeed, over and over when individuals who do not vote are asked why they fail to do so or what prevents them from becoming more involved in politics, the most common answer they give is that they believe that their vote or their contribution won't count towards changing the final outcome. In this way a limit on contribution size in municipal elections I believe demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that the voices of all Albertans have a more equal opportunity to be heard. Ultimately, citizens are more motivated to donate when they believe that their contribution to a campaign is truly needed and valued.

Further, Mr. Speaker, size restrictions on financial contributions would not only level the playing field for the electorate during a municipal election but would also do so for those actually seeking to run for municipal office. Given that individuals or groups would be limited to the \$5,000 donation maximum during a campaign period, the financial advantage of candidates who rely on a smaller number of significant donations to fund their campaigns is greatly reduced. In order to stay competitive, all candidates would then have to turn their attention to raising funds beyond a small existing base. I would submit that this could lead or should lead to more development and discussion of policies that benefit the majority of a constituency in a municipality rather than a select few. In short, candidates would need to broaden their horizons and their fundraising activities.

Ultimately, this is certainly a more attractive prospect for Albertans who may be considering the idea of running in a municipal race. Mr. Speaker, because of the level playing field that Bill 203 creates with respect to contribution size, such would allow for a greater range or number of new entrants into public office on the municipal level, broadening the scope of ideas and providing Albertans with more choice when deciding on political leadership. Indeed, it helps ensure that the system is free and fair for all candidates and voters alike.

Even more, regulating the size of campaign contributions would help protect candidates and elected officials from allegations of undue influence. Indeed, it can sometimes be simply the appearance of wrongdoing that gives voters pause even where nothing untoward exists. By reducing this real or perceived influence, candidates and elected officials are less likely to find themselves in a situation where their decisions are weighed against who donated significant funds to their campaign. As a result, we are likely to see greater confidence in our municipal governments and locally elected officials, allowing them to focus on important local issues. Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, the strength of regulating the size of campaign contributions is that it presents a win-win situation, benefiting both candidates and electorate.

The amendments contained in this bill only seek to raise municipal standards to the same level of transparency and fairness already experienced at the provincial level. That is to say, Mr. Speaker, this bill is not imposing unique or far-reaching regulations for municipal elections but simply extending a standard already followed provincially.

It is for these reasons that I will be supporting Bill 203, and I encourage all members of this House to do so as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall indicated that he wished to speak.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and pleasure to speak in support of Bill 203, brought in by the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater, and I would like to congratulate

the hon. member for bringing the bill, which is long overdue. Currently municipalities have the power to create their own bylaws regulating whether the candidate running for any office discloses an account for their campaign contributions. In Calgary the reporting for many members was \$101; Edmonton, \$300; Red Deer, \$100; and Lethbridge, \$300. There are no maximum limits for contributions in any of the cities, and most cities don't include provisions about what to do with the contribution surpluses. In large municipalities like Calgary the surpluses are huge, and candidates, you know, can do whatever they want with the surpluses. They can pocket it; they can walk away with it.

The penalty in Calgary is no more than \$1,000; in Edmonton it's \$750 or \$100 per offence, depending on the type of offences; in Red Deer it's \$500 or \$100 each, depending on the offences; and in Lethbridge it's at least \$500 and no more than \$1,000. This bill, you know, will ensure that there is a level playing field across the province by requiring that all municipalities must abide by the same standard as everywhere else. People have been calling for this bill for a long time. It was not clear if the financial statements are checked for accuracy. It was very vague.

There was great concern about campaign contributions. We need to regulate what happens with the surplus contributions. In some communities the surplus goes to the municipalities. In Edmonton it goes to nonprofit organizations. In Calgary the aldermen get to keep their surpluses. You know, some aldermen have surpluses over \$50,000. I think this is important. Perusals should be standardized right across the province so that there is, you know, the same level playing field for all the contributions.

Another argument goes that these contributions or surpluses are private funds; they are not public monies. I think that making these donations tax deductible would stop that argument right in its tracks as well. In Calgary, for instance, campaign contributions are collected during the tenure of a councillor, and that can be pocketed by the person if he chooses not to run in the next election. He or she is able to raise funds under false pretenses. You know, those funds, clearly, should be spent on the elections. If they are not, then it becomes clearly unethical. Those funds should be formally regulated.

As it stands now, the current fines in some cities are not severe enough to disclose the contributions or for misfiling the financial statements. This bill will help, I think, to address some of those concerns as the bill will regulate maximum donations by individuals, corporations, or trade unions to \$5,000. The minimum disclosure limit will be \$100, and that will be right across the province. It will also address the issue of campaign surplus funds. The funds should be held with the municipality until the next election. A candidate may decide to use the funds for the campaign, or if they decide to not run again, the funds can go to some nonprofit organization.

Also, the audit that will occur with the spending of over \$10,000 is a step in the right direction as well. It says that the maximum fine that candidates will pay to the municipality for late filing of financial information is \$500. I think that the fine should be a little bit higher. You know, I think that it should be more than \$500. I think the rest of the fines are appropriate.

4:40

I think that these contributions should be tax deductible. By making the contributions tax deductible, I think it will make it more accountable, more transparent for everybody, and it will create the same level playing field for all the candidates who are running for office.

This bill goes some way to making municipal elections more transparent and candidates more accountable. I think I'm going to

support this bill. It's going to strengthen democracy as well. My main concern, you know, is making the financial contributions tax deductible. We need to ensure that all the funds given to the candidates running as municipal candidates are used for municipal elections only, that they are not used for federal or provincial elections. Those are some of the amendments we should have in there. If we address those, I think I'll support Bill 203.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today in this Assembly to speak in favour of Bill 203, Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009, brought forward by the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater. The objective of Bill 203 is to define minimum standards for financial contributions during municipal elections. This would include ensuring comprehensive and timely disclosure of campaign financial records and creating a clear set of rules regarding surplus campaign funds. Much of this not only brings municipalities in line with what candidates are required to do at the provincial level but also in other jurisdictions across the country. In short, Bill 203 introduces consistent accountability and transparency standards that would improve our democratic process during municipal elections. Bill 203 is just one more way to ensure that our electoral process continues to work for Albertans.

The *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary defines democracy as "a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections," in short, a government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Mr. Speaker, Canadians and Albertans cherish and value democracy, which forms the foundation of our governmental institutions, and all democracies support the core values of equality of opportunity, accountability, and fairness in our political systems. I think it's safe to say that Canadians can identify themselves by their shared belief in support of democratic governments, procedures, and institutions. A number of municipalities across Alberta have in fact passed bylaws that ensure campaign finance disclosure and that surplus contribution funds are handled properly. The examples set by these municipalities are excellent examples of the way in which greater transparency has benefited both the candidates and the public.

However, to ensure the same level of transparency in all municipal elections across the province, we need to have legislation that guarantees adherence to consistent procedures. One key way to establish this consistency is by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of candidates and contributors. I believe this allows the public to have greater confidence in the democratic process as this increased knowledge allows the public to make better and more educated decisions.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 would also regulate the size of campaign contributions and ensure full public disclosure of all financial accounting in campaigns. This would go a long way to increasing the opportunity for more candidates to run in municipal campaigns by lessening the likelihood that a particular candidate may raise a large donation from a single supporter. Other candidates may not be able to compete in an election if they cannot do the same and/or raise campaign funds to the same degree. In this way regulatory limits on campaign contributions do not limit the amount a candidate can raise or spend in total. It just allows contributors to have a more equal role in the campaign process.

In short, Mr. Speaker, I believe this means that each contributor

would be valued to a greater extent. In part this is because a candidate's success would be based more on their ability to earn the support of and raise funding from a greater number of voters. This would better support our democratic system by ensuring that a few large contributors would not be able to fund a candidate's entire campaign. Indeed, when a single person or organization is the main contributor, there's a risk that a candidate may later feel indebted to these individuals. If the candidate is elected, the interests of these individuals could then later take future precedence over the good of the majority.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 addresses this by limiting campaign contributions by any person, corporation, trade union, or employee organization to \$5,000 within a campaign period. Ultimately, this element of Bill 203 would help ensure a more democratic electoral process, allowing the majority to play a greater and more direct role in the campaign process. In my experience in municipal politics perhaps fundraising was not an issue because in many rural municipality elections the vote is based on the individual, not how much campaign money he or she could raise. At the same time, the legislation in Bill 203 would require that candidates disclose their financial contributions to voters no matter what the amount is, helping to provide Albertans with greater transparency when it comes to candidates.

Furthermore, I believe that this bill would create a clear directive for dealing with surplus campaign funds, requiring these funds to be declared and held in trust until the next election or donated to the municipality or a registered charity. Here, too, we would see a more enhanced democratic process as this directive ensures accountability and allows Albertans to be assured that their donations are being used for election purposes.

Mr. Speaker, improving and enhancing democracy is always a good thing, and Bill 203 sets a standard for accountability and transparency that will enhance our electoral system at the municipal level. It is vital that we do everything possible to make sure that elections and campaigns in Alberta remain open, fair, and democratic so that voters are not only informed about the candidates they support but have faith in the system. Because of this, I support Bill 203.

I look forward to the remainder of the debate. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise and continue debate on Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009, as sponsored by the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater. If passed, this legislation would amend the Local Authorities Election Act to provide minimum campaign finance standards in municipal elections. These would include regulating the size of campaign contributions, creating standardized guidelines for dealing with any surplus campaign funds, and ensuring full public disclosure of all financial accounting in a campaign. Proper campaign finance disclosure is essential to ensuring transparency and accountability. It allows voters to infer what contributors may influence a successful candidate's decision-making in future years.

Mr. Speaker, as outlined in the Canadian Constitution, provincial governments are responsible for providing legislation and structures that direct our municipal governments. Though several municipalities have passed legislation regarding campaign finances, Bill 203 would provide enhanced standards that apply to all Alberta municipalities. This would ensure accountability that stretches to all reaches of our province.

4:50

Several other provincial governments have already implemented province-wide municipal campaign finance legislation similar to what Bill 203 seeks to accomplish here in Alberta. These include Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. Ontario's Municipal Elections Act provides rigorous minimum campaign finance standards that apply to municipalities province-wide, with some exceptions for the city of Toronto. Many of these standards are similar to the measures proposed in Bill 203, including contribution limits, full and complete disclosure statements, and the handling of surplus funds following an election. For example, contributions to candidates are permitted from individuals, corporations, and trade unions but must not exceed \$750. The exception is Toronto, where mayoral candidates may accept contributions up to \$2,500.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Like Bill 203, however, in Ontario anonymous contributions to local candidates are prohibited and must be turned over to the clerk to become part of general funds in the municipality. In terms of disclosure all candidates, including those who withdraw their nomination for office, are required to file a complete and accurate financial statement with the clerk to report all contributions and expenses. These forms must include the names and addresses of all those who contribute more than \$100 to a campaign. In addition, an auditor is required to review campaigns that record expenses or contributions that exceed \$10,000.

Ontario's municipal election law also carefully regulates the handling of surplus campaign funds. Campaigns with a surplus in excess of \$500 must pay the surplus in its entirety to the clerk responsible for conducting the election. Following an election, any surplus amount with a value lower than \$500 is deemed the candidate's own funds. Surplus dollars are in turn held by the municipality in the event that the candidate runs in the following election. If the candidate doesn't seek re-election, the surplus becomes the property of the municipality. Mr. Speaker, Ontario's comprehensive yet targeted legislation can serve as a useful template as we examine the concerns Bill 203 is designed to address, from the handling of surplus funds to ensuring full and accurate disclosure statements.

Quebec also carefully regulates municipal election finance through An Act Respecting Elections and Referendums in Municipalities. This act also reflects the unique nature of Quebec municipal politics as political parties are prominent actors at the municipal level. However, unlike Ontario only individuals who reside in the municipality are permitted to contribute to the campaign. Corporations and trade unions are excluded. Individuals may contribute a maximum of \$1,000 per fiscal year to a municipal political party or independent candidate. Disclosure statements must be filed annually no later than April 1, in an election year no later than 90 days following polling day. All contributions must be recorded, including the number and total amounts of contributions \$100 or less and the names and addresses of those who contribute more than \$100. Moreover, political parties and independent candidates must appoint an auditor. Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 recognizes these measures already in place in Quebec and incorporates many of its goals, such as the contribution limits and full disclosure.

In British Columbia both the Local Government Act and the Vancouver Charter provide standardized municipal campaign finance regulations for all municipalities. All campaigns must complete and submit a comprehensive disclosure statement and must record the total value and number of contributions less than \$100. For contributions greater than \$100 the name, type of contributor, and contribution dates must be provided. If the contributor is a

business organization, the address of the contributor and the names of two directors or principal officers must be disclosed.

Moreover, the handling of surplus campaign funds is similar to that of Ontario, plus funds of \$500 or more that remain in a candidate's account following an election must be donated to the local government. These funds are held in trust in the event the candidate chooses to run in a by-election or subsequent general election. If the candidate chooses not to run, the funds are considered a donation to the revenue of the local government. In fact, all handling of surplus funds must be clearly indicated on a candidate's disclosure statement. This includes how the surplus was dealt with, the total amount of the surplus or deficit after payment of expenses, and any surplus funds used from a prior campaign. British Columbia also sets serious penalties for those who fail to comply with campaign finance laws. Punishments can include disqualification from holding elected office for up to five years and a \$5,000 fine.

Mr. Speaker, in recent years there has been a renewed effort amongst all levels of government to implement stronger elections finance legislation. Legislation such as the Federal Accountability Act and, here in Alberta, the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act helps to ensure confidence, trust, and accountability in our electoral system. As we see in other provinces such as Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, comprehensive yet targeted legislation can ensure that our citizens enjoy the same level of confidence in our municipal elections as we do in our provincial elections. This is why I support Bill 203 and encourage my colleagues on both sides of this House to vote in favour as well.

Thank you.

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

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I realize that I just have a few minutes, but there are a couple of things that I wanted to say. I think this is a very good bill. Certainly, we have to be able to have more accountability at this level. Unions feel that the maximum contribution is too restrictive at \$5,000. My question would be that if a person is a member of a union that has already made that contribution, does that exclude them from making their own personal contributions? I'm not sure that was clear in my mind.

The surplus funds certainly have to be accounted for. The concern that I would have with this is if somebody would be collecting money at one level of government with the idea that they would run again at that level but, in fact, then use the money that they had collected, let's say, on a municipal level for a run at a provincial level seat. I'm not clear on how that would be sorted out. I think that would be very wrong. I think that once the money is collected at one level, it should be used at that level or else forfeited, and then they have to start again if they've moved up to the next level.

The other thing is, I think, an important controversy that I believe should be addressed and discussed – and I apologize for not being here for the whole debate – that it would help if municipal donations were made tax deductible as are the other two levels of government because, really, the municipal level is a legitimate form of government, so it would fit under that provision.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In the remaining few minutes I'm pleased to rise and join the debate on Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009. I'd like to join my colleagues in congratulating and thanking the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater for bringing forward this bill.

As members are aware, this bill would include regulating the size of campaign contributions, the handling of surplus campaign funds, and ensuring full public disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures. These measures would help to ensure, as others have pointed out, public confidence in all candidates who choose to run for political office in municipal elections. It would also help to protect candidates from accusations of conflict of interest or other charges by providing strict limitations on contributions.

Bill 203 also gives us the opportunity to examine and discuss Alberta's comprehensive campaign finance legislation, which governs provincial elections. In respect to the comments from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona I think it would also accommodate a discussion on some of the issues that she has raised, which are unrelated to this bill but which, nevertheless, deserve discussion. In doing so, we can see what aspects of provincial legislation may be useful and which may not if translated to the municipal level.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans can take pride in the fact that our provincial elections are conducted with the highest degree of accountability and transparency. This is accomplished through adherence to the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. A careful look at the act reveals that our provincial legislation addresses many of the concerns of Bill 203.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member, but the time allocated for consideration of this item of business this afternoon has now concluded.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: Hon. members, the chair has a long list of members who wish to participate this afternoon, so please govern your comments according to that. This is a remarkable turnout late on a Monday afternoon.

The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Provincial Achievement Tests

503. Mrs. Leskiw moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate provincial achievement tests for grade 3 students and consider alternative assessments for learning.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and a privilege to stand today and open debate on Motion 503, urging the Alberta government to eliminate the provincial achievement test for grade 3 students and consider an alternative assessment for learning.

Mr. Speaker, for me kids always come first. That is why I have dedicated many years of my life to Alberta's classrooms, providing our children with the foundation necessary to help them succeed and build Alberta's future. Now as an elected representative it is my responsibility to work with my constituents and assess measures that will improve Alberta's world-class education system. That is why I have introduced this discussion on whether provincial achievement tests, PATs, for grade 3 students are the best mechanisms for learning assessment. Part of the effectiveness of our world-class education system is based on the willingness to continuously improve to better meet the needs of our children, and I believe that reviewing and enhancing our method of assessment would further strengthen our education system.

Mr. Speaker, I have observed how the grade 3 PATs have placed a burden on grade 3 students, teachers, and parents. For teachers a great deal of time is spent preparing each of their students to write the achievement exams. This is time that could be spent on teaching

the curriculum rather than teaching for a test. The achievement test interferes with the responsibility of teachers to determine curriculum emphasis, design learning activities, and develop and administer their own evaluation procedures.

Teachers are ultimately responsible for evaluating and reporting students' progress. Further to this, the PAT does not provide an individual assessment of students' academic achievements or progress. Rather, it only tests information that can be assessed through pencil-and-paper examination. Factors such as that a child is well nourished or had a good night's rest can strongly influence test performance. Teaching methods need to be tailored directly to the students' needs, particularly in the earlier grades, where students from all walks of life have different challenges and may require modified teaching methods to advance their academic achievements. Mr. Speaker, a one-size-fits-all teaching method may not educate students in a way that corresponds to their individual needs.

Timing is another drawback of this exam. Provincial achievement tests are currently written near the end of the school year, but the results are not handed back until the fall, after most students in the grade have moved on to the next grade. This does not provide teachers the ability to offer additional support to individual students, nor does it give students the ability to improve. It's just a snapshot of how a particular student and/or school performed on a certain day.

I believe along with many other teachers across this great province that the funding spent on administering these tests could be better spent on curriculum enhancement and on developing more effective methods of evaluation. In 2001 the Alberta Teachers' Association surveyed teachers about the provincial achievement testing program and found that only 6 per cent of teachers believe that grade 3 achievement testing should continue as it is. Alternatively, 33 per cent of teachers wanted the tests replaced with diagnostic tests, and 44 per cent of teachers believed that the tests should be abandoned altogether.

Accountability is very important within the education system and helps to ensure that the curriculum standards are met. However, the PATs for grade 3 may not be an effective method of accountability. Statistically, similar tests could be collected through sampling procedures which would be less expensive and disruptive.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I want to emphasize that in my experience as a teacher we are not doing our students a favour by the continuation of this exam but, rather, a disservice to both our students and teachers. I also want to emphasize that we have one of the best education systems in the world, and this is clearly demonstrated by both my teaching colleagues and our students. In this province we know that our students have the ability to compete with any students from anywhere in the world. Education is the foundation of our province's success. I look forward to exploring the possibilities of how we can continue to improve our exceptional education system, in doing so enabling us all to act and realize the unmatched potential that exists in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, once a teacher, always a teacher. Students have always come first for me, and I will always promote what is best for our kids. I'm encouraging both Albertans and this Assembly to consider alternative methods for assessing our students in grade 3, and I ask that you stand in support of Motion 503.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today in this Assembly to speak in favour of Motion 503, the elimination of grade 3 provincial achievement tests. I'd like to express my

appreciation to the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake for bringing forward this very important motion.

Mr. Speaker, we need to acknowledge the positive direction of Motion 503 and what it means to our youth. Since the introduction of grade 3 standardized provincial achievement tests in 1992 our society has changed a great deal, and in the past 17 years school curriculum has been amended to reflect not only these changes but the standards and expectations placed on our students.

Currently achievement tests are designed to determine if students are learning the information that they will need to succeed in the future. However, at the age of 7 or 8 years these young people are all learning at their own pace, and it's imperative that our children have the ability to experience their own individual strengths and weaknesses and grow into well-rounded citizens. I believe that it's very important that students in grade 3 are assessed. However, it needs to be on an individual basis.

Currently teachers are working closely with interested parents regarding the personal assessment of their students. For example, on a daily basis there are quizzes, essays, projects, and the observation of students by teachers that can help to judge the personal progress of students. Assessments of a child's progress cannot be focused on their test-taking abilities. This is true particularly in the third grade, where the test-taking experience has not yet been fully developed. Teachers in schools have recognized the need to have students learn at their own pace. If this is what they want, then why would we try to judge this on a standardized scale?

Over the past few weeks, Mr. Speaker, I've had the opportunity to visit 15 schools in my constituency as part of their grade 6 curriculum to learn about government. During this time I took the opportunity to discuss the issue proposed by Motion 503 with teachers directly, and most have said the same thing: testing of students is important to ensure there is progress and that schools offer a standardized level of instruction; however, there needs to be an alternative test.

Instead, I'd like to see students being tested at the beginning of the year and again at the end to judge their progress. This diagnostic type of test is very different from the standardized tests currently in place. Diagnostic testing is generally accepted to be an in-depth evaluation of a relatively narrow scope of analysis aimed to identify specific conditions or problems. In this way diagnostic testing can be the best answer for assessing students learning at different paces. In my opinion, this is the best type of testing for our students. It not only evaluates their abilities, but I believe that we can take the results from these tests to ensure that Alberta teaching standards are being upheld. With this common-sense approach I believe the emphasis will be then on the students versus on the test. After all, it should be the student that is evaluated, not the school.

It is for these reasons that I support Motion 503. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am extremely pleased that the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake introduced Motion 503. I'm not only pleased, but I'm relieved and I'm celebratory that the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat stood up and so eloquently supported this motion. I really appreciate the fact that even though he doesn't have a teaching experiential background, he does his homework. He, as he pointed out, visited 15 schools, and he talked to stakeholders. I'm sure that in his dealings with children he's got a sense of what their best interests are.

Now, it's extremely important that this motion doesn't say: let's

toss tests and forget about testing. What it says is: let's consider alternative assessments for learning. The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake gave examples of a variety of instruments that have considerably greater validity than a student's ability to fill in a very narrow space with an HB pencil, because that is one of the chief skills that is required on a multiple-guess test.

5:10

Well, beginning at the grade 3 level is a very interesting place to start because that test is particularly torturous on young individuals, but where it is most repulsive is at the grade 12 level for the various reasons the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake pointed out. Why, on the basis of a two-hour multiple guess, is this given the same evaluation credibility as an entire year's work of very diverse assignments? What this standardized achievement test does very effectively is test a student's family's wealth. It also tests reasonably effectively the students based on their advantage and the length of time they've had in an economic well-being circumstance with English as their first language. It also, because of its heavy language basis, will test wealth and language.

What it fails to test are the creative areas. What it assumes – and maybe that assumption can be applied to math – for language arts, social studies, and science is that there is a single right answer, that by picking B, then A, C, and D have no value. Now, having taught elementary math, I gave students more marks for how they got to the right answer than for the right answer itself. That's, unfortunately, the thing that standardized achievement tests do not do. They test a very basic level of understanding, the assumption that there's only one way that it can be done.

What happens is that students who are intellectually diverse will overthink a particular answer, believing that what they have come up with as their first thought can't possibly be right. The way you're supposed to pick an answer on these multiple-guess tests is that your first impression is usually your best one. They will overthink it and as a result fail because they work so hard at coming up with: "How could this possibly be the answer? I must be wrong. I must look for other possibilities." When you've got little introductions of about 12 words leading up to the question from which you're supposed to choose the A, B, C, or D, then it doesn't test their ability. What it does test is a person's ability to read the length of a stem. Any of us who have taken statistics or sampling at some point in university know how to do well on these particular tests, and it's of large concern that such value is given to these tests.

What is even more disconcerting is the way in which these tests are administered. It was pointed out by both the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat and the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, who is introducing Motion 503, that these are end of the year tests. They are tested when a child is leaving grade 3, leaving division 1, going into division 2. They occur at the end of grade 6, when a child has not only left the division but in most cases has left the school. How is that end result going to help them when they transfer into junior high school? It's again tested at the grade 9 level, where up to a quarter to a fifth of a student's mark is based on this two-hour one-shot wonder, and then of course by the time it hits grade 12, they're gone. What good is this test that they have no longer any opportunity to improve upon unless, of course, they fail it, in which case they'll be doing summer school and trying again to be a better guesser in the exam they write over the summer?

If the government is truly concerned about the level of learning, then they've got to give some credit to the teachers, who have spent a minimum of four years getting their education or in the case of a master's of education have spent six years and in their practicums have gone through a whole variety and coursework on different

methods of assessment, including students' own self-assessment, which is extremely important that students learn to evaluate themselves on a base of understood criteria.

I am hoping that government members are going to be supportive of this motion as a first step. It's not saying that evaluation isn't important, but it's saying: let's put the emphasis, as the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat put it, on the learning end of things as opposed to the testing end. You know, the old axiom of the tail wagging the dog is what standardized achievement tests are all about. Hopefully the motion passes.

The next step is that the results are used internally, that they're not used as a hammer externally to beat down children. That is what standardized achievement tests do in schools with multi-ethnic populations. That is what happens in schools where the poverty levels run high. That is why First Nations schools are exempted. They are a definable group.

If the results are important, then let's work within the schools to improve those results, find the schools that fit in the bottom 200 of the testing results and provide the funding and the support, the reduced class size, the one-on-one type of teaching that will bring them up to the level that can be achieved primarily at the private school, where they have the option to select what children are allowed to enrol. They have the funding to provide reduced class sizes.

Motion 503 is just the beginning, and I hope the story will continue. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and join the debate on Motion 503. Since the last election I've had the pleasure of sitting beside the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake in this Assembly. This means that we are often able to share ideas on debates that are taking place. It doesn't, however, mean that we always agree. We sometimes find ourselves supporting the same goal but differing on how to get there, or we just don't agree, period, but we respect each other's opinion.

Mr. Speaker, I do agree with my colleague on Motion 503, and I want to thank her for representing the interests of eight- and nine-year-olds. As a former teacher she brings a great deal of perspective and expertise to this issue, and I greatly respect her opinion.

Recently, Mr. Speaker, I got a letter from a constituent of mine who is also a teacher. The writer argues that the tests place a lot of stress on an eight- or nine-year-old child. She has seen children lose sleep worrying about their performance and being unable to perform to the best of their abilities. At such a young age even good students can be derailed by their anxiety surrounding these tests. I hear stories from my constituents about their own children. One constituent told me that her child said: "When my teacher told me to take out my pencil, I started to sweat. I got cramps in my tummy, and I thought I was going to throw up." I have to ask myself: what's the point of this test? Is it going to make our children smarter? When I'm old, is my doctor going to be better qualified to care for me because they took an achievement test when they were eight or nine years old?

5:20

I'm all for accountability in our education system, Mr. Speaker, but I think that our resources might be better spent developing new diagnostic tools. An achievement test is a snapshot of how that student is doing on a given day. It may have some value, but is it

worth the expense both financially and in terms of stress on our students? Maybe we should do away with the expense of snapshot and continue working to create a scrapbook, one that takes into account a wide variety of factors and allows students to develop over a period of time, an approach that recognizes that children have different learning styles and they have different skills. Some children have skills that measure up well on an achievement test, and others have different skills. This type of tool would really allow us to evaluate how our education system is doing and establish a way to improve it.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake for bringing this motion forward and lending her considerable expertise to this Assembly. I also want to urge my colleagues to support Motion 503.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I currently have 13 members on the list. We have 35 minutes.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will be brief based on some of the very excellent comments that have been made by members from all sides of the House this afternoon.

I want to compliment the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, and I applaud her. I say that also as a former teacher. I want to say that at the end of the day the outcome that we are looking for is, quite simply, for students to reach their full potential. I'm proud to say that I have an almost two-year-old, and some day when he is eight or nine years old and in grade 3, I'm looking forward to being a teacher's greatest advocate and not a teacher's worst nightmare.

I'm very pleased to say that I have spoken to many grade 3 teachers in my community of Fort McMurray, where we have 23 schools. I value their opinion. At the end of the day Motion 503 says, "Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate provincial achievement tests for grade 3 students and consider alternative assessments for learning." I believe in diagnostic teaching, which has been talked about, as well as: how do we spend our energy? I believe we can spend our energy in a more efficient manner for our teachers and for parents and for students in helping them reach their full potential.

I want to say that alternative assessment is really a dialogue with teachers, with others that are involved in this, shall I say, important venture. This is about a dialogue. Last week you heard the Prime Minister and the President of the United States talk about a dialogue on clean energy. I think it is healthy in enhancing our system by not saying that we just simply eliminate, but we're looking at enhancing an already excellent system in our province.

With that and from what I have heard from grade 3 teachers, I fully support Motion 503. In my former life as a teacher and without any fear of contradiction I encourage all members from all sides of the House to support this important motion.

Thank you.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, will try to be briefer than usual in light of the number of people that want to speak.

I want to of course start by commending the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake for her use of her opportunity to bring a motion before the Legislature with respect to one that has generated

so much interest. I can definitely say that we will be voting in favour of her motion because I think it is a very wise initiative and one that demonstrates a great deal of common sense. In my own constituency, I can report to my colleagues, I have received a phenomenal amount of feedback from people even with just the recent amount of press attention that this issue has gotten. The response has been very solidly on one side of the issue, basically, also supporting this initiative that's being brought forward by the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

There are a number of really good, important points that have already been made by many speakers. I can say, you know, that I have a son who took the grade 3 test last year, and I have a daughter who will take it next year. One of the things that is most important to me is that I worry about the degree of stress that this process can in some cases impose upon kids and also upon the school. I also worry about the impact that this test can have on the quality of education that's actually provided in the classroom. I do know that time is taken out from other educational activities in order to prepare the students for this test. I think that we ultimately experience a loss in terms of the overall education that goes on in the class because of the need for the children to be prepared properly for these tests. Also, I have several different schools that provide immersion in my riding, in my area, and of course the children in those programs have to take the test twice, so there's additional stress and anxiety there.

I think what's really important is that children in the classroom do get assessed and that their progress is clearly identified. I do want to make that very clear. I think that assessing is very, very important. I think the incredibly patient teachers at my own school would on a good day call me a high-needs parent when it comes to wanting to know how well my kids are doing. I have nothing against proper assessment, but I do think that that assessment should be done in a way that allows for the natural variance from day to day that children will experience and also allows for it to be used in a functional way so that if there is assessment done and then there are deficits identified, the teachers have the ability to respond in a reasonably timely fashion to change what's happening. I think, particularly when kids are at this age, you know, seven, eight, nine years old, that so much changes between the time they write the test and the time they get the results back that the opportunity has long since been lost for teachers to do what they do best, which is to help our kids learn as much and as well as they possibly can when they're in school.

As I said, there have been a number of very, very good points already made in favour of this motion, so I won't go on any longer. I do urge my colleagues here to join our caucus in voting in favour of the motion.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to speak in favour of Motion 503, the elimination of grade 3 provincial achievement tests, or PATs. Motion 503 urges the government to consider alternative assessments for learning for Alberta's grade 3 students.

As the father of three daughters I know the dedication, hard work, and enthusiasm that students in Alberta put into their education. I was always there to help each one of them finish their homework, complete a project, or study for a big test, and I saw the anxiety that they went through each time they had to prepare for a major test like a PAT, not that a little anxiety is always a bad thing, Mr. Speaker.

Overall, the PAT is used to determine if the students are learning what they are expected to learn. There's a lot of pressure put on a student as a result of the exams. Concerns with disappointing results and even failure can lead a student to doing not as well as they could or can lead a student to doing much better.

Mr. Speaker, I think that testing in schools is extremely important. I absolutely believe that you cannot manage what you cannot measure. However, I am not convinced that PATs in grade 3 are the best way to measure eight- and nine-year-olds. Perhaps it would be beneficial for all parties – students, teachers, and parents – to take another look at the standardized testing in Alberta. I wholly support that we need to catch them by this age so that they don't fall behind. This motion is providing an opportunity for alternative methods of evaluation to be considered, methods that focus more on the individual needs of the student, methods that will inevitably contribute more to a student's long-term academic success.

Our province has always been a major advocate of education. It is important for us to develop a testing mechanism that best meets the needs of Alberta's students and one that will continue to meet those needs. In an era where it is so important for our children to continually further their education, it becomes essential for us to start with the basics and make sure that our children learn what they need to. Taking another look at the grade 3 PATs in this province could help us understand and help us improve our already world-class education system.

Mr. Speaker, our children are so vital to the success and vitality of this province that we must do everything we can to ensure that they learn and grow into Alberta's future leaders. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and speak to the motion brought forward by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake. I want to start by thanking the hon. member for raising what I believe to be an exceedingly important issue, not just the issue of the provincial achievement tests at grade 3 but the issue of education and its importance to our students and to our community as a whole.

5:30

As you'll know, Mr. Speaker, and all members of the House will know, we're engaged in a very strong discussion about education over the course of the next year, talking about where we need to be as we educate our students in this province so that they can be ready for a global economy and a global community and so that they can be ready to participate locally as citizens in their local community and in their local economies. As we talk about the 21st century learner, we talk about the knowledge, skills, and attributes that our learner needs to have to be successful.

We also need to determine how we know when we've achieved those essential elements of learning. I would start by agreeing and by putting forward the concept that teachers are in the best position to assess the learning and the progress of the students in their classrooms. Teachers are professionals. They're trained as teachers, and they are in the classroom with the students on a day-to-day basis, both promoting learning of concepts and assessing how that learning is going. Assessment for learning happens, I would submit, Mr. Speaker, on a daily basis in the classroom. It has to. Teachers have to know whether the concepts that they're putting forward and the methodology that they're using to instruct the students in their classrooms, who come from diverse backgrounds and who come

with diverse abilities – whether they're grasping the concepts, whether they're learning, and whether they're moving forward.

There should be no argument at all, in my view, about whether assessment for learning is important – absolutely it is – and whether assessment for learning is best done in the hands of teachers, who are the professionals. Absolutely, it must be.

There are also, though, two other assessment processes: assessment as learning and assessment of learning. I'll not speak about assessment as learning at the moment because that might just confuse the issue, and I have a short period of time, and you have a long list. But assessment of learning is also important. In my view, it's not discrete from or distinct from assessment for learning. All assessment has to be used for learning in some manner or form. But assessment of learning so that we can report to the community that our school system is working, that the investment that we're making in our children is a valuable investment, and that we are moving forward as part of the larger community is very important.

At lot of the discussion around provincial achievement tests has been around the concept of high-stakes testing. I want to just speak for a moment about that because I think it's very important that we not allow provincial achievement tests to become high-stakes testing. They're not a measure of the teachers. The PAT 3s, PAT 6s, PAT 9s are not a way of determining whether our teachers are doing a good job.

All you need to do is be in any classroom in any community in our province to know that each classroom is made up of a different group of students, that bring different talents and abilities, different abilities and disabilities, different backgrounds and perspectives, even different languages to the classroom. They bring their social problems both from home and from their community to the classroom. So it cannot be used as a measure of teachers, nor can it be used as a measure to rank schools, as some purport to try and do. That's not the purpose, and that's not a useful result for provincial achievement tests.

However, there is a value to achievement tests in terms of understanding across the spectrum of our learning system how well we are doing and to be able to report back to school jurisdictions for their use within their schools on trends within the teaching and learning that's happening and in other ways in which the curricular leaders in the schools, the principals and other curricular leaders, can work within their school community to determine if there are things that need to be changed within the system, if there are ways that we can do things better.

There's a role and function for provincial achievement tests. There's an appropriate way to use the results of those provincial achievement tests. I would argue that there are even ways to use them effectively for student learning. We have some 13 years of experience with PAT 3 tests, and one of the things which I've learned from looking at the results is that they're entirely predictive of outcomes for those students in later years. Mr. Speaker, what that tells me is that the tests are reliable, but it also tells me that we're not using them appropriately because if they are predictive of the result, we're not changing the result as a result of the tests.

That's sort of a convoluted way of saying it, but I would say this: should we be looking for improvement in our assessment processes? Absolutely. I've committed to work with the ATA and others in the education community to find better ways to do assessment. There's a new project being headed up by Dr. Barry McGaw of the University of Melbourne to look at how we assess 21st century skills to be able to assess them in an appropriate way. I think we should be engaged in that project because we need to move our assessment practices and we need to make sure that our assessment practices are useful practices for the student, for the school, for the system, and to be able to report back to our public.

Mr. Speaker, while I understand the sentiment behind the motion that the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake has brought forward and I understand the concerns that are being raised about people teaching to the test and about the stress of the grade 3 students, I think those are issues that can be overcome. I do think we need to make sure that we have ways of recognizing the testing standards and assessment standards and outcomes across the spectrum of our system. We have to appreciate that our system is held up as being one of the best in the world because of its strong curriculum, because of its strong teaching standards, because of its strong teachers, and because of our accountability pillar in our assessment processes.

Before we change what we're doing, we ought to know what we're going to. That would be my comment to the hon. member. Should we look at the PAT 3 tests and, presumably, in the future the PAT 6 and PAT 9? Perhaps we should. But let's know and understand what assessment we need to make sure that we're effective not only for the students, which is most important, but for the system, know that we're doing the right thing and investing in our system across the province so that our students can be ready for the 21st century – we're into the 21st century now, so I'd better say for the latter half of the 21st century – so that they can participate in a knowledge economy, a global economy, and be good both global and local citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and add to the debate on Motion 503, which urges the government “to eliminate provincial achievement tests for grade 3 students and consider alternative assessments for learning.”

Mr. Speaker, we're very fortunate to live in this province. We have an exceptional education system, that allows our children to succeed. I have a child that's in that system, and he and his classmates are all very successful. In addition, we've got exceptional teachers, and they should all be commended for the exemplary role they play and how they perform in building Alberta's future by educating our youth.

However, it's necessary to review our system to ensure that it continues to reflect the needs of our students, our teachers, and all Albertans. This provincial testing program, as mentioned earlier, was introduced in 1992. The first objective is to determine if students are learning what they are expected to learn at a particular grade level. Fair enough. The second is to provide Albertans with a report as to how well students have achieved provincial standards at these specific points of schooling, and the third is to assist schools, authorities, and the province in monitoring and improving student learning. These objectives are very important; however, there have been some concerns about the effectiveness of this testing model. The hon. Minister of Education has already explained the difference between assessments of learning and assessments for learning, so I won't go into that.

In discussions with teachers in my own constituency they've admitted that, often, in grades where provincial achievement tests are administered, they end up teaching to the test. By focusing primarily on teaching to the test, valuable time is spent just preparing students for the test rather than simply covering the curriculum. Further, teachers are less able to tailor their teaching methods to meet the needs of individual students. Mr. Speaker, I believe we must ask ourselves if the current model of testing is the most beneficial way to determine if students are learning what they're

expected to learn. I also feel it's important to consistently revise our assessment program and put greater emphasis on alternative methods for learning testing, such as diagnostic testing, which enables teaching methods to be tailored directly to those students' needs, which is vital for their long-term academic success.

It's important that we continually examine our education system to make sure that it's operating effectively for our children and all Albertans. That, Mr. Speaker, is why I stand before this House wholeheartedly in support of Motion 503.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a privilege to speak in favour of Motion 503, eliminating provincial assessment testing for grade 3. It's also an honour for me to speak today because my grade 9 teacher and, actually, the head of the Alberta Teachers' Association, Frank Bruseker, is here this afternoon to witness that a recalcitrant and lackadaisical student in his grade 9 class has been able to participate in a debate of this stature in Alberta at this time. So I thank Mr. Bruseker for his work with me back then and his current work on behalf of the Alberta people.

5:40

If we get into the merits of the debate, my father served as a teacher in the Calgary public system for 25 years. My mother served in the Calgary public teaching association for another 30 years. So my experience with provincial exam testing is mostly anecdotal. When it came to things that came up in the classroom, I would tend to believe things my mother said a little more than my father not because my father wasn't a great teacher – he probably was – but my mother was one of those hard-working schoolteachers who paid attention to students, who really did everything by the book and looked at what worked best with students. I think my dad sort of cut corners the odd time. But I'm telling tales out of school and probably shouldn't be doing that.

I'd get back home after a day of school, whenever it was, or from university, and I'd see my mom the odd time – you know, rarely did I see her like this; it was usually toward the end of the year – and she'd come home; she was all stressed out and was all upset. I'd say, "Mom, what's the matter?" and she said, "We had those exams again." What "those exams" was referring to were the exams that her students would have to take in grade 3. My mother was an educator, a principal primarily in the K through 6 grades for the majority of her last 15 years of teaching.

I'd explore with her. I'd say, "Well, what's so bad about them, Mom?" and she'd say, "It distracts my teachers' and my children's time and my student learners for the last month of preparations before the exam." She found this a loathsome experience not only for the students and the staff, but it didn't lead to learning in a productive manner that added anything to the kids' self-esteem, self-worth, or ability to learn anything that was remotely, to my mother's thinking, valuable to them for the course of their lives.

You know, what happens afterwards with those things is what I think is even more reprehensible. I understand that this is not the government's fault, but when these test results get FOIPed by the Fraser Institute for their publishing results, what occurs in our communities is that people cross-compare and analyze what their kids' scores were in one section of town vis-à-vis another. Then assumptions are made that teachers are better over at this district than that district. This is the type of combativeness and divisiveness that I don't believe defines Alberta and shouldn't continue, at least at the grade 3 level.

Given that many people would wish to speak on this issue, those are my reasons primarily for supporting this motion. God bless the teachers of Alberta.

The Speaker: Hon. member, just so I understand. Mr. Bruseker, a former member of this Assembly who is in the gallery, is your former teacher?

Mr. Hehr: Yes.

The Speaker: And you are now in the Assembly.

Mr. Hehr: Yes.

The Speaker: I now understand.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise to speak in support of Motion 503, sponsored by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake. First, I'd like to state that I believe in regular testing, whether it is the assessment of learning or assessment for learning. I believe that they both are important parts of education. While I believe in the value of regular testing, I believe there are strong merits in re-examining how assessment tests for grade 3 students are conducted as well as the communication of such tests with the students' parents, education systems, and the public.

The grade 3 provincial achievement test is currently structured in such a public and formal manner that teachers are teaching to the test, spending disproportionate amounts of time on the PAT. Eight-year-old children are put through unnecessary substantial and emotional stress in preparation for as well as responding to the test and the outcomes, and the bigger context of the student population is not integrated into the overall interpretation of the test results.

Mr. Speaker, while I have received input from constituents and stakeholders, with a high majority of them in support of the motion, I myself as a parent believe in the need to develop our children's ability to handle stressful, demanding situations and have put my own children in music programs as additional discipline to experience structural learning, competition, and examinations. Arriving at the decision to support this motion was not the easiest one for me. It took some back and forth.

As a first-generation Canadian, having come from a highly conformative and competitive educational system in Asia, I have seen many times over the psychological scar from intensive examinations linger on many people for years. People have recurring nightmares about examinations. Remembering the view of my grandfather, the first of three generations of educators in my family, about Canada to immigrants, that this country is purgatory for the middle-aged but that it is heaven for the young, I believe that efforts to alleviate unnecessary and sometimes unfair stress on our young students are worthy considerations and act in keeping our children's childhood experience as heavenly as possible.

I'm pleased to support Motion 503 today. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to speak this afternoon as well in support of Motion 503. I certainly thank the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake for her work on Motion

503. Our excellent education system, the importance of teachers, the great opportunity that students have in Alberta to learn, I think, is evidenced by the keen interest in the matter that Motion 503 draws our attention to. The Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake makes a compelling argument for an alternative approach to assessment for learning. I think that certainly her experience and the interest that she has generated in this issue speak well and make a compelling argument for our reconsideration of the way we do these tests.

I would not support this motion if it were only seeking to eliminate all assessment measures. This motion does not do that. I have some concern about the wording regarding the elimination of achievement tests. That's been mentioned by other speakers. However, I think that this being a motion urging the government to consider this provides opportunity to deal with this in a reasonable manner. I have no problem with testing. However, the fact that students learn in different ways says to me that alternative assessment measures are warranted.

I speak from experience both as a student and as a parent that not all students convey their grasp of a subject matter based on a point-in-time test. There must be better ways of considering this. I believe there can be a more effective and better assessment for learning done, and on that basis I support this motion. The motion urges the government to eliminate the PATs and to consider alternative assessments for learning, and on that basis I support this motion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will be brief because I know that there are others and that we're going to run out of time. I just would actually make sure that I'm on record as supporting this and thanking the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake for bringing this forward. Clearly – clearly – by the support we have in the gallery and the number of phone calls that I've been receiving, this is a motion that really must be passed.

I just would like to share one personal story. When I was in high school, your whole year was based on a two-hour exam. I didn't really do all that well on those exams, so I came away with the idea that I was stupid. I came away with the idea that I was stupid, and I quit after high school. I ran into a prof that I was having coffee with after I'd had my children and gotten married, and she said to me: "Bridget, you're intelligent. What you aren't is educated."

I went back to school when I was 45, and I took that attitude with me. I said to the teacher that had to get me through grade 12 chem that they made me repeat and that I couldn't understand that. Just because they hadn't split the atom when I went to school didn't mean I had to repeat chemistry. However, what I had said to this fellow was: "I don't give a damn if I learn anything. Just get me through this exam." That's the attitude that I think sometimes testing brings. I'm not saying that we shouldn't have some kind of an evaluation, but I truly believe that we can damage little eight-year-old psyches that will follow them for the rest of their lives. Those test results follow them with every single teacher that they will get from grade 3 to grade 12, so please, please, let's pass this motion.

5:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, then Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to rise and speak to Motion 503, the elimination of grade 3 provincial achievement

testing as sponsored by my colleague the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake. I want to thank and compliment the hon. member on doing so, on bringing this motion forward. She's a passionate teacher, and she's passionate about our kids and about our students.

I think that there are good things and bad things – I'll keep this short – about standardized testing. I think the benefits are that you have an opportunity to assess the system, how it's working, if information is getting to students. It makes the system somewhat accountable, and I think that's good. It's also good to have some information for parents out there. However, I have to say that I've always thought that timed standardized testing is just a real silly way of assessing student achievement. I mean, all it really does is test the ability of a child to regurgitate points of information as quickly as possible. I just don't see how on earth that can show that somebody is learning a subject. I've felt that way for a long time, so I'm going to support this motion.

I would like to suggest, before the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity gets too excited that I'm agreeing with him on something, that I still do very much . . . [interjection] This is harder for me than it is for you.

I would like to very much say that I do think there should be some sort of standards in the testing. It's just that this timed testing just does not make sense, doesn't cut it. So I will be supporting Motion 503.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure to rise in support of the motion to eliminate the provincial achievement tests for grade 3 and to consider alternative assessments for learning.

I think a lot has been said about, you know, putting eight-year-olds through the tests. It's very stressful not only for them; I believe it's stressful for the teachers as well. You know, I think the teachers can pass on the stress to the kids, too, and the poor kids have to live with that for the rest of their lives. Even the teachers, with the time taken away for the tests, end up teaching the kids only eight and a half months instead of 10 months. There's a cost involved in this. The money going towards the tests could be spent elsewhere.

The teachers do their assessments throughout the year, and I think that they are the best judges to test the students. There are a lot more other reasons, you know, to support Motion 503, but since there is not much time, I will be supporting it. I want to congratulate the member for bringing forward Motion 503.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, according to our rules at 5:55 it's my pleasure to call on the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake to conclude the debate.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank my hon. colleagues who spoke to this motion. I would like to again emphasize that part of the effectiveness of our world-class education system is based on our willingness to continually improve it to better meet the needs of our children. That is why I have introduced this motion on whether provincial achievement tests for grade 3 students are the best mechanism for learning assessment. This past hour we have discussed the many challenges with this assessment test: its timing, its effectiveness, and the impact it has on our children.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that other assessment methods would better meet the needs of our children, teachers, and the educational system as a whole. Therefore, I thank my colleagues for their consideration

of this motion and ask all members from all parties to support my Motion 503.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 503 carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:55 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Ady	Elniski	Notley
Anderson	Forsyth	Olson
Bhullar	Groeneveld	Pastoor
Boutilier	Hehr	Quest
Brown	Jacobs	Rogers
Calahasen	Johnston	Sherman

Chase	Kang	Taft
Denis	Leskiw	Weadick
Doerksen	Mason	Woo-Paw
Drysdale	Mitzel	

Against the motion:

Allred	DeLong	Johnson
Bhardwaj	Fawcett	Liepert
Blackett	Fritz	Lukaszuk
Campbell	Hancock	Oberle
Dallas	Horne	Renner
Danyluk	Jablonski	Vandermeer

Totals	For – 29	Against – 18
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[Motion Other than Government Motion 503 carried]

[The Assembly adjourned at 6:09 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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Deputy Chair: Mr. Kang

Anderson Brown Calahasen	Cao Jacobs	MacDonald Sandhu	Woo-Paw Vacant
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Berger Boutilier Drysedale	Griffiths Hehr	Mason McQueen	Oberle Webber
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