



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday, April 27, 2009

Issue 30

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, April 27, 2009

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Today's prayer was authored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill. Let us be ever mindful of our responsibilities as elected officials. Give us the wisdom to serve for the common good of all Albertans, and help us to carry out our duties with respect and courtesy for all of our colleagues in this Assembly. Amen.

Hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to invite all to participate in the singing of our national anthem. It will be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau. Please participate 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

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 this Assembly a unique group of individuals who are visiting the Legislature today. Joining us for their annual visit are some of the executive members from the Pacific Northwest Economic Region. PNWER has a great tradition that the current executive travels to all jurisdictions within PNWER. We're very pleased to have them here with us today and tomorrow meeting with ministers, members, and government departments. They've taken this opportunity to look at best practices that affect everyone in this jurisdiction, including energy, environment, health, and border issues. Mr. Speaker, the individuals are seated in your gallery, and I'd like to ask them to rise and remain standing when I call their names: Senator Lesil McGuire from the state of Alaska; MLA Mike Chisholm from the Saskatchewan Party, the government of Saskatchewan; Wendy Baldwin, consul and program manager for the consulate general's office in Seattle; Matt Morrison, the executive director of PNWER; and David Kettles, U.S. relations for International and Intergovernmental Relations. I'd like to ask the Assembly to greet them with the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security.

Mr. Lindsay: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through to all members of this Assembly two very important people seated in your gallery this afternoon. With us this afternoon is Stan Woloshyn, a friend and former colleague, who served the constituents of Stony Plain and the people of Alberta for

many years as an MLA and minister. Joining him is his grandson Scott Woloshyn, who attends St. Marguerite school in the constituency of Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. With your permission I would ask our special guests to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a rather large group of grade 6 students from St. Marguerite Catholic school in Spruce Grove. They're accompanied by a long list of teachers and parent helpers, which I'll go through in a moment. We have 110 students in the galleries accompanied by teachers Miss Lori Green, Mr. Joel Boyko, Mrs. Lori-Lee Carriere, Mrs. Judy Monea, Mr. Denis MacNeil and parent helpers Mrs. Brenda Canfield, Mrs. Sheri Ratsoy, Ms Kim Johnston, Mr. Larry Krahn, Mrs. Kerri Sutherland, Mr. Mike Woloshyn, Mr. Trevor Lein, Mrs. Carmen Victoor, Mrs. Jacquie Frennd, Mrs. Monica Halvorson, Ms Shelley Buillie, Mrs. Tara Kozdrowski, Mrs. Patti Kocon, Mr. Paul Richard, Mr. Harold Properzi, Mrs. Rena Nielsen, Mr. Mitch Flaman, Mr. Richard Stirrett, Mr. Bryan Fehr, Mrs. Shannon Matsuba, and Mrs. Tammy Walsh. Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, they are in both galleries, 137 guests in all. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

The Speaker: I'm sure you bought lunch for them all.

The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to all members today a group of students and parents and helpers from Rimbey elementary school. There are 20 grade 6 students, very bright and eager kids, that asked good questions this afternoon; their teacher, Mrs. Cathy Coers; and some parents and helpers, Ms Lennie McFadyen, Mrs. Glenis Shaw, Mrs. Holly Trenson, Mrs. Margaret Tanasiuk, Mrs. Laureen Morton, Ms Pam Elliot, Mr. Glen Clark, and Mrs. Frances Beagle. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you 18 students and six adult chaperones, including their teacher, Heather Hempstock, from Bishop Routhier elementary school. Bishop Routhier elementary school is located in the Peavine Métis settlement, about 350 kilometres north of here. I don't know which gallery they're seated in, but I'd ask that they stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to be able to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly a great group of kids. On Sundays when I go from MLA, I turn into a Sunday school teacher, so this is my Sunday school class. They're up visiting, and I'd ask them to rise as I name them: Jenae Feddock, Laura Stringham, Taylor Stevens, Jaden Feddock, Becky Cooper, Jon MacDonald, Linden MacMillan, Scott Broadhurst, Chris Pinter, and Myrna MacMillan, who is helping me today.

They're about to go and take part in some tourism in this province at West Edmonton Mall after question period. I'd ask that we all give them a warm welcome.

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

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly today people I consider to be friends and, of course, colleagues. They represent the county of Camrose. They're up here in Edmonton today doing some work, and we had the opportunity, myself and the Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, to have lunch with them and hear some of the things they're working on. I would like to have them stand as I call their names. They are the reeve, Don Gregorwich; councillors Kathleen Ireland, Harvey Benke, Glen Nelson, Doug Lyseng, and Al Radke; and Steven Gerlitz, administrator. They're behind me up here. I guess they've got us surrounded. I'd ask my colleagues to extend the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three guests joining us in the gallery today, all of whom have come to hear my member's statement and to express their concern about the fate of the Wild Rose Foundation and its funding. The first person I'd like to introduce is Danisha Bhaloo, who is the director of programming for the Edmonton inner-city children's project. This is a 14-year old project that has been providing recreational and educational programming to youth in the McCauley-Boyle Street community. Danisha, would you please stand?

Heather McPherson, please stand. She's the executive director for the Alberta Council for Global Cooperation, and with her is Auralia Brooke, who is the research and administrative officer for the same organization. The Alberta Council for Global Cooperation is a coalition of voluntary-sector organizations located in Alberta and working locally and globally to achieve sustainable human development.

Please join me in welcoming my guests to the Alberta Assembly.

1:40

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

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you my first granddaughter, and first grandchild, Alyssa. She is a beautiful seven-pound, four-ounce little girl. Since she was only born 15 hours ago, she has to join us by television today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Members' Statements

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

Pacific Northwest Economic Region

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. PNWER, or the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, is a formal organization established in 1991 with seven original legislative jurisdictions: Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, British Columbia, and Alberta. The Yukon joined in 1994. In 2008 Saskatchewan became a partner as well.

Our former colleague Jim Horsman is one of the founders of PNWER. The original vision was to establish a region-wide

organization that would address common interests and concerns, including energy, environment, climate change, agriculture, and, last but not least, border issues and trade movement of goods and services across our common borders, to reduce congestion.

PNWER has set itself some lofty goals, including promoting greater regional collaboration, enhancing the competitiveness of the region in both domestic and international markets, leveraging regional influence in Ottawa and Washington, DC, and achieving continued economic growth while maintaining the region's natural beauty and environment. I strongly believe that PNWER is reaching and surpassing these goals, and we should all be very proud.

After so many years PNWER has become so respected that many other areas are trying to use this association as a model to improve their respective relationships. The midwestern United States is looking at PNWER for keys on how to build on their own organizations.

I'm very proud and pleased that PNWER is very well respected in both Ottawa and Washington, DC. Along with my colleagues from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, Calgary-Bow, and Calgary-North Hill, thanks for the opportunity to represent Alberta at PNWER.

Mr. Speaker, everyone was working in isolation on the issues that their jurisdictions faced, and only after meeting did everyone begin to realize how many of the PNWER jurisdictions are facing the same issues, thus the obvious need for working together.

Under the great leadership of the CEO, Mr. Matt Morrison, PNWER has indeed become greatly successful. PNWER has a great future.

Thank you.

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

Wild Rose Foundation

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Towards the end of March I began receiving phone calls, e-mails, and letters from people concerned that the Wild Rose Foundation would lose its funding in this year's budget, and on April 7 the monies available under the Ministry of Culture and Community Spirit to the NGO volunteer sector were cut by \$7 million. This decision continues to be strongly opposed by members of the human services and voluntary sector.

There are two major problems that I have with this cut, and the first is practical. The government has eliminated all funding for the international development program, \$1.3 million, cutting off support to a number of Alberta groups that work to better lives all over the world. The minister has also eliminated the \$4.7 million grant pool that targeted volunteerism in human services in Alberta. Groups that offer counselling to AISH recipients, support for seniors, help to new Canadians to access services, and that support volunteerism have all told me that this cut will put their services in doubt at a time when they're needed more than ever.

The minister has told organizations who received grants from Wild Rose that they can apply under CIP or CFEP. How cruel. There's no extra money in either of those programs. In fact, CIP's budget has been reduced by \$1.1 million. Nonprofit organizations will be competing with community groups, municipalities, arts groups, education, and others vying for CIP money, not just the same pie and more forks but a tartlet and more forks.

That leads me to the second problem, and it relates to this government's approach. It's an approach that they've used in health care, in human rights, and now in the NGO voluntary sector. This government divides and conquers. It cuts the most vulnerable first and then plays each vulnerable group against each other. In the

budget debate the minister repeatedly said, “Well, which sector should I cut, then?” or “Would you rather I cut the arts?” It’s a ridiculous argument, particularly in light of the billions of questionable expenditures this government has wasted in health care reorganization, bonuses to well-paid deputy ministers, and a royalty scheme that nets us less money from our natural resources.

*As one person put it, we are all intricately woven together to create the fabric of our community: arts, culture, film, theatre, sport, museums, health, and human service. The government has failed the nonprofit sector, it has failed to support social development, and it has failed to provide a budget that supports strong, vital communities.**

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

Vision Education Alberta

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One reason that Alberta is known for having one of the best education systems in the world is because it is a priority for our government to ensure that every student has access to high-quality learning opportunities. Students with disabilities may require extra supports to achieve their educational goals. This government, along with education stakeholders and community groups, is committed to ensuring that these students get the services they need to maximize their learning opportunities and outcomes and fully develop their personal potential.

The services for students with vision loss initiative was launched in May 2008 with a \$9 million government commitment to enhance educational supports for students who are blind or visually impaired. Through this initiative, I’m pleased to say, Alberta students with vision loss can now access online resources, training, and support through one window, the new Vision Education Alberta website. The Minister of Education officially launched the website today over the noon hour.

Vision.alberta.ca is a unique place for Alberta students with vision loss, their families, classroom teachers, educational assistants, vision teachers, other vision specialists, and education stakeholders to access important information, including, Mr. Speaker, news and upcoming events; loan catalogues for alternative format materials, including Braille, large print, audio, and e-text; video training clips for specialized equipment; and other educational resources. This site is highly accessible for students who are blind or visually impaired, and it is designed to work co-operatively with assistive technology to ensure students fully benefit from the site’s offerings.

I’m pleased to rise today, Mr. Speaker, to honour this initiative and to encourage you and all members to visit the site to learn more valuable information about supports and services for students with vision loss.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Challenge North 2009

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the city of Cold Lake hosted the Northern Alberta Development Council’s Challenge North 2009 conference. The turnout was truly amazing, with approximately 200 delegates in attendance as well as our hon. Premier, six ministers, and 10 MLAs. It was a busy week filled with brainstorming sessions, workshops, and fun-filled activities.

Challenge North 2009 was an opportunity to share experiences, ideas, and solutions that help to outline and address the issues that northern communities are faced with. Through the discussion we were able to identify the risks, challenges, and opportunities that our

communities will encounter as we move forward together. The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has spoken a lot about the importance of strong municipalities as a means to create strong, vibrant communities. The conferences and the workshops like Challenge North 2009 help to build and strengthen the connections between our communities.

I would like to thank everyone who came out to Cold Lake last week to participate in the conference. I had a wonderful time, and I truly enjoyed the dialogue that took place.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Oral Question Period

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

Swine Flu Pandemic Planning

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The swine flu pandemic raises very real concerns for our strained health care system’s capacity to cope. As a former health officer I know the need for clear lines of authority; accurate, timely communications; and a well-supported health workforce. Last June the province’s four senior public health officers resigned en masse in large part because they felt that this government was not taking public health seriously. To the Premier: what capacity does this province have to deal with the flu pandemic?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, there have been no confirmed cases of the influenza, but our health officials have been working very closely with the federal health department. We also increased surveillance for acute respiratory illnesses and are monitoring very closely. Once again, this weekend the minister’s staff was working very closely with the federal government.

Dr. Swann: In crowded emergency waiting rooms and clinics a flu virus spreads very quickly, very easily. What is being planned to prevent this?

1:50

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I think that the Leader of the Opposition, with his background and training, will agree that it’s incumbent on all of us as members of this Assembly not to cause undue concern. The situation is such that our chief medical officer of health has put Alberta Health Services on high alert to ensure that anything that has indications of symptoms is brought to the attention immediately. As the Premier has indicated, there are no cases in Alberta at this stage although there are some elsewhere in the country. We continue to work with the federal government on this situation.

Dr. Swann: Well, every day we have people crammed into hospital rooms, gurneys in hallways, waiting in emergency departments. How will the system cope with increased demands of a pandemic?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, we want to ensure that – and this is in the statement from the chief medical officer of health yesterday – the first contact if someone has concerns is with the Health Link to ensure that the right advice is given. Ideally we want to ensure that we’re treating these situations seriously but not necessarily in the public institutions, so we’ve done a couple of things. As of tomorrow the provincial lab here in Edmonton will be doing testing. It’ll be a 24-hour turnaround, so we’ll have results much quicker than we are today by having to send it out of province.

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

*The text in italics exceeded the time limit and was not read in the House.

Physician Supply

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Alberta Health Services has quietly implemented an astonishing and unprecedented province-wide freeze on new physician hiring. We will not even be replacing retiring physicians. Instead of fulfilling his election promise, the Premier has supported that decision and is doing the opposite of what was promised. To the Premier: did the Premier approve this recent decision to freeze physician hiring?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we remain committed to our overall goal of increasing the number of trained physicians here in the province of Alberta. We've increased the number of seats in our training universities. Those physicians, of course, will take time to be trained and implemented into the workforce. But we know that we have some catch-up to do in terms of not only physicians but nurses as well and other health care professionals because we've seen an increase in our population and also an increase in need for the kind of services we provide.

Dr. Swann: Well, clearly the Premier doesn't get it, that the primary health care system is in serious jeopardy, and therefore the people of Alberta are in serious jeopardy. Which other vital health professionals are on the chopping block, Mr. Premier? Nurses, lab technicians? Where are we going from here?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, with this issue about reductions the health budget in this province has seen the largest increase compared to other departments. Some departments got zero. Some got a modest increase of 2 per cent. Health got an increase of 4.7 per cent to ensure that we keep the momentum, keeping as many people as possible employed in delivering health services in the province. Was it a cut? No. It was an increase in the budget. So I don't know where they're coming from. They are saying that there are cuts and cuts. There's more money going into health at a very, very difficult time and economic situation.

Dr. Swann: Again to the Premier: how much money are you planning to save with these freezes on physicians?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, it's actually an increase in the budget of 4.7 per cent. You know, years before the percentage of increase was 10 to 14 per cent. We know – Albertans have told us – that if we keep increasing one budget at that rate while the projected increase in economic growth is dropping, then we will not be able to sustain this very good system we enjoy for the next generation. That is important. Always look to how you can help the next generation and sustain this very good program that we enjoy.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Precision Drilling Corporation

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The oil patch is a small world, where everybody knows everyone else and deals are often made over a handshake. If what ends up as a multimillion dollar merger or acquisition begins as a casual conversation between two insiders who have worked together on deals before, what business is it of ours in this House as long as it's just business? But if the public sector or public money is involved in any way, then it is the business of this House because then it involves the public interest. To the minister of finance: is the minister aware that the vice-chair of AIMCo and the founder of Precision Drilling are long-standing

friends and business partners? I will table the relevant documents at the appropriate time.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, no, I'm not aware of that, and I guess I would have to ask: what business is it of this House? We have deliberately, by legislation, created a Crown corporation that is at arm's length. We neither politically interfere, nor do we get engaged in screening of investments, nor do I see the relevancy of it in this particular situation. I would assume that that connection must be made because right at this point I fail to see the relevancy.

Mr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said, I will table the appropriate documents for the minister to take a look at. Perhaps then she will see the potential conflict of interest here.

Can the minister produce proof to this House that the vice-chair of AIMCo recused himself from absolutely all discussions of this deal going back to mid-March, when it was first offered, or even earlier, when the idea would have first been raised?

Ms Evans: You know, my hon. colleague the President of the Treasury Board is absolutely right. They are not understanding, Mr. Speaker, in the opposition benches that AIMCo as a Crown corporation does not in fact consult with us in any way, give us any of the information. They have their own rules to follow. They are subject to consideration by the board. The board does its due diligence through the staff relative to investments they make. The best reason to have us not interfere politically is that you can't imagine how politically polarized that would be. We are no different than the Canada pension plan, which is totally separate. They go even further than we do to make sure that the audit is separate. Mr. Speaker, we are not involved in the day-to-day operation of AIMCo. I have no knowledge of this.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Evans: And, actually, I would suggest . . .

The Speaker: No. The hon. member has been recognized, please.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to ask the minister if she would please review what happened through the course of this deal and come back tomorrow and assure the House that there were no conflicts of interest and that all appropriate procedures and codes of conduct were followed.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, again, I'm not sure it's even appropriate to have this conversation on the floor of the House. This is a question that should be provided in writing to the chair of the AIMCo board. The AIMCo is accountable for it; this House is not. If this House starts taking the time to go through all of the minutiae of the detail there of AIMCo, then we're not doing the business of this House. These kinds of concerns can be tabled in letters to Mr. Charles Baillie, who is the chair of AIMCo and who has been duly appointed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Swine Flu Surveillance Measures

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. While the swine flu virus has been spreading, this government has caused disarray in the public health system and has shrouded the department of health

in secrecy. The minister forced top health officials out of the system, allowed syphilis infections to spread, and now he's keeping plans to monitor swine flu a secret. When his department spokesman was asked what specific measures were being taken to monitor the outbreak in Alberta, he refused to answer. My question is to the Premier. How can we know if your precautions against swine flu are sufficient when your health minister won't even tell us what he's doing to keep swine flu under control in this province?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, once again the leader of the third party has made some allegations against the minister. The minister can respond.

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the chief medical officer of health issued a statement yesterday. The statement is pretty clear. The same individual is holding a media conference as we speak, just to in fact actually say the same thing he said yesterday. I'm not sure why the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood is making those accusations.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the official for the department refused to say what surveillance methods were in place. How can Albertans have confidence in a government that claims to have surveillance measures in place for swine flu but won't say what they are? Swine flu could be the next pandemic, and this government is refusing to tell Albertans how our province is monitoring infection. Telling people to call Health Link if they've been infected isn't good enough. Albertans deserve to know what the government is doing . . .

The Speaker: Okay. There is a time frame, hon. member. Now I will recognize the hon. minister.

2:00

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I guess I have some difficulty understanding this particular member's motives here. What he is suggesting, if I hear him correctly, is that he doesn't believe the chief medical officer of health. He wants to hear from a spokesman from the Department of Health and Wellness. Well, how absurd can you get? We have the chief medical officer of health, who is clearly in charge of this particular issue, who is in contact with the federal Public Health Agency, other provincial agencies, issuing a statement yesterday, meeting through the media today, and somehow this individual calls it secrecy.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, his own official refused to answer a direct question with respect to this matter, so I'll just ask the minister. What are the surveillance methods that your department is using in order to track the growth of the pandemic, or potential pandemic, of swine flu and its entry into this province?

Mr. Liepert: Well, again, I would suggest that all of us in this House, Mr. Speaker, have the responsibility to show some leadership, to show some leadership that doesn't start to try and make accusations that something is happening that isn't. The chief medical officer of health has been very clear. There are no confirmed cases in this province. I spoke to him just before coming into the House. He says that nothing else has changed. We have outstanding individuals in Alberta Health Services whose job it is to

ensure that the health of Albertans is protected. I trust them, not him.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by the Leader of the Official Opposition.

High-risk Offender Website

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Currently there are approximately 19,000 registered sex offenders in Canada. Each and every one of them has committed horrific crimes that are devastating to their victims. Cory Bitternose is a repeat sex offender so violent that his sneaker imprints stayed on the face of a woman he viciously attacked. Today Bitternose is facing 46 separate charges in connection with recent attacks plus, ironically, one charge for failing to comply with the national sex offender registry. My questions are all to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. How many registered sex offenders live in Alberta, and how many are featured on Alberta's high-risk offender website?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, according to the statistics from the national registry there are currently more than 1,600 registered sex offenders living in this province. Alberta's high-risk offender website contains a list of approximately 70 offenders who have been released into the community and are considered a high risk to reoffend. Our website is a repository of all high-risk offender public notification news releases that have been issued by police agencies in Alberta. Albertans can access the website if they want to know if a high-risk offender has been released into their community.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Was Mr. Bitternose on Alberta's high-risk offender website? If not, why not?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, the individual the hon. member is referring was not on our high-risk offender website. For an individual to be put on our website, they have had to have been the subject of a media notification by police alerting the public to their release into a community. Our website has never intended to be an active list of all known registered sex offenders or high-risk offenders in Alberta. As for the national registry it is not a publicly accessible site. It is used as a tool by law enforcement to keep tabs on registered sex offenders.

Mrs. Forsyth: Given that the national sex offender website is broken, with ineffective legislation and faulty technology, would the minister consider adopting Ontario's national sex offender website, which is considered the best in the country?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, the question is very timely. Just this week a parliamentary review began on the Sex Offender Information Registration Act. This is the legislation that covers how sex offenders are registered in a national program. We anticipate some consultation by the federal government with the provinces and territories on expected recommendations from the review that will lead to amendments and improvements on a national system. A more effective national system will allow us to look at what all provinces could and should be doing within their own jurisdictions.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Physician Supply (continued)

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our emergency room staff are overworked, stressed, and some are reluctantly considering leaving the province's health care system because of the extraordinary pressures today. To the minister: what does the minister have to say to the 200,000 desperate Calgarians who even now cannot get a family doctor?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, we have been very clear in this particular Assembly that solving our family doctor issue is not just simply a matter of finding more doctors. We need to ensure that we have a delivery model in place that uses all of our professions to the utmost of their abilities, and we are in the middle of ensuring that that is taking place. We will continue our recruitment of doctors. There is recruitment that takes place by some doctors in this province from outside. It's a number of situations.

Dr. Swann: That sounds like a contradiction to me, Mr. Speaker: continuing recruitment when there's a freeze on new hiring. Maybe the minister could explain that.

Thousands of cancer patients waiting for treatment will now face even longer wait times because this government refuses to hire new doctors. What is your response to Albertans, Mr. Minister?

Mr. Liepert: Well, I'm not sure where this particular member is getting his information relative to a hiring freeze, Mr. Speaker. There was a situation with a recruitment process through the former Capital health region of recruiting foreign physicians. There were a dozen or so who had offers of employment extended, and those are being honoured. There were a number of other discussions where no particular offer had been extended, no even verbal commitment had been made. In light of the current economic situation that Alberta Health Services finds itself in, it is reviewing this situation.

Dr. Swann: Well, how can a minister of this government justify spending \$35 million on horse racing, \$25 million on a greenwashing campaign, and we can't afford to hire new physicians in this province?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just explained in my answer that we are in fact hiring new physicians. Every particular program that Alberta Health Services has inherited from the various health regions is being assessed to ensure that we're getting value for dollars. This particular opposition is continually giving us good advice on how to save money. This is exactly what Alberta Health Services is doing, ensuring that their expenditures are justified before they simply write a blank cheque.

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

Apprenticeship, Trade, and Occupation Management System

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Some apprentices in my constituency and other parts of Alberta are waiting much longer than usual to get their exam results, record book updates, and other services they require. My first question is to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. What is the reason that these apprentices are being forced to wait so long for their results?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, recently we implemented a new computer system to increase the efficiencies in the apprenticeship system now and well into the future. As you well know and this House knows, we have extended the number of apprentices considerably over the last few years. This new system is going to be online. It's online access 24/7. When we launched the new system province-wide this February, the sheer volume of the records that we were transferring over did cause some delays in normal client service cycles. Our first priority – and it remains our first priority – is restoring client services so that the apprentices can get their marks.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister: how many apprentices in the system have been affected?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the exam records of approximately 6,000 of the 70,000 apprentices that we have who were originally caught in this transition process is kind of the number where we're at. So far some of the things that we've done to get them back on track is that we've allocated more staff from the department to work on going back through our manual system. The exam records of about 2,000 of those apprentices are left to catch up on, but we expect to be caught up to those in about the next 10 days. There will be some further delays because this is an ongoing process. We continually have new apprentices coming into the system and registering. Front-line staff offices across the province are going to be working directly with the affected Albertans and ensuring that the client services are met.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister: why did the department need a new system, and when will it be fully functional?

2:10

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it's been about 25 years since the system has been updated. That's quite a long time. As you well know, there have been a lot of changes in our province over the last 25 years; in fact, a lot of expansion of the apprenticeship training program, a lot of expansion in what is going on in terms of how those apprentices are marked and the exams are done.

These systems are fundamental to record the accuracy and preserve the integrity of the apprenticeship training certificates. We knew that as we ramped up the number of apprentices that we have up to the 70,000 mark, we were going to need a new system to ensure the type of client service that apprentices in Alberta have come to expect.

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

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A game of semantics about climate change is played in Alberta. Instead of having a system which relates to other countries, we have a made-in-Alberta version that doesn't compare to anyone and which allows Alberta to claim all kinds of things out of context. The 6.5 megatonnes reported by the minister last week does not represent an actual reduction in greenhouse gases; it's a reduction of intensity of emissions. My question is to the Minister of Environment. In 2007

the large emitters reported 114 megatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. Can the minister confirm what that number was in 2008?

Thank you.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the issue of savings is related to the requirements under our legislation that companies reduce their emissions over the base that was established in 2007. The member can be assured that there was a 6.5 million tonne reduction in emissions over what would have been in place had we done nothing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back to the same minister. In the 2002 climate change strategy the target for 2010 was to reduce emissions, emission intensity, by 20 megatonnes. Given that it has taken so many years to reduce greenhouse gas emission intensity by 6.5 megatonnes, is the minister on track to see this reduction of some 13.5 megatonnes in the next 10 months?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the climate change strategy that this government tabled some time ago and that we are in the process of implementing projects that there will be a bending down of the curve notwithstanding a significant amount of economic growth, notwithstanding a few million more people living in Alberta, with a few hundred thousand new homes and automobiles and everything else associated with that growth by 2020, and we believe that we are on track to achieve that.

Ms Blakeman: Back to the same minister: given the concerns raised by the Auditor General report and others about the ability to measure and compare reductions and the language used when this government reports reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, will the minister commit to using more accurate and comparable terminology when discussing Alberta's emissions? I live in hope.

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, contrary to what this member would have us believe, Alberta is setting the standards. Alberta is establishing the protocols for measuring. Other jurisdictions look to Alberta for our experience, having been one of the only jurisdictions that has been requiring measurement since 2003 and that has had legislated reductions in place since 2007.

Vehicular Accident Statistics

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, vehicle collisions in Alberta seem to go up every year, and 1 out of 4 collisions in Alberta involve speeding. In 2006 the sheriffs began to patrol and conduct traffic enforcement on Alberta highways as a way to bring down collisions. My first two questions are for the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security. How can Albertans know whether we're getting value for money by having sheriffs patrol Alberta's highways?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, traffic safety is, obviously, a key element of safe and secure communities, and Alberta's traffic sheriffs are working diligently to ensure safety and reduced collisions on our highways. Through collaboration between sheriffs, local police agencies, and the RCMP aggressive drivers and speeders are routinely targeted and held accountable for driving habits that can lead to serious or deadly collisions on our highways. We continually review and assess how traffic safety is enforced so that collisions can be reduced. We also receive many letters and e-mails from Albertans thanking our sheriffs for the job they're doing on our highways, and many of these individuals comment on the reduced speeds they now see on our highways. So, yes, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Brown: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll ask the question in a different way. What performance measures is his department using to assess the cost-effectiveness on an ongoing basis of the sheriffs in making our highways safer? What performance measures is he using?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated in my earlier answer, we get e-mails and letters from everyday Albertans expressing appreciation for the work our sheriffs are doing driving up and down our highways. I personally can see that speeds are reduced on our highways. Again, that's in large part due to the great work that our sheriffs are doing in this province.

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, it's almost four months since the last calendar year ended. However, my office has been advised that even preliminary data for 2008 collisions won't be available until late fall this year. My final supplementary question is to the Minister of Transportation. Why are data on vehicle collisions, injuries, and deaths not more readily available so that we can assess the effectiveness of the sheriffs department?

Mr. Ouellette: Well, Mr. Speaker, the collision stats are just about always released in the fall. The reason for that is that we need to receive and compile all of the different data, but we need to give time to the RCMP, the sheriffs, all the other enforcement agencies to compile all of their statistics. That said, traffic safety is a priority for this government, and as soon as we get the results, I will compile them and make sure that the hon. member gets those results. I've just been releasing the '07 results, and they've been getting all of those stats. That was from the fall of last year.

Taser Use by Law Enforcement Personnel

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, the Solicitor General isn't halfway through testing the taser arsenals of the Alberta police services, and already 50 tasers have been found to be operating outside of the recommended limits. Given these results, will the Solicitor General consider a moratorium on the use of the remaining untested tasers in this province?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, of the 400 and some-odd tasers that we tested, the ones that were pulled out of service were pulled out simply because they did not meet the manufacturer's specifications. When we made that decision, we weighed the possibility of public danger versus officer safety, and we believe that the prudent decision has been made. The remaining tasers will stay in operation.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you. Are you not worried? With 50 tasers found in the first round of testing to be operating outside the limits, wouldn't it be more prudent to pull the remaining things before testing is done to give people some measure of assurance?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, we weighed that balance between public safety, officer safety versus pulling all the tasers, and I stand behind our decision. In fact, the results that we received were very technical results of testing. There was not one taser that operated from an amperage basis above the manufacturer's specifications. In total energy they were maybe one or two per cent higher. Again, they were pulled because they simply did not meet the manufacturer's specifications.

Mr. Hehr: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that a Califor-

nia study indicated that you are six times more likely to die in police custody after having been tasered, will the Solicitor General commit to a mandatory review by the Alberta Serious Incident Response Team for any incident where a taser is deployed during arrest or detention of an accused?

Mr. Lindsay: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to speak to the study that the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo mentioned, the California study, when he talks about six times the fatality rate over the course of a year. The person who did that study did not even check with the police jurisdictions to find out whether or not a taser had been used in the arrest of that particular individual.

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

Mental Health Services

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government covered up the mental health report because it exposed their long-standing failure to fix Alberta's mental health system. The report said that the number of psychiatric beds in Alberta is well under half the national average, and since the NDP made it public, the health minister has been twisting the truth and holding up a criminal diversion strategy as a mental health fix.

Mr. Liepert: Point of order.

Ms Notley: To the minister: why won't you stop stealing bed numbers from other ministries which are not designed for general mental health patients and create real spaces to help some of the 20 per cent of Albertans who suffer from mental illness?

2:20

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the member is talking about. This particular province has invested some 600 million dollars into mental health facilities. We've been bringing on new beds. We continue to bring on new beds as part of our SafeCom initiative, and we will continue to do that.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, by chirping about these 80 beds and the safe communities strategy, this minister is playing bait and switch with people who need psychiatric care. He's piling onto the same 80 beds that the Attorney General has already earmarked to accept people involved in the justice system. Again to the minister of health: why are you using a crime-reduction strategy to cover up your failure to provide enough mental health care for the 20 per cent . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, hold on. The first time you used "twisting the truth," and now you're accusing the minister of covering up. I mean, let's get some temperate language in here if you want me to recognize you.

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, this particular government believes that you get a much better success rate if you work together as departments rather than separately. We've got an initiative under safe communities that involves some half a dozen or more departments of government. It is working well. We are continuing to put new beds into the system. Whether they are beds that are for mental illness or addictions, it's all connected to health care.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, last week the Attorney General said in committee that those beds were designed for people in the justice

system. So for the rest of Albertans who have mental health problems, where are we? The number of psychiatric beds in Alberta is less than half the national average, there is little or no access to the most basic of mental health services in regions across this province, and for decades this government has rejected the need for adequate community mental health services. Why is this minister more focused on keeping the report secret instead of taking responsibility for this government's failures so far and adopting the recommendations of the report?

Mr. Liepert: Very briefly, Mr. Speaker, I'm going to refer this question to the Attorney General because the member is so offside in her numbers that it needs to be corrected.

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

Ms Redford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this issue, I would say, not to clarify this issue. What this government does is treat all Albertans in the place that they need to be treated. When we were discussing last week how we would use mental health beds that were connected to the safe communities initiative, we talked about recognizing the fact that there might be people in the criminal justice system that had some other need. We don't categorize people as having a mental health issue or being a criminal. We will take a comprehensive approach to mental health and safe communities in co-operation with each other.

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

Minimum Wage Exemptions

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Recently I met with a constituent who drew to my attention a website operated by the Edmonton Social Planning Council. The website includes a forum where people can discuss issues which concern them. A recent topic in the forum concerned Alberta's Employment Standards Code, and the suggestion in the discussion was that the code allows for exemptions to the minimum wage for persons with disabilities. So I'd like to ask the hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration how many companies have permission from the government to pay disabled individuals less than the minimum wage?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Edmonton-Rutherford is quite right. This provision allowing exemptions to the minimum wage does exist in the Employment Standards Code. However, there have been no permits issued or renewed since January of 2006, and no permits are currently in effect. As such, employees are entitled to the current minimum wage of \$8.80 per hour.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. To the same minister: given, then, that no permits have been issued in the recent past, why does this provision exist in the Employment Standards Code?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, the provisions for minimum wage exemptions in the Employment Standards Code have existed for

decades. When first enacted, they reflected a different philosophy towards disabled individuals than does exist today. It was seen as a way to support the integration of persons with disabilities into the workforce. When we receive a permit request, our employment standards staff work with the employers to determine alternatives to issuing that particular permit.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the explanation.

Some of the respondents in this online conversation are maintaining that there are still cases in the city of Edmonton where disabled workers are receiving less than the minimum wage. Finally, then, to the same minister: what does the minister have to say to people who are making these allegations and suggesting that disabled individuals are working in \$4-an-hour positions?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, I'm saying that we need to get the facts. Let's get the information to us. We've posted a comment on the discussion group outlining what the current requirements are, and if any Albertans feel that their entitlement to minimum wages has not been met, that they're not receiving that from their employer, I encourage them to file a formal complaint with our employment standards. There's a lot more information that's available online through employment.alberta.ca in the safe and fair workplaces section.

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

Temporary Foreign Workers

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was recently reported that Chinese temporary foreign workers working in Fort McMurray were paid their wages only until auditors could verify they were paid. Then the money was transferred to bank accounts in Hong Kong. In the end these workers received only 10 per cent of their total wages. My first question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. Why is the government of Alberta still supporting a flawed temporary foreign worker program?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, Employment and Immigration has also determined that 132 Chinese temporary foreign workers employed by SSEC Canada on the Horizon oil sands project were not paid earnings from April to July of 2007. These funds are held in the government trust account now and will be disbursed to the workers who had not been paid for their work prior to their return to China. Those funds are there, and we're trying to identify all of the workers before transferring the funds.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: how much money is the government of Alberta holding for the benefit of these workers and their families?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, as I have indicated, we've begun the process of verifying individuals' identities and establishing that process for the distribution of unpaid earnings. It sounds like there's about \$3.17 million that is owing. As we collect those funds, we'll be returning those to the workers. They'll be reimbursed accordingly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that you spent over 58,000 taxpayers' dollars touring overseas last fall, and included in that trip was one stop in China, did you ask the Chinese officials about this matter and how you could contact these individuals so that they could get the wages, the 3.17-odd million dollars that you claim they are now owed because they were cheated out of their fair wages?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, our occupational health and safety officers interviewed several of the temporary foreign workers regarding those incidents. Basically, that's how we determined that those workers had not been paid. Certainly, we are concerned. We're trying to identify the individuals that have not received their full wages to make sure that we can return those wages to them.

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

Direct Energy Retail Marketing

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. A number of my constituents in Whitecourt-Ste. Anne have contacted my office about the confusion that they have experienced caused by different services offered by Direct Energy Regulated Services and Direct Energy Marketing Limited. My questions are all for the Minister of Service of Alberta. What are you doing, Minister, to protect Alberta's energy consumers from noncontract regulated utility services versus long-term contract unregulated services?

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Following complaints from consumers and an investigation by Service Alberta, Direct Energy has signed an undertaking to ensure that its salespeople are clear about the company's different retail operations. Direct Energy has submitted a plan explaining how it will accomplish this, including details of its complaint process and sales staff training. Direct Energy must fully comply with that plan by September 30, 2009. Direct Energy has also paid \$5,000 to Service Alberta as a requirement of the undertaking. The \$5,000 will cover the cost of investigative work my department has conducted.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's fine, but it seems like the issues come from door-to-door salespeople that seem to put pressure at times on my constituents. What is the advice that this minister gives to Albertans and my constituents when these door-to-door people arrive?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are, indeed, very strict rules in place regarding what door-to-door marketers can and cannot do. Albertans who do have concerns about any practices should contact us, and we will investigate. Again, it is so important that they let us know what's happening out there. Consumers do have the right to ask questions of anyone who tries to sell them something at the door. They are under no obligation to sign any agreement for electricity or natural gas. It's entirely in their hands.

Mr. VanderBurg: My final question is to the same minister again. When the minister's department gets a concern or a complaint from one of my constituents or any Albertan, how long does it take to get back to my constituents, and how are these complaints handled directly by your department?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past seven years the government has investigated 356 complaints against energy marketers, has followed up with 169 enforcement actions ranging from warning letters to criminal prosecutions. Typically the complaints come to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. Then they are investigated by the consumer unit in Service Alberta. With the intervention of the consumer services area nearly \$160,000 has been returned to Alberta consumers as a result of electricity and natural gas settlements. We will continue to monitor the company's progress to ensure that all requirements of the undertaking are fulfilled and can take further enforcement if necessary.

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

School Capital Construction

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Minister of Education trumpeted the increase of over 10,000 student spaces by 2013, claiming that it will meet Calgary's growth pressure. Since 2003 the Calgary board of education has applied the province's space utilization formula, closing 13 schools, and is projecting the closure of another 15,000 student spaces over the next 10 years, a net loss of 5,000 spaces. To the Minister of Infrastructure: will the ministries of Education and Infrastructure stop pitting urban against rural infrastructure needs and review the approval process for school capital projects province-wide?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The program ministries bring the infrastructure needs to my ministry to help provide these. With respect to Calgary, that the hon. member is referring to, we have 26 major projects under way right now, 20 of which are new schools and replacement schools, and our overall projects are going to put in place 32,630 new seats for students.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. It's important to note that that 32,000 figure is a province-wide figure, and it isn't meeting the requirements.

Given that during the past six years only one modernization project was approved in Calgary by the Infrastructure and Education ministries, will your ministries commit to approving at least some of the 11 high-priority preservation projects identified by the Calgary board of education?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hayden: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the present time there are six major modernizations, additions taking place in Calgary. We are investing in infrastructure in Alberta at two times the closest jurisdiction in the rest of the nation, so if we're being accused of investing heavily, guilty as accused.

Mr. Chase: Since the cuts of 1993 this province has not kept up with infrastructure deficit. Given that the 2003 Commission on Learning report recommends that junior kindergarten to grade 3 classes have no more than 17 students, why is it that of the 122 schools that are in the Calgary board of education's jurisdiction, 77 still have more than the recommended number? That's progress?

Mr. Hayden: Mr. Speaker, I can't speak for the Minister of Education on the programming in the schools. I can only speak to the 129 major new schools, renovations, and modernizations that are taking place right now.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Nuclear Power Consultation

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents have expressed strong views both for and against the option of nuclear power generation as part of Alberta's energy supply mix. Last month the report of the Nuclear Power Expert Panel was released. The panel was asked to create this report to provide a basis for informed discussion in Alberta on this issue. My question is to the Minister of Energy. Could the minister explain how Albertans can share their views on nuclear power? That's 'nuclear,' not nuclear.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I certainly would be able to do that. There's a workbook and a survey that have been created with information from a panel report that we recently received. It's available now, as of today, on an interactive website, and Albertans can provide their input electronically. They can request a hard copy to be sent by mail. We will guarantee Albertans that completing the survey will ensure your views are considered on this topic.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was receiving pronunciation tips from my friend the Minister of Municipal Affairs if you could imagine.

My second question to the same minister: in what other ways will the consultation process engage Albertans to ensure that all views are represented?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, we encourage all Albertans to get involved in this process. We think that by completing the workbook and the survey that's attached with it, they will have an understanding of the situation and be able to be involved. But to ensure that the process is comprehensive, there will be discussion groups, selected randomly, held across the province of Alberta, there will be meetings with stakeholders, and there will be a public opinion survey on the matter. An independent research firm is managing the process for us, and we believe that all Albertans will have an opportunity to respond.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A third and final supplement-

tal to the minister. There is no formal proposal placed before the Alberta government at this time to build a nuclear power facility, but there have been discussions in the province since 2007. Could the minister inform this House as to when a decision will be made on this issue?

Mr. Knight: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, the decision will be made when we are satisfied that Albertans have had an opportunity to voice their opinion relative to the issue. The first step was to get the facts with the expert panel report. The next step is, certainly, to hear from as many Albertans as are prepared to give their opinion. The survey will remain open until the 1st of June, and the government will consider all of this input. It's a very serious and, we think, good opportunity for all Albertans to be involved, and we think that a provincial policy could be expected before the end of the year.

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

Cost-shared Crop and Livestock Funding

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, for a government that doesn't like to be in the business of being in business, we once again see the minister of agriculture providing subsidies to big corporate farms. The federal-provincial agribusiness programs announced last Friday will give grants ranging from \$100,000 up to \$5 million for cost-shared crop and livestock projects. To the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: why is this government now offering hundred thousand and multimillion dollar grants to big producers when last June he announced "the end of ad-hoc funding"?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the hon. member would like to clarify just a little bit exactly what he's talking about, maybe I could answer his question.

Dr. Taft: Well, I suppose I could send the minister printouts from his own website if he's not familiar with the program.

To the same minister: given that this minister told producers last year that if they can't run a viable business, they "need to consider ways to exit the industry," why is he now giving out big grants to private agricultural businesses? What are we supposed to believe?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm certainly pleased that he brought that little issue up about exiting the industry. What I said and what I'll have to say time and time again in front of people: when we had the program, the monies were coming; if you were considering exiting the industry, now was probably the time to do it. Never once did I say that you had to comply with anything to exit the industry.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, I'll send this material to the minister. It's from his own website, his own department.

To the same minister: if corporate farms are being provided with millions of dollars in grants, can the minister at least require that they are bound by occupational health and safety legislation to protect their paid workers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I'd

just like to see the list of the corporate farms that are being offered a hundred thousand dollars' worth of grants.

But getting to where he just went, it's very interesting because he is so specific on what we should do with the farm occupational health and safety standards. Do you realize how many family farms are also corporate farms? Just think about some of this.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 102 questions and responses today.

The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness wishes to supplement an answer given last Thursday. That will provide an opportunity for the member to whom the answer was being given to raise an additional question.

Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's important that I clarify an answer that I provided to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview last week. I will table five copies of a letter from the chair of the Alberta Health Services Board, and it's relative to the Mazankowski Heart Institute. I won't read the entire letter. I'll just read a portion of it.

It is now our expectation that the building will have achieved substantial completion and hospital handover by May 31, 2009. It will take approximately two weeks for the proper authorities to inspect and issue occupancy permits. Alberta Health Services staff will occupy the building on or about June 15, 2009, to be followed shortly thereafter by patient move in to general care and intensive care units, operating theatres, and procedure rooms.*

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

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the clarification from the minister, and I think we can probably put this issue to rest if there's just one more step taken. The Alberta Health Services website has a link to a detailed description of the Mazankowski Heart Institute, and over and over for at least two dozen programs it describes the institute as if it's fully up and running and taking all kinds of patients when in fact it's not. My final request to the minister on this would be to just have Alberta Health Services take down that link until the hospital actually is functioning and taking patients.

Thank you.

Mr. Liepert: We'll forward a copy of *Hansard* to the CEO of Alberta Health Services, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we'll continue the Routine momentarily, but might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(continued)

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

Mr. Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present to you and through you to all members of this Assembly the wheelchair team who won the silver medal at the 2009 Canadian wheelchair curling championships in Halifax. We have them in the two galleries. Up in the public we have Jack Smart, the team skip, and Bridget Wilson. If they could just wave. You see that they have their silver medals around their necks. Over in the members' gallery: Bruno Yizek; Anne Hibberd and her husband, Ken

*See page 794, left column, paragraph 11

Kaufman; Tony Zummack, the coach; and Martin Purvis and his wife, Fran Purvis. I'd also like to introduce Donna Elms, my constituency assistant, and Sydney Crawford, my new STEP student.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, I'll see if I can get this one right. It's a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly, as I indicated, 24 visitors, students from the Peavine Métis settlement. They're seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask that they stand as I introduce them. Miss Heather Hempstock is a teacher. Mr. Bruce Joudry is the principal. It's rare that principals come, but it's great to have him here. The parent helpers are Mr. Al Holmes, Mr. Eric Filion, Mrs. Teasa Gauchier, Mrs. Dorothy Anderson, Mrs. Juliet Gauchier, Mrs. Natalie Cunningham, and a special guest, Mr. Brian Davies, who is a former teacher from Alice Springs, Australia. He also taught in Redwater, Alberta. That's not the kicker; it's the fact that he's 94 years old, and he's now joining the students here. I'd ask them to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: In 30 seconds from now we will continue the Routine.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Aboriginal History Quiz

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Friday, April 24, the hon. Minister of Aboriginal Relations and I attended the seventh annual Aboriginal History Quiz awards day at Prince Charles elementary school. Prince Charles is a school that is designed to meet the needs of urban aboriginal children and families through the Awasis program. The school uses the Alberta learning curriculum and integrates aboriginal content into all subject areas.

The goal of the Aboriginal History Quiz is for children to develop self-awareness, self-esteem, study habits, and pride in aboriginal culture by having the opportunity to learn about their history and culture. The curriculum areas of the quiz focus on social studies, language arts, the Cree language and culture, and native studies. The hon. minister and I had a chance to hear some of the questions that were asked and were extremely impressed by their difficulty.

I would like to congratulate all of the students that participated in the quiz and awards ceremony on Friday and thank all who attended. It was a tremendous success.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Wind Turbine Technician Program

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to speak to this House about a success story in my hometown that highlights not only some very dedicated Lethbridge folks' but also this government's commitment to the development of viable alternative energy resources.

On April 15 officials at Lethbridge College learned that the college's wind turbine technician program had been selected the winner of the 2008-2009 program excellence award from the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. The six-month program prepares graduates for immediate work in the wind turbine

industry. Thanks to a partnership with BZEE, which provides similar training in Europe and sets the standard that is recognized by most major turbine manufacturers world-wide, these grads can go to work anywhere. Many choose to stay here in Alberta, but others have gone and will go on to help develop wind power around the world.

Mr. Speaker, this program is unique in Canada and attracts students from across North America and around the world. It's an unprecedented opportunity for people to pursue a career in trades and at the same time be leaders in greening our growth and developing a renewable energy resource. A total of 27 people have graduated from the wind turbine technician program since its inception in 2008. Another group is set to graduate this coming July. Thanks to their education here in Alberta, these folks will become invaluable assets in the wind energy industry in southern Alberta and ambassadors of Alberta's commitment to developing sustainable energy alternatives for the future.

Mr. Speaker, this is just one of the many examples of research into alternative energy sources in southern Alberta. The Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership, which includes Economic Development Lethbridge, is looking into a number of innovative ways to develop both wind and solar power and is doing exciting work in the area of biofuels. The partnership is currently working on establishing an integrated biodiesel refinery in southern Alberta and has done extensive research into waste-to-energy treatment alternatives that will not only reduce the environmental impact but will actually turn waste into usable fuels.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Notices of Motions

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

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to give notice of a point of privilege pursuant to section 15(2) of the standing orders with respect to some interference with my role as an opposition MLA that took place last week.

2:50

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Bill 36

Alberta Land Stewardship Act

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I request leave to introduce Bill 36, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Administrator, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

With the input of Albertans, municipalities, and business and environmental organizations this government created the land-use framework tabled in December of 2008. This framework introduces a new approach to land-use planning, one that will meet the environmental as well as the economic and social objectives of this province.

To implement the land-use framework, I rise to table Bill 36, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act, for first reading. This act creates seven planning regions in Alberta. It authorizes the creation of regional plans and requires compliance with those plans. It creates new conservation and stewardship tools that will protect Alberta's natural heritage on public and private lands. The Alberta Land Stewardship Act will provide a blueprint for sustainable growth, a

policy balance that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the opportunities of future generations.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 36 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Liepert: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of the letter I referred to earlier in question period.

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

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to discussion in question period today I'd like to table speaking points from the minister of agriculture, where he talks about changes to agriculture funding as well as programs under that department giving grants up to \$100,000 and up to \$5 million.

I also have three excellent letters from constituents, each one written in detail and at length, expressing concerns about cancelling funding for the Wild Rose program. They are from Alisha Brown, program manager for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association; MacKenzie Gordon, Students International Health Association; and Leslee Greenaway, co-ordinator of the Nyarut village community development project.

My very last tabling is a letter from Alison Dinwoodie expressing her opposition to the use of taxpayer dollars for pictures of foreign beaches to rebrand Alberta, and she also objects to pharmacare costs increasing for seniors.

Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to table five copies of corporate registration documents that detail a business partnership between the founder of Precision Drilling and the vice-chair of AIMCo.

Thank you.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of correspondence from a constituent, Marjorie Russell, who's very concerned about the elimination of funding for chiropractic services and believes it's limited thinking on the part of the government to shut out one profession and some of the citizens who use that care.

Thank you.

The Speaker: On a purported point of order the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll be very brief. It's under Standing Order 23(h), allegations against another member. I believe you have already identified the fact that the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona used the term "twisting the truth." She's been here long enough to know that that's unparliamentary. This is occurring far too often in this Assembly to have decent debate, and I would ask the member to withdraw that comment.

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

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me start out by saying that I haven't yet had the opportunity to actually look at the language that's been ruled parliamentary and nonparliamentary.

I would like, however, to give just a brief background to what led to my questions and my statement. In particular, as recorded in *Hansard* last week, on April 20, 2009, in response to questions from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood about a mental health report which had been released and which had clearly identified a number of deficits in the provision of mental health care to the general population in need of mental health care, the minister responded, "You know, in the last year through the safe communities program we've opened up some 80 new residential beds, and in this particular budget [we have allocated] some additional 42 million dollars."

Subsequently, on the evening of April 22, while I was participating in estimates debate with the Attorney General, this issue came up. As a result I asked the Attorney General – and it's again found in *Hansard* – about the 80 beds which had been referred to. I said: "Now, I know the health minister spoke about 80 beds, and I believe those were talked about for last year, or are those this year?" She responded: "This year." Subsequently in that debate she said: "Forty new beds to existing programs that are already connected into the justice system and provide services." Subsequently she also said:

One of the things that we need to determine – and it's one of the reasons that we're doing this now in the second year and didn't do it immediately in the first year – is that we want to ensure that when we do that, we're going to be able to connect them to the justice system. So your question about simply passing money over and having it sort of, you know, disappear in the health budget is exactly what we don't want to [have] happen.

My concern was that in responding to the questions from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, the minister implied that the 80 new beds were a response to a report prepared for the ministry of health about the deficit in mental health beds for the general noncriminal population across the province. Subsequently it became clear that the 80 beds that the minister referred to in this House as the response of his ministry to that issue were in fact clearly designated for people in the justice system. That was what was in the Attorney General's comments to me in estimates.

So are the 80 new beds the truth? Yes. Was characterizing them in that way perhaps a twisting of the truth? That's what I thought. If, however, the Speaker confirms that that characterization is too close to the line, I'm prepared to apologize, and I wait for your ruling.

The Speaker: Did I hear you correctly, hon. member? You're withdrawing the comments and apologizing? Just say "yes," and we'll move on.

Ms Notley: Yes.

The Speaker: I can go on for 10 minutes on this. I've talked about temperate language. You withdraw the thing, apologize, and we're moving on. Nobody else is participating. The matter is finished. There's nothing more, Calgary-Nose Hill. I would have introduced you, but the matter is now determined with an apology, which is the customary parliamentary tradition.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood on a question of privilege. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, you will speak on behalf of?

Ms Notley: Yes, I will, Mr. Speaker, if I can just find my documents.

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, this seems to be pretty much your purview, with respect to you. You might want to wait around.

Mr. Liepert: I don't. I've got other things to do.

The Speaker: Well, I'm sorry.

Privilege

Obstructing a Member in Performance of Duty

Ms Notley: I apologize, Mr. Speaker. They are right here.

The facts of the issue relate to a matter that occurred on Thursday, April 23, at about 11:15 a.m., where the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood attempted to attend a government news conference; however, he was barred from entering Government House, where the conference was taking place. When he asked why he could not enter, security staff told him that they had received orders from the minister of health not to let him in. It is our intention to argue that barring the leader of the third party's attendance constitutes interference with his role as an MLA and is, therefore, a breach of his privilege. I believe that this is the earliest available opportunity for me to raise this point of privilege. The incident happened too late in the day on Thursday to provide notice that morning. The Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, therefore, provided notice prior to the deadline today.

3:00

Obstructing members in the discharge of their duties is a breach of privilege. To quote *Erskine May* at page 143, "The House will proceed against those who obstruct Members in the discharge of their responsibilities to the House or in their participation in its proceedings." Attending government news conferences is a necessary part of the Member for Edmonton-Highland-Norwood's job as a member of this Assembly and as the leader of the third party. As an opposition leader his role requires that he be able to obtain a full understanding of government policy to be able to provide proper critique. Following government news conferences, he is usually expected to provide comment to media. In these circumstances it is crucial that he receive the information first-hand from the government rather than have it relayed to him through members of the media who are attending the news conference.

Furthermore, Government House is a public building. When the government invites the media there for an announcement, there is no reason why Members of the Legislative Assembly should be forced to wait outside. The government, therefore, uses public resources to provide information on a significant announcement of its policy to the media while excluding members of the opposition. Members of the Assembly should have at least equal access to such announcements as members of the media.

The Speaker ruled on a similar point of privilege in this Assembly on March 5, 2003. Yes, I know it's not exactly the same point. However, the issue at that time was that the media had been briefed on a piece of legislation which was on notice on the Order Paper but had not been introduced. The Speaker at that time ruled that a prima facie case of breach of privilege existed in that instance. The argument supporting that question of privilege was that the rights of a member of the Assembly were interfered with because the member was not provided the same information that had been provided to members of the media on a bill that was about to be introduced. To quote from the Speaker's ruling as it appeared in *Hansard*,

the department briefing provided to the media concerning Bill 19 when the bill was on notice but before it was introduced constitutes a prima facie case of privilege as it offends the dignity and the authority of this Assembly. As the chair has noted on many

previous occasions, the principle of ministerial responsibility holds that ministers are responsible for the actions of their officials and, in turn, are responsible to the Assembly for those acts.

Although the question that we are dealing with today does not involve a piece of legislation and, instead, involves a public policy announcement rather than a bill, we would argue that the effect on the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood's ability to fulfill his role as a member is similar. That is, the media have information about public policy before he and other members of the Assembly do, yet the media then expects the member to provide comment on that policy.

The government makes numerous announcements on policy, but it should be pointed out that the announcement on Thursday was particularly significant as it dealt with the issue of insurance coverage seniors receive for prescription drugs and had been the subject of extensive debate within this Assembly in the previous two months. Since the government's original announcement on seniors' drug coverage in December there has been considerable public debate on this issue, and the change in policy announced on Thursday was a response to that debate.

On Thursday when the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood asked the minister of health why he was barred from the news conference, his reply, as recorded in *Hansard*, was as follows:

I know that this particular member craves media attention, but if he'd take a look at the release that went out yesterday, it said: for news media. There are restricted areas there, and I'm afraid that, you know, it wasn't a town hall meeting. We didn't invite the president of the chamber of commerce or the mayor of Edmonton, and frankly we didn't invite the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Now, I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that as a member of this Assembly commenting on an issue with respect to public policy coming through this government, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood should not be characterized as a member of the public or the president of the chamber of commerce. Rather, to do so negates his role and his ability to perform his functions as a member of this Assembly.

When the member asked the minister why the government took this step of deciding to bar the opposition from the news conference, the minister replied:

Mr. Speaker, that is just a bunch of bunk. This particular government, this particular Legislature provides more funding to that party, which is not an officially recognized party. We do things that are unprecedented in this House. For that member to stand there and say that kind of stuff is baloney.

Mr. Speaker, according to the record of the House, that is where the matter stands.

For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I ask that you rule that a prima facie breach of privilege has occurred. Should you so rule, pursuant to *Beauchesne's* 114(2) I would move that this matter of a point of privilege be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I will recognize additional participants on this matter.

Normally at 3 o'clock we sort of come to Orders of the Day, and that allows individuals to bring a certain type of refreshment into the Chamber. Today, if you wish to have coffee now, consider it so. It can be brought into the Chamber, but this is really nonprecedential, of course.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to respond to this purported point of privilege. I would like to refer to our own

Standing Order 15(1) where it states: "A breach of the rights of the Assembly or of the parliamentary rights of any Member constitutes a question of privilege."

Then I also refer you, Mr. Speaker, to *Beauchesne* 31(10).

The question has often been raised whether parliamentary privilege imposes on ministers an obligation to deliver ministerial statements and to make announcements and communications to the public through the House of Commons or to make these announcements or statements in the House rather than outside the chamber. The question has been asked whether Hon. Members are entitled, as part of their parliamentary privilege, to receive such information ahead of the general public. I can find no precedent to justify this suggestion.

Mr. Speaker, clearly, in my humble opinion, the reference in *Beauchesne* is almost a complete parallel to the circumstances that were described by the member. That being said, it is generally a practice of the government to include MLAs and opposition members, in particular, in news conferences. In this particular instance there was a technical briefing, that is not infrequently attended solely by members of the media. There was also a news conference that followed.

The issue of the previous ruling by this Speaker refers to briefing of the media of legislation prior to its being introduced in this House. Clearly, we were not dealing in this instance with legislation. We were dealing with an announcement of government policy. I refer you back to my reference in *Beauchesne*. That being said, Mr. Speaker, the Premier has made it clear through public statements that he considers it standard practice that opposition members should be involved and invited to government news conferences. That being the case, clearly there is direction being given to all members of cabinet with respect to the involvement of the opposition in future news conferences.

Mr. Speaker, I think that this instance has perhaps drawn the issue to the attention of all members and to the attention of the Premier and the government in particular. But I must reiterate that this clearly is not a question of privilege. However, I think that there is a reasonable solution that has been proposed and thereby adopted by the government for future reference.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to offer some comments and arguments on this particular point of privilege raised by the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. The Official Opposition, of course, has a keen interest in the outcome of this as, in fact, the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Official Opposition critic on seniors had preceded the leader of the third party to this particular government occasion and had likewise been obstructed from entering the premises and instructed to leave.

Mr. Speaker, I think this question of privilege is about interference. The way I see it, there are two issues to this. One is the obstruction in being able to enter the facilities. The second is whether the members were impeded in their work. In the case of our two members being refused access, their way being barred in attempting to participate in the media conference, was their privilege as members of this House breached? We have some historical background to that. Particularly, in *Beauchesne* 24 it talks about:

The privileges of Parliament are rights which are "absolutely necessary for the due execution of its powers". They are enjoyed by individual Members, because the House cannot perform its functions without unimpeded use of the services of its Members.

In addition to that, I am guided by what appears in *Marleau and Montpetit* on page 55, in which it notes, "Thus, privilege came to be recognized as only that which was absolutely necessary for the

House to function effectively and for the Members to carry out their responsibilities as Members."

3:10

I think that what is at the heart of this matter is the obstruction to Government House. If I may refer the Speaker to *M and M*, page 51, "The House has the authority to invoke privilege where its ability has been obstructed in the execution of its functions or where Members have been obstructed in the performance of their duties." Certainly, I think that to have an Official Opposition leader, a leader of a third party, and an Official Opposition critic attempting to attend a significant announcement of a change in government policy is part of the performance of their duty.

Further, I note that on page 65 of *Marleau and Montpetit*, referencing a report during the 13th Parliament, a special committee stated that "the purpose of privilege was 'to allow Members of the House of Commons to carry out their duties as representatives of the electorate without undue interference'." I argue that the barring of the way to the Government House media conference is undue interference. Their way was obstructed on the instructions of the government.

Finally, I note on page 85 of *Marleau and Montpetit*:

In circumstances where Members claim to be directly obstructed, impeded, interfered with or intimidated in the performance of their parliamentary duties, the Speaker is apt to find that a prima facie breach of privilege has occurred. This may be physical obstruction, assault or molestation.

Further, appearing on that same page is the reference that

on October 30, 1989, Speaker Fraser ruled that a prima facie case of privilege existed when [the then Member for Windsor West,] Herb Gray . . . raised a question of privilege claiming that a RCMP roadblock on Parliament Hill, meant to contain demonstrators, constituted a breach of Members' privileges [because it denied] them access to the House of Commons.

We recognize a number of locations where members carry out their duties. This Assembly, this Chamber, is one. Where committees meet is a second. I believe Government House would be included in that as a place where we do business. The Annex to the Legislative Assembly is another place where members carry out their parliamentary duties and carry on their business. So this Chamber is not the only location, not the only precinct in which that business is carried out. I argue that barring a member's entry into any of those other locations I've outlined is an unnecessary obstruction and does impede the member's ability to perform their parliamentary duties. Of course, the roles of the Official Opposition and of other parties are recognized throughout *Marleau and Montpetit*, *Beauchesne's*, *Maingot*, and a number of others. I won't go on with various references that outline the duties of the Official Opposition there.

I think there is an argument that the physical obstruction and denial of access to the location did in this case constitute a breach of several members' privilege. I would argue that the Premier has in fact recognized that. But while I appreciate that this individual is the Premier, I would prefer to see the ruling come through the Speaker, which sets that out in *Hansard* and is able to be referenced henceforth by those of us in the House now and those that follow behind us, that members should not be impeded, physically particularly, in their attempts to carry out their work.

I think what's important here is the members' ability to access that policy announcement. The further communication and dealings with the media I am not as certain, in fact, are part of the members' businesses. It certainly is something we all engage in and that many of us are particularly enthusiastic to seek out. But the work that we do as legislators is a work that is focused on policy; it is focused on

legislative development; it's focused on consultation with the citizens. That is the work that I think was impeded when the Leader of the Official Opposition, the Official Opposition critic for seniors, and the leader of the third party were barred access to the public policy announcement in Government House last week.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my points.

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, sometimes there are situations that are different or happen at the same time and that maybe weren't preplanned. Thursday mornings this government holds its caucus meetings in Government House. We have for quite some time, and barring exception, we continue to do so. While it may be unfortunate that we had a media conference at the same time, I would suggest that on any other Thursday we would not allow the opposition members to enter Government House as we're conducting what is a critically important and necessary part of doing our business as legislators, as I'm sure they would probably keep their doors closed if they were holding a caucus meeting and we wanted to listen in. Quite frankly, I can't imagine.

Mr. Speaker, I guess, to get to the gist, I said that one thing is being barred from the facility, being stopped. The other one is about their inability to do their job. We're talking about a policy release that's not going to take effect until July of 2010. If this were an issue that was time sensitive, that would have prevented the opposition from commenting to the news before it was implemented or before it could have taken place – but this is a policy that is being developed. The minister has made absolutely no secret about it – we're going to go back and come forward with another policy paper – and made no secret that it would take effect in July of 2010. There is not an issue here of sensitivity, where the hon. members would not have time to comment. They probably have far too much time to comment without thinking about it.

If the hon. member is going to make the statement that he is unable to do his job because he was unable to get the factual information from the government news release, then he ought to be able to make the connection to us that at some time before in this House he had actually used the factual information from a government news release to help him do his job. Quite candidly, Mr. Speaker, it's simply about being in a place to contradict, to bend, to shape, to reply to whatever they need about the government news release. It has never been about them needing the context of the news release. It's about being in the right place to get in front of a camera and make negative comments about it. That's their job. That's their job, I guess.

3:20

Certainly, to satisfy myself that somehow not being allowed into the front row of the cameras at a government release around a policy paper that's not going to take effect until July of 2010 when the hon. member has shown quite candidly that not only doesn't he believe anything we say or do and is certain to repeat that – I'm not exactly sure how he could make the connection that not having a front row or having to wait half an hour to see on the news something that's not going to take effect for a year in any way, shape, or form impaired his ability to do his job. Lord knows, there are enough other arguments to go on about that.

But, unfortunately, we do hold our caucus meetings in Government House. We'll continue to hold them there on Thursday mornings. I would think the opposition would respect the fact that we don't try and go into buildings where they're holding theirs. If we've learned a lesson to not hold media briefings or if this were in this building, Mr. Speaker, I would agree. No one should be kept from media conferences in this building for this is the people's

building. Caucus meetings are somewhat of a different manner.

I look forward to your good judgment.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, do you want to participate as well?

Mr. Mason: Yes, please, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, I thought you were going to start them.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Thank you. I prefer to follow and make some comments with respect to this issue. The hon. Deputy Government House Leader has given us a quotation that the opposition or MLAs in general do not enjoy the privilege of having prior information from government announcements ahead of the public or ahead of the media. In fact, Mr. Speaker, what happened was that the media was given privileged and prior access to an important government policy announcement, and the government used physical obstruction in order to ensure that the opposition did not get the information until after it had been provided to the media. This is a very different thing than the hon. Deputy Government House Leader talked about.

I'd like to speak briefly about the question of location. The hon. President of the Treasury Board talked about the importance of giving access to the media facilities in this building as opposed to Government House or other potential locations for government announcements. In fact, the media room in this building, Mr. Speaker, is under the control of the government and not under the control of the Speaker, as are the facilities in Government House. This is an important distinction because, I suggest, the government could simply change the policy with respect to opposition access, so they could do what they've done at Government House in the media room in this building very easily. That's why I don't believe that this needs to be or should be left as a matter of government policy, which can change from time to time. If the government giveth, the government can taketh away. That is why I believe that it's important to have a ruling.

I want to be clear that we are not seeking unlimited access to government buildings or public buildings in this province. We have no intention of trying to attend a government caucus meeting. But I do want to point out that the government caucus meeting is not in the foyer of Government House any more than the cabinet table is in the media room in this building. It's on a different floor. In fact, the news conference was scheduled subsequent to the Conservative government caucus meeting. There is no question of us seeking access to Conservative caucus meetings. That is absurd, Mr. Speaker.

I just want to conclude by saying that when the government uses its authority to exclude opposition members from important policy announcements, it is an important question. I would equate it very much with the release of legislation. I think that the nub of it is that the media or the public were given prior access to a news conference dealing with an important public policy issue which we had raised in this House and debated in the House and that physical means were used to ensure that we were not present. I believe that that represents an interference in our ability to do our job.

I think that a reasonable and well-balanced policy that recognizes that the opposition and, indeed, all MLAs should not take the back seat to the media in important policy announcements or, as has previously been ruled, legislation is important for the functioning of our system here. To ensure that a proper balance remains, notwithstanding the very large size of the government, a small opposition needs to be protected from undue use of power by the government. I think that all Albertans will benefit if we have a clear policy with

respect to this, which emanates not from the government but which emanates from yourself, Mr. Speaker, that ensures that the appropriate balance between the legislative and executive branches exists in practice here in our Assembly in Alberta.

That concludes my comments, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much for your attention.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I've been listening to the arguments on both sides of the House regarding this purported breach of privilege that occurred last week over at Government House. As a member of this Assembly who was barred at one point from coming into this legislative precinct, I have considerable interest in this point of privilege.

Now, I'll be concise. The hon. President of the Treasury Board suggested that Government House is on Thursdays routinely property of the government caucus.

Ms Blakeman: The room.

Mr. MacDonald: The room. Precisely. It looks like a room out of the *Star Wars* movie. But, certainly, it's the room.

I would remind the President of the Treasury Board that in the Annex the third party certainly shares, I believe, a portion of the floor that they have with members of the government caucus. If not, they're on the floor below. Certainly, the Official Opposition shares the third floor with members of the government caucus. There's no need to ban one group or another whenever there's an activity going on. We even share the washrooms. So this heavy-handed, ham-fisted behaviour last Thursday is inexcusable. When you look at what goes on in the Annex and compare it to the activity that happened at Government House, I certainly would think that there is a violation of the rights and the privileges of the Member for Lethbridge-East, the one for Calgary-Mountain View, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Now, just think about that and also the McDougall Centre in Calgary. While I'm here, I was very pleased to hear the Minister of Environment acknowledge that in the future the McDougall Centre will be open, and it will be open to opposition members as they wish. I was delighted to hear that from the hon. Minister of Environment.

3:30

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would just remind the House of the co-operation and the harmony – the harmony – that happens in the Annex between government members, Official Opposition members, and members of the third party. They do everything but share their own offices. They certainly share elevators, security, bathrooms. There don't seem to be any problems, so I can't understand why the government would be so draconian last Thursday at Government House.

Besides, it'll be interesting. There could be another privilege on this whole issue when Bill 34, the Drug Program Act – it's a money bill – is finally introduced and is before the Assembly. Now, that will be interesting.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I take it that's it?

Well, I appreciate the comments from everyone. I just want to make a couple of comments before I give my ruling. We've reviewed this matter over the weekend, and I don't want to prolong it.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, please, it's the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly who has to fight the wars of disharmony between the Official Opposition and the third party when it comes to one square inch of space allocation. If one caucus gets one more square inch of space than the other one, I've got to spend days on it. So go whistle your harmony tune someplace else with respect to that because one gets one thing, and somebody else gets something.

Thank you very much, President of the Treasury Board, but the effective date of the statement, in fact, is totally irrelevant to the argument with respect to all of that.

I want to thank all members for their participation. Usually the chair takes a day or two to rule on purported questions of privilege, but this situation has been well known for a few days, and the chair doesn't want to prolong it any longer.

Essentially, the hon. leader of the third party's question of privilege is that his ability as a member was infringed upon in an unacceptable manner when he was denied entry to Government House for an announcement concerning the drug plan for seniors made by the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness on the morning of Thursday, April 23, 2009. Technically this alleged violation of the member's ability to perform his duties is characterized as a contempt.

For the benefit of those viewing the proceedings who may not be familiar with the location of various buildings in Edmonton, Government House is located a few kilometres north and west of the Legislature. It is next to the Royal Alberta Museum and is used by the government for various purposes, including caucus meetings and ceremonial events.

With respect to procedural matters the chair notes that the third-party leader provided notice of his purported question of privilege to the Speaker's office at 11:09 a.m. today, April 27, 2009. The events giving rise to the purported question of privilege occurred last Thursday. Standing Order 15(5) provides that a question can be raised "after the words are uttered or the events occur that give rise to the question." The member chooses to rely on the two-hour notice provision found in Standing Order 15(2). For the reasons that follow, the chair will consider that the notice has been adequately provided.

A similar issue concerning access to government briefings was the subject of a Speaker's ruling on March 7, 2000, at pages 286-287 in *Alberta Hansard* for that day. In that instance the chair ruled that denial of access to a press briefing in the media room in the Legislature Building was not a question of privilege. As the chair noted then, he does not have control over that room, and it is not booked through the Speaker's office. It is not part of the parliamentary precincts. Clearly, the same can be said of Government House and McDougall Centre in Calgary.

In the 2000 ruling the chair referred to a January 19, 1984, ruling by Speaker Francis in the Canadian House of Commons. The 1984 incident involved some members of the opposition being excluded from a media lockup where it was alleged that a copy of a bill was released prior to first reading. As the chair said in 2000 at 286 and 287 of *Alberta Hansard*,

even in the federal Parliament, where the Speakers of the Commons and the Senate exercise control over the entire building, it has been held that restricting attendance at a media lockup does not constitute a question of privilege.

The chair went on to quote Speaker Francis' 1984 ruling at page 563 of *Commons Debates* for January 19, 1984.

The Chair obviously recognizes that the parties represented in this House may from time to time request rooms. They may or may not choose to invite members of the press. They may choose to invite their own supporters or include or exclude their own supporters.

They may on occasion include members of other Parties or not include them. This is not a matter for the Speaker to decide.

As the chair held then, allowing or not allowing a member to attend a media briefing does not constitute an impediment or obstruction to the member performing his or her parliamentary duties, which presumably is the category of privilege that the leader of the third party relies on. If the facts had been different and the question of privilege involved the denial of access to this Chamber or a proceeding in this parliament and on the precincts of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, this ruling may have been very different.

Accordingly, the chair finds that there is no prima facie question of privilege. The chair is, however, very pleased to hear of the position of the government and the direction provided by the Premier to members of Executive Council with respect to similar matters as this as we go forward.

The chair concludes by saying how ironic this really is. In the mid-1980s the Speaker, under incredible pressure from the opposition parties and the media, asked the government to take over further control of buildings within the precincts. The Speaker of the day approached the government. The government minister of public works, supply, and service at the time, who was myself, argued with the Speaker that that would be the wrong thing to do and that total control over the precincts should rest with the Speaker. The Speaker, however, as a result of the pressure from the opposition and the media parties at the time, convinced the government that it might want to assume some of the responsibility that the Speaker had previously had. Twenty-one years later I say that this is quite ironic.

This matter is concluded.

Orders of the Day

Written Questions

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

Hospital Ward Closures

- Q6. Mr. Mason:
Which hospitals had to shut down wards temporarily or indefinitely due to staff shortages between April 1, 2006, and January 31, 2009, which wards were shut down, and for how long?

Motions for Returns

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

Executive Council Hosting Expenses

- M21. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of all hosting expenses under \$600 in the ministry of Executive Council, itemized by event and amount, for each for the fiscal years 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, we do know from the *Alberta Gazette* the government's hosting expenses for Executive Council over \$600 that are published. Certainly, in those years we can see where it follows a rather erratic spending pattern. It goes from \$44,000 in 2004 to \$145,000 in 2005, which was centennial year, and I can understand that because it was a very, very busy year for Executive Council. The following year it was cut back by about \$50,000 to \$94,000. In 2007 it went back up

again to \$106,000. In 2008 – these are calendar years; I will make that clear – it was \$32,000.

There's quite a range of hosting expenses here. I think that in light of this range and in light of the fact that the government's hosting expenses over \$600 have increased so dramatically in the last five years – in fact, they have gone from \$480,000 to \$1.4 million, so that's roughly a million-dollar increase over a five-year period. What exactly is going on in amounts below \$600?

3:40

That is the reason for my request. I think taxpayers across this province would be very, very interested to know what these amounts are for the years in question, and I would expect that the government is quite able to provide those amounts.

Before I conclude, I would remind all hon. members of the Assembly that I was surprised, as were different taxpayer associations, to learn that there appears to be from the official government spokesperson no official budget for expenses of this nature, whether they're over \$600 or below \$600. This information should be made available, and that is the reason for my request through this Motion for a Return 21.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the Premier to recommend that the members reject this motion. This motion would cover a period of time of four fiscal years. There would be an excessive cost and, frankly, an inordinate amount of staff time required to restore digital information, recover, review, itemize the records containing the details of all hosting expenses under \$600.

The member is well aware and has noted that there is an opportunity for itemization for expenses over \$600. There also is on each minister's website, including the Premier's website, a monthly summary of office expenses that can be accessed by not only this member but members of the public. Mr. Speaker, if the member is truly seeking specific information that he can't find on either of those two sources, it's recommended that he submit a FOIP request so that the appropriate costs, which, I can assure you, would be significant, can be allocated so that this member can satisfy his own curiosity in some kind of a fishing expedition.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. To think that this hon. member considers me to be a curious fisherman; I am defending the interests of the taxpayers.

Now, I'm very, very disappointed that this motion for a return is being rejected. I can't imagine that there would not be a summary. I know there has been a lot of fiscal mismanagement by the government, but I cannot imagine that there is not somewhere in the deputy minister's office – the deputy minister, I remind the hon. Minister of Environment, must or should be signing off on these expenditures. It shouldn't be a lot of time. It shouldn't take a lot of resources to find this information because if the hon. minister – and we're not looking for his department. The President of Executive Council should be signing off on these expenditures, or the deputy minister should be signing off on these expenditures. If they're not, why not?

This shouldn't be hidden. These amounts should not be hidden like the achievement bonuses were in the global departmental budget. It surprises me that the government would reject this

request. Mr. Speaker, the excuses that have been provided surprise me. I just cannot believe that there is no summary of this and that it cannot be provided in a timely and economical fashion. It just astonishes me.

When I look at how much money we have spent and some of the lavish hosting expenses, I can see why this is so far out of control, but I'm disappointed that the government, by rejecting this motion, indicates that they're not interested in getting it back in control. I'm very, very disappointed.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 21 lost]

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

Sustainable Resource Development Hosting Expenses

M22. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of all hosting expenses under \$600 in the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development, itemized by event and amount, for each of the fiscal years 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If you don't succeed, try again. That's what they taught us in 4-H club.

Mr. Speaker, when you look at what's published in the *Alberta Gazette* for amounts over \$600, you have the functions. I want to pick one function that has been, in my opinion, totally out of control. This is the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties', affectionately called the AAMD and C, fall 2008 convention and minister's open house. Purpose. The purpose of this event: "promote the relationship with elected officials in municipalities from across the province." The amount spent was \$12,659. The dates given are the 11th to the 14th of November 2008. The location is Peace River. Yes. People are looking around. I don't know if that's the correct location; neither does the hon. Member for Peace River.

Now, the year before that, the bill was a little bit bigger. This would be the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Alberta Transportation held a similar open house at the same event, but they held theirs in Edmonton. The bill submitted to the taxpayers was \$2,780. I don't know why both departments couldn't have gotten together and saved the taxpayers a few dollars, but that didn't happen. If we're having this sort of out-of-control spending with those specific events, what's going on in amounts of \$600 or less? Why is the government so reluctant to provide that information to the taxpayers? Forget about me; think about the taxpayers.

With that specific event and the \$12,600 tab, we can go back to 2008, and the same function was \$14,184, the minister's open house.

The Speaker: Hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes?

The Speaker: With the greatest degree of respect, it's Monday afternoon; it's private members' day. The question that you have in here deals with a motion for a return for expenditures under \$600 in the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development. It's very clear what the motion says: under \$600, the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development. It would be really, really helpful to all private members, many of whom even have other business they want to conduct this afternoon, if we were to be totally onboard with the question and to be, in other words, relevant to the discussion. It would be helpful.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I am building a case here with a very valid example of just why we need this information. With this case we can see by going back a few years that the cost of this event was less than \$3,000. When we look at the hosting expenses over \$600 and see how they've increased, we need to know what's going on with the amounts under \$600. You can clearly see there's more than a pattern here. We have no idea, if you look at the hosting directives, if alcohol or other spirits were provided, whether it was just for food. You have no idea. There is a difference in those directives because there are hosting expenses and those that are provided for what are called working lunches. Now, I don't know what the difference is, but apparently there is one.

3:50

With Sustainable Resource Development if we look at what was going on with expenses over \$600 since 2004, through to 2008, well, we can see that there's quite a range. Taxpayers would be interested to note that in 2007, during the calendar year, SRD spent \$100,000 in hosting expenses over 600 bucks. It was down in 2008, to \$64,568. This is according to the *Gazette*, and the *Gazette* gives the details.

Now, I'm asking, with this motion for a return, for the details on what's spent under \$600. I think it's a reasonable, valid request. If we look at this government's budget and where we're spending a lot of money, if we look after the pennies, the dollars will add up themselves.

I would certainly hope that we can get this information and that it won't be rejected like Motion for a Return 21. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising on behalf of the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, once again, to urge members to reject this motion. In the interests of saving a few pennies in unnecessary, repetitive words that are already recorded in *Hansard*, the arguments that apply to this instance also are the same as the ones that I have already enunciated with respect to the previous and, in fact, the next two as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to complete the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, it's a dark day for openness and transparency in this province that our Motion for a Return 22 is being rejected, just like Motion for a Return 21.

In conclusion, surely there is a summary of these expenses available in the office of Sustainable Resource Development. Someone somewhere must be signing off on these expenses. My recollection of the Treasury Board directive is that this has to be done. If that's being done, there has to be a record. With our annual reports and the line items that are provided in those annual reports and the breakdown of those line items, this is not an unusual or an unreasonable request. I just am very, very disappointed that the government cannot provide this information.

We look at, again, hosting expenses and where they've gone. It's incredible, and it's disrespectful to the taxpayers to reject this motion. It would also be neglectful of the government's duty to provide this information because it's not the government's money; it's the taxpayers' money. Whether the hon. members across the way like it or not, we have a role in providing accountability by asking these questions and demanding that this information be made

public. I cannot understand why this government is so reluctant to say: yes, we will provide that information. I have no idea what you're hiding.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 22 lost]

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

Energy Hosting Expenses

M23. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of all hosting expenses under \$600 in the Ministry of Energy, itemized by event and amount, for each for the fiscal years 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, it's quite straightforward. If we look at the Department of Energy, the Department of Energy would be a role model for some of the others that are in amounts over \$600, particularly the ministry of advanced education. In 2008, for instance, in the calendar year, according to the information I got from the *Alberta Gazette*, the Department of Energy spent \$5,077 on hosting expenses over \$600. The year before they spent \$25,000. The year before that, they spent \$18,000. In 2005, while some departments were spending well in excess of \$100,000, the Department of Energy spent \$3,676.

We can get all that information from the *Alberta Gazette*, but we cannot get the hosting expenses that are below \$600. What's to stop two officials from a department with credit cards from splitting the bill so it doesn't show up as an amount over \$600?

Ms Blakeman: Nothing. They've done it before.

Mr. MacDonald: The hon. member said: nothing; it has been done before. Well, this is why we should be getting this information from Motion for a Return 23, to just exactly see if this is a practice and how widespread it is. Certainly, if government officials, say, are to go out – let's pick a restaurant. We're not going to pick Denny's or Boston Pizza either. We're going to pick the Hardware Grill. Let's pick the Hardware Grill. A delegation goes out. Let's say that the spirits, the liquor or the wine, are put on one individual credit card and the meals themselves are put on another individual credit card. Those amounts are less than \$600, but if you totalled them, they could be anywhere from \$660 to \$1,170. The taxpayers are none the wiser in any of this, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Employment and Immigration is looking at me, but yes, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre makes a very good point there. Certainly, if this is a practice that's going on, it should be stopped, and if it is a practice that's going on, taxpayers have every right to know.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Again, I'm going to repeat for the record that this information should be readily available because someone somewhere is signing off on this. If the minister looks perplexed, I think the hon. minister should after session today go back to his office and ask his deputy minister or one of the assistant deputy ministers for the list of hosting expenses that have occurred in those respective fiscal years, Mr. Speaker, that I'm requesting. I'm sure they're there, and I'm sure they're readily available. It's not a big deal to get them.

I think that in this case, with Motion for a Return 23, I'm very confident that in the interest of being open and transparent this

government is going to finally understand and provide the information.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the Minister of Energy to once again urge all members to reject this motion for a return for the same reasons I've already enunciated on the previous two.

[Motion for a Return 23 lost]

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

4:00 Finance and Enterprise Hosting Expenses

M24. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of all hosting expenses under \$600 in the ministry of finance, itemized by event and amount, for each for the fiscal years 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This motion is similar to the other three. If we look at the Department of Finance and Enterprise and we look at what happened in the last five years with amounts over \$600 as recorded in the *Alberta Gazette*, these are, I would say, reasonable expenses: in 2004, \$1,228.

Mr. Campbell: Then why waste our time?

Mr. MacDonald: Well, in 2005, hon. Member for West Yellowhead, the bill jumped from \$1,228 to almost \$40,000. I don't think the taxpayers would consider that a waste of time.

Now, the next year they sort of remained about the same, at \$33,000. The following year, 2007, they were down to \$21,000. Then again in 2008 it more than doubled from the 2007 calendar year, to \$52,867.80. That's in amounts over \$600. The hon. Member for West Yellowhead can trot down to the library and look through the *Gazettes* and see for himself the function, the purpose, the amount, the date, and the location of those events. They're all over the place. It was amazing that last fall when the financial meltdown was in full force, there were many interesting amounts listed in excess of \$600 from that ministry, many with various groups, various advisory groups and whatnot. Unless the government accepts my Motion for a Return 24, we have no idea what kind of hosting went on in amounts of \$600 and less.

Perhaps the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, when he was conducting his review on condominiums, had some hosting expenses that were under \$600. Maybe that's a work-in-progress. Maybe all that is being done through the ministry of finance. It could be being done through Municipal Affairs. It's hard to say what's going on with that review.

Again, when you look at the department and you look at the fact that these amounts have to be signed off, it's not unreasonable to request this information. It should be provided unless this is a government that for some reason or other doesn't want the taxpayers to know where they're dining and with whom and why.

Mr. Rodney: What are you trying to say?

Mr. MacDonald: What I'm trying to say, hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, is that if this government is sincere in their commitment to being open and transparent, this information will be provided

through this request to the Assembly and ultimately to the taxpayers, who are footing the bill.

It's not long ago that we had a Treasurer, who has gone on to Ottawa, who used to stand in this Assembly and show us all the sweat-soaked loonie that that hon. member had on his lapel. We've forgotten about that, Mr. Speaker.

An Hon. Member: A gold-plated loonie.

Mr. MacDonald: It may have been a gold-plated loonie; I'm not sure.

It was a loonie, and the hon. member, the Provincial Treasurer at that time, was very anxious to remind all members of the House, regardless of which side of the House they were on, about that sweat-soaked loonie and what it meant. I think that if this motion is to be rejected, the spirit or the intent that was shown by that hon. member by wearing that loonie on his lapel will have been forgotten by this government.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of finance.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For reasons similar to what the previous House leader has provided on behalf of the ministers of Energy and SRD and on behalf of our Premier, on behalf of our Ministry of Finance and Enterprise I similarly reject the motion and would just identify that, obviously, ministers' expenses for 2007-08 can be reviewed and viewed on the website. Service Alberta has a website available. More specifically detailed information could be accomplished by a FOIP request.

I think one of the things I'd like to identify is that the hon. member keeps referencing this government. Well, since this last election occurred, one year ago, many of the charges he's looking for were with the previous government, certainly many of the same members but with the previous Premier. We have no difficulty having those researched and brought forward provided the hon. member would like to pay the charge. I mean, we're going into a situation where very detailed records are being asked for and over a period of time, a considerable lapse in time, which would be very costly. So also being somewhat mindful of the cost to this government and also mindful of the various areas for transparency in regard to expenses that he could avail himself of today if he chose, I think that we're being quite reasonable in this approach.

I have to go one step further. I really do reject some of the attitude that's coming from the member that would suggest that ministers of the Crown would go to a great extent to camouflage by the use of two different credit cards and all kinds of things. We're all listening to this, and I wish the schoolchildren of Alberta could be in here to hear someone make those kinds of allegations. Fair to do so because under the dome they can say virtually anything, but that truly offends me. If my grandchildren were here, they would wonder, "How can you let him talk like that about you, Grandma?" It's ridiculous.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just want to raise a couple of issues. I'm a citizen; I'm a taxpayer. I'm also fortunate enough to be a legislator. I know that members of the government feel that this is an easy hit against them, but frankly the members of the government make it an easy hit. They are required by legislation to give us the kind of detail that was laid out by my

colleague the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for expenditures that are over \$600 but not under \$600. That's why these requests have been laid out in the four different departments.

I understand that the minister of finance would be offended by the idea that somehow there were shenanigans going on around hosting expenses, but with respect, Madam Minister, we didn't invent that. We got the examples shown to us by predecessors on that side where procurement cards were used by executive assistants where expenses were split up. We weren't creative enough to dream that one up ourselves. We're building on the solid examples that have been laid before us by members of the government and their staff previously.

I think what's important to the taxpayers is that we understand why expenditures have been made and that they are reasonable and fair. If the government invites people to come and brief them on something or give them an explanation or give them some consultation or speak to them in some way and it happens over mealtime, particularly over lunch, fair enough. You know, they've been put out, and they don't have an opportunity to go and have their own lunch now, so lunch should be provided.

4:10

I think that where citizens draw the line is around alcohol and the provision of alcohol. I'll stop right there and say that in some countries that would be expected, but frankly if we're dealing on that level, those are probably hosting charges that are above the \$600 level. I think that below that \$600 level citizens have a right to say: was alcohol included in that? And perhaps it shouldn't be. Maybe that's an internal government decision that's already on the books. If it is, great. If it's not, could I possibly recommend it? I just don't think taxpayers should be paying for people to consume alcoholic beverages given that this is all supposed to be happening on working time.

The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has pointed out that there has been a stupendous increase in hosting since 2004. We are witnessing that in the above \$600 category, which we're able to track. We have no idea if the same thing has happened in the under \$600 category because we can't get any information on it. Truly, to say that, well, we should just go ahead and FOIP that, I'm sorry, but I've been around that racetrack before, and it was an absolute waste of my time, conjured up by members of the government, in which we got referred around and around and around about expenditures. Frankly, the freedom of information and protection of privacy was intended to facilitate the government providing information to the citizens, to the opposition, and to the media. What it has become is a giant cover-up, and it ends up costing the taxpayers even more money because the opposition and the media end up using their resources to pay the government in order to get access.

Why are we asking for so many documents? Well, because when we ask for something reasonable, we get nothing. So we end up having to cast a very wide net. There are always consequences to every action, and that's the consequence we've now come to with FOIP. The government has made it darn hard, the net gets cast wider, and then we get these ridiculous charges of tens of thousands of dollars for FOIP. That is not about accessibility to information.

If the government wonders where this is coming from, I just have to say: look back to yourself. There are enough documented examples where hosting was abused. It should be above board. It is the kind of thing that creates curiosity in the public and in the opposition, so fess up. Get it out there. Tell us how many people were there for lunch and why, and tell us what you were eating. Was it salads from Boston Pizza? Fair enough. That's the kind of careful, prudent management that I would expect. But there are too many other examples in front of us that we have managed to dig out

in the past to stop us from continuing to do that kind of digging now.
Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre brings up a really good point when she says that there are consequences to everything that we do and that the government often brings some hardship upon itself because it acts in the manner that it acts. Well, to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre it should be pointed out that there is a great deal of truth in what she says, that there are consequences for everything that we do, but the consequences don't flow only one way. They flow the other way as well.

For a prime example we don't have to look back more than five minutes. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar will rise, and he will use my name, not by my true name but by my constituency, and insinuate that in my review of the building envelope under the building code I may be wining and dining and spending money inappropriately. He won't say it directly, Mr. Speaker, because he's a bright man, and he knows what the rules of the House are, but there are ways of tarnishing another person's reputation and making innuendoes just by squeaking by the rules, getting the message out clearly that you're suggesting that someone is doing something. "I'm not saying, but I'm saying," as kids in junior high school would say. That is just enough to get that information out there and insinuate what somebody is doing over there.

That's exactly what the member does, and I don't know what he would base it on. He has never travelled with me. He has no clue what it is that this review encompasses. He has no clue even whether there were any meals involved or, if there were, where they were, or were they day trips that, you know, perhaps didn't require. Maybe all the individuals who were submitting to this committee were actually coming here to the Legislature. He has no idea, no idea whatsoever, other than the fact that he knows that I am doing some kind of a review. That is enough for him to insinuate that now with this committee I'm wining and dining.

Mr. Speaker, I'll be honest with you. If it came to vote right now to decide whether I should release any information to him, I'd say to him: "Do it the hard way. If you're going to accuse me of things that you have no clue about, why would you expect me to assist you in your work as a member of the opposition? Do it the hard way. Dig it up." There is FOIP. There is process.

Second of all, Mr. Speaker, just open the newspaper. Over the last 24 hours children addicted to ecstasy died, members of my Somali community in Castle Downs are facing problems with law enforcement, there are issues with recession, and there is the swine flu possibly approaching Alberta. There are big issues that Albertans want us to deal with. They expect this Chamber to address some issues that they really, honestly care about, that really, really matter, and they pay big dollars to have us here, sitting in this place. They don't pay your salary, my salary, and for the lights that are on in this Chamber and the hundreds of people that work behind us to support us to discuss frivolous things only for the purpose of, hopefully, getting a one-liner somewhere in the paper, because that kind of stuff sort of attracts media attention, and you may be able to get that one-liner.

Mr. Speaker, the rules are clear. Anything over \$600 has to be listed, and it is listed publicly on web pages. Anything under \$600 – and that includes your \$3 cup of coffee; that's under \$600 as well – that stuff is not listed because the cost of listing it probably

cumulatively would be more expensive than the actual bills. But there is a process that they can utilize. They can use FOIP. Use it if you think that there are any issues. If you want to FOIP my committee, hon. member, and make yourself look really foolish, go for it. Find out what dinners we had, where we had them, and how much the entire process cost.

He won't do it because he knows he won't find anything, but he will say it in the House so that it's on the record so that somebody can think that something wrong may have happened. That's shameful. It's unfortunate that our rules allow for that to happen, but they weren't intended for that.

To the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, indeed there are consequences for everything that we do, but that goes both ways.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. To conclude the debate on Motion for a Return 24, I've listened to the last three speakers with a considerable amount of interest. I'll start with the latter and go back to the initial speaker. With the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, I've already been provided by various people in the condominium industry a summation of the hon. member's activities around the review, and I certainly find that interesting. I would remind the hon. member that FOIP is a very, very expensive process and that whenever we FOIP or ask a question, government members say: well, it should be on the Order Paper under a written question or a motion for a return. In Public Accounts they certainly provide that response. In regard to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has indicated, it is a revolving door for us. This government hides behind expensive FOIP schedules all the time. It's routine.

If we look after the budget for hosting expenses, we will have enough money left over to adequately fund programs and services to reduce and in some cases eliminate criminal activity. What we're saying is that by looking after these amounts – and the hon. member may think they're trivial, but they certainly are not. If you were to add up this entire government and these hosting expenses, they would be well in excess of \$1.4 million, which is the amount 600 bucks and above.

4:20

Surely, in that department, Mr. Speaker, in the ministry of finance, it's frightening to think that the minister is not signing off on these hosting expense requests that come in in amounts of 600 bucks and under. I don't think the Taxpayers Federation would be too impressed with that activity. I would urge all hon. members across the way to have a look at the hosting expenses, the directives that come from the Treasury Board to control these expense amounts. If they were trivial amounts, there wouldn't be any need for this hosting directive from the Treasury Board. But there are two directives. In fact, they are amended routinely as times change.

This is in direct contrast with what the minister of finance has said. When we look at what we do know from the *Alberta Gazette*, regardless of whether it's the Klein era or the new era of the hon. Premier, we've seen hosting expenses skyrocket in amounts over \$600. How do we know that that same trend isn't going on with amounts of \$600 or less unless we get this information?

In conclusion, the hon. minister of finance was talking about schoolchildren. Well, I would remind the hon. minister of finance and the other hon. members across the way that there are many children in this province who through no fault of their own come to school hungry and stay hungry all day long. To the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs: when we think of our hosting expenses

and we look at the extravagance, the lavish, wasteful spending of this government in the last couple of years, to think that there are children in our school system not only going to school hungry but remaining hungry all day long is shameful.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 24 lost]

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

Bill 203

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

[Debate adjourned March 16: Mr. Horne speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on Bill 203.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, please, Mr. Speaker, on the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009. I have been reading this bill since the hon. member introduced it. It certainly is an interesting legislative initiative, and it is one that has created considerable interest. I have some questions regarding this bill at this time, and hopefully we can be provided with answers before we vote. Some sections of this bill are very reasonable, and for others there are questions.

However, with this bill I would like to know, in light of what happened with Elections Alberta and the fact that in the last provincial election, in March 2008, there was a great deal of difficulty in administering the two acts and getting that election up and running and getting people enumerated and trying to get some sort of control on it – the House has been through that matter many times, and I think we'll be dealing with that again. If these legislative initiatives to Bill 203 were to become law, who will enforce this, and will they have enough resources to enforce this? I know that with municipal elections you can certainly go to city hall in downtown Edmonton, you can go to Calgary, and you can look up the disclosure statements of many of the candidates. Exactly how this will be enforced, how much it would cost: I would appreciate an answer to that question.

In the definition of trade union that occurs, I'm curious why that definition was chosen. That definition, Mr. Speaker, reads:

“Trade union” means a trade union as defined by the Labour Relations Code, the Public Service Employee Relations Act or the Canada Labour Code (Canada) and that holds bargaining rights for employees in Alberta, and for the purposes of this Part all locals in Alberta of a trade union are deemed to be one trade union.

When this definition was drafted, did the hon. member consult, for instance, the Alberta Federation of Labour or the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, where they have many locals throughout the province, different locals that represent different workers? Were they consulted on this? For instance, the United Nurses of Alberta: were they consulted on this bill, and did they agree with this definition? Also, the Health Sciences Association of Alberta: were they consulted on this? If I'm reading this correctly, the AUPE, for instance, would be restricted and limited by this definition because, of course, they have locals all over the province, representing, as I said before, various locals.

Now, also, the limitations and contributions. It's different than the provincial limitations, which are \$15,000, and then during an election period they're \$30,000. Why was this amount – and this is in section 147 – not to exceed \$5,000 in any campaign period? Why was that amount chosen?

Also, if I could ask regarding a definition, and I'm just looking for it here, Mr. Speaker. I can get to this later. There was a definition in here that I wanted to talk about that had reference to organizations as defined by the Income Tax Act of Canada. I believe I've found that; it's on page 7. It would be section 147.05. Which section of the Income Tax Act of Canada is the hon. member referring to? Is it 258? I think that's the section that I have my eye on, but I'm not sure. If the member could correct that, I would be very, very grateful.

Before I cede the floor to another hon. member, I would also like to know why the definition of the campaign period was written as it is in this legislation.

Those would be my comments, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

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

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Briefly I'd like to put my support behind Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009. The member sponsoring this bill should be commended on being perceptive in identifying an area of the municipal act that definitely could have used some updating and, shall we say, tweaking.

4:30

I think all Albertans would believe and even pride themselves on the fact that we want our elections to be as transparent as possible. Particularly when it comes to finances, they want to make sure that any and all money donated to political campaigns, be it in municipal or provincial or federal races, is money that was spent in accordance with how it was intended to be spent, meaning on the actual electing of their favourite or preferred candidate, and that also there is a transparency relevant to who is donating to whom and how much in order to be certain that there isn't a possibility of someone unduly influencing a particular candidate.

Lastly, I think Albertans would expect that following an election, if there is any surplus in a campaign, the surplus be declared so that not only those who donated money but pretty well the entire electorate have a clear understanding of how much money a candidate has raised, how he or she has spent the money, how much money they have in their surplus account following the election, and how that money will be disbursed.

Those rules are pretty well entrenched in our provincial statutes relevant to provincial elections. The federal government has done some recent changes, shall we say, tightening up their legislation on electoral financing. I think it is time that perhaps some of those ideas be also now transferred to municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, many important decisions – and some would frankly, maybe even rightfully, argue that some of the most important decisions – are made at the local level. Those are decisions that really impact us as citizens from day to day. Even though the budgets that municipalities operate with may not be in dollar value as big as they are provincially or federally, these decisions are very important. It's very important for Albertans to know how their elected representatives have been elected to their posts and how their campaigns have been financed. Hence, because of the prominence of the municipal governments, we now refer to them as governments. We see them as an order of government, which in the past wasn't the case. I think that if they are to be treated like governments, if they are to have the benefits of being known as orders of government, then they should also abide by some electoral rules that allow them to get to be government.

I'm looking right now in the bill at section 147.03(1): very

common-sense principles that I don't think anybody in this Chamber or outside, in Alberta, would disagree with. Subsection (c) says, "Money in the campaign account shall only be used for the payment of campaign expenses." Well, I would say, Mr. Speaker, that that's natural. If people donate money for a campaign, they expect the money to be used only for campaign expenses.

Subsection (d): "Contributions of real property, personal property and services are valued." So if somebody gives you an office to use for the duration of the campaign, that actually has a market value. You should declare it as a donation. That's what we do in provincial elections.

Receipts should be issued to everyone who contributes to a campaign, and whether they have a taxable credit benefit to it or not is irrelevant. At least then they're receipted and accounted for, so there is a transparency built in.

Disclosure statements should be filed in accordance with the section of the act, of course, at the end. That's something that we do provincially as well.

Records should be kept by the candidate of campaign contributions and campaign expenses for a period of two years following the date of the election. That makes a lot of sense, Mr. Speaker, because if there is any question, there should be records to refer to for a reasonable period of time, obviously. Two years to me would appear to be a reasonable period of time.

"A campaign contribution received in contravention of this Act is returned to the contributor." That happens, Mr. Speaker, provincially. If a provincial candidate was to receive money for a campaign from outside of the province, for example, which is not allowed, if that was to be tracked down, that candidate would have to return the dollars to make sure that only appropriate contributions are kept within the campaign finances.

Mr. Speaker, most importantly, subsection (2) says, "A candidate who contravenes any of the provisions of this section is guilty of an offence and liable to a fine of not more than \$1000." Here I perhaps would argue that a thousand dollars is not significant enough, but that's something that could be debated at a later point as we proceed with this bill. I think that a thousand dollars perhaps may not be sufficient to deter a person from breaching the act; however, you'd imagine that that person also would be disqualified from holding his or her post if significant breaches were found. So I would perhaps consider a higher fine.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, I think the bill is very well intended. It addresses a need that exists out there, and it will definitely give Albertans some peace of mind, knowing that when they donate money, the monies are spent just the way they intended the money to be spent and not in any other way. Also, it will give Albertans peace of mind that there is control on contributions and that there could not be – not to suggest that there is – any influence peddling relevant to the size of contribution to a candidate.

Again, I would like to thank the member sponsoring the bill and encourage the entire House to vote in favour of this bill because I think this is one piece of legislation that all of us could agree on.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to participate in the discussion today in second reading of Bill 203, the Local Authorities Election (Finance and Contribution Disclosure) Amendment Act, 2009, proposed by the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater. As democracy evolves across Canada and abroad, it has become apparent that the finance and contribution components of an election's various candidates and parties are important factors in

determining the overall virtue of the electoral process. By extension, the value of the democratic process and the perception of government amongst everyday citizens hinges on the merit of the electoral process.

Legislation similar to Bill 203 has been introduced at the federal level and thus far in some provinces as well and has been perceived as a good measure. While our government has done so for provincial elections, Mr. Speaker, there's been no such regulation in regard to municipal elections. Bill 203 seeks to implement structure for municipal campaign financing similar to that which is already in place for provincial elections here in Alberta as well as a number of other jurisdictions.

Mr. Speaker, municipal governance is vitally important in a diverse province like Alberta. In many ways Alberta's continued prosperity, as I see it, will rely on strong municipal governance and, by extension, a continually respected election process, as has been referred to by other colleagues. Municipalities manage many of the public goods and services that citizens use every day, and it is the citizens who in many ways are the best promoters of local government policies. As Albertans deserve confidence in the process that elects their mayors, aldermen, reeves, and councillors, Bill 203 seeks to enhance finance and contribution standards for municipal elections. While the province's electoral process at the municipal level has been sufficient to this point, we must make improvements where necessary consistent with government goals.

Bill 203 is forward looking and, as such, is not retroactive. This is an important point to our discussion as current municipal government members should not feel that their election to office is in any way being scrutinized after the fact. To be clear, we do not intend nor wish to convey a message to municipal governments and citizens alike that there is blame to be placed. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, past municipal elections have occurred under the purview of our government as is written in the Local Authorities Election Act. By this very fact we support the present-day state of municipal election results as they were implicitly sanctioned by the province. Bill 203 seeks now to enhance the electoral process at the municipal level consistent with our duty to Albertans to provide transparency of government and consistent with the same goals of the Local Authorities Election Act.

4:40

In considering Bill 203, Mr. Speaker, we recognize that it is intended to be implemented on a go-forward basis. Past election campaign finances will not be audited nor investigated for any municipal district, county, or city. Elected officials, for example, would not have to disclose financial contributions from past elections as these elections occurred under the Local Authorities Election Act as it stands, without the proposed changes.

One of the changes proposed by Bill 203 is in regard to unused contribution amounts, or surplus funds. I wish to provide some clarification to this point since surplus funds will require disclosure. Surplus funds are the amounts that are unused after a campaign but remain in the possession of the campaign; thus, these funds, if kept, are likely to be used in future elections if the candidate was to seek re-election.

Changes proposed by Bill 203 for the Local Authorities Election Act would require under the new rules that such funds be declared by July of 2009 if they are to be used for future elections. If surplus funds exist and are used for a campaign in the future, they are, for the purposes of disclosure, current funds for that campaign. However, as the bill is not specifically retroactive, limitations on the size of existing surplus funds will not be regulated, while funds raised under the new rules would be regulated. This is simply an

issue of fairness, Mr. Speaker, as existing surplus funds are basically grandfathered. If any of these funds continue to exist and, acceptably, are intended for use in the future, they should not be subject to contribution limits, for example, as such rules were not a part of past decisions on campaigns. Rather, these funds raised according to the Local Authorities Election Act must merely be disclosed, as is appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, I trust that I've made it clear here that Bill 203 would require that existing surplus funds be disclosed if they're intended for future use but that the bill is not specifically retroactive and will not take anything away, so to speak. The ultimate result of this is fairness for all parties involved and the acknowledgement of the importance of municipal elections and the legislation that they operate under.

In consideration of the practical virtue and fairness of Bill 203 I urge the members of the House to support it, as I do, and I thank the Member for Athabasca-Redwater for bringing this matter forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: I'll call on the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater to close the debate.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and thank all my colleagues who have spoken to this bill, given their comments, thoughts, suggestions. I think we've had some very good debate over what has probably been the longest two hours of debate I've ever been a part of. But, finally, here we are.

As I mentioned in my opening statements, Bill 203 would define provincial-wide standards regarding financial contributions in municipal elections and the disclosure of those contributions. These amendments that I've proposed would simply align the municipal election finance rules with those that already exist at the provincial and federal levels as well as in other jurisdictions across the country.

Without any further ado I will thank my colleagues for commenting on this and look forward to the vote and encourage everyone to support it.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a second time]

Bill 204

Provincial-Municipal Tax Sharing Act

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

Ms Blakeman: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is sure an interesting day for municipalities here in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. We just had financing, and now we're going to talk about financing specific to Bill 204, the Provincial-Municipal Tax Sharing Act. At this point I would like to move second reading of Bill 204 and offer a few comments in support of it.

Mr. Speaker, I live in a city, like almost 80 per cent of the people who live in Alberta do. For some time I've noticed my city struggling with having enough money to provide the basic services that I as a citizen expect them to provide. At the same time that I'm watching my city struggling, I was until a few short months ago watching the province rolling in double-digit surpluses. To me this was an inequity that should not be. There is only one taxpayer. We should be able to work this out. So I started looking for some possible solutions to how we could have some sort of a revenue-sharing process between the provincial government and the municipalities.

First of all, the question is: well, was there a problem? Yes, definitely in the reading that I did, there's clearly a problem.

Frankly, I could see the problem as I walked down the street. I could see it, you know, as I read the letters to the editor about people unhappy with the litter pickup in their city or the number of times their road got plowed in the wintertime.

I was also able to read it in a number of different articles and commentary. I read through the AUMA resolutions. I read through AAMD and C. Certainly, there was lots of commentary in there about financing. Also in Canada West. The Canada West did a very good report which I would recommend to people, *Delivering the Goods: Infrastructure and Alternative Revenue Sources for the City of Edmonton*. It was released in June of 2008. Yes, there was a problem. Others had identified it. Okay.

So, two, was there a provincial role in this? Could something the province did or was capable of doing, legally had access to, address this issue? Clearly, the answer to that question is also yes. Essentially, we have a constitutional set-up where we have a federal government and a provincial government, and they divide up in the constitution who is responsible for what. That same Constitution also sets out that provinces create the municipalities under them. Yes, the province is responsible for creating the municipalities and the laws that go around them. Indeed, we just debated second reading of Bill 203, which talked about election financing for municipal elections.

When I looked at alternative revenue options for the province to share some revenue with the municipalities or for the municipalities to be granted by the province additional revenue generation, a number of things were suggested. They fall into a couple of general categories. Again, I will encourage people to read the Canada West document.

There are things like visitor-specific selective taxes. Those essentially are things like lodging and accommodation taxes, restaurant taxes, bar and pub taxes, beverage taxes, gambling taxes, et cetera. There are also vehicle-specific selective sales taxes, where we get into things like a local option fuel tax; a local vehicle registration tax; car rental tax; local tax on parking; vehicle ownership, or a wheel tax; special taxes on vehicle sales; et cetera. There's quite a long list that appears on page 31 of that document.

I was quite interested in a third possibility, which was called a SPLOST, which is a rather unattractive name but an interesting idea. That was essentially called a penny tax, but it was to fund infrastructure. I was really captured by what I was hearing from municipal councillors throughout Alberta but also others that, really, what we were dealing with here was an operating gap, and that's what I chose to try and address. What I've ended up with is what you see before you as proposed in Bill 204, which is about indexing grants to provincial income.

4:50

Now, Mr. Speaker, people that are following along with this particular debate may not be aware that private members get their placement in the bill draw literally by having their name drawn out of a hat. You've got to be having the blessings upon you to have a good bill draw. This is my 13th spring session. I have had exactly one other good bill draw. In those days in my caucus it was traditional that if you had an excellent bill draw, the best one actually, you handed it over to the leader, who got that position. In fact, that's what I did, and I got punted to the back of the bus with some number that was so high that I didn't even get the bill printed.

I was pretty excited when I was going to get an opportunity this year. In fact, I drew Bill 201, and I exchanged places with my colleague because we felt that that was a very timely bill and something that he really wanted to bring up. I am still pleased to have position of Bill 204 and to be able to bring forward and

encourage my colleagues in the Assembly to have a good debate about municipal financing.

We've talked about: is it necessary? Yes. Can the province do this? Yes. What was really needed? Well, what I was told was that municipalities really needed three things. The property tax in municipalities, which is their primary revenue source, is not responsive to growth. So even though we're now in a recession, we are still expecting growth in a number of our urban areas in Alberta. It's not as fast a growth, but we're still expecting growth. They really do tell me that property tax is not responsive enough to growth. They have to build things and provide services on a municipal level. They cannot keep ahead of it and have an increasing operation gap.

They needed something that would respond to growth, that the city would be able to control how the money was spent, and that would be predictable to them. Thus, we have the revenue sharing that is laid out in Bill 204: specifically, take a portion of the provincial income tax, which includes personal income tax and corporate income tax – and it's a small amount, 2.5 per cent – set it aside in a separate account which would be created by cabinet within the next sitting after this bill passes, and then the money from there would flow back out to the municipalities for operational purposes, not capital, not infrastructure.

This legislation is based on the Manitoba model, which has been up and running for some time. I believe that their percentage is currently 4 per cent, and there was some talk about how they wanted to increase it to 6 per cent. We have a larger population base, and I think the 2.5 per cent that I'm asking for here is quite reasonable.

The idea behind this is that it is for operational spending, as I said, and that it's an unconditional grant. There are no strings attached. The province can't tell the municipalities how to spend it. It goes to them, and they decide on a local basis how they would be spending the money. It is for operating money – I'll repeat that again – not for capital. There are other grant programs in place. Also, the entire procedure and process would be examined and reviewed in one year.

So I did quite a bit of talking. I got a lot of correspondence back and a fair amount of support and some questions from municipalities. I didn't get formal responses from AUMA or AAMD and C, but in this province I wouldn't have expected that either.

I'm looking forward to a healthy debate on this. I think a number of members in here come from a municipal background and understand exactly what I'm talking about when I talk about funding gaps. I hope that the members will be supportive of my suggestions here, but I hope that there's a respectful and energetic debate more than anything. We need a wider discussion of the relationship between the province and the municipalities, and given that two-thirds of us live in those urban areas, this is an important part of that discussion.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Danyluk: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It indeed gives me pleasure to be able to stand up and have an opportunity to speak on the private member's bill today. This bill suggests that a portion of personal and corporate tax revenue be dedicated to ensure the sustainability of Alberta municipalities. Let me start by saying that ensuring the sustainability of Alberta municipalities has been and will continue to be a priority of this government. We know that strong municipalities are the key ingredient to strong communities and that strong communities are the building blocks of a strong province. The Premier has stressed his firm belief in this on numerous occasions.

Mr. Speaker, this government has consistently shown its commitment to fostering strong communities. That is why the Alberta municipalities receive a level of support that is unmatched in the country. In fact, that is exactly the reason that we did introduce the municipal sustainability initiative. Over the past two years we have provided municipalities with \$900 million through the MSI, and this funding is having a real impact in our communities. In all corners of our province Albertans are enjoying the benefits of this program. They are seeing new roads, recreational facilities, emergency and police facilities that keep their communities safe, investments in underground infrastructure like water and sewer lines that provide essential basic services, and, of course, libraries, which play a critical role in the well-being of communities.

Mr. Speaker, the MSI also provides \$50 million for operating. The member opposite talks about the necessity for operating. The two large centres had the opportunity to have some of their funding put into operating. Their decision was that they wanted all funding to come as capital, and that's exactly what we did.

MSI is new money on top of other significant support that the government already provides to municipalities. Under MSI, Mr. Speaker, municipalities have the autonomy to determine local priorities and choose their projects to meet their citizens' needs. Unlike Bill 204 MSI also includes measures to ensure that we are accountable to Alberta taxpayers for funds provided to municipalities. Projects must meet program criteria designed to ensure that they will contribute to the long-term sustainability of Alberta communities. Municipalities must submit a long-term infrastructure plan as well as detailed information about each project to be funded through MSI. We are also developing an accountability framework to ensure that funds provided to municipalities are used to meet agreed-upon objectives. None of these accountability measures would be included in Bill 204, which would provide a fixed proportion of tax revenue unconditionally.

In addition to MSI, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta municipalities receive support from programs such as the Alberta municipal infrastructure program, the municipal transportation grants, the Canada-Alberta municipal rural infrastructure funds, and Alberta municipal support such as the underground petroleum tank site remediation program. In fact, last year municipalities received over \$2.3 billion in direct funding from this government.

The Deputy Speaker: It's 5 o'clock. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business for today has concluded. The minister still has time to go the next time.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Ecological Integrity in Land Reclamation

506. Mr. Berger moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to use site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes to ensure the preservation and integrity of our plant ecosystem.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and privilege to stand today and open debate on Motion 506. The purpose of reclamation is to return disturbed land to a capability that is equivalent to or greater than what existed before. The use of native species to revegetate disturbed sites is already common for most reclamation projects; however, while the use of native species

is encouraged, it is not mandatory. That is why I feel we need to ensure that any land being reclaimed on native landscapes in Alberta is reclaimed with only native grasses and forb species. This means prohibiting the introduction of foreign and/or invasive species into areas that are undergoing reclamation.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, the reclamation of specified land is carried out in accordance with the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, EPEA, the conservation and reclamation regulation, and also in accordance with the disposition and authorization issued under the Public Lands Act, the Forests Act, and the exploration regulation. These require that companies conducting activities that disturb land must remediate and reclaim the land in a way that will support activities similar to its previous use. However, similar to its previous use does not require the use of a hundred per cent native species.

Mr. Speaker, I want to discuss why it is vitally important for native species to be used in all future reclamation projects on native lands. Introducing nonnative, invasive species to native landscapes can have serious long-term effects both ecologically and economically. Invasive species have the ability to rapidly reproduce and displace natural vegetation, which may lead to many negative ecological challenges. For example, it can result in the crowding out of native plants, including rare and endangered species. Furthermore, the introduction of foreign species can reduce soil stability and water quality.

Mr. Speaker, many of the Alberta initiatives work to re-establish native species, especially along stream banks as well as areas back from streams, such as rough fescue, which provides for water retention and water filtration and is also a great carbon sink in the backcountry. Additionally, many invasive plant species can rapidly spread beyond the reclaimed area, causing considerable ecological damage. For example, highway corridors provide opportunities for invasive species to move rapidly through the landscape by being transported on vehicles or during the mowing of ditches. The seeds from these plants could also be introduced throughout a highway corridor during construction or utility improvements. That is why it is best to maintain native plant species throughout native landscapes. Maintaining naturally adapted grasses and forbs also leads to more efficient water use as well as enhancing the carbon uptake, which is beneficial for not only the plant ecosystem but our overall environment.

The introduction of nonnative species can also lead to negative economic impacts. When these invasive species spread onto agricultural fields and pastures, herbicides are needed to bring the weeds under control. Furthermore, weed control is increasingly becoming more expensive. In the agricultural sector invasive species not only require increased application of herbicides but can also result in reduced crop yields.

Mr. Speaker, foreign species can also negatively affect wildlife. Deer, elk, and many other species that feed on native grasses and plants are accustomed to their natural habitat. Invasive plant species that crowd out native plants can not only destroy the natural habitat of many animal species but can potentially poison wildlife. Further to this point, while invasive species may adversely affect wildlife, the same can be said about farm livestock. Part of what makes Alberta beef the best in the world is the natural grasses and plants that our livestock graze on. This is something we want to protect.

The economic impacts of introducing invasive species to native landscapes can be considerable. In fact, in 1999 the science adviser to the United States Secretary of the Interior suggested that invasive plants cause about \$123 billion in damages every year in the U.S. In this province the economic costs of invasive species would also be surprisingly high. Controlling invasive species is one method.

However, it is best to not introduce these species in the first place, particularly on native landscapes.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, we are fortunate in Alberta to have some of the most pristine landscapes in the world, and I want to see it kept this way for many generations to come. I ask all the members of this Assembly to join with me and stand in support of Motion 506.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much for recognizing me. I'm very happy to stand up in the House in support of Motion 506. It's no surprise to me that it was brought forward by the Member for Livingstone-Macleod. For anyone that's ever been in that constituency, they surely understand that it's God's country. I'm just a tad biased because my family originally came from that area.

He raises a number of very valid points. As we deal with a province in which there has been a lot of disturbance of the land through mostly oil and gas development but for a number of other reasons – exploration, seismic, you know, forestry roads, that sort of thing – we're learning some lessons. I think we've had to learn some lessons through consequences where we have seen that when you disturb the soil, basically, you open it up, and any seed that falls into it, that's what can take hold and grow, in some cases very invasive species and, in fact, noxious species. It can and does have long-reaching and detrimental effects on our natural environment.

I'm thinking of loosestrife, for example, which was immensely damaging to our wetlands. A really great plant; I had one in my garden. Man, did that thing grow, and it produced hundreds of thousands of seeds. It was so effective, and it was fabulous. My garden was filled with flowers until my neighbour came over and said: please get rid of that, and when you do, burn it and make sure that you pick every single seed out of the soil because it is prolific and invasive. It was. It took me years before I had finally got the garden rid of it because every spring it would come up again. I thought: wow; that's in a garden in a city with somebody that is watching it and trying to deal with the fact that it is such a prolific seed producer.

The problem with loosestrife is that once it took hold in wetlands, it just choked it out exactly in the same way it did in my garden. It just took it over, choked it out, and made just about any other native species very difficult to compete with it. It was not a good food source for the local animals. We were replacing, you know, good, easy-to-access nutrients for the animals and waterfowl that were frequenting the wetlands with this very woody stalk that was nowhere near as nutritious. That's one small example of how it can really get away from us.

I'm very supportive of what has been brought forward in Motion 506 by the Member for Livingstone-Macleod. I'm the Official Opposition critic for Environment. I've talked to a number of the groups that I deal with on this from the environmental and conservation side, and they are supportive of this as well. I think it makes sense, but sometimes we have to pass laws to remind ourselves to do the right thing, and this may well be one of those times.

5:10

We're expecting that if this motion passes and the government implements it, we could see benefits like, as I've mentioned, retention of the local biodiversity, certainly in the grasslands the appropriate grass. We've already lost significant grass out of the area that the Member for Livingstone-Macleod represents because the long grass we don't really have anymore. It doesn't really exist. It's gone. It has been taken over by the shorter prairie grass.

If you're in some of the museums down that way, I think particularly Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump – is that where it is? – there's an excellent example of the root structure. The root structure of the long grass is long; it's, like, three feet into the soil. With the short grass it's much less; it's about six inches. The long grass just didn't compete, and it's gone. We really, essentially, don't have it anymore.

I think, for some of the reasons that I've mentioned, that it does give our native flora and fauna an opportunity to continue to thrive, that it's going to increase the reseeding potential – we're not usually doing fertilization in those areas, but it would certainly reduce it if you're using an indigenous planting to the region – and trying to get as close to what was there before if you can't actually get what was there before. I'll hearken back to my references there to the short and long grass. The shorter grass is as close as you're going to get to what you had before in the long grass.

This is, I would argue, a common-sense motion. It's something the government should be going forward with. It is supported by the environmental and conservation groups.

I had one question. The member amended his original motion partway through. I'll just read the whole thing so that I can get to it:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to use site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes to ensure the preservation and integrity of our plant ecosystem.

The amended part is “on native landscapes.” I'm not sure what was there before, so I'm not sure of the significance of the change there. Maybe he could get one of his colleagues to explain that if he gets a chance.

I remember a number of conversations with my uncle, who was for many years in the seed business, and he used to do a lot of reclamation projects. I remember being shocked at hearing that often there was no requirement of him to seed in a reclamation project anywhere close to what had been there before. Of course, he was a businessman, very successful, and he did what was most cost-effective, which was not always the native planting. Even back then I remember being disheartened by that because it meant that – he was selling seed for reclamation along the sides of highways and things, so covering a lot of land, and to hear that we weren't even trying to get back to anything close to what had been there before was pretty disheartening because we'd essentially changed the landscape. I think one of the lessons that we keep failing to learn is that you can't fool around with Mother Nature because sooner or later she'll get you for that. I think this is falling into line with that, and understanding and coming as close as possible to what is the native biodiversity is a darn good idea.

On behalf of my colleagues – I think all of them support this. I certainly do.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm in favour of listening to the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, okay. We've got some of them that are going to listen to the debate.

I'm going to certainly be encouraging my colleagues in the Official Opposition to support Motion 506. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to enter into debate on this motion. I, too, am intending to speak in favour of the motion. I think that this is in support of a good deal of work that we've been doing in Alberta Environment

and, in fact, reflects to a very large degree the practice that has been ongoing for some time.

I want to address the question that the hon. member just brought forward with respect to the insertion of “on native landscapes” into the motion, and it is an insertion. It came as a result of some discussions between the hon. member and myself. There is a responsibility that we have for reclamation that applies not only to areas where there are native grasses but also in agricultural, cultivated lands. So it doesn't make as much sense to use native grasses to do reclamation in an area that is cultivated in the middle of a grain field. Obviously, it doesn't apply.

Also, there are instances where we do have industrial disturbances that are on the fringe of urban development areas where once the reclamation has been completed, they get incorporated into urban development, residential areas, and those kinds of things. Again, it wouldn't make sense to reclaim to native grasses and then come back a year later and remove all of those and put yards that may or may not have loostrate in their gardens.

Like everything, Mr. Speaker, we learn that sometimes there needs to be some degree of interpretation or some degree of ability for our people to be able to have some discretion when it comes to applying these kinds of rules. They tend to sometimes become hard and fast, and that's maybe not the most appropriate way to deal with it.

There are other ways that we need to deal with and encourage minimizing the disturbance and the effect, particularly on native grasses. While it's true that the use of seed that would be recognized as native is critical and important and we've since 2001 advised against the use of nonnative seeds to revegetate sites, we also endorse best practices for minimizing disturbance on grasslands. One of the most effective ways of doing that is by scheduling activities, drilling activities, for example, during the winter, when the ground is frozen. That has a huge impact on minimizing the impact.

The native plant species are an important component of our end goal within our environmental legislation, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, or EPEA. It's reflected in the upstream oil and gas reclamation criteria for grasslands and our recently revised reclamation criteria issued for forested land by Sustainable Resource Development. The issue of land reclamation is jointly delivered by Environment and Sustainable Resource Development. We're currently reviewing our upstream oil and gas reclamation criteria to strengthen the use of native plants on native landscapes. We're also committed to the use of native species on reclamation in the oil sands, and EPEA approvals support the use of native species in those areas as well. In fact, Sustainable Resource Development currently approves the reclamation seed mixes, including for those areas managed under EPEA approvals such as oil sands facilities.

For a moment I just want to talk a little bit about trees and shrubs. Although they're not necessarily part of what the member has before us, trees and shrubs for reclamation are also required to be native and from a local seed source, particularly when we're talking about the reclamation in oil sands. Any use of nonnative species of trees and shrubs needs to go through a very thorough evaluation process. The use of nonnative trees and shrubs is currently restricted to reclamation research trials and occurs only after a very formal review. Oil sands operators are developing a seed co-operative to ensure that a stable supply of native seeds is available. That's important because, particularly if you have large areas of disturbance, acquisition of seeds can be problematic. So the seed bank is an important vehicle for ensuring that we have reseeding available. The province is providing guidance in the development of this

overall plan, and we plan to expand in the future to ensure that we include herbs and grasses.

5:20

Mr. Speaker, I commend the member on his initiative to bring this issue forward. I support the initiative with one cautionary note: we have to ensure that there is a degree of discretion that's involved in the application of a policy such as this to deal with some rare instances where it might make sense to have nonnative species in particular circumstances.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand today to speak in favour of Motion 506. The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod is a man of the earth, someone who understands that nature never rests and that bare ground never stays that way. Indeed, he has already mentioned rough fescue in his opening comments. Rough fescue is a wonderful grass. It's a grass that has often been equated with snow and used as cattle feed.

It is logical that we should approximate as close as possible the same species of grasses and forbs as were in a place prior to a disturbance. Nature enjoys generalities and adapts quickly to conditions, which is why so many plant and animal species can be found over a wide range of areas. Alberta folksinger Ian Tyson eloquently describes the coyote's range as extending from the tundra to the shores of Malibu. I'm sorry, I don't remember the name of the song.

Mr. Rodney: It's the shores of Malibu.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you. And so it is with grasses and forbs. Prairie species are reasonably common and highly adaptable. The reason that native species are not often used in reclamation is mostly a matter of supply as opposed to suitability.

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, a federally funded organization, has developed a nondestructive means of harvesting native grass seeds, a system that they perfected at the old Lethbridge research station in the mid-1980s. Imagine, if you will, walking with a pair of long pants through the prairie and your pants are polyester. Now, I know that disco is out of style and leisure suits are hard to find, hon. members, but my point is still served. As you return to the car, you will see the various seeds stuck to your pants and your socks. This is nature's way of propagating seeds over a wide area.

The PFRA, instead of being annoyed by the seeds sticking to their leisure suits and socks, saw opportunity. Using prairie ingenuity and an old Massey-Ferguson model 510 Western Special combine, the PFRA developed a combine harvester that does not disturb the prairie grasses. It is quite effective in stripping the seeds from the stalks. Because different prairie grasses go through seeding at different times, the converted harvester had to be light enough to travel over the prairie many times with minimal disturbances. In place of a straight-cut header, a large brush, not unlike that used on a street sweeper, is mounted above the combine table and rotates slowly, brushing seeds onto the table. This particular vintage of combine harvester, which predates the high-tech equipment used today, had fairly significant losses which resulted in volunteer reseeding as the machine progressed. Progress was very slow as nature does not yield her abundance in any particular hurry. Oftentimes it took them all day to brush and thresh a bushel of native seed. This particular bushel of seed, however, may have been

enough to seed a hundred acres in combination with other plant species.

The real beauty of the PFRA machinery is the ability to travel across the same piece of native prairie harvesting different seeds at different times of maturity. Grassland is undisturbed, and indeed protected areas such as Grasslands national park in southern Saskatchewan are the perfect locations to harvest. All we need to make this an effective business model is a market. We have native seed. We have harvesting technology that we can license to independent operators. We have a ready market.

It makes sense to promote the idea of using native species for regeneration and reclamation. I applaud the hon. member for offering us the opportunity to develop and enhance not only the rural environment but also the rural economy.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today and speak in favour of Motion 506. Motion 506 urges the Alberta government to use site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes to ensure the preservation and future integrity of our plant ecosystem.

Currently companies that conduct activities that disturb land must remediate and reclaim the land to make it productive again in a way that will support activities similar to its previous use. The Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act sets out the regulations for conservation and reclamation of lands. It states: "The objective of conservation and reclamation of specified land is to return the specified land to an equivalent land capability." However, there is no requirement to use 100 per cent native species when reclaiming lands.

Invasive nonnative species can rapidly spread throughout the native grasslands as they have minimal controls to limit their spread. However, the severity of nonnative species varies. Timothy, for example, is commonly found in Alberta and throughout North America and is planted as a forage crop. Timothy is a perennial grass that is native to Europe. It was introduced to North America in the 18th century. Although timothy is not native to Alberta, it is much less invasive and harmful to the ecosystem. Timothy is commonly grown for horse and cattle feed, particularly because of its relatively high fibre content. While timothy is an example of a nonnative plant species that is less invasive and harmful, other nonnative plants can be much more invasive and displace beneficial native grasses.

It is important that reclamation projects control what they seed, particularly ensuring that they use clean seeds, without weeds, and foreign and unusual grasses. Motion 506 would encourage the use of clean seeds that are native to Alberta in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes. This would help prevent nonnative and harmful species from spreading in Alberta.

Naturally adapted grasses and forbs lead to more efficient water use and carbon uptake, which is beneficial not only for the plant ecosystem but our overall environment. Native plants have grown within communities of various grasses, where they have evolved together and provide habitat for a variety of wildlife species.

While some nonnative species are less harmful than others, it is important that we prevent the spread of the most harmful invasive species. Motion 506 would prevent the spread of harmful species by requiring the use of only site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would hope that maybe later on the member would clarify the wording of "site-specific." I take it as the

site in the area where the reclamation work is being done, not to the seed that was there before on the exact piece of ground but to the species that are growing around the site, so it's specific to that area and site. For example, up in my area a lot of the green zone has timothy growing in it, so if there's timothy growing all around this site, it wouldn't be harmful if timothy came back.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Benito: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today and speak to Motion 506, which urges the Alberta government to use site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes. This would ensure the preservation and future integrity of our plant ecosystem.

Currently companies that conduct activities that disturb land must remediate and reclaim the land to make it productive again in a way that will support activities similar to its previous use. The Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act sets out the regulations for conservation and reclamation of lands. It states that "the objective of the conservation and reclamation of specified land is to return the specified land to an equivalent land capability." However, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act does not require the use of 100 per cent native grasses and forbs to be used when reclaiming native landscapes. Motion 506 would encourage the government to ensure that future reclamation would include the specific native grasses and forbs.

5:30

The use of native plant species would be beneficial in a number of ways. By using native grasses, reclamation projects would be using plant species that have already adapted to our region's specific geography, hydrology, and climate. Native plants have grown within communities of various grasses, where they have evolved together and provided a habitat for a variety of wildlife species. By introducing nonnative grasses, many of these native ecosystems are replaced and lost to us forever. Another advantage of native plants is that they develop a deep root system, which helps prevent flooding, controls erosion, and enhances biodiversity.

An example of a beneficial native grass in Alberta is rough fescue. Rough fescue was adopted as the official grass of Alberta on April 30, 2003, thanks to the hard work and dedication of the Prairie Conservation Forum. Though not as noticeable as the wild rose, it is, nevertheless, a symbol of Alberta. Alberta has the largest area of rough fescue grassland in the world and is the only place in North America that has plains, foothills, and northern kinds of rough fescue.

Rough fescue is a wonderful grass. It is among the most productive grasslands in North America in terms of providing valuable forage. This forage is very beneficial to both wildlife and livestock. Rough fescue is very important as prime winter forage because of its ability to retain high nutrient levels during the winter season. Rough fescue is invaluable to ranchers and wildlife throughout Alberta.

However, fescue grassland is one of the most threatened native grass communities in Alberta. According to Environment Canada fescue prairie once extended over 255,000 square kilometres in the prairie provinces. Less than 5 per cent of the original fescue prairie remains today. At 315 square kilometres the Little Fish Lake-Hand Hills block in Alberta is the largest piece of northern fescue grassland left. Invasive nonnative species can and have been rapidly spreading throughout native grasslands and displacing native grasses like rough fescue.

Motion 506 would help prevent the introduction of invasive foreign plant species in reclamation projects and would help maintain the integrity of site-specific native grasses and forbs in Alberta. It is important to protect the few things that are slowly being lost to us, and as a proud Albertan I feel that it is necessary to take all actions possible to protect and enhance through proper reclamation our native landscapes.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Motion 506, which urges the government to use site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes. Essentially, Motion 506 aims to ensure the preservation and future integrity of our plant ecosystem by requiring that companies that disturb land must use specific grasses upon reclamation of land.

Alberta currently has stringent legislation regarding land reclamation across our province. Motion 506 would strengthen this legislation by requiring 100 per cent native species to be used when reclaiming native landscapes. This would continue Alberta's trend of being a leader in land reclamation throughout Canada.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta was the first province to legislate land reclamation, through the Surface Reclamation Act in 1963. This act provided a standard of reclamation for private land throughout the province. Over the last 46 years the act has been amended to require more stringent conservation methods, including a requirement for companies to strip the topsoil from the land and store it for future reclamation upon completion of the project.

In 1993 the Land Surface Conservation and Reclamation Act was replaced by the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act. Currently the reclamation of land is carried out in accordance with the EPEA and other conservation and reclamation regulations.

Mr. Speaker, last summer I had the opportunity to visit a coal mine in central Alberta with rural caucus and to observe the reclamation process first-hand. I was encouraged by the results I was able to see. There was a noticeable commitment from the company to leave the land in a condition equal to or better than how it was prior to the mining operation.

The passing of Motion 506 will serve to enhance the current regulations and, therefore, significantly improve the conditions of future land reclamation projects. Ensuring the use of site-specific native grasses and forbs could mean a variety of benefits for Albertans, in particular for those living in areas where land will be reclaimed. For instance, native grasses have adapted to a particular region's geography and climate over centuries.

In addition, native plants have also grown within communities of various grasses, evolving together and providing a vibrant habitat for a variety of wildlife species. If these same native plants and grasses are not returned following the reclamation process, this can directly impact the return of wildlife species to the area following reclamation. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the use of naturally adapted grasses and forbs leads to more efficient water use and carbon uptake, which is beneficial not only for the plant ecosystem but our environment overall.

This compelling information illustrates that Motion 506 has the environmental interests of Albertans at heart. I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod for bringing forward this important motion. I strongly believe that the benefits to our ecosystem promoted by this motion are significant. Therefore, I'll be offering my support to Motion 506.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

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

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to make a few comments. I certainly recognize that the constituency of Livingstone-Macleod probably has the best preservation of some of the native grasses in the province. My roots are also in God's country down there, and I certainly miss that country.

I'm not particularly conversant with native grasses per se, but I certainly do support the restoration of native species of all types. I'm not sure if this motion is intended to apply to native flowers, but I certainly hope and anticipate that it does. Particularly at this time of the year I certainly miss the wild crocuses and the shooting stars and the buttercups and the tiger lilies and some of those flowers that are very specific to the south country and in the native areas. I would hope that the intent of the motion is to broaden it to preserve all native species of that type because they certainly add to the beautiful landscape, particularly in southern Alberta, at this time of the year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are any other hon. members wishing to join the debate on Motion 506?

Seeing none, I'd like to recognize the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod to close the debate.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to comment on some of the questions that were left out there. I'd made a comment earlier about the availability of seeds and the process of growing some of them. Rough fescue, for example, has been reproduced, and it's now put out there in plugs and replanted into areas. It's started out in a greenhouse, then replanted as plugs into disturbed areas.

A comment on the flowers. Yes, for any of the flowers that are native to that area, if the seeds are available, they, too, would be welcome to be put back.

Site specific would mean specific to the site. If you're in an area of timothy, put it back to that. If that was not the native plant there and it had taken over already, then basically we would be looking at it differently than we would if we were in pristine native areas. Let's try and keep those exactly the way they are as much as possible, using common sense.

5:40

It was an interesting comment from the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti as we were in Australia last winter and toured one

farm that had reseeded all of the farmland back to native trees and was now harvesting native tree seeds. That was his income now because they're replanting as much as possible to have an uptake of the water that is creating big salinity areas and blowing their soil out. The native trees are replanted on ridgelines. It takes the water up, and their lower areas are now producing better again. So there are opportunities, if we have this in place, for seed producers to come forward, and we already do have some in the province. There are concerns over the price of native seeds. The price of native seeds will become competitive if there are more people producing and capturing them.

I would like to thank all of my hon. colleagues who have spoken to the motion this afternoon. Mr. Speaker, I would like to again emphasize how fortunate we are in Alberta to have some of the most pristine landscapes in the world. To keep it this way, I believe this motion needs to be passed, to ensure that our native landscapes are preserved. That's why I have proposed this motion urging the Alberta government to use site-specific native grasses and forbs in all future land reclamation projects on native landscapes.

This past hour we have discussed the importance of our native landscapes, the effects of invasive species, and also the geographical diversity of this province. Overall, Mr. Speaker, I believe that by exclusively using site-specific native grasses and forbs in the future, reclamation projects on native landscapes are one way to ensure that our native grass species and forbs remain on our landscape for generations to come.

Just one more comment on our fescue grass. It's one of the few grasses in the world that can cure on the stump with the exact same protein level as it had when it was actively growing and green. It does provide a very important source of nutrition for all of our furry animals, as do sweetgrasses as well.

Therefore, I thank my hon. colleagues for their consideration of this motion and ask all hon. members to support Motion 506. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 506 carried unanimously]

The Deputy Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we call it 6 o'clock and adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:44 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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