

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 20, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/04/20
[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

O Lord, grant us a daily awareness of the precious gift of life which you have given us.

As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and our country.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: Introduction of Visitors

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly the Metis Nation of Alberta Association provincial council, members of which are seated today in your gallery. Earlier today the hon. Premier Klein and I had the honour and the privilege of signing on behalf of Alberta a new Alberta/Metis Nation of Alberta Association framework agreement, which provides for our ongoing partnership and relationship with the Metis Nation of Alberta and our work with the Metis Nation of Alberta in helping to ensure that Metis citizens of Alberta have all the opportunities and can take advantage of all the opportunities possible. It's a very, very important day for both the Metis Nation Association and for the province of Alberta.

I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly the provincial president, Audrey Poitras, and the members of the council: the provincial vice-president, Ken Bourque; zone 1 president, Gary Bourque; zone 1 vice-president, Wilfred Boucher; zone 2 president, Francis Dumais; zone 2 vice-president, Henry Desjarlais; zone 3 president, Ephram Bouvier; zone 3 vice-president, Marlene Lanz; zone 4 president, Brian Fayant; zone 4 vice-president, Cecil Bellrose; zone 5 president, Wayne Cunningham; zone 5 vice-president, Trevor Gladue; zone 6 president, Robert Campbell; and zone 6 vice-president, Jim Whiteford. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Highwood.

MR. TANNAS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly a distinguished Canadian soldier. Major General Bob LaRose joined the Canadian army in 1945 and subsequently served in operations in Korea and later in Germany. He held a number of important staff appointments including commandant of the Combat Arms School by 1970, commander of the Canadian contingents in the United Nations emergency force in the Middle East, and the United Nations disengagement observer force in the Golan Heights during 1975 and '76, and chief of land doctrine and operations at National Defence headquarters in 1978.

Since his retirement from the regular army that year, he has been a highly effective and very active spokesman on a wide range of defence issues. Appointed the colonel commandant, Royal Canadian Armoured Corps in October of 1996, General LaRose is in Alberta visiting the three regiments of the armoured corps in this province: Lord Strathcona's Horse, a regular regiment based in

Edmonton, who incidentally will be celebrating their 100th anniversary later this year, and two reserve regiments, the King's Own Calgary Regiment and the South Alberta Light Horse, the senior reserve regiment in Alberta based in Medicine Hat and Edmonton. The latter regiment is commanded by our Sergeant-at-Arms, Lieutenant Colonel Brian Hodgson.

Mr. Speaker, General LaRose is standing in your gallery, and I'd ask the hon. members to give him the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

head: Presenting Petitions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm putting a petition in urging

the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

Nineteen people from Calgary-Fish Creek.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have a petition today from the SOS. The petition is calling upon

the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

There are 230 signatures from Edmonton and the surrounding area. This brings our total as of April 20 to 8,338 signatures.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, have a petition to submit on behalf of the SOS group. It has 112 names from Edmonton on this one.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to submit a petition from the SOS group. These are signed by people from Lethbridge, Coaldale, Fort Macleod, Medicine Hat, Picture Butte, Stand Off, Spring Coulee, and Cardston, and they request

the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

head: Notices of Motions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) I'm giving notice that tomorrow I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 197, 198, 199, and 204.

I'm also giving notice that tomorrow I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 142, 143, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 157, 158, 163, 165, 168, 169, 180, 181, 182, 184, 185, 186, 194, 195, 200, 201, 202, 203, and 204.

Mr. Speaker, I anticipate that with the co-operation of the opposition to the same extent as we had last week, we should be able to finally reach the end of this list tomorrow afternoon.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

MR. HAVELOCK: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table this afternoon five copies of my letter to the Hon. Anne McLellan, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, dated April 12, 1999, regarding amendments to the Criminal Code with respect to home invasions.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Public Works, Supply and Services.

MR. WOLOSHTYN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to table five copies of the 1998 annual report of the Alberta Association of Architects in accordance with chapter A-44.1, section 6(4) of the Architects Act. Additional copies are available in my office upon request.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to table with the Assembly today responses to questions raised during reporting of main estimates on Tuesday, April 13.

MS BARRETT: Two tablings, Mr. Speaker: first, five copies of a release from the Calgary public school teachers local 38 complete with graphs that show that while the number of teachers in their district is decreasing, the number of student enrollments is increasing, and additional supportive documentation from the Calgary board of education entitled Summary of Official Enrolments for Provincial Grants. It's a scan of the current year and the previous nine years.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to table a report by Dr. Jerome Nriagu, the professor and director, environmental health services program, department of environmental and industrial health, School of Public Health at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The report is entitled Arsenic in Groundwater in the Cold Lake Area, and he comes to the conclusion that some people may prove to be susceptible to the arsenic in the Cold Lake area because of the high quantities in the water.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table five copies of an ad placed in the Spruce Grove *Examiner* by the Capital health authority that says "Change in Community Physical Therapy Coverage for Out-of-Region Residents," indicating that services are only available on a self-pay basis.

1:40

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a copy of a letter from the Premier in response to one received from Equal=Alberta. This is the Premier's letter to Equal=Alberta in which unfortunately he says that his schedule does not allow time to meet the group as they had requested. The appropriate number of copies of that.

Also, the appropriate number of copies of *Focus* magazine, which is produced by the Strathcona Place Senior Citizen Centre, an excellent little magazine full of all kinds of tips on activities for seniors.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Family and Social Services.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five copies of a document called Connecting Voices Creating Choices, put out by the Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation. It deals with Bill 1, and I'd suggest to all members that they should read it.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is an information booklet from Maurice-Lavallee high school and elementary school, and the second is the national award-winning newspaper from that school. I had the privilege of visiting there two weeks ago. I table this on behalf of all members.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon as well. The first is from a constituent of mine, Mr. Tymchuk, to the Minister of Health expressing his concern about the deteriorating state of health care in this province.

The second is from the teachers at St. Francis Xavier high school in my constituency wherein they oppose Bill 20 and the removal of the Board of Reference.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Guests

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 39 bright young students from my hometown of Redwater accompanied by their teachers, Mrs. Kathleen Baker and Mrs. Diane Grainger, also parent helpers Mrs. Carol Regula, Mrs. Theresa Breitzke, Mrs. Julie Hrywkiw, and Mr. Chris Murphy. They're seated in the members' gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray.

MR. BOUTILIER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege and honour today to introduce to you and members of the Assembly a very special lady from the city of Fort McMurray. Mrs. Olive Woodward is a very active member of the community in representing senior citizens. She is a golden citizen herself, in fact close to nine decades, and Mrs. Woodward was the template for Fort McMurray's slogan: we have the energy. In fact she has recently with other seniors participated with others in a Harley-Davidson motorcycle ride. She is seated in the public gallery, and she is indeed an inspiration to all Albertans. I ask us to give her a warm welcome.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise to introduce to you and through you to members of the

Assembly a very special lady, a lady who gave the invocation at our signing ceremony this morning, Elder Delia Grey from I think the constituency of St. Albert. She gave the invocation in English, French, and Cree, which epitomizes what the Metis culture is all about in Alberta. I'd like her and the other elders who are with her and other representatives of the Metis Nation of Alberta who are with us in the members' gallery to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister of science, research, and information technology.

DR. TAYLOR: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the House three residents of Medicine Hat. We don't often get residents up here from Medicine Hat because of the distance to travel, so I'm pleased that they're here. I'll urge all members to be on their best behaviour today. They are Don, Lorna, and Travis Campbell from Medicine Hat. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House, and when that's done I have another introduction.

The second introduction I'd like to make, Mr. Speaker, is my second oldest daughter and her husband, David and Lisa Litke. They're just preparing to go off to Papua, New Guinea, to work with tribes that have no written language. They're going to be translating or transcribing, working with a group that transcribes, from the oral language into the written language. They will be leaving in August with a two year old and a one-month-old baby. They are just in their final preparations, getting ready to go. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Family and Social Services.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to introduce to you and through you a group of students from Rosemary school. I'm here to introduce 11 grade 7 students from Rosemary accompanied by teacher David Blumell and parent Kristie Hall. This is the third group from my constituency in the last eight days, which is absolutely unprecedented, and I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislature.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to introduce to you and to the members of the Assembly a young man from Ardrossan elementary school and a member of the 153rd Ardrossan scout troop. His name is Andrew Wahlstrom. He's here job shadowing the Minister of Municipal Affairs. He's accompanied by his father, Cliff. I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Leduc.

MR. KLAPSTEIN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 48 grade 10 students from John Maland high school in Devon. They are accompanied by teacher Mrs. C. Fraser and group leaders Anji Fraser-Gordon and Sherry Smith. I'd ask that the Assembly extend to them a warm greeting.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very

pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a very special person and talented artist who's joining us in the public gallery today. Rhona McAdam is a published poet. She has four books that were published, all by prairie publishers: *Life in Glass*, *Creating the Country*, and *Old Habits*, and with *Hour of the Pearl* was the winner of the 1987 Alberta poetry award. She's a longtime friend now visiting us from London, England. I would ask her to please rise and accept the warm and traditional welcome of the House.

head: Ministerial Statements

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

Metis Nation Framework Agreement

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I referenced in my introductions this afternoon of our visitors in your gallery and Elder Grey and members of the Metis Nation in the public gallery, Premier Klein and I signed a new Alberta/Metis Nation of Alberta Association framework agreement on behalf of the Alberta government this morning.

The Metis Nation of Alberta Association president, Ms Audrey Poitras, and the six zone regional council presidents signed the agreement on behalf of the MNAA. This agreement is the fifth such agreement signed since 1987 and continues the commitment of both parties to work in partnership with the mutual goal of enhancing the conditions of Metis people in Alberta. With each successive agreement we have attempted to ensure that our relationship remains dynamic, positive, and appropriate for the times. We are pleased that the previous framework agreements between the MNAA and the Alberta government have enhanced the relationship between us and have provided opportunities for information sharing, joint planning and action, and for a variety of projects and initiatives.

The agreement we signed today has a focus on sector-specific projects and initiatives with positive and measurable outcomes and results for Metis people in Alberta. This agreement's orientation toward outcomes and results is absolutely critical to our future success as partners. Under the agreement we look forward to strengthened working relationships between provincial departments and the MNAA. This is where the action will be, on sector-specific initiatives that are meaningful to Metis people.

1:50

As Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs I am honoured today to be part of the historical links between the Metis Nation of Alberta Association and the government of Alberta. Our mutual efforts for the Metis people of Alberta continue to be carried out in the spirit of shared trust, shared responsibility, and shared action. In the spirit of mutual sharing, the Alberta government looks forward to continuing our work together to implement the new framework agreement.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to take this opportunity and congratulate the Metis Nation of Alberta Association and the six regional presidents on the signing of the framework agreement. The Metis Nation of Alberta represents over 20,000 Metis people in Alberta, and the signing of the agreement has significant impact on the representation they will receive from the elected president, Audrey Poitras, and their six councillors.

The negotiations that were undertaken by the government and the Metis Nation clearly represent the needs of both groups. The measurable outcomes and the sector-specific projects and initiatives will satisfy the government's needs. The ability of the Metis Nation of Alberta to offer Metis-specific programs and services will fulfill the needs of the Metis community.

I've had the opportunity to work with Audrey Poitras. Audrey is the first woman president of the Metis Nation of Alberta, and I know that her dedication to the process has helped to ensure a successful relationship with the government. As a member of the Metis Nation I look forward to this type of leadership in the years to come.

head: Oral Question Period

THE SPEAKER: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Deputy Leader of the Official Opposition.

User Fees

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In October of 1998 the Supreme Court ruled that any user fee which does not have a direct relationship to the cost of providing a particular service is a tax and must be approved by the Legislative Assembly. Between 1992-93 and this year the government brought in nearly 800 new or increased user fees, including 400 of these user fees through regulation. This does not have approval of the Legislature. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier tell Albertans how much of the \$285 million in revenue received from these 800 new and increased user fees is a tax on Albertans?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, in the context of the court ruling I would suggest that none of them are a tax. They are simply to cover the cost of providing the services.

We expect to introduce legislation soon to freeze the fees pending a review of all the fees in this province, and I can assure the hon. member that like taxes, the only way fees are going is down.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental will be to the Provincial Treasurer. When will the Treasurer release the 276 pages of user fee analysis conducted by his department so Albertans can find out how many of these new 800 fees are taxes?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, what we're planning on doing is far more actually in excess of what the opposition are even requesting. What we'd like to do is take this opportunity that's been given through this court case in Ontario not to look at just a few fees which might in fact be in question in terms of bringing in more dollars significantly than they could or should, but in fact we want to publish and let all Albertans see all of the fees, all in one place.

Every fee that we have is public, and people can go and find out what that fee is and what it's for, but we'd like to actually table in the Legislature all the fees, everything that we have in this province. We'd like to take a period of time, no more than a year, and review everything, and I'd look forward to opposition input on this. Then we do a review and see: are some of those fees . . . [interjections] If we were to assess a fee for the number of times the member over there chirps in, we could probably significantly pay down more of the debt than we had even anticipated.

Mr. Speaker, what we want to do is let all Albertans – we want to include the opposition in this exercise – look at all of our fees, and those in fact, if there are any, that are deemed to be bringing in more revenue than the cost – it's at that point the courts say that then we have to decide whether to actually declare that in statute. And that's what we plan to do. As the Premier said, part of the exercise will

also be to see how many of the fees that we have in place we can lower.

It's an exciting exercise. I think we're the only province that's doing it this comprehensively.

DR. NICOL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is proposing to bring in an additional \$101 million in taxes through user fees over the next three years. Will the Premier commit that not one of these new or increased taxes will be implemented without being debated and approved by this Legislative Assembly?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, all those fees or most of them anyway are subject to orders in council. But clearly the legislation that is now on notice, Bill 35, will probably come in next week sometime. Basically it says that we will freeze everything pending a full and comprehensive review of all – what is it: about 800? – fees for service in the province. We'll have an opportunity at that time to assess whether those fees are commensurate with the services provided or whether in fact they should be lower.

Mr. Speaker, when the hon. Provincial Treasurer suggested that there's an opportunity for input from the opposition Liberals, I think he meant that in all good spirit. I look forward to constructive input. Now, that would be a concept, to get constructive input from the Liberal Party. If they will commit to do that, they would be more than welcome to participate in the process.

THE SPEAKER: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

West Edmonton Mall Refinancing

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The government's attempt at micromanaging the containment of the West Edmonton Mall refinancing scandal continues to unravel despite their best efforts. Now, new information not contained in the Auditor General's report continues to leak out bit by bit. For example, we now learn that the Premier received letters on West Edmonton Mall as early as February 9, 1993, and received a document on October 19, 1993, just days before his now infamous memo putting the former deputy Premier in charge of government relations with West Edmonton Mall. My questions are to the Premier. How does the Premier explain the fact that the February 1993 letters and the October 1993 document on the refinancing of West Edmonton Mall are not even mentioned in the Auditor General's report?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, all I can say is that all of the information requested of me by the Auditor General was turned over to the Auditor General. This goes back – what? – six years now. Everything that the Auditor General required was handed over to him. How the Auditor General chose to use that information was entirely up to him. I didn't conduct the investigation; he did.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, then, given that the Premier continues to say that he's turned over all the information about his role in the West Edmonton Mall financing, will the Premier tell Albertans today what was discussed in those February 1993 letters and the October 1993 documents that were sent to his office? What was in the letters?

MR. KLEIN: I have no idea, Mr. Speaker. I would have to go back and review the whole file. If this hon. member can tell me what was discussed – you know, as I said before in this House, I have a hard enough time remembering what was discussed yesterday, never mind

six years ago, because there are so many issues that come before me. I'm required to deal with maybe 15, 20 issues a day, and he's asking me to remember and recall in every single detail some discussion relative to some letter that took place, you know, six years ago.

I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, that there's one letter I do remember, and again my memory had to be refreshed. It was a letter from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark urging the government to get involved with West Edmonton Mall to protect it.

2:00

MR. SAPERS: Given, Mr. Speaker, that as far as I'm aware it's the only half billion dollar mall bailout that the government was involved with, I thought it might have been top of mind for the Premier.

Will the Premier confirm that the October 19, 1993, document was in fact the final step in the appointment of the then former deputy Premier as the minister in charge of West Edmonton Mall? Wasn't that the content of that memo?

MR. KLEIN: Well, he's not even using a fishing rod now. He's using a net, trying to capture everything, Mr. Speaker. I'd have to go back and, you know, review the file. All I can do really at this point is reiterate what the Auditor General said in his report, and I think this is fundamental to the whole issue, and that is that there was no inappropriate political involvement in that deal.

THE SPEAKER: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. According to the statutory declaration of the former Alberta Treasury Branch acting superintendent – and by the way, it's the only one that's been made public; the Premier still refuses to release his. The acting superintendent was instructed, according to his affidavit, by the government in November of 1993 to use the ATB to finance West Edmonton Mall. Now, we learned that there is a December 3, 1993, letter and a memo of the same date hidden away behind some closed door or drawer or basement vault in the Premier's office. Mr. Premier, will you confirm that the December 1993 memo and letter were the marching orders from the government to the acting superintendent to use the ATB to finance West Edmonton Mall as was discussed in your November 30, 1993, meeting?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, again he's asking me to go back six years. Without having any documentation before me, to recount in detail every aspect of every document is absolutely impossible. Again I would reiterate that the Auditor General's report was quite clear. There was no inappropriate political involvement in the West Edmonton Mall deal.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member – I don't know if I can use the word – misleads the House by suggesting that the former acting superintendent of the Treasury Branch filed a statutory declaration. He leads one to believe that that statutory declaration was given to the Auditor General. To my knowledge there was no statutory declaration filed by the former acting superintendent before the Auditor General. There might have been one and there probably was one filed with the courts. There are numerous court actions revolving around this particular situation, and the hon. member well knows this.

MR. SAPERS: Mr. Premier, it's time we all got to the bottom of this micromanaged scandal. Will you tell Albertans once and for all what was discussed in the December 3, 1993, letter and memo? I assume you've been briefed.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, he makes the wrong assumption. You know, send over the letter. I mean, just shoot it across, make it like an airplane. I don't know what he's referring to, and no, I haven't been briefed on something that happened on December 3, 1993. That was a long, long time ago. You know, I might have been. Nor do we have research staff assigned to do nothing but spend taxpayers' money to delve into old letters that might have some meaning or might not have some meaning.

You know, as far as I'm concerned, Mr. Speaker, all the information that was required of the Auditor General – and I think that this is important – was turned over to him in the course of his examination of this particular situation. Again, I say: he found that there was no inappropriate involvement by any politician.

MR. SAPERS: It's called freedom of information, Mr. Premier, and maybe it's about time you turned the information over to Albertans.

Will you release the 167 pages of documents that are in your office that are currently being hidden from Albertans regarding the government's involvement in the West Edmonton Mall refinancing?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, that is a very, very dangerous assertion, and I don't think it's truthful. I don't think it's truthful. Obviously he's been successful in getting some information. He has a document that I know absolutely nothing about. Maybe if I had a chance to read it, it might refresh my memory. But to suggest that there are all these documents squirreled away or hidden away someplace in my office is simply not true. That is a very dangerous statement to make.

If this hon. member knows where these documents might be or even has a hint as to where they might be, Mr. Speaker, I would challenge him to go outside this House and make that statement and say publicly to members of the media that I am deliberately squirreling away and hiding maliciously documents that ought to have been turned over to the Auditor General. That statement is absolutely false, and it's irresponsible of this member to make such a statement.

Education System

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, according to . . . [interjections]

THE SPEAKER: Hon. leader of the ND opposition, you have the floor.

MS BARRETT: Thank you. According to statistics that I filed earlier today, Mr. Speaker, it's clear that the Calgary board of education has seen a reduction of more than 2 percent in the number of teaching staff in their schools while they saw an enrollment increase last year alone of 5.5 percent. Meanwhile, the Edmonton public school board is facing a similar crisis and as of last night is now looking at additional layoffs. So much for the government saying that the cuts have stopped. The fact is that the repercussions are continuing. I'd like to ask the Premier why it is that he's inflaming the situation by talking about back-to-work legislation for the Calgary teachers when it's his government's policies that created the mess in the Calgary area in the first place.

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all I have to dispute the assertion that we created the mess. We hardly created a mess by allocating something close to a billion dollars over six years to education in this province, an average increase of 6 percent per year. That's hardly creating or contributing to what the hon. member refers to as a mess. As a matter of fact that should go a long way to really enhance and to accommodate education in this province.

Relative to her assertion that there will be back-to-work legislation, Mr. Speaker, I was asked the question yesterday: would the government order the teachers back to work? My answer at that time was that I don't know at this particular time. We would have to assess as a government whether there's irreparable damage being done. I said that the question was totally hypothetical at this particular time because the teachers, although they have the right to take a strike vote, have not done so yet. They have rejected the offer. There are lots of steps that can be taken: mediation, certainly further negotiations. Everything is hypothetical at this particular time.

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, why is it that the government won't just simply cover the costs of the deficits that these school boards have been forced to accumulate by years of underfunding by the government? Why is it that the government won't just pay those deficits off? Is it because it would be an admission that it's this government's fault in the first place?

MR. KLEIN: It has been pointed out time and time again that some school boards indeed have surpluses. Some school boards in fact have deficits but are dealing with those deficits. I'm going to . . . [interjection] Mr. Speaker, would you please tell that member over there to keep her mouth shut? I mean, it is so distracting really. You know, I can understand it if she wants to yip and yap while her own party is asking questions, but at least have some courtesy to let me answer the question from another party.

2:10

THE SPEAKER: Perhaps, hon. Premier, you might help the chair by identifying the hon. member in question.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I can only identify her by voice, and I've heard it so many times that I'm sure it's the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MS BARRETT: Well, Mr. Speaker, while the government finally agreed last week that it won't proceed with scrapping the Board of Reference, I'd like to ask the Premier why the government won't amend the government's current legislation so that it doesn't become a crime for teachers to advocate peaceful disobedience to unjust laws like back-to-work legislation that the Premier mused about yesterday.

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, again, I am not suggesting there will be back-to-work legislation. I was answering a hypothetical question, and I said that we would have to assess the situation if and when it happened. That's something that the hon. Minister of Labour will have to keep his eye on and discuss with Executive Council.

Mr. Speaker, getting back to the second question, which I really didn't have an opportunity to answer. It dealt with deficits. The question was: why don't we just pay off the deficits? I started to say that some school districts have indeed surpluses, but I wanted to point out how one school district is dealing with a deficit. The Edmonton public schools are predicting a \$15.5 million deficit for this fiscal year, but there are plans in place to balance the books by 2001-2002. So the board's budget for next year actually shows a surplus of \$5.4 million, which will be used to start bringing deficits down. This is long-term planning, and we commend the Edmonton public school board for doing that kind of planning, for undertaking that kind of process.

As I indicated before, the hon. Minister of Education and officials in his department would be more than happy to work with school boards to bring in deficit elimination plans.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Employment Programs

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Even with Alberta's low unemployment rate there are people who need help in this province in getting work. I'm concerned about the reports that the government is eliminating job placement and other career services targeted at people who need specialized help. To the Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development: does the minister support specialized career services?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, Mr. Speaker, yes, we do, but I want to point out to the members and to the people of Alberta that most of the people that we deal with can come through our mainstream programming. However, there are some groups – and I would mention perhaps youth, disabled people, aboriginals, and of course abused women – where oftentimes they have many barriers toward employment. So in those particular areas we still carry on what we would call targeted funding.

MRS. O'NEILL: My first supplemental: if Advanced Education and Career Development does support specialized career services, why is the department not renewing its contract with Options for Women?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, Mr. Speaker, in this particular case Options for Women had a contract with the federal government, and then when the labour market development fund switched over to the province, we of course extended all of those particular agreements until whatever their end date was. In this particular case, then, when contracts came to an end, we really looked at two things: one, did we want that sort of program to continue, and secondly, if we did, on what basis? So we put into place a couple of rules. The first one, which I think is very important and all members here in the Legislative Assembly would support, is that we went to a competitive bid process. I think that's only fair, and I think it's the only way to be accountable.

As far as the Options for Women program, then, that they had been delivering, it was really for people with very few barriers, and it was felt that these people could use our mainstream programming. Options for Women is perfectly entitled to submit bids for any of our other targeted programs such as skills for work.

MRS. O'NEILL: My second supplemental, Mr. Speaker, is: what types of career development programs, then, does the department support?

MR. DUNFORD: Mr. Speaker, we actually have quite a number of programs, but again I want to inform all members that we start with an individual assessment. I mean, in this province we're just not interested in putting seats in seats. There are people out there that have needs, and we want to assess those right from the beginning. Then we find of course in those needs that sometimes it's merely a matter of providing information, but certainly with others there are workshops that are required, job placement services. Of course maybe most important of all we have a very successful academic upgrading program and job training as well.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Education Funding

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A high school student from Nanton writes:

Our Social Studies textbooks are only two editions out of date, while our most current torn maps give an excellent portrayal of the world in the mid-cold war era.

He continues:

The gym floor is deteriorating, as is much of the equipment, but that's really alright; only one person has seriously hurt himself in there this year.

This while the Premier continues the myth that children in public schools are adequately funded. My questions are to the Premier. If schools are adequately funded, why are students at J.T. Foster school in Nanton being forced to use dated, inaccurate texts and maps and an unsafe gymnasium and equipment?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not familiar with the specific situation relative to the school at Nanton. I will discuss this, however, with the MLA for Highwood, in which the town of Nanton exists. I think that he will probably tell me a different story.

DR. MASSEY: Mr. Speaker, this is to the Premier. If schools are adequately funded, why are students at Grand Trunk high school in Evansburg attending a school with no art, no music, limited options, a split physics 20/30 class, and a library that is closed for half of every school day?

MR. KLEIN: I don't know, Mr. Speaker. Why are hundreds and hundreds of schools not complaining about anything in this province? You know, I visited schools where there are no complaints whatsoever. Now, Evansburg, again, I will discuss with the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, I believe it is, and we'll look into that particular situation. It is the responsibility of the MLA to . . . [interjection]

Well, Mr. Speaker, again I'm hearing this chitchatter, and what I'm hearing from across the way is that it isn't the responsibility of the MLA. Well, what are these MLAs doing out and about and checking out schools if it's not their responsibility? It certainly is the responsibility of the MLA for Whitecourt-St. Anne, as it is the responsibility of the MLA for Highwood to take these matters under consideration and report to the Minister of Education and myself if necessary.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. I hope those MLAs will have the resources.

If schools are adequately funded, why are people in Coaldale pleading for the poor floor and roof structures and fire-charred beams at R.I. Baker school to be replaced?

2:20

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I can tell the hon. member that safety concerns are really the priority issues that are addressed under our capital funding program. The hon. Member for Little Bow will take this matter under advisement, as he, I'm sure, took the matter relative to the Vulcan school under advisement.

Whether we have the resources? Of course we have the resources. We have tremendous human resources in this caucus, because in this caucus there are a number of concerned people, all concerned about matters that affect their constituencies, notwithstanding the fact that it appears to be the duty and the responsibility of the Liberal Party to go out and about the province and create mischief wherever they possibly can.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-West, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Summer Temporary Employment Program

MS KRYCZKA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. People in my constituency are concerned about youth unemployment. My question is for the minister of advanced education. Can the minister tell the Legislature how the government is addressing the needs of young Albertans who need work experience?

MR. DUNFORD: Mr. Speaker, we have a number of programs where we bring youth into the workforce. Some of them apply just to the private sector, but one I would mention today does in fact apply to the public sector, and it's called the summer temporary employment program, lovingly referred to as STEP.

I would just want to inform the members of the House that this summer we'll be putting \$9.75 million into this program. We'll be creating about 5,000 positions for young people through summer employment. I just want to remind everyone once again that these are nonprofit organizations such as the postsecondary institutions, municipalities, and of course all of those nonprofit agencies that do so much good work in our communities.

MS KRYCZKA: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that the minimum wage has just increased to \$5.65 an hour, why does STEP provide only \$4.50 per hour?

MR. DUNFORD: Mr. Speaker, what we're trying to do with the STEP program, of course, is provide work experience, so the way the program is set up is to provide that job for the student. We do expect the employer to top up those particular earnings. I might mention – and it's probably something that needs to be discussed at some point in time – that if we were to move our particular contribution up to the minimum wage, we would probably be reducing the opportunity for young people in the workforce this summer by as many as 500 students. So we in the department have made the decision. We accept the responsibility to continue funding this year at \$4.50 an hour.

MS KRYCZKA: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I understand that some organizations didn't receive any STEP assistance or received assistance that was less than their request. Why did this happen?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, Mr. Speaker . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Why? Why?

MR. DUNFORD: They ask me why, Mr. Speaker.

This is a case I believe where success does sometimes bring its own problems. We had a huge number of requests this year. We had established, by the way, a deadline of February 26, and of course I'm now receiving requests from various organizations to help out because they didn't get their requests in on time. Basically we have a situation where we have a pool of money. We try to distribute it as best we can, but when the money's gone, we're gone.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

VLT Plebiscites

MR. WICKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The residents of Wood Buffalo have waited nearly 24 months – 24 months – for the Premier to fulfill his seven-day commitment to remove VLTs upon receipt of the successful plebiscite. My questions are to the Premier. Does the Premier not see this as a wee bit of a broken promise?

MR. KLEIN: No, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member knows very well that this matter has been the subject of litigation, and we have said that until that litigation is settled, we would not remove the machines. Certainly the validity of all plebiscites was challenged. The courts ruled against the government and their ability to establish policy that must be followed by the gaming commission.

Mr. Speaker, we plan to introduce legislation to fix that problem and take appropriate action to abide by the results of the plebiscites in those municipalities that voted to remove VLTs.

MR. WICKMAN: Secondly, Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier: when precisely does the Premier intend to bring that legislation forward to this Assembly?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, it is going through leg. review as we speak. We wanted to make sure that we had good legal opinions relative to this piece of legislation so that it wouldn't be challenged in the future. So to answer the question, I would suspect either late this week or early next week.

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, my final question, again to the Premier: how does the Premier intend to deal with the question of retroactivity?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I already indicated that we want to bring in legislation that will reflect the wishes of the people as those wishes were expressed through a plebiscite. So that will address the issue of retroactivity.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Direct Billing of Patients

MR. DOERKSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past weekend I had the opportunity to meet with some local physicians from the Red Deer area. One of the issues that they raised with me was a concern about their being able to retain their ability to directly bill patients even though the service being provided is covered by Alberta's publicly funded health system. In particular, they were concerned about their ability to directly bill Albertans who had been removed from coverage under the Alberta health care insurance plan because they had not paid their premiums. My first question to the Minister of Health: could the minister advise whether physicians will continue to be able to directly collect fees for services provided to individuals who have decided to not pay their health care premiums?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think the very important factor to note here is that no individual in this province registered with the Alberta health care insurance plan is denied service because they have not paid their premiums or not kept their accounts up to date. They are not denied service. That's very important.

The other thing is that if individuals incur an expense vis-a-vis receiving a service from a physician in this province, the physician is promptly reimbursed. So any contention from a physician that it is necessary to collect directly from an individual because they are not up to date on their Alberta health care premiums account is not correct.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, my second question is also to the Minister of Health. Would the minister be prepared to consider an exemption to any prohibition of direct billing of patients by doctors so that physicians could carry out this direct billing in situations

where the validity of an individual's health care number is in question?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important to point out that our current electronic billing system in this province was established with the needs and the desires or goals of physicians in mind. That is, they wanted to be paid promptly; they wanted their cash flow in terms of their overall office operations and so on to be steady and predictable. Certainly over the last number of years Alberta Health has responded.

There have been some millions of dollars invested in an electronic billing system. We are actually somewhat proud of the system in that there's a very rapid turnaround in terms of payments to physicians. That is something that I think the vast, vast majority of physicians very much appreciate.

2:30

Now, with respect to those very rare cases quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, where a person does not present a valid Alberta health care number, as part of that overall system we have set up a 24-hour phone line so that a physician or more likely and of course more appropriately their support staff can phone Alberta Health and verify whether or not this person is registered with the system. In the majority of cases it's a matter of having lost a card or something like that. So that health care registration is verified, and they're paid.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Speaker, my final question is also to the Minister of Health. Will the minister consider allowing direct billing by physicians in situations where the patient has agreed to such billing?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think it's really, really important to note that we have as the government of Alberta, as the Department of Health responded to a very important, at least indicated to us as very important, desire on the part of physicians in this province, and that is to be paid promptly, to be paid fully, to be paid in an efficient manner. We've converted our whole system at, as I said, a considerable cost and considerable rearrangement of staff and so forth to that system, which has been a goal of physicians and a goal of ourselves.

Now, what the member is saying is that we should still be able to maintain a system which would allow for direct paper and pencil billing so to speak, Mr. Speaker, and that's not what we're tooled up to do today. Quite frankly it's our position that we've set this system up for the benefit of physicians, and people should be using it.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Plavix

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. New drug therapies which produce better results and have fewer side effects have been approved for use by Health Canada. Individuals with employer prescription drug plans receive coverage of these products while seniors on the Alberta government's plan do not. Plavix, a new drug for the treatment of heart disease, is one such drug. My questions are to the Minister of Health. Why isn't this government covering Plavix for Alberta seniors?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, we do have an expert committee that reviews the various new pharmaceutical products that come on the market and after that review recommend coverage or recommend inclusion in our overall drug coverage plan in this province, which I think compares quite favourably to any others in this particular

country. I will candidly admit that I'm not aware of the nature or properties of Plavix, but certainly I would follow-up on that.

I do think it's important to emphasize that we have a very comprehensive number of pharmaceutical products that we cover. We are continually reviewing those products in terms of their effectiveness and coverage that is needed in the province, and I don't think we can be expected to keep up with what private firms may or may not cover. We could probably go through – I'm just suggesting it may be possible, Mr. Speaker – the list of the insurance company that the hon. member is referring to and find that there is a whole host of drugs that are on our list but aren't on theirs. So I put it in that context.

MS BLAKEMAN: My next question's also to the Minister of Health. What does this government have to say to seniors who cannot afford Plavix and are forced to rely on less effective drugs?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member by her words evidently feels that she can judge the effectiveness of a particular pharmaceutical. I'm not going to make that particular judgment because I'm not familiar with the scientific knowledge that surrounds it. But I can assure all hon. members that with respect to this particular drug I will see that it's brought to the attention of our officials and our committee, and we'll look at it if for some reason we haven't done so already. I have a feeling that it's probably a situation in which it is in the review stage right now.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. That's fine.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Automobile Industry

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When consumers venture into the automotive industry, they sometimes are faced with a variety of issues like unpaid liens, lost deposits, misrepresentations, consignment fraud, and unlicensed businesses. The question is directed to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Could the minister please explain how the Alberta Motor Vehicle Industry Council is going to promote a fair marketplace that will benefit both consumers and businesses?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, throughout the last two years we've done extensive consultation with stakeholders who truly believe that the industry with self-managed and professional assistance from members of the automotive industry themselves is most knowledgeable about the ways and means by which any type of inappropriate behaviour by the businesses hurts the integrity of the industry.

It is our belief, Mr. Speaker, that this council as established will enable better consumer relations with members of the industry, taking accountability for the manner in which the services are delivered. Working closely to make sure that both the training and the licensure and all of those needed and necessary business attributes are provided equivalently by all the members, they will, in effect, follow a framework similar to that of Credit Counseling Services Limited, the Real Estate Council, who have worked to in fact clean up certain sectors of our business enterprise in Alberta to the advantage of all Albertans.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question to the same minister: by having the industry members police themselves, isn't that just like the fox guarding the henhouse?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, in fact sometimes there's a perception that the consumer and the business itself have entirely different interests, and this is not so. In fact the ethics and the integrity of a business are better and are enhanced and improved when the businesses themselves get along well with their consumers.

With the consultation we did on the Fair Trading Act, a significant number of members of that industry were involved. They are fully familiar with the issues, the regulations that we will be proclaiming in September. To ensure that industry members are kept up with acceptable standards, they will be regularly communicating, and we will periodically be checking to make sure they're complying with every aspect of the agreement.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Some small automotive businesses are concerned that the council and the fees associated with it will put them out of business. Is this council going to drive the small guys out of business?

MS EVANS: No, Mr. Speaker. In fact, consultations with all licensed businesses regardless of size indicates support for these measures. We believe that all businesses are impacted by unlicensed businesses, that in fact there is a value that goes along with having achieved a licence. The fees that will be paid – and they are rather nominal considering the work that council will be doing – will in fact assist in cleaning up any of those areas of the industry that currently are untoward.

Physiotherapy

MRS. SOETAERT: Mr. Speaker, this government's health system is discriminating against people living outside the Capital region who attempt to access physiotherapy treatments at a Capital region facility. If you live on one side of the boundary, you'll be denied funded service, but if your neighbour lives just inside the boundary, he or she will get service. The principle of equal access and seamless boundaries is being trampled yet again because of poor administration, lack of leadership and co-ordination by the Department of Health. My questions are to the Minister of Health. What broke down in the system that some Albertans have choice of access but others do not? Who's to blame?

2:40

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to respond directly to the hon. member's question. I listened to it very carefully. She indicated that if you lived on the west side of the boundary, you got service there, and if you lived on the east side of the boundary, you got service there. That seems to me to be logical. So what's the problem?

MRS. SOETAERT: I'll make it a little clearer. Is it the government's policy to allow some Albertans access to physiotherapy services but to deny others access depending on where they live? That's what's happening. People cannot access Capital physiotherapy without paying for services that are normally funded.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, again I listened very carefully. The hon. member indicated that people were being denied access to physiotherapy services depending on where they live. Now, I'll get back to the first question, and that is: if they live on the west side of the boundary, they can get physiotherapy services there, and if they live on the east side, they can get physiotherapy services there. I think what you're referring to is the whole issue of the level of eligibility or what people are covered for. The point is that every resident in this province can get the physiotherapy services that are available to them in their region.

MRS. SOETAERT: My final question, Mr. Speaker. Given that you cannot go to the physiotherapist of your choice, that you are excluded from crossing boundaries unless you're willing to pay, I want to know: what's next? We've lost long-term care accessibility. We've lost physiotherapy accessibility. What's next? Emergency, acute care? That's what's happening.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member that in terms of essential physiotherapy services which are offered as a result of, let's say, the follow-up recovery services necessary from an operation, those are available with the Capital health authority if they've had their surgery in the Capital health region or if it's an injury situation. I'm sure all other regional health authorities endeavour to provide that service as well.

I think really what we're talking about here, Mr. Speaker, is a recent policy change made by the Capital health authority where they have continued to provide physiotherapy services for those essential follow-up conditions and needs for care, but they're not providing the full extension, if you want to call it that, of publicly funded physiotherapy services to people from outside the region.

head: Members' Statements

THE SPEAKER: In 30 seconds, hon. members, we'll call on three members today to participate in Members' Statements. We'll go with the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Snow Goose Festival

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise on behalf of the hon. Member for Vegreville-Viking to recognize the seventh annual Beaverhill Lake Snow Goose Festival, which is being celebrated April 24 and 25 in Tofield, Alberta. If there's any doubt that spring is here, a trip this weekend to Beaverhill Lake, located 70 kilometres east of Edmonton, will put those questions to rest. Spring migration is in full swing, and the birds are back by the thousands.

Recognized as one of the best places on the continent to see migrating birds, visitors will experience the grand wonder of nature as scores of snow geese, Canada geese, various shorebirds, cranes, and swans return to Beaverhill Lake after heading south for the winter. An exceptional site of critical habitat for a wide variety of species, an estimated 40,000 to 70,000 ducks have been recorded there. In addition, the bird observatory has registered the passage of a number of other species of birds during the migration period each year. A total of 126 species of land birds, including 74 neotropical migrants, have utilized this area on an annual basis.

To secure the health and viability of this habitat, the Canadian Nature Federation and the Beaverhill Lake stakeholders' committee began to develop a conservation plan in 1996 to deal with the potential threats to the site. The stakeholders' committee, composed of various naturalist organizations, Environmental Protection, Alberta Agriculture, Alberta Tourism, the John Janzen Nature Centre, Ducks Unlimited, the Canadian wildlife centre, the county of Beaver, the town of Tofield, and local landowners have amassed a wealth of invaluable knowledge and expertise concerning Beaverhill Lake and its natural resources. In fact, the site was officially dedicated as a globally important bird area on April 26, 1997, and serves as a model of conservation throughout the world.

So bring your binoculars and a good pair of rubber boots this weekend to Tofield for the seventh annual Beaverhill Lake Snow Goose Festival. Come enjoy the wonders of our natural environment.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Women's Issues

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Women's issues in the province of Alberta have steadily slipped lower and lower on the list of government priorities and now have become barely visible. Abolishing the Alberta Advisory Council on Women's Issues in 1996 and lumping the funding for women's shelters into the children's services programs are clear indications that the government is ignoring the challenges that women face. Moreover, there are scores of studies produced by experts that clearly show that the five years of funding cuts disadvantaged women much more than men. Those budget cuts were not gender neutral. For example, the job losses in the public sector were in fields dominated by women, and today women are having to dedicate more time and unpaid labour to caring for ill family members because of the gap left by a decimated health care sector.

Women in Alberta are asking rightfully who is benefiting most from the economic upturns, considering that the Treasurer is bending over backwards to give tax breaks to those earning enough income to be subject to the high-income surtax. Meanwhile, Alberta's nurses, a profession dominated by women, are going to have to fight desperately for their economic rewards from this government.

Just two days ago came the most sorrowful expression of this government's insensitivity on this matter. Options for Women, an organization that has been enormously successful at finding work for women, is now in danger of closing because the government refuses to fund employment programs that cater solely to women. Options for Women has always met or exceeded its contract requirements, and there is no reason to believe that there is any potential for problems in the future. The agency has extensive knowledge of the issues and challenges that women face in the labour market. Their track record is excellent.

Notwithstanding the exchange that occurred earlier today in question period, I urge the government to reconsider this and the minister to fund Options for Women for the work that it does on behalf of women in Alberta.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recycling has become a very prevalent aspect of our lives. Communities, families, and individuals are all getting involved in recycling programs. Well, let's take recycling one step forward and look at recycling ourselves.

This week is National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week, and I would like to remind the Assembly of the importance of signing your health card. There is a critical demand for organ donation across this country, and it is a sad fact that the supply of organs never meets the demand. This country, this great country of Canada, has one of the lowest donation rates of all developed countries in the world. Organ donation is something everyone should take seriously. You may think that you will never fall sick and need a donation, or more likely you may think a tragedy will never befall you or your family, but accidents do happen, and the reality is that people unfortunately die.

We all have the ability to do something about this issue. Often possible organ donors are never able to contribute to the lives of others because they are not prepared for the event. Organ transplants present a sad paradox. In most instances, for someone to receive an organ donation, someone else must die.

2:50

Mr. Speaker, organ donation week gives us the opportunity to discuss with our families our wishes on becoming an organ donor. I have committed myself as an organ donor since 1976 and brought forward a private member's bill, that passed last year in this Assembly. I'm now chairing the organ donor implementation committee. Alberta has now taken the lead on this important initiative.

I encourage all members of the Assembly to pull out their health cards and sign themselves up as organ donors. The gift of life is the most important gift you'll ever make. Don't take your organs to heaven; heaven knows we need them down here.

THE SPEAKER: Notice was given during the question period by the hon. Government House Leader that he wanted to rise on a point of order.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today in question period there was an exchange which in my view offended rules 23(h), (i), and (j) of our Standing Orders as well as *Beauchesne* 491 and 409(5). Standing Order 23(h) refers to making "allegations against another member," 23(i) refers to imputing "false or unavowed motives to another member," and 23(j) refers to using "abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." I would submit that the exchange in the question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora did all three.

The hon. member referred to a question relating to a letter I believe dated December 3 or December 13 – I forget the exact date – and in the context of that discussion referred to hiding documents; where are the documents "hidden" in your office, those types of references. I would ask that you rule that those references to "hidden" documents, to hiding documents, and to where are the documents hidden be ruled unparliamentary and that the member be asked to withdraw them.

They're clearly suggesting that the Premier is hiding something. The words themselves say that. The Premier has been very forthright in answering questions and saying that everything has been turned over to the Auditor General, that the Auditor General has made a decision based on the evidence before him with respect to this issue, that the question of what documents should be released and when is a matter that's more appropriately determined by the Auditor General rather than by the Premier.

In fact, there has been no hiding of documents, but irrespective of that, Mr. Speaker, the allegation that there's been a hiding of documents, the allegation that documents are hidden in the office, in my submission, is unparliamentary.

I'd move on to 409, Mr. Speaker, which says:

A brief question seeking information about an important matter of some urgency which falls within the administrative . . .

(5) The matter ought to be of some urgency. There must be some present value in seeking the information during the Question Period rather than through the Order Paper or through correspondence with the Minister or the department.

Well, in fact, Mr. Speaker, if you'll refer to the Order Paper, you'll find under Motion for a Return 168 a motion which asks for precisely the same information. In fact, it says: "that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of letters" – I'll leave out a piece – "between the former deputy Premier and the Premier for the period October 29, 1993, to November 1, 1994." I would suggest that the documents that the member is referring to would

probably fall within that motion for a return. If they don't fall within that motion for a return, they certainly could fall within one of the other 11 motions for returns that are on the Order Paper with respect to this matter, and if they're not within those 11, they certainly could be the subject of a motion for a return.

It's not a question of urgency. The matter under discussion, clearly, by the date of the letter he's talking about, was in December of 1993. It's not a matter for question period at all and certainly not a matter which should be the subject of "abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder," under 23(j).

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora on this point of order.

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly understand the government's sensitivity about this issue, and I wish there were ways that we could pursue this without the Premier inviting members to step outside and that sort of thing.

The facts are quite plain. I'll try to deal with them in the order that I heard the Government House Leader try to justify his point of order. Number one, the language used is nowhere in *Beauchesne*, in my reading. In fact, I think if you check the Blues, you'll see that there was a reference to the phrase: documents that are "hidden from Albertans" in the Premier's office. In fact, Mr. Speaker, those documents are hidden away. I'm assuming they're in safekeeping because they are the subject of exclusions under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. I'm hoping that they're, you know, hidden away in a safe place and that they haven't in fact been destroyed. They're not available for my review, they're not available for your review, and they're not available for the review of any Albertan. I think that that is pretty close to a dictionary definition of being hidden away or secreted away or just suppressed. So that's on the first point.

The second point. If you do want to talk about the kind of language and bringing the House into disrepute and using language that would offend both *Beauchesne* and Standing Orders, I think we could in fact look at the Premier's own words when he used either the words or derivatives of the words: falsehoods, irresponsible, misleading. All of those words are in *Beauchesne* and listed as unparliamentary. Now, as I said, I understand the Premier's sensitivity in not wanting to deal with these questions, and I understand that he wants everyone to assume that the Auditor General's report has ended this matter when in fact it hasn't. That incomplete report just poses more questions. Now, Mr. Speaker, I did not rise to challenge the Premier on his abuses of language and his violations of what has been considered unparliamentary before, because it wouldn't serve any particular purpose. Clearly I was very careful to make sure that the language that I chose did not offend either your strictures or those that are imposed on us by *Beauchesne* and Standing Orders.

Finally, I will deal with the rather interesting argument from the Government House Leader that because there's a motion for a return that may or may not deal with these matters, therefore it's not appropriate for question period. Number one, those matters are not on the Order Paper for debate today. Number two, it is an urgent matter because we still don't have the whole truth and nothing but the truth about what happened in regard to the refinancing of West Edmonton Mall, and it is on my mind and on the mind I think of other Albertans. Number three, the government has made it clear on every occasion that a question regarding their involvement with West Edmonton Mall – this government has rejected providing the information. They have rejected every written question and motion

for a return, and the Deputy Government House Leader indicated to me that in fact these others were destined for rejection as well. So I can have no expectation that the information will be forthcoming.

The fact is that just because there may or may not be – and the Government House Leader wasn't even clear whether there was – a motion for a return that would cover some of the same information is really not relevant to today's question in question period.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I said, I understand the reason why the Government House Leader may have been prompted to rise to his feet on this, but I submit that there was no violation of Standing Orders or of *Beauchesne* or of other parliamentary principles as they have been established in this Chamber.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, there's certainly a lot of guidance given to hon. members in terms of what is written in *Beauchesne* and what is not written in *Beauchesne*, and the House itself makes its own rules, which are of primacy importance. Although we are talking about phrases such as hidden or hiding, that sort of phraseology is not ruled out in *Beauchesne* in terms of being unparliamentary. It's also very true that what may be in one context today may not necessarily be in the same context tomorrow, and in fact they may from time to time be ruled out one way or the other.

The exact words that were used were:

Will you release the 167 pages of documents that are in your office, that are currently being hidden from Albertans . . .

Those are, essentially, words from the electronic Blues.

To repeat, the words "hidden" or "hiding" were not viewed as unparliamentary in the past. In looking at the words, there's no suggestion directly that it's the Premier that is hiding anything at all from the people of Alberta. There is some suggestion, as we indicated yesterday, in terms of some of these statements and some of these questions, that when one looks at the black and white, the hard copy of words, they somehow do not have the same kind of intent as when they are expressed in an environment that sometimes may be charged and perhaps from day to day charged even a little more than another day.

3:00

Strong statements will never be viewed unparliamentary, I would suspect, by any Speaker anywhere in the types of jurisdictions that follow this type of government. I think perhaps it would be a stretch to suggest that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora is actually accusing the Premier of hiding anything. Words have their own meaning unto themselves in the blankness of a document. When you take it out in two hours or three hours or four hours from now, when you read it tomorrow, somehow the meaning will not have the same impact that it may have had a few minutes ago in this particular question period.

Before we move to Orders of the Day, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

head: Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

THE SPEAKER: I'd ask the hon. Member for St. Albert to present certain guests.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure this afternoon to introduce 15 residents of New Zealand, who are in the members' gallery this afternoon. They are traveling by train from Victoria to Halifax, across our wonderful country. I would like to welcome them to the Legislature of Alberta and

introduce them to you and through you to members of this Assembly by asking them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: Would it be appropriate for the Speaker to supplement the comments made by the hon. member?

HON. MEMBERS: Yes.

THE SPEAKER: Well, to our very good friends from New Zealand, I had the pleasure of being in your country just last fall and traveled north to south. Would you convey our good wishes from this Legislative Assembly back to the good people who work in your national Assembly in Wellington, in particular to the Hon. Doug Kidd. Your Speaker of your national Assembly is a personal friend of mine.

All the best as you enjoy Canada. It's not quite as beautiful as New Zealand, but we're very friendly.

head: Orders of the Day

head: Public Bills and Orders Other than

head: Government Bills and Orders

head: Second Reading

Bill 205

School (Early Childhood Services) Amendment Act, 1999

[Debate adjourned April 13: Mrs. O'Neill speaking]

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying previously, I support the initiative that my colleague for Calgary-East has taken with the introduction of this bill. I understand the intent: to continue to build Alberta's education system to be the best that it can be for the province's children.

The bill we are debating today pertains to early childhood services. These services are a wonderful part of a student's journey through our formal education system. They are the blocks with which children can build their path to the future. The age of a child when he or she enters an ECS program is the stage at which they are very impressionable. It is the point where they are developing numerous social and functional skill sets and attitudes.

Programs such as kindergarten, while certainly preparing a child for entry into a fuller and more formal education, serve an even greater role in the life of that child. I believe that there is true merit in the existence of early childhood services, or, as I grew up to know and affectionately call it, kindergarten.

I feel that the benefits of the child who attends kindergarten are numerous. While the communication and social skills acquired through such services do well to prepare a child for entering grade 1, they also help ease children into the transition from being at home or in day care to being in a school atmosphere. For a child entering the formal education system, there are all kinds of fears: the fear of encountering new people, of leaving home or day care, and simply the fear of procedures that differ from their daily routine. To be able to introduce them into an environment that sets the stage for the learning process upon which they will embark is an experience that is invaluable to them and their families.

Essentially, early childhood services are the silent teacher, as a child is learning without realizing they are being taught. They learn through having fun, through playing games, through listening to stories, through singing and painting. Each child that leaves an ECS

program should be well equipped to head into the broader world of formal education that lies before them.

I should also say, Mr. Speaker, that programs such as kindergarten, day care, and community activities also serve to bring together not only children but entire families who come from different backgrounds and experiences. It is a learning experience for children and parents alike. I'm sure that most of us who are parents had the realization that a child entering school is not the only one that must adjust. We as parents also face some adjustments.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to reiterate what the sponsor of this bill said in his opening remarks. The intent of Bill 205 is to legislate something that is already the policy of this government and does not stray from our commitment to the education of the children of this province. I believe the education of our children is a partnership. It is a partnership established among our communities, our educators, our schools, our parents, and most importantly, our children. This is an important relationship that is willingly committed to improving, promoting, and delivering continuous learning across this province.

Early childhood services are an integral part of this process. The legislation that is before us would ensure that all children have the opportunity to benefit from the services provided by kindergarten as part of the early childhood services program. As it has been explained, kindergarten is currently a program provided in all school jurisdictions by either the public school system, the private school system, or a private, nonprofit ECS program, but regardless of the institution delivering these programs, there are certain government regulations that must be met. They must operate with certified and certificated teachers.

Local school boards, school councils, and schools are responsible for making decisions that will serve students best. This allows for decisions to be made according to their individual needs and the needs of the individual students, taking into account their age, the subject matter, and the community environment in which they live. Schools have been given considerable flexibility on decision-making in order to respond effectively and efficiently to the needs of students and the wishes of the parents.

Mr. Speaker, while I firmly believe that this proposed legislation allows for the school to maintain a degree of flexibility within the program, it is ultimately the responsibility of the school boards to examine early learning in their schools. Alberta Education supports choice in education to ensure student and community needs are met. The current system allows parents and students to have the opportunity to choose schools and programs in the public education system within standards and policies set by the provincial government. Parents have a wide range of options to choose from within the public education system: public schools, separate schools, Franco-phone schools, charter schools, as well as alternative programs offered by school boards and home education.

The establishment of kindergarten in Alberta has a long history. With a great deal of work it was determined that the best system would be one that allows for parental choice and flexibility. This is important as it enables parents to be involved in the early education of their child or children. In keeping with the flexibility of ECS programs, for those who prefer to prepare their child at home or may not have the availability of transportation, many rural schools offer two-full-days-a-week programs for children in kindergarten to accommodate parents in such situations.

An example of what is working in one area of the province is from the Buffalo area of the Wainwright constituency. Parents take their child one day a week to a kindergarten program, and on alternating days they meet with parents and their children in similar educational situations. This system was developed due to the distance between some of the homes and the school. I am encouraged that there was enough co-operation to have been able to reach a workable solution.

This example very clearly demonstrates that the current system allows parents to ensure that the needs of their children are met and the incredible dedication of ECS programming to accommodate the children, not to mention the willingness of parents to work with the system.

3:10

Bill 205 would continue to allow this flexibility and would continue to encourage parents, schools, and the community to work together in educating their children. Encouraging education during the early years sets the stage for children to get into the spirit of learning. Early childhood education is important for stimulating motivation in children, which will help develop children's self-esteem and positive feelings towards learning.

I would say again that ECS is a wonderful part of the journey through a formal education system in this province that is one of the best Canada has to offer. None of this invaluable experience is taken away with the amendments proposed in Bill 205. So I would conclude by saying that I believe in Alberta's early childhood services programs, especially the value and the success they have demonstrated.

A member of this Assembly has brought before us a piece of legislation that feeds into the strength of our education system and ultimately into the education of our children, who are the future of this province. I would encourage members of this Assembly to look long and hard at the strength of this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased that the hon. Member for Calgary-East has brought this forward. My, how times have changed. I think it's very important that this become legislation, because we have seen in the history of this province that on a whim this government can cut kindergarten hours, ECS hours, in half just like that. So I think this is a very important bill. I think it's very important to legislate this. If we truly believe in education and if we truly believe in children, then I'd like to see this in legislation, that early childhood services are available for every child prior to entering grade 1.

I remember that when this present government cut it in half, there were petitions, children in the galleries, parents – it took thousands of people to say to this government: "Wake up. This is an essential service. This is important if you really want to value education. If you put your money where your mouth is, then put it with education." Interestingly enough, finally after a year or two they decided: well, let's put some more money back into early childhood services.

Lo and behold, three years later we need money in a literacy program. Well, go figure. Those kids who probably didn't have the money to access full kindergarten are now the same children that we're paying for with the literacy program. Catch the irony of that one. Just catch the irony of that.

So I am glad that there's a private member's bill up here. Obviously that member realizes that you can't trust this government. One minute: oh, ECS is important. The next minute: it's not important; who needs full-time hours? I remember, during that time when kindergarten was cut in half, meeting Dr. Myer Horowitz, and he was telling me that 20 or so years prior to these cuts he'd had to lobby every single MLA and try to teach them the value of early childhood services. He said: "You know what, Colleen? Here I am again, 20 years later, fighting the same fight with a bunch of people who don't understand the value of education." I think he met with

several MLAs who are still in here today. You know, it's sad that he had to relobby, if there is such a word, that the vision that he provided 20 years prior had been mucked up by a government where the bottom dollar – it didn't matter if it was children being hurt or not. So he had to lobby once again a government that wasn't listening or caring about children in early childhood.

I am very pleased that this bill has come forward. I'm going to support it. In fact, I'd like to even see an amendment that increases it to 475 hours. I really would. That would be really half-time. You know what? Within this, it is a person's option still to put their child in early childhood services, in ECS. It's still their option. It's available, and it's still the parents' option. But it is legislated because – who knows? – next year there may be a different priority. This government may want to pay down the debt so quickly that they're going to take away funding totally for kindergarten. So this is just trying to legislate it so that it will commit this government to valuing early childhood. I certainly do, and I know that if we don't take care of our children early on, we will pay for it later on.

I know there are several people who want to speak to this. I think it is very near and dear to quite a few members. I think I have briefly stated that I will support it, that I don't trust this government enough to just hope that they'll provide for it. I want it legislated. I want it properly funded. I look forward to, I hope, a majority of members supporting this piece of legislation.

Thank you.

MR. DOERKSEN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think my comments might be somewhat different than the points made thus far on Bill 205. The principle of this bill really takes us into the debate about mandatory kindergarten, and that debate engages us in a primarily philosophical question. The School Act in its preamble actually sets the stage for this philosophical question. I'm going to read to you the first two clauses of the preamble to the School Act.

Whereas the best educational interests of the student are the paramount considerations in the exercise of any authority under this Act; and

Whereas parents have a right and a responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children.

In the first instance, the state asserts its interest in the education of students. This is further affirmed in section 3, where individuals "6 years of age or older" are "entitled to have access . . . to an education program." Section 8 is even stronger in that it states that an individual who "is eligible to be enrolled," meeting certain age requirements, "shall attend school." The word used is not "may," which is permissive in its meaning. The word used is "shall," which is prescriptive, even dogmatic in its meaning.

[Mrs. Laing in the chair]

I do not know the complete history of the education act, but I suspect that there was significant debate when the government of that day moved from a requirement to have education available and accessible for students to prescriptive legislation that not only required availability and accessibility but made attendance mandatory. The bottom line is that the state exerted its authority by deciding it had a compelling interest in the education of children.

Madam Speaker, the evolution of public opinion since that time is such that such intervention by the state in education is mostly accepted by Albertans, who rarely spend any time even thinking about the philosophical question. The recognition of the importance of education and, in particular, learning to learn is universally accepted. Who would debate its importance? Who would want to deny this child an education? But there is a tension between the

notion of state control in the education of children and the rights and responsibilities of parents and their desires for their own children. The School Act in its second statement in the preamble, which I read earlier, gives at least recognition to this idea.

It is at this point of tension that philosophical lines in the sand are often drawn with respect to mandatory kindergarten. While this bill does not make that final step, it does, I argue, move us in that direction. That kindergarten is important to Albertans is not in doubt. That mandatory kindergarten extends the tentacles of state intrusion into the lives and personal affairs of families is also not in doubt, at least not in my mind. It is not ground that parents should easily give up.

3:20

As a matter of prudence, those who philosophically support mandatory kindergarten need to ask themselves a very important question, and that question is: at what point do you or will you draw the line? Surely if kindergarten is mandatory, why not preschool or prekindergarten? These are ideas which carry a certain amount of currency and even have been discussed already in this debate. Therefore, when it comes time for you to cast your aye or cast your nay on this bill, please understand that you are voting on an idea. If you are in favour of government intervention – and some would say intrusion – please vote in favour. On the other hand, if you are in favour of retaining parental autonomy and that very important check on government control and expansion, please vote with me in defeating this bill.

Further, Madam Speaker, I would like to add that for those who have spoken in favour of this bill and have now realized the strength of my arguments and the importance of the ideas in front of them, it is no shame to them to change their mind. In fact, it would be to their credit.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to speak to support the principle of the bill, which is to include kindergarten or early childhood education programs within the School Act. I think that's a very desirable, long-awaited action that's being proposed by way of this act, so I support that principle of inclusion of the early childhood services program into the School Act.

I have, however, some concerns here. Let me just make my observations here very quickly; time is short. My primary concerns are the following. The bill, in amending section 24, amends only sub (1) of section 24 and leaves sub (2) untouched. In sub (2) the existing legislation says that

a person or board that provides an early childhood services program may charge fees in respect of the program from the parent of a child referred to in [sections above].

The fact that this bill seeks to include an early childhood services program into our public school system which is available without any requirement of having to pay fees – I think the retention of fees to be charged for early childhood service programs is inconsistent with the spirit and the letter of the School Act. So I would certainly seek to make some amendments to see if this inconsistency can be removed.

Secondly, Madam Speaker, the proposed changes in sub (1) of section 24 allows that

an early childhood services program under subsection (1.1) may be provided by a board or a person approved by the Minister.

Similarly, in the next subsection it is stated that

a board or, with the approval of the Minister, a person may also provide an early childhood services program to

- (a) a child before the child's kindergarten year if the parent of the child agrees.

The point that I have some serious concerns about is the enabling authority the minister is being provided here by way of this subsection for this program to be offered by a person authorized by the minister. I presume that person could include private, for-profit establishments, institutions, groups, individuals who may be interested in providing this service. Clearly, again, this would be a step towards privatization of our public school system, and I would certainly be opposed to this. I would like the member or the Minister of Education to speak to this concern of mine.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

The second implication of authorizing a person other than the board to offer an early childhood services program is that it could be offered by persons who do not necessarily have the educational qualifications required at this point by every school board in the hiring of teaching personnel. So in addition to providing an opportunity for privatization of these services, these amendments will also lead to deregulation of the certification requirements that people who teach children in their early years will need. That's a second very serious flaw, I think, in the bill, and I certainly will be opposed to that particular amendment on those grounds.

The third concern that I have has to do with the reduction of the number of hours; 400 hours are stated as the minimum. The tendency in legislation, when you state a number like this, is to use that as a ceiling rather than as a minimum. Presently, I think, the provision in the kindergarten area allows for 475 hours of instruction. Here we have 400 hours, and that, again, to me is a step backwards and will need to be changed. I'll see if I can move some amendments to the bill to correct that flaw.

The last point that I want to make. I'm not sure, and I would like the member who has sponsored the bill, in whose name the bill has come to the House, to perhaps clarify this. This is sub (1.5), another amendment.

Where the Minister is satisfied that it is not feasible for a board to ensure that all children in their kindergarten year have access to an early childhood services program, the Minister may authorize the board or a person to provide alternative programs.

I have some questions about what is meant by "alternative programs," and I'm seeking more information on this. I hope the hon. member will be able to provide answers to that question.

Altogether, Madam Speaker, while I am supportive of the principle of inclusion of early childhood services programs into the act so that they become a regular part of what we expect our school boards to offer, I have some serious concerns having to do with the charging of fees – I think they're fundamentally inconsistent with the provision of free education and universal education to all children in this province – and the minister's ability to permit both private providers, who may provide their service for profit, and the deregulation of the certification and educational requirements that could be introduced as a result of this bill. My main concerns have to do with this deregulation, privatization, and the reduction of the number of hours available for early childhood services.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, but the time limit for consideration of this particular item has concluded.

head: Motions Other than Government Motions
3:30

Police Staffing Level

508. Ms Olsen moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the govern-

ment to establish a benchmark of one police officer for every 525 Albertans.

[Debate adjourned April 13: Mr. Dickson speaking]

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to have the opportunity this afternoon to join debate on Motion 508, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Norwood. Although this motion appears to be well intentioned, I find myself in a disagreement with what this motion proposes, and I am therefore unable to lend it my support.

I would like to begin by addressing some of the comments the Member for Edmonton-Norwood has made relative to this motion. First of all, when she referenced some statistics from an Environics poll done for Alberta Justice, she conveniently omitted some important results from that poll. She noted that "51 percent of respondents stated that crime in their community was a very serious or somewhat serious problem." What the hon. member conveniently neglected to mention is that about 80 percent of the respondents in that same poll were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the level of policing in Alberta. Madam Speaker, 80 percent support for a level of policing is certainly not a loud cry from Albertans for hundreds more police officers to be hired.

Secondly, Madam Speaker, the Member for Edmonton-Norwood indicated that 80 percent of respondents stated that "providing more police officers would be effective in reducing the level of crime." While this may be true in terms of reducing crime, the polls also showed that 86 percent thought that tougher sentencing would be effective, that 90 percent thought increased crime prevention would be effective, and that 73 percent pointed out that increased rehabilitation programs would be effective. Only 45 percent of respondents thought that passing more legislation would be an effective way of reducing crime, but we must believe that if this motion were to pass, the sponsor would expect legislation to be passed to implement this benchmark.

Madam Speaker, I understand that prostitution has been a problem in the constituency of Edmonton-Norwood and that the hon. member has done some good work to tackle this problem. However, I must point out a quote from the hon. member on this topic in reference to cracking down on pimps, johns, and prostitutes. She is quoted in the *Edmonton Sun* as saying that you don't need more police to do it. Obviously the hon. member understands that there are other ways, usually better ways, to combat crime than simply hiring more police officers. Why, then, does she think we need more police to tackle Alberta's overall crime rate, which, by the way, has been declining for some time now? It's really a mystery.

I would also like to briefly touch on one other comment from the Member for Edmonton-Norwood. In her speech she remarked that a lot of people use the police to population ratio, including people "who are considering investing in Alberta." Madam Speaker, I must say that if the police to population ratio is truly an important consideration for potential investors, then we'd better leave the ratio right where it is, because right now people are investing in Alberta and are moving to Alberta in massive numbers. They are doing so with extreme confidence in Alberta's economic and social conditions. In fact, the most effective and most reliable way to reduce the crime rate is to reduce the unemployment rate, especially among teens. Alberta has had the lowest or close to the lowest unemployment rate in Canada for several years now, and Alberta's low unemployment rate continues to this day, even with massive immigration to Alberta in recent years.

Madam Speaker, I think it is obvious that the safety of Alberta

communities and the effectiveness of the justice system are high priorities for this government and for Albertans generally. This was certainly apparent during the discussion at and leading up to the justice summit at the end of January. The summit represented an opportunity for Albertans to offer input about all aspects of Alberta's justice system. Just in case the Member for Edmonton-Norwood missed the justice summit and has not seen any of the encouraging results and recommendations that came from it, I'll take this opportunity to highlight some of them.

First of all, survey results from the Angus Reid poll, not the Environics poll alluded to earlier, show that 90 percent of Albertans have confidence in the RCMP and that a whopping 94 percent of Albertans have confidence in their local police. Madam Speaker, this is the highest level of confidence for all of Canada. To me this result indicates that Albertans are very pleased with the levels and the quality of policing in this province. They are not calling for hundreds more police officers. These survey results show that Alberta's excellent police forces are doing a tremendous job, with sufficient staffing levels and resources. Although these things must be reviewed from time to time, the recommendation of Motion 508 clearly is not and should not be an immediate priority.

There was much more encouraging news from the justice summit. Levels of confidence in more specific areas of the justice system, such as protecting the public from offenders, catching lawbreakers, and promoting crime prevention, also increased from 1997. Clearly, Madam Speaker, in the areas of policing and justice, this government is giving Albertans the confidence and protection that they need and deserve.

If we look at the specific justice summit recommendations on policing, there were no loud outcries for more police officers. Instead, most of the recommendations suggested that the government continue to promote successful community-based projects and crime prevention programs. These are the types of services that make the most difference in Alberta's communities.

Crime prevention and enforcement involve much more than just hiring more police officers. Community-based services are what Albertans are asking for, and they are the services that fit the needs of Albertans. Over the past few years we have seen the tremendous success of neighbourhood police offices. These allow the police force to become more involved in communities, more active in communities, and more visible in communities. The benefits of these local stations are immense. Furthermore, there are more programs, such as Crime Stoppers, Rural Crime Watch, and Neighbourhood Watch, that are great assets to our policemen and policewomen and for Albertans.

Furthermore, Madam Speaker, Motion 508 urges the government to do something that is clearly not within its exclusive jurisdiction. In Edmonton and Calgary policing is funded from unconditional municipal grants, and it is up to the municipal force to determine the appropriate number of police officers. As for rural policing, RCMP affairs are not simply a matter of provincial authority and jurisdiction but also of local and federal. Without heavy-handed legislation, the provincial government is not even in a position to properly implement what Motion 508 proposes.

Quite frankly, the motion put forward by the member opposite is an overly simplistic approach to justice and policing in Alberta. By focusing purely on the ratio of police officers to the general population, Motion 508 fails to take into account many of the important economic, social, and geographic diversities of our province. Madam Speaker, not all communities have the same need for policing services, and to impose a uniform standard for police to population ratio would probably be a waste of taxpayers' dollars, and it would negatively affect the number of police officers available

in areas that require a higher percentage of police officers in the population. On the one hand, Motion 508 would impose an artificial cap on the number of police officers in a region or a municipality and fails to take into account the actual needs of the local community. On the other hand, resources may be spread too thin across the province to provide the extra manpower in those particular areas that require it.

3:40

Madam Speaker, most regions and centres in this province function extremely well and remain very safe communities. The Minister of Justice has already noted – but I think it's worth repeating – that St. Albert has only one police officer for every 1,267 residents. That's certainly a far cry from the ratio of one officer for every 520 residents suggested by the member opposite. Yet St. Albert is a very safe, secure, and beautiful community which experiences very little crime.

MR. SHARIFF: Because Mary represents it.

MR. BRODA: That's right.

This municipality does not need to increase the number of police officers it currently has by close to 150 percent.

On the other side of the equation, a uniform ratio such as Motion 508 suggests might have the effect of lowering the availability of law enforcement officers in certain communities. High Prairie, for example, currently has a police to population ratio of 485. The crime rates per officer is around 131. If the ratio were to be altered to 525, High Prairie would lose police officers.

It makes sense that resources be directed where they can be of most service. There is no point in setting up an arbitrary system of uniformity which results in inefficiencies. We must target our resources to make sure that policing is adequate in communities that have a greater need instead of increasing them in municipalities like St. Albert, which are doing well with their current resources and staffing levels. This approach will provide us with the type of equality that really matters here: safety for all Albertans regardless of the community in which they live.

It also makes sense, Madam Speaker, to allow for a greater ratio of law enforcement officers in larger geographic areas with sparse populations. Densely populated areas do not need the same number of police officers per capita as more sparsely populated rural areas. This is due to the sheer number of kilometres which are covered by officers in rural areas compared to those within cities and towns. The police to population ratio does not necessarily have to be the same in Calgary as it is in Cardston. Again, it is clear that a uniform provincial benchmark is inappropriate for Alberta's needs. Alberta's police to population ratio compares well with that of other Canadian provinces, especially when we account for the differences in crime rates across the country.

We must assume that the intention of this motion is to address crime. Alberta's overall crime rate, defined as the total police-reported crimes under the Criminal Code, actually indicates, excluding traffic crime, that it is about equal to the Canadian average. But it's far below the rates of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, B.C., and the two territories. The crime rate is declining. This is something Albertans are extremely proud of, and we should be proud of this fact. Do we really need to hire hundreds more police officers to fight a falling crime rate? I don't think so.

Let's look at the crime rates in some specific crimes. First of all, Alberta's homicide rate is less than the Canadian average and almost half of what we see in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and B.C. In 1996 homicide rates declined in only two provinces, New Brunswick and

Alberta. In that same year Alberta was one of only five provinces whose homicide rate was lower than the average of the previous 10 years. These are very encouraging results, and they show that Alberta is doing very good things when it comes to preventing violent crimes.

When it comes to property crimes, again Alberta is doing a tremendous job of prevention. The rates in Alberta for motor vehicle thefts and break-ins are both below the Canadian average and about half the rates in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and B.C. These rates have remained fairly stable in Alberta in recent years. However, this stability comes at a time when virtually every other province has witnessed an increase in the rates of motor vehicle thefts and break and enters. Again, it is difficult to see why the Member for Edmonton-Norwood is calling for more police officers to fight declining rates of crime.

Madam Speaker, there's also a serious financial component to this motion. The across-the-board increase that would be required to implement this motion would result in a severe increase in cost to Alberta taxpayers, with very little visible return on their investment. It would cost an estimated \$105 million per year to increase the police to population ratio to the figures proposed in Motion 508, but there is certainly no guarantee that this would have any meaningful effect on Alberta's actual crime rates. There is no conclusive evidence that the number of police officers in a jurisdiction has any real effect on the number of actual crimes committed.

The factors which affect the crime rate are numerous. It will serve no purpose, Madam Speaker, to ignore other factors and focus exclusively on the number of police officers in a community. The law enforcement officers in Alberta have always done and continue to do an excellent job ensuring safety and justice for Albertans. Alberta is well known for its strong communities, and Albertans take pride in that reputation. There are many, many good things being done at the community level in Alberta to prevent crime, things that don't necessarily require additional police officers.

In looking at the statistics on this subject, it is apparent that some of them may be misleading if not considered closely, Madam Speaker. The numbers certainly do show that the police to population ratio has been increasing, but there are a number of important reasons for this. In addition to the financial restrictions on staffing which many police organizations have felt as the population increases, the change in the ratio has also been affected by two other significant factors.

First, many administrative tasks that police officers once had to attend to have now been passed to civilians. This has had an effect of freeing officers' time for direct policing responsibilities. It has also created job opportunities for Albertans, something which this government does very well. As employment and the population increase, the figures of the past several years clearly show this.

Second, the police to population ratio has been affected by urbanization. Madam Speaker, tens of thousands of people are moving to Alberta every year to experience the Alberta advantage. Although many of them are fleeing an oppressive regime in the people's republic of British Columbia, many more are coming from all over Canada and from around the world. The majority of these new Albertans are becoming residents of Alberta's major urban centres. This has added to an already strong urbanization trend, causing a decrease in the number of officers required per capita.

The wording of Motion 508 doesn't mention or even consider the other factors which have an impact on crime rates. For example, both violent and property-related crimes have been shown to increase in areas which have experienced economic growth. Well, Madam Speaker, we all know about the healthy economic growth that has been occurring in Alberta year in and year out since 1993.

Although members opposite would never admit it publicly, Alberta's economic growth has been possible thanks to this government's sound economic policies.

Madam Speaker, for that reason I will not be supporting the motion and encourage everyone else not to support it.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

3:50

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I hope the bureaucrat listening in the background is enjoying that speech. I really believe that's where it came from just to kill this motion really quickly timewise.

Madam Speaker, I'm pleased to stand to speak to this Motion 508, and just so the member opposite can hear me, I'm in favour of it. The main emphasis of this motion is that every Member of this Legislative Assembly has fielded questions about crime in our constituencies. Does anyone ever get down to the understanding that where we're sitting in policing is just another area of the downloading from this government over the last few years? For the bureaucrat up there listening, I hope they're understanding that too.

Funding for police services has fallen dramatically over the last several years. In the case of municipal police forces, the provincial cuts exceed those of health and education. In 1998 there was an average of one officer for every 552 Canadians. In Alberta there was an officer for approximately every 574. This motion will take us to the average level of policing in the other prairie provinces. If, as the Member for Redwater stated, the Alberta average compares with other provinces, why in Manitoba is there an officer for every 512 residents and in Saskatchewan an officer for every 540?

We also need to consider the cost of crime on society. When the costs of the victim, the costs of a shattered life, policing and private security, court and legal costs, and correction costs are considered, the Fraser Institute concludes that these total costs may be as great as the total public expenditure for public schools. Some profess that can be re-engineered to eliminate activities that do not provide value. This is particularly difficult for a field like policing, where new activities do not reap rewards. A police car on the street is a deterrent.

I do agree with the Member for Redwater opposite when he talks about community-based policing. I was at a meeting three weeks ago in a junior high school in my constituency, Steele Heights. We had the Edmonton Police Commission and the chief of police and his officers come in, and this was a major issue that everybody brought into concern. They wanted it to stay in place.

But at the same time it came around to a money basis and is it going to be a fundable item? Yes. I believe it should be. An officer that is a beat cop on the Fort Road in my constituency is a very well-respected man. He can be looked at in the face instead of from the shoulders down, which happens in most cases when police are involved.

We also talk about a question yesterday in the House from the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek around home invasions, and today we sit and listen to the hon. Minister of Justice from Alberta tabling a letter that he sent off to the federal Minister of Justice around this and the importance of how terrible home invasions are. I totally believe him. Like the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek I would not want to be in the situation where I open up my door to have somebody force their way in.

Policing is about people and responding to their needs and fears. I hope the bureaucrat heard me.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, but under Standing Order 8(4) I must put all questions to conclude debate on the motion under consideration as proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

[Motion lost]

THE CLERK: Motions Other than Government Motions. Motion 509, Mr. Marz.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora?

Point of Order Items Previously Decided

MR. SAPERS: Yeah. I just would like a ruling, Madam Speaker, on Motion 509. My query is this. Previously the Assembly dealt with Motion 506, which deals with substantially the same area, and my recollection is that Motion 506 in fact passed. Motion 506 called for the development of an accountability framework, which I understand is the substance of Motion 509, no doubt a worthwhile idea, but I just would like a ruling. I'm referring to *Beauchesne* and to our own Standing Orders and of course to *Erskine May*, where there are several references to the fact that basically the Assembly shouldn't be dealing with the same matter for debate twice, and I would appreciate your guidance.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: First off, hon. member, I do know that Parliamentary Counsel reviewed this. It does go before them. Prior to it coming forward in the Legislature, they will definitely make some decision as to that particular item. I would have to go back and take a look at the various motions. If the Assembly can bear with me a moment, I will have a discussion with the table.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora and the Assembly, I will stand by what I said. Parliamentary Counsel does go through these prior to them being introduced in the Legislative Assembly. As well, the Speaker's office reviews them, so I believe it is in keeping that we move forward. We have dealt with one motion that – actually, if you read them, you could say that there are similarities or you could say that there are differences. I think it depends totally on how you want to interpret it. Something like this is left up to Parliamentary Counsel to make the call on in the very beginnings of motions and bills.

So we will carry on with the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Health Care Accountability

509. Mr. Marz moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to establish effective accountability measures within the health care system through mechanisms at the point of health service access involving both the consumer and provider.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to rise today. This motion urges the government to review the possibilities of implementing new and innovative mechanisms to increase consumer and provider accountability within the health care system at the point of service access in order to ensure best spending practices.

The objective of this motion is to promote consumer awareness of the costs involved when accessing the health care system as well as to examine alternative finance models that may be able to deliver

health care services in Alberta at a reduced cost while complying with the principles outlined in the Canada Health Act.

Madam Speaker, before I go into the specific details of the motion, I wish to make it absolutely clear that this motion is strictly about finding new and better ways of spending our health care dollars. Throughout the course of debate there will be some suggestions made that deserve thoughtful examination. However, the scope of this motion is not necessarily restricted to those suggestions made by myself or those of my colleagues, and I sincerely hope that all members of this Assembly consider these suggestions as starting points for debate and approach them with an open mind. I would certainly invite all members to add their ideas to such a review process. I look forward to a productive and insightful debate on options that might be considered useful to improving health care spending and service delivery.

Madam Speaker, when it comes to resource allocation, most publicly funded programs, especially health care, have a general tendency of having an endless appetite for resources. Health care, as all other public programs, contributes to the general health of Albertans. However, optimal public benefit from the full mix of public programs cannot be realized if any sector or program receives a disproportionate allocation of available public funds.

4:00

Open-ended spending on health care in this province is now and for good reason an outmoded practice. Only 25 to 30 years ago the control of public expenditures on health care was considered to be undesirable and unnecessary. Health care was seen as something uniquely crucial to the general health of the province, an area where intense spending would in turn pay off in other areas. Health care costs were thought to eventually stabilize as the health status of citizens improved, and it was believed that economic growth would routinely provide the revenues needed to pay for health care considered necessary. All of these assumptions are now known to have been contrary to a balanced approach to improve the general health status of Albertans.

Changes in health care have often been perceived to be radical and revolutionary. A more rational explanation of changes to health care is that health care policy was responding to the dynamics of philosophical, political, technological, organizational, educational, and economic realities, and because of these changing dynamics, consumers and cost-effective practices will be what drives health care towards future sustainability.

The volume of health care known to be inappropriate is becoming of great concern. It is essential that we address health care spending habits in an effort to maintain quality health care at an affordable cost that is sustainable and universally acceptable.

Perhaps the impression that more is better is not entirely the fault of those whose creed it is to spend, spend, spend. They've been told so many times by opposition parties and the media that the only way to better health is to spend more. [interjections] Well, Madam Speaker, some members have stated that, and they will have their opportunity coming up to debate this issue.

Madam Speaker, our Premier has made it clear on many occasions that this government will follow the advice of Albertans and will do the right thing and spend tax dollars responsibly and assist institutions with sound financial planning that encourages good management and broad efficiencies. This government has chosen to be proactive in improving health care by achieving a responsible, open, and accountable framework that ensures Albertans have access to quality programs and services at an affordable cost.

This mission began with public consultation and resulted in the establishment of effective regional health authorities, implementation of health care performance measures and targets, and adherence

to business plans and other reporting methods. I commend the Premier and the Minister of Health for these positive and effective steps that have served the interests of Albertans well. However, despite our best efforts that have improved what operates within the system of government and health institutions, the measures that have changed health care have not adequately involved health care consumers.

When it comes to giving Albertans tangible information on health care spending, we need to do it in a way that Albertans will understand. Madam Speaker, this can be effectively accomplished by allowing Albertans to know exactly what the cost was to access health care services on a per visit basis, with a yearly total distributed at the end of each fiscal year. I'm convinced that an overwhelming number of Albertans would be concerned when they see exactly how much it truly costs for the treatment they received.

If a health care invoicing system were in place, as is a common practice in all well-organized businesses, Albertans would be aware of their role in the health care system. To be effective, the invoices would detail the services that have been provided and their respective costs. To ensure accuracy, signatures of patients and service providers on the same invoice would be required as a condition for compensation by Alberta Health. The patient would immediately have the exact knowledge of what Alberta Health was being charged for and how much was being spent. The health system could also in turn use these invoices as a valuable research tool.

Most importantly, though, this point of access approach to accountability would give patients and providers an accurate understanding of how they're using the system and would likely encourage more responsible use of the health care system after finding out that a short trip to the doctor too often results in long billing by service providers to Alberta Health.

Health care billing statements would provide government and regional health authorities with an effective education and accounting tool that would be easily understood. To control costs, one must know where the money is being spent: to whom, for what, and for whose benefit. Data on costs within the health care sector are now reported in ways which defy sensible interpretation and which make comparisons difficult. This simple, low-cost information system would not only satisfy many of these curiosities but would also involve an important and forgotten portion of the health care puzzle, the people of Alberta.

Madam Speaker, the apparent disregard for consumers, despite their powerful and determining role in the health care system, is not entirely any single stakeholder's fault. The problem exists largely because the current health care system was built around the Canada Health Act, which effectively prohibits consumers of health care from having any control over meaningful choices, such as how they wish to receive health care benefits and how they may apply them.

In considering that fundamental problem, an innovative and alternative finance system was brought to my attention. Upon deep reflection my conclusion was that this strategy of health care payment was not only sensible and beneficial to consumers but also offered them something very powerful and positive, the freedom of choice. Madam Speaker, I'm speaking of medical savings accounts, or MSAs, which empower the individual with freedom to choose while unchaining them from the restrictive rules that have been forced upon them by a third-party controlled system.

In the United States their model of a medical savings account is an account that's controlled by the insured person to pay health care expenses. It works in combination with a high-deductible health insurance policy that protects the insured from catastrophic illness, prolonged hospitalization, or a particularly unhealthy year. In addition to the high-deductible policy, the individual or an employer

on behalf of an employee can make contributions to the MSA through a designated trustee or custodian, usually a bank or an insurance company. Funds from this account may be used only to pay the medical expenses incurred by the insured or his or her family, and all accumulated funds remain the property of the MSA account holder.

MSA funds, including any interest or investment earnings, accumulate from year to year, thereby prefunding future medical expenses. MSA funds grow in tax-sheltered accounts. After retirement they may also be rolled over to a pension plan or a registered retirement savings plan that would eventually become part of the owner's estate. When qualified medical expenses during the year exceed the deductible and total out-of-pocket maximum, the insurance plan usually pays the remaining medical expenses.

Medical savings accounts are designed to counter the fundamental problem of cost control. They restore direct incentives to consumers to control costs, which stimulates true market cost-control competition. MSAs put individual consumers in control of their own health care decisions so that consumers are free to decide whether a procedure or treatment is worth the expense. Though MSAs are typically being implemented or considered by other jurisdictions where health care is not dominated by public funding, the theoretical model used in those instances could be altered to accommodate the publicly funded system framework.

The current legislation allows that the idea of MSAs should be considered in the form of a pilot project, as the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake will illustrate in future debate on this issue when he speaks to this motion. Canadian versions of MSAs need not ignore the principles of the Canada Health Act, and in fact they would achieve those goals in different but more efficient ways. It could be a worthwhile experiment to judge the feasibility and the effectiveness of such a system, since it is one proposal for health care reform that has been designed precisely to address cost-related control programs while granting sovereignty to consumers with respect to their health care decisions.

Any cost-control measures we might consider must remain dedicated to achieving greater value for the money. However, the changes that have been made to date are only understood and recognized by those who represent the organizational framework of the system, leaving the public comparatively blind to how health care systems operate and at what cost. Health care system users and taxpayers have not been systematically and routinely involved and therefore have not yet been able to actively participate in improving the health care service delivery.

4:10

The arguments driving change are powerful. Even if national and provincial budgets allowed for sustainable massive increases of health care spending, it would still make sense to wish to spend our health care dollars better. It would still be wise to reduce public expenditures on health care, while spending elsewhere brings greater health care status improvement for dollars spent.

Political leadership in Alberta with respect to health care has often been innovative and courageous. Following that tradition, I urge all the members of this Assembly to support this motion regardless of whether you agree with my own suggestions or not. As I said before, the motion is not restricted to any particular ideas but merely asking for a review. We all must recognize and accept the need to manage health care wisely and lead the search for new and better ways to obtain more effective measures that deliver more value for the money so Albertans can rest assured that they will have access to high-quality medical services for generations to come.

I believe that the government has done a tremendous job in

improving health care services by delivering partnerships within the regional health authorities and the use of numerous planning and performance measurement tools. However, this government was elected to work on behalf of Albertans, and like those we serve, we will never be satisfied with the status quo. We'll keep our minds open and constantly look for new and better ways of doing things. When issues like improving health and quality of life are raised, Albertans demand and deserve nothing less.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have been trying to follow the speech that the hon. member put forward with regards to his motion, and quite frankly I have difficulty reconciling what the motion says and what the speech said. I guess it would have been helpful to actually have a copy to follow as he was speaking. I'll be looking forward to reading the *Hansard* to see if I misunderstood.

The motion talks about establishing "effective accountability measures . . . through mechanisms at the point of health service access involving both the consumer and provider." When I looked at Motion 506 that was put forward, which dealt with the system of accountability for Alberta's health care system and having performance measures, I thought there was some similarity between these two motions. I must admit, Madam Speaker, that in your ruling you were correct in indicating that they are different motions, having heard the explanation from the member on Motion 509. What it appears to be is that this motion has been developed in order to ensure that Alberta's health care system could be privatized with greater ease, that in fact what we would have set up is a system of HMOs within which these medical savings accounts could be set up as well.

As I listened, what was interesting was the contradiction that we see with this motion vis-a-vis what the Minister of Health said this afternoon in question period when there was a question dealing with Bill 7 and direct billing. I think there has to be some reconciliation done between this idea of a health care invoicing system where in fact the patient – I will use the word "patient," not "consumer," and I do that deliberately – signs an invoice that is then sent to the billing agency. Well, if you have direct billing as being proposed by the government under Bill 7, you could not in fact do the health care invoicing system that the hon. member talked about. I recognize that it's a private member's motion, but in fact Bill 7 would nullify exactly the kind of proposition that you're putting forward. So the argument to support the motion fails on the face of what the government itself is doing.

The problem that I see as I read the motion, in the context of the explanation that was provided, is that in fact we are not setting up a system of accountability within the public health care system, and it's interesting that the motion does not talk about the public health care system. It just talks about the health care system. In fact what we are doing is setting up a control mechanism.

The member seemed to be very careful in saying that what the government did was wonderful with regards to health care, but what the providers in health care have done has not been so wonderful, and in fact it is the providers' fault that the health care system we have right now is in the crisis that it is in. The reality is that it is the providers, the stakeholders in health care – the doctors, the nurses, the LPNs, the multitude of health care professionals – that have held this system together contrary to the wishes and the motives of this government.

In fact, what we have seen is that the accountability measures that

need to be put into the system are accountability measures that hold this government accountable to the principles of the Canada Health Act – I do not have a problem with those principles – and to the wish of Albertans through numerous roundtables, through the summit that was held recently, through any discussions that you look at that indicate that Albertans want a publicly funded, single payer health care system. They do not want the kind of system that you have put forward and envisioned in your motion.

I can say quite frankly that given the context of what I heard this afternoon, I would have great difficulty in supporting the motion. What is interesting, though, is that it's not the way the motion reads, so the explanation was illuminating, to say the least.

In the motion it talks about "at the point of health service access," and I would assume that is directed at the medical profession, because that generally is the single point of entry into the system. In the comments that the member made, a number of assumptions seemed to be built into those comments that in fact what is occurring right now is that the so-called gatekeepers are not doing an appropriate job, that in fact they are attempting to waste taxpayers' dollars, and that they are providing service that is contrary to the requirements to ensure health for individuals.

I can give the member numerous examples, and I was just on the phone this afternoon with an individual who has not been able to access the health care system. This is not an accountability problem because of a doctor not providing the care, but they cannot access the health care system. In fact it is not there for them when they need it. They have been diagnosed with cancer, and they have had to wait and wait and wait and wait for treatment. This is not the gatekeeper's fault. This is not the medical profession's fault. It is the fault squarely of this government in terms of lack of accountability to ensure that the health care system is there for Albertans when they need it.

Though I did support – I felt that in Motion 506 there was an admission that in fact there is a lack of accountability within the health care system, and we need some performance measures so the government can monitor the system's efficiency and monitor what has happened as a result of its cuts. This one is directed at ensuring that what we will see is private health care in this province, and I don't think that's where Albertans want to go.

4:20

The member indicated at the outset of his speech that he hopes there will be some helpful suggestions from other members with regards to how we can establish effective accountability measures within the health care system. On a daily basis, hon. member, the Official Opposition provides suggestions as to how this government could be more accountable, how we can ensure that the health care services that are required within this province are there for Albertans. We have pointed not only to the suggestions that we bring forward on behalf of Albertans and on behalf of individuals who are knowledgeable in health care delivery, but also we have pointed out some suggestions that have been made by the Auditor General with regards to how the health care system can become more accountable.

What's interesting – and we've seen this through the written questions and motions for returns – is that when we have asked for accountability, particularly with regard to the private clinics and the contracts that are made with the regional health authorities to the private, for-profit clinics within this province, what we are told is that we can't be provided with that information. That information is either not available or because of the corporate veil is not accessible to us or to the public. If the member were truly interested in an accountability system, one of the first things he should be suggesting to the Minister of Health is that in those private, for-profit clinics' financial statements the breakdown of exactly how much goes to profit, how much goes to administration, how much

goes to salary, and how much is left over for patient treatment should in fact be provided to this Legislative Assembly and not hidden in some back corner.

Those are the suggestions that I think would be quite helpful to have the Minister of Health provide in this Legislative Assembly. As a member of the Official Opposition that's a suggestion I provide to you that you can take and use in ensuring that there is accountability within the health care system. That is one way to in fact do that. It sounds like the member has done a fair amount of research, but if I were to point him in the direction of research that has been done in the States, along with the research on the medical savings accounts – if he wishes to in fact find out the way dollars are spent unwisely, the way dollars are spent in the American health care system, which is not a single payer, publicly funded system – what he will find is that there is a lack of controls within the American system.

In fact, when you look at the models of the HMOs – and this is something that this government should particularly be interested in – what is now happening is that the vast majority of states within the United States are passing legislation to control the HMOs. They are passing legislation, exactly the kind of legislation where the Member for Peace River, I believe it is, has a committee set up to ensure that there is less regulation within the province. That's exactly the type of legislation that's being passed in the United States in order to control the HMOs.

What those controls are for is to ensure that there is no fraudulent billing occurring within the system, that in fact the medical savings accounts are actually controlled by the insured person, if they can be. There is a whole host of legislation that is now being proposed and that has also passed within a large number of states in the U.S. to try and control something that we have control of within Canada and within this province. That is the delivery of health care services to ensure that the dollars are being directed towards the patient and not being directed into the pockets of a corporation, that in fact the decision as to whether or not a service is provided is not based on how much it costs but is based on whether or not that service is required. Quite frankly, the gentleman I was just talking to a little bit earlier feels that he is nothing but a number, that he is nothing but an individual who is seen as a liability to the system as opposed to someone whose life is valued and who in fact should be provided with the best care that can be given to an individual within this province.

We have the capability, we have the knowledge, and we have the skilled health care professionals, but what we don't have is the backing of this government to ensure that a publicly funded health care system is first and foremost. This is one example, unfortunately, from what I heard. We have a lot of energy being directed at private health care, and how do we privatize our health care system?

The notion of "consumer" in the health care system quite frankly I think is a faulty notion. When you are lying on a gurney in the emergency department of a hospital, I don't think you are in any position to choose what kind of treatment you particularly wish to have. It's not as if you can go shopping and if you don't like the treatment, you return it. The reality is that you have to have full confidence and trust in the individuals and in the system being there. That is being lost, hon. member, and it is unfortunate that we are losing that within this province.

There was a notion as part of that which I caught in the opening remarks by the member that talked about the current system prohibiting consumers from making meaningful choices. I think my remarks addressed that. In some instances you may be able to go for a second opinion, and quite frankly our system allows you to go for a second opinion. An HMO type of system would not allow you to go for a second opinion. If you had a medical savings account but perhaps that medical savings account was set up so that you had a

limited amount of dollars, you might not have that choice to go for that second opinion. You might not have that choice to go elsewhere to find out whether or not the treatment that's being prescribed is the right treatment. In a lot of instances there is no choice.

So the notion of a consumer in health care I think is a notion that is dangerous to enter into. I think as a patient, as an individual who's receiving health care services, you have to be knowledgeable, yes. I agree with that part of the statement the member made, that individuals who are entering into the health care system have to be knowledgeable. That's part of the job of the gatekeepers, that's part of the job of the other health care professionals, and it's also the job of the government to provide that knowledge. But I think that when we think of health care as a product that you can take off a shelf, we've lost the essence of what the value of a true public health care system is and what that means to Albertans.

Do we need to spend our tax dollars responsibly? I think that's something the member had mentioned as well. Of course we do, and as the Official Opposition we have always, always maintained that we have to have responsible spending of our health care dollars. But the reality is that what we have seen over the last number of years is a squandering and a misuse of our health care dollars by this government.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt you, hon. member, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

Could I have unanimous consent to revert to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

head: Introduction of Guests
4:30 (reversion)

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is with great pleasure today that I introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a group from the forest industries here to review second reading of Bill 27, Regulated Forestry Profession Act. The first people I'd like to introduce are from the Registered Professional Foresters Association. They are Bryon Muhly, Brydon Ward, Doug Krystofiak, and Rodney Neys. The next people I'd like to introduce are from the Alberta Forest Technologists Association, Rick Stewart and Tracey Cove. The other people I'd like to introduce are from the land and forest service of Environmental Protection, Cliff Henderson and Dennis Quintilio; from the Alberta Forest Products Association, Murray Summers and Garry Leithead; from Weyerhaeuser Canada Ltd. I'd like to introduce Neil Stevens; from the Canadian forest service, Natural Resources Canada, Bob Newstead; from the Canadian Institute of Forestry, Jerry Sunderland and Evelynne Wrangler; from the Society of Professional Biologists, Rob Powell; from the Institute of Agrologists, Ken Davies and David Chanasyk. I'd like them all to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

Bill 27
Regulated Forestry Profession Act

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead on Bill 27.

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to move second reading of Bill 27, the Regulated Forestry Profession Act.

This act was developed to improve the quality of forestry service in the province by improving the regulations for professional foresters and professional forest technologists. The continuing quality and compliance of our forest professionals contributes to the protection of Alberta's sustainable forest resources.

I would like to acknowledge the work and contribution of the forestry professionals and the forest industry who, individually and as representatives of their professions and of industry, provided input to this legislation and the efforts of the staff of Alberta Labour and Alberta Environmental Protection who worked on this legislation.

The Regulated Forestry Profession Act has the support of the forest industry through the Alberta Forest Products Association, of foresters through the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association, and of forest technologists through the Alberta Forest Technologists Association. This act replaces the Forestry Profession Act and regulates both professional foresters and professional forest technologists.

Overview of the act. The Regulated Forestry Profession Act is an omnibus statute modeled on the proposed Health Professions Act. It has two sections: a common section establishing registration, professional conduct, continuing compliance, an appeal process, and structure and accountability requirements; a schedule section which will continue the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association as the college of Alberta professional foresters and will establish the Alberta Forest Technology Association as the college of Alberta forest technologists. The schedule also reserves certain titles for members of the two colleges. Regulations will define registration, conditions of practice, and other requirements unique to each profession.

Title. This act continues to protect right to title. Only members of a regulated profession may use certain titles when marketing their services. The use of protected titles clearly indicates to the public which professions are regulated and which are not.

Professional registration. Today under the new act colleges will continue to act as gatekeepers to the professions. Colleges establish requirements of professional registration. The Regulated Forestry Profession Act stresses the assignments of compliance in determining eligibility for professional registration. Colleges will be responsible for ensuring a clear link between registration requirements and those skills, knowledge, and abilities required for a safe and effective practice. Under the new act registration, assignments, processes, and requirements are to be fair and transparent to the applicants.

Continuing compliance requirements. Traditional professional legislation emphasizes entry qualifications over the ongoing or continuous professional compliance of members. In today's market, with the changing technology and service requirements, maintenance of professional compliance is becoming increasingly important. Colleges have a significant role in encouraging the continuing professional compliance of members. Through proactive and supportive continuing compliance programs, potential practice deficiencies may be identified early, leading to fewer complaint investigations and disciplinary actions. The Regulated Forestry Profession Act requires each professional to develop and implement a continuing compliance program within five years of the act coming into force. With continuing compliance requirements to be a condition of maintaining professional registration, it will encourage members to stay current in their field.

Required registration. This act requires foresters and forest technologists who qualify for registration and who practise forestry

on public lands to be registered with their respective professions. Required registration prevents people from misleading the public by implying that a professional has the qualifications for registration where they are not subject to regulations by their peers. Required registration does not limit the ability of employers to hire other personnel to provide forestry services. Employees and clients will continue to have a choice to hire a regulated professional or not.

Complaint investigation and disciplinary action. In addition to concurrent complaint investigations and disciplinary hearings, the Regulated Forestry Profession Act establishes an alternate complaint resolution process. Through complaint resolutions such as mediation, complainants and professionals meet to discuss and resolve differences to their mutual satisfaction and to the satisfaction of the college. Complaint resolutions have been used effectively in other jurisdictions for a more timely and effective response in addressing some types of complaints. This act also establishes requirements for notifications to complainants of action taken and for making findings from disciplinary actions more accessible to the public.

Improvement in public accountability of professional organizations. The Regulated Forestry Profession Act establishes the same public accountability requirement as the proposed Health Professions Act. These include 25 percent representation on the council and on the hearing and appeals tribunal, open disciplinary hearings, public notification of disciplinary decisions, and the ability of anyone to complain to the Ombudsman about activities of the professional regulatory organization once all appeal avenues are exhausted.

Conclusion. The new Regulated Forestry Profession Act provides tools for professions to respond to public expectations through a more transparent and consistent registration, continuing compliance and professional conduct requirements, and to establish clear accountability for professions.

The degree of collaboration between the forest industry, the professional foresters, the professional forest technologists, and the government in developing this new act has been extraordinary. In the future I hope to see more examples of this level of industry and professional support in other sectors.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

4:40

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to stand and support Bill 27, the Regulated Forestry Profession Act. [interjections] Do you like that? This is a good-news story, and I'm happy to say that we finally have one here that deals with environmental protection. [interjections] You like that? It's a surprise, Madam Speaker, but I'll tell you: I've been saying all along, for all the years I've been in this Assembly, that if the government would just do it right, we'd be happy to support it. Finally we have a key example of that happening.

How did this happen? Well, the government consulted and listened. Go figure. It's surprising that this has worked out so well. In fact, the government went to the key stakeholders in industry, consulted with them in a truly consultative fashion, listened to what they said – and that's where we sometimes lose it, I think, in this Assembly. The government says that they consult and listen, but between the listening mode and the actual writing of the bill and getting it in here to debate, something happens there. We can see that in Bill 15, that it didn't work there. But in this bill it worked. It worked very effectively. In fact, what was said, what they heard is what came out on the pieces of paper. So for that I congratulate

the government. You did a very good job, and you worked very proactively with industry on this.

MRS. SOETAERT: Don't go overboard, Debby.

MS CARLSON: Well, I'm sure that before this bill is through the House, there might be one or two small points that we may have some concerns about. But at this stage, at second reading . . .

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Question. Question.

MS CARLSON: No, no. It isn't time for the question yet. There's quite a bit to talk about here I think.

MR. GIBBONS: You have to put up with it for 20 minutes.

MS CARLSON: That's right. You get 20 minutes. I'm sorry.

So what happened in this process that worked so effectively? First of all, let's talk about what was needed here. What did the industry want, what did government want, and what did people want? What everyone wanted was increased accountability of the professions. And why is this necessary? In an environment where we have considerable downsizing by government, somebody's got to pick up the slack. In this case it's industry, and industry has done their part in this. They've said: yes, we want more accountability; yes, we are prepared to work with the government in establishing more accountable practices; and yes, definitely we want to be a full participant in that. So they went forward with this.

I would like to talk a little bit about some of the history in how they ended up achieving the goals of enhancing forest services in Alberta, I think, by improving regulation of forest professionals and creating a new act that helped further protect public interest in Alberta's sustainable forest resources, because forestry is such an important part of our economy. Back in April of '95 Alberta Environmental Protection, Alberta Labour, the Alberta Forest Technologists Association, and the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association formed a working group to work towards licensed practice. All organizations, all levels of government came with this same mandate and worked very co-operatively on this. We weren't invited, Madam Speaker, I'm sad to say, but we were able to keep an eye on what was going on, and we're very happy with the progress.

After a short period of time a discussion paper on this issue was released to the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association membership and, with that, a mail-in ballot on licensed practice. The ballot asked for a yes or no vote on three major parts of the proposal. One was to regulate foresters and forest technologists under one act, which we see reflected in this legislation. The second was to implement mandatory registration either in the Alberta Forest Technologists Association or the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association for all eligible forest practitioners. The third was to introduce regulation of four restricted activities. These are forest management plans, wildfire prevention and control plans, prescribed burn plans, and annual operating plans. All three of these parts were approved by a majority of the respondents.

Then in March of '97 industry roundtables were conducted to identify weaknesses in the proposal, which is great. That's exactly what you do. Take it to the membership, bring it back, work out any wrinkles, and come back with a refined process. Issues discussed included eliminating the restricted practices provision, reducing government processes, and grandparenting provisions. Details of this proposal were discussed within Alberta Labour, and my colleague will have some comments about this later on in terms of

the process with Alberta Labour. The Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association appeared before a government standing policy committee. Once again we weren't invited, but they appeared. They were told to work on the proposal further.

It would help, you know, Madam Speaker, in these kinds of processes to include the Official Opposition at the invitation of the government more often. When we can work co-operatively together, I think there are a number of successes and good-news stories that we can see in this province. I would make that request at this time because we have a lot of common goals in this province, and perhaps we would get to them a little quicker if we could work co-operatively.

The Alberta Forest Products Association was brought into the process in March of '98 because Alberta Labour said that they would not move forward without this association's support. I think: good news again. Small forest industry operators began voicing concerns over the proposal, and some thought they would be unnecessarily restricted from carrying out their business. We're still getting some feedback from some of those organizations, but I think for the most part they're satisfied with where this has ended up.

Then, as I understand it, an ad hoc committee of forest industry company representatives made a presentation to the Alberta Forest Products Association's board and recommended the following four things: one, support for regulation of both foresters and forest technicians; two, mandatory registration for all foresters and forest technologists practising forestry on Crown lands in Alberta; three, elimination of controlled acts; and four, the addition of grandfathering clauses, specifically a time limited, onetime six-month window so that they could make the transition with the changes. All things that I think are very supportable. The committee asked for written assurances from the land and forest service that a streamlined approval process would be implemented while maintaining the status quo submission or approval process for small operators. Then the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association board supported the modified proposal.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

At a special meeting this past December of '98, Mr. Speaker, the association released the results of a mail-in ballot that asked members to vote yes or no in support of the modified proposal. One hundred and forty-eight ballots were cast, with 60 percent in support of the proposal. Not as high, perhaps, as we would like, but I think a good showing of support from the organization.

Alberta Labour professions and occupations branch has, I believe, consulted extensively with organizations representing the forest industry – certainly that's the information that we're getting back – and with professional foresters and forest technologists about this proposed legislation since '95. The industry, represented by the Alberta Forest Products Association, the registered professional foresters represented by the Alberta Registered Professional Foresters Association, and forest technologists represented by the Alberta Forest Technologists Association are, as we understand it, all in favour of the bill, and Mr. Speaker, so are we.

Currently, as I understand it, in this province there are about 350 registered professional foresters, 100 foresters practising who are not registered, approximately 180 registered forest technologists, and 700 to 800 technologists practising who are not registered. So we're going to see some changes over time as this bill is passed.

Mr. Speaker, how is this going to affect the public? What's the impact going to be, and what are the good things that are going to come out of this? I think the mandatory registration component is very good. We've had it on one side but not on the other side for

some time now. When you have a mandatory registration component, you have authority to act if there are problems, not that there have been a lot of problems, as I understand it, in the past. An organization, an association needs some clout if they're going to make tough decisions from time to time, and this legislation gives that to them, I believe.

I think another very strong part of this bill is the alternative complaint resolution. This looks like it's going to save a lot of time and money, Mr. Speaker, for people who have concerns. The public should like this particular aspect of the bill because it's just going to be less costly for them and give them a more accessible system for complaint resolution. My understanding is that most of the complaints that come in are minor in nature, but they still need to be resolved. How can we do that outside of the court system? There now is an alternative there.

4:50

I think the third factor that's very important here is that the public membership is going to be increased to 25 percent. This is modeled after the Health Professions Act, which this whole bill was modeled on. I think that's good in two regards.

AN HON. MEMBER: It isn't passed yet.

MS CARLSON: Yes, the Health Professions Act is still under debate, but in terms of how it applies to this bill, it streamlined the process because there was a blueprint that could be followed. In this particular case, in this bill, it seems to be working quite well, and anything that gives the public more participation in any aspect of our environment I think is good. [interjection] Yes, that's true. It does have to be balanced with professional advocacy, and the profession has to have some mandate to do that. I think now, with the mandatory registration component, they are given that mandate, and we're going to see some progress in that regard. [interjections] Yes. So we have to make sure that professional advocacy has a role to play in here and is recognized, if not through the bill itself, perhaps through regulation after the fact. But if the industry wants to take a look at that in terms of bringing an amendment to this bill, we're certainly prepared to take a look at supporting something like that.

So like I said in my opening comments, in general we support this bill. As we go through the various stages and get more feedback from people in the community, we may be bringing forward a couple of amendments that would strengthen it and enhance both the public's and professionals' ability to participate in this.

When we take a look at this bill and analyze it from a variety of factors, my first question arises, Mr. Speaker. We hear from the government that this legislation is essential for Alberta Environmental Protection to streamline future operations, and I think there are many good things in this act. But I think we have to ask the question – and I hope to have this answered before we get out of debate on this bill – is streamlining always a good thing, particularly when dealing with sensitive environmental issues?

There is a role for government to play in this regard. We're not sure that we have exactly the right balance at this stage in terms of how much of a role the government is going to play and how much is put on the shoulders of industry. We heard it earlier from a government member when they said that you don't set the fox to watch the henhouse. That's always a concern that we have to have when we're looking at changes in legislation that put the bulk of the responsibility back on industry's shoulders, not that they haven't been good watchdogs so far.

I spend a lot of time out in the province at a variety of places taking a look at how companies are managing the forests, how

they're working with the general public, and the kind of role they see for themselves into the new millennium. I would have to say that in this province we are very lucky that most of the companies involved are quite proactive and are very willing to be full participants in open discussion. There are a couple of companies that I wouldn't put in that same category, Mr. Speaker, so those are the ones we have to watch very carefully in terms of what happens when you start to streamline and when government backs out of taking an active hands-on role. This isn't an issue that I've seen debated in this Legislature or outside this Legislature, and it's something the minister seems to back up from every time I address it to him, so it's still a concern.

While we support this legislation, while we think it's progressive and that the consultation has been done in an excellent fashion, that those results have been listened to and acted on in this legislation, that those are all true, streamlining continues to be a concern for us. When government pulls out of its role in a large-scale way like they have in this instance, there's always the potential for problems. We've seen that in health care, we've seen that in education, and we've seen that in a variety of ways in environmental protection in this province. So I urge caution in this capacity. I urge more open debate in this Legislature on the role of government in environmental protection because there are issues that I think really, really need to be addressed and far, far more comprehensively than what we've seen in the past.

With that, I'd like to talk about the parts of this act, if I may. In part 1 you see that it's quite a comprehensive bill with a number of parts to it and then a number of divisions, Mr. Speaker. Part 1 really talks about governance. I think it is fairly well laid out here. It's quite easy to follow. We see the rules of the committees and tribunals set out in a manner that I think meets the needs that we saw from industry when they were participating in it.

Part 2 deals with registrations. It sets out the general mechanisms for mandatory registration. We're going to see that the foresters and forest technologists who qualify for registration and who practise forestry on Crown lands will now all be required to register. Good news, I think. It puts some control into the system and gives the organizations themselves some authority to act as necessary. So I think those are good things.

We also see that liability insurance is included in the act, and I think this is necessary now for a number of reasons. I think it's recognized that decisions made by foresters and technologists in managing Alberta forests may have substantial long-term impacts. As we see government moving out and industry and organizations moving in, somebody at the end of the day can be held liable for decisions which are made that have substantial long-term impacts and that may in fact have negatives impacts. So insurance is important at this stage of the development, I think, to offer protection to those participants both from industry and from the public at large. A requirement for liability insurance provides some assurance that assets will be available for successful claimants. That's just being responsible on both sides of the fence, Mr. Speaker, and certainly we support that.

If you get to part 3 of this act, that talks about continuing competence and lays out the requirements. Each profession is required to develop and implement a continuing competence program within five years of the act coming into force, and that's good. Continuing competence requirements are set as conditions for maintaining registration, and this should help, I think, to encourage members to stay current in their field. Like many other registered associations there is a professional requirement, and I think that's good news for everybody, for the professionals in the field and for those who will benefit from that continual upgrading that goes on.

Part 4 of the act deals with professional conduct. It describes in more detail the complaint process, the alternative complaint resolution mechanisms, what happens in investigations, hearings, decisions, the appeal process itself. I think it's quite well laid out. It should be easy to follow for people who have concerns as well as for those in the profession to understand what the requirements will be of them should there be some concerns brought before their board.

There are some more things I want to talk about, another part to this and a variety of divisions. Mr. Speaker, I will hold those comments until we get into committee on this, and I will let some of my other colleagues speak.

5:00

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

MR. GIBBONS: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to stand and talk to Bill 27, the Regulated Forestry Profession Act. As I read through the bill, I understand that the objective of this bill is to bring both registered professional foresters and the registered professional forest technologists under one piece of legislation. The goal is to enhance the quality of forest services in Alberta by improving regulations for the forest professionals. This act will subject forest professionals to regulations by their peers, and clear public accountability will be established through more transparent and consistent registration and professional conduct requirements. We hope that the new act will help further protect the public interest in Alberta's sustainable forest resources, as forest industries have become a sustainable part of this province.

There's a very important item that we should not neglect to bring out today, and I'd just like to bring some of the rationale that we have behind backing this bill. I do suggest that we bring the contents of the bill and go forward with it because, in my understanding, all parties affected by the proposed legislation had a hand in drafting the bill and are in support of it. In a lot of cases we're finding that that is not the same communication that actually happens in other areas.

AN HON. MEMBER: Like Bill 15.

MR. GIBBONS: Like Bill 15. You're correct.

The new act will also improve the regulations and public accountability of a group of professionals working in a sector that is vital to the Alberta economy. Mandatory registration will help establish and maintain high forest management standards. Although our party supports this bill for the many good provisions it contains, we should also point out that implementing the legislation is only the first step in properly regulating forest professionals. The next step is for those who hire and use foresters, mainly the Department of Environmental Protection, to accept the new standards and require that new proposals, plans, projects have the stamp of approval of the forestry professional as defined in the act.

Although this type of strict regulations and licensing had to be compromised in order to gain the full support of the forest industry for a new legislation, government should have a plan for how and when it will occur. Only then will the new act be truly effective and all the work worth while that was put into developing it. Under the act individuals that are neither foresters nor forest technologists will be unaffected, and the individuals of the companies will continue to do business as usual with the province. When will this change? Will it change through the amendments of the act or by regulations? With the extensive consultation process I do support Bill 27, and

instead of talking about the role that the government bureaucrats play in this one, I'll sit down and take my leave, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased this afternoon to rise and debate at second reading Bill 27, the Regulated Forestry Profession Act. As is the case sometimes with good fictional novels, you get to the back of the book and you find your best reading. I guess as I looked at the schedule for the profession of registered professional foresters and schedule 2, the registered professional forest technologists, I would have to slightly dampen the government's anticipation that this bill would perhaps receive unanimous support, because what I found in reviewing those schedules is that in essence the bill says, "In their professional practice, registered professional foresters [will] carry on the practice of forestry." Similarly, in Schedule 2: "In their professional practice," the bill reads, "registered professional forest technologists [will] carry on the practice of forestry."

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

So what, Madam Speaker, is the difference? What denotes professionalism within the profession of foresters? In the briefing provided this afternoon it was outlined that four restricted activities were discussed by the participants in this process. It included forest management plans, wildlife prevention/control plans, prescribed burn plans, and annual operating plans. I would ask this afternoon why those restricted activities are not included in the law but are rather left to regulation, which can be changed at any time, at any point of the day, whenever this government decides to issue an order in council.

If in fact the government's alive to the premise of the bill, which says that they want to promote and protect and serve the public interest, why then are they leaving restricted activities to be defined in regulation? Why is that not in the act? I'd like to have a government member answer that question this afternoon. To me it seems that while it's a supportable principle to encompass a practising profession within an act, there has to be some differentiation between what is restricted practice and what is general practice.

In this essence, Madam Speaker, I would ask: how do employers differentiate what practice is that of a technologist and what practice is that of a professional forester? It doesn't seem to me that the act defines that, so then that leads me to another concern, that in essence we've created a marketplace where the employers can go to the cheapest common denominator. Perhaps I'm wrong this afternoon. This has been a precedent that's happened in other sectors, and it seems to me that this bill has left too many gaps and holes to be defined by regulation.

Just to go back to the beginning of the bill, I'd like to debate for a few moments the role of a college as defined in part 1. The bill cites that a college must "carry out its activities and govern its regulated members in a manner that protects and serves the public interest." But how ironic it is, Madam Speaker, that that responsibility should be outlined in law for the college, when this government has perhaps done more to endanger the public through their cuts, erosions, and underfunding of environmental protection. We see all kinds of incidences now where the contamination of water supply, the intensive livestock operations, all kinds of environmental exploitations are causing risk to public safety and health, yet this government still maintains that when it comes to protecting the

public, secondary bodies to itself such as colleges must under the law protect and serve the best of the public's interest.

I thought as well that it was very interesting to read (c) and (d) of the responsibilities of a college. They must "establish, maintain, and enforce standards of practice, registration and continuing confidence for the practice of the regulated profession." Further, they must "establish, maintain and enforce a code of ethics."

Those are laudable responsibilities, Madam Speaker, and rightly, for the protection of the public and the interests of the province, those types of responsibilities should be defined within the law. But the complexity is that if we encompass a scope of practice for a profession and we melt in with a very vague description that technologists will be practising in some component of that scope of practice, we compound that by a work environment that has been subject to undermining, subject to underfunding, subject to perhaps there not being enough people employed in that particular area.

I wonder how realistic it is in this new reality in Alberta, Madam Speaker, for a college to actually be able to enforce standards of practice and a code of ethics. Will they in fact, then, have the legal ability to go onto a work site and make sure that the working conditions on that work site are conducive to the standards of practice and their code of ethics being achieved? Will that be the case? That is not something that's in the act. [interjections] Well, it says that the college must "maintain and enforce." How in fact will that enforcement occur, and what will be the parameters and process through which that college will be able to fulfill those responsibilities?

5:10

Perhaps, Madam Speaker, that's something else that the government intends will be in regulation this afternoon. Again I would ask: why? Why would we leave that to regulation? Is it not the public's right and their entitlement to know how such processes of enforcement would work? Again I would hope that the hon. sponsoring member or the minister for this particular area would be prepared to answer those questions at some point in the second reading debate.

I thought it was interesting as well, just skipping a couple of pages, that the government has taken it upon itself to outline who in fact can participate in the college if they happen to be licensed in that profession, and they've exempted a couple of criteria. So this can be a full-fledged, fully paid, completely professionally trained member, but if they are

a person who represents or is normally engaged in representing a group of employees who are regulated . . . in the negotiation of collective bargaining agreements or in any proceedings under a collective bargaining agreement with respect to regulated members or who negotiates or sets professional fees or guidelines on professional fees on behalf of regulated members of a college . . .

So let's say, for example, Madam Speaker, that I am a regulated forester and I'm working at a work site and I'm sitting on a labour/management committee on behalf of the employees on that work site. This government is saying that I would not be able to participate professionally in the college. That is in fact what this clause is saying. Why would that be? Are you saying that I cannot define what is the standard of practice and the code of ethics that I must meet as a professional practitioner and not differentiate that from issues that are within the collective bargaining process or the collective agreement? This is an infringement of professional practice and an infringement of professional rights, in my opinion.

If someone has worked and has become active to the degree that they want to be involved in both components of the profession, those being the professional side and the collective bargaining side, I say that this government should have the political wherewithal to allow

it. What it will do is strengthen our professions, make them more activist, and make them better equipped to serve the public interest this government says it is so intent on protecting.

So I would raise the question: were the members of this profession consulted about this exclusionary clause? Were they in agreement with that component being in there? I'd be most pleased if the government would be prepared to table evidence that they have the support of the professional membership for that component.

The final aspect I'd like to talk about this afternoon, Madam Speaker, is the new positions that are created within the act and similarly are created within the Health Professions Act, the hearings director and the complaints director. The act lays out that

14(1) A council must provide for the appointment of an individual as a hearings director under the purposes of this Act.

(2) A hearings director may not chair or participate in a hearing, review or appeal . . .

(3) A council must provide for the appointment of an individual as a complaints director for the purposes of this Act.

What I think is fascinating is that it doesn't seem to be anywhere in this act what in fact the qualifications of a hearings director or a complaints director are. Now, again I may be wrong, but in my review I have not seen that in the act, so again if the hon. member across the way wants to stand up and correct me this afternoon, then I'd be most pleased to have that happen.

It leaves another gap. Is in fact this person who's going to be coordinating hearings and complaints relative to the professional conduct of the membership of this profession going to be someone who is trained in the profession of forestry? Will it be someone that the government deems is qualified? Will the job description and the qualifications be something that the college has the authority, Madam Speaker, to decide themselves?

It would seem to me that it'll be an interesting process to go through and particularly to differentiate where in fact the boundaries of professional practice are between the technologists, between the professional foresters, and whether or how through the complaints process that line is going to be defined, Madam Speaker. Again, it's a gray area.

To summarize, I don't have a great deal of trust when it comes to this government's handling of professional practice in the province. That distrust comes from firsthand experience, and I am at this stage reserved on whether the benefits of the bill outweigh the gray spots and gaps that I've identified this afternoon.

So with those thoughts, Madam Speaker, I would be prepared to conclude my debate on the bill. Thank you very much.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Hon. member, do you wish to conclude debate?

MR. STRANG: Thank you, Madam Speaker. At this time I would like to conclude debate. I certainly appreciate all the comments and inquiries from the members opposite, and I'll make sure that when we get to committee, I will answer them all for them and that we'll get into a good discussion. I certainly thank them very much for their comments, and I also thank our members from the gallery, because I think it's very important as this is a very important piece of legislation.

I would move second reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 27 read a second time]

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:20 p.m.]