



Second Session, 38th Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF
DEBATES OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
(HANSARD)

Tuesday, February 28, 2006
Morning Sitting
Volume 6, Number 14

THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

ISSN 0709-1281

PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Entered Confederation July 20, 1871)

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
Her Honour the Honourable Iona V. Campagnolo, CM, OBC

SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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CONTENTS

Tuesday, February 28, 2006
Morning Sitting

Routine Proceedings

| | Page |
|---|-------------|
| Budget Debate (<i>continued</i>)..... | 2531 |
| D. Jarvis | |
| D. Thorne | |
| Hon. J. van Dongen | |
| H. Lali | |
| Hon. C. Richmond | |

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2006

The House met at 10:03 a.m.

Prayers.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: I call continued debate on the budget.

[1005]

Budget Debate (continued)

D. Jarvis: I will continue from where I started off last night, when time ran out. I was talking about the budget of 2006, in which there was somewhat of a little different situation. In the previous budget in 2005 we stated that the plan was to include transportation, health and education, whereas this present budget is ostensibly to provide support for senior citizens, who make up about 14 percent of our population. It is an ever-growing population, and we will see in excess of 23 percent in the near future.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Previous governments had no real plan about setting goals and priorities. This government has now done that, and it's in writing. We have met the challenge. We are basically telling the taxpayers what this government's intentions are. At the same time we're setting out performance measurements for it, to see that it progresses. This is a first in this province in many decades.

The achievement will be the five great goals, and this can only be done through the government, when the government gets its fiscal house in order. This has ostensibly been done already, and we're following a plan. We now see three balanced budgets, and the debt is being addressed.

Our goal should be something better than we inherited from the decade of decline in the '90s when the people of B.C. were left with a very, very substantial debt. Now the citizens can gauge how we have done. Are we better off than in the '90s? Obviously, we are. As the minister stated in her budget, over 175,000 people have now moved into British Columbia. That is a great thing, actually, if people are coming back home to work. People are moving into the province because they're looking for work, and now we will be able to hand down to our children and our grandchildren — my grandchildren — an economy that is growing. It is exciting — something that we can all be able to see and plan for our future.

As an MLA elected back in the '90s, there was no future for our children, as we were solidly in debt, and it was growing. At one point we were up to the point where, just to address our debt alone, we were paying out \$8 million — just to address the interest. Now that's

been reduced substantially. Those in charge believe that we have a good, solid base to work on, and we will progress throughout the years as we address the seniors and address our health needs, our transportation needs and our education.

Our goal should be something better than we inherited from the decade before. We will create a situation where our philosophical bents are somewhat different. We will continue to make this province a better place to live in. The budget this year clearly defines the difference between the two governments, but this government and the party opposite — everyone in the chamber — came here with the same purpose, I believe: to serve the people of the province who elect us. Where our two parties differ, however, is how we go about the progress. That is, as I say, the difference in our political philosophies.

This present government believes in creating the circumstances and the means for people to help themselves and supports them in doing so, where previously the government believed that they were a government that was being the provider of all things to everyone. The desire to help people is a very laudable motive, and indeed it is what brings us all here, as I said. But when our government takes it upon itself to be the saviour of everyone and all things, it saps and drains the basis of our whole economy — that is, the development and the investment and the freedom to do so.

[1010]

This, in a way, sums up the entire division between the political Left and Right in this province, and it can be summed up by a single question: are people capable of helping themselves?

The Left, not just here in B.C. but throughout the western world, says no. They believe it is their duty and right not just to help people but to decide what the people themselves need. This government believes that the answer is yes, and we believe that the vast majority of people in this province are not only capable but want to be able to find the ways to improve their lives through their own efforts.

Let me stress my next point. We also believe in providing a safety net to catch people when they fall or run into truly unexpected difficulties. Contrary to what some try to say about us, this is one of the greatest responsibilities and goals, and we take it very seriously. This is where the government faces its biggest challenge. When we as a government put programs in place to help fellow citizens, the money comes from every working person. Every time someone cashes a cheque for any kind of government assistance, it isn't the government that is paying. It is every single working woman and man in this province who provides the money. In effect, the whole province is a cooperative.

The fact is that government has only as much money to spend as the people in this province are successful. Having more people at work, making money, supporting their families and improving their lot in their lifetime means that we are able to do more and spend more to help those who need help. This is ex-

actly what this government has done and will continue to do.

Hundreds of thousands of new jobs mean many, many millions of dollars more to spend on assistance programs and health care, etc. Every new job that's created in this province results in more tax dollars being available to spend for the benefit of the whole province, and every company that moves to B.C. or establishes an office or a factory here means more tax dollars for this province.

We know that the opposition dislikes big business — in fact, any kind of business that involves the dirty word "profit." But I remind the people here in this House that every business or company that operates in this province and makes a profit pays taxes on that profit. This is where the money to fund health care, social assistance, maintaining parks, etc., comes from.

What happens to the rest of that profit? It doesn't come to the government in the form of taxes. It is either reinvested in the companies themselves or paid out in dividends to its shareholders. Who are the shareholders of many of these companies? The mutual funds. So every time a party attacks big business and the word "profit," they should remember that they are attacking the retirement savings of the ordinary people of this province.

Large companies only employ a third of the population — only a third of the working people in this province. Almost half, 47 percent, of the workforce in this province either is self-employed or has a small business. For that half of our working population, that word "profit" translates into their paycheques and the continued existence of their jobs.

One thing this government cannot do, and in fact no government anywhere can do, is ensure that particular jobs last forever. Change in anyone's life can be traumatic, but change is a fact of life. Without change in our world, we would have no computers, cars, televisions or even electricity. Change is a fact of life, and this government's plan and goal is to provide people with the tools and means to move through that change or any change that may appear before them.

When people lose jobs, we support them through the transition. That is what is in this budget as well. When change is looming on the horizon, we put plans and programs in place to help people prepare for that change. We help individual people train or retrain with new skills for new opportunities, and that is also in this budget. We help communities develop and attract new businesses.

[1015]

When I look at the 2006 budget, I'm pleased there are many aspects in it that are good for the people of British Columbia — for example, in Children and Families and in Education. I would refer you to the fact that the budget in the Ministry of Children and Families provides \$72 million more for social workers and other front-line staff. In the Ministry of Children and Families also, there's the \$100 million to enhance child protection. In the same Ministry of Children and Families, another \$34 million to increase funding for phase

two of child and youth mental health is in this budget, and there will be \$36 million more to support and implement five regional aboriginal child and family development service authorities.

Public Safety and Solicitor General is going to provide \$2 million for the crystal meth secretariat to combat the production and use of crystal methamphetamine in this province, which is a terrible thing that's occurring amongst our young.

The Minister of Education in this budget provides \$112 million in additional funding for K-to-12. The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance has another \$4 million to double the school startup supplements. In community living, a \$30 million grant for the family independence fund will be forthcoming. All of this is in this budget.

British Columbia will spend \$34 billion on new buildings and buses and public works in 2006, and this is quite a feat. The budget marks the fourth straight year of significant increases in investment in our economy. It's up 6.5 percent, I believe, over last year. There is \$83 billion that has been planned for major capital projects.

The budget, as I said, is up \$3.6 billion to almost \$12 billion — \$11.98 billion, I believe — in health spending alone. Since 2001 we have had a significant increase in health spending in this province. British Columbia is also ranked as the highest province in this country in health care and health services. It's a very wonderful thing that's happening, in the sense that we are ahead of all the other provinces and territories, and our government is still trying to improve it.

The actual budget shows that there will be \$25 million in 2006-2007 for the centre for surgical improvements at UBC Hospital. It's going to add another \$25 million for surgical initiatives — for joints, knees and replacement surgery. The research centre for hip health is going to be \$5.5 million from the ministry to advanced education. It will go towards the creation of research — the centre for hip health at Vancouver General Hospital. There is going to be \$5 million for the creation and implementation of the provincial surgical patient registry.

So we go on and on about how this budget is going to do these great things for this province. It is a plan, and it will be done, as we've always done what we've planned and said in the past. Every newspaper and every radio broadcast shows that we have done very well in British Columbia. It's going to continue to do so and lead the rest of the nation.

[1020]

As I said, to meet transportation, health care and education needs, in the previous budget in '05 and this budget we are going to be spending billions of dollars. It's going to result in considerable benefits to the people of this province.

One of the things in my own riding that I'm really quite pleased about is the fact that the Finance Ministry has listened to what I was saying and what others have said over the past years in regards to the homeowner grant. It has continually gone up a substantial amount

in the last while, increasing the threshold to \$178,000. The grant itself is up to \$570 for the average person; for seniors and people with disabilities and veterans, it's now up to \$845. This will make a significant change, I think, to a lot of people that are on fixed incomes in my riding. The seniors in my riding will certainly benefit from it.

I can't sit down without saying one thing that I always say. That is that the highway and bridge infrastructure in my riding is always in question. There has been a great deal made about the Gateway program that's occurring, and we all support that. I think anyone with some reasonable sense in them will understand that it's a necessary thing that we have this Gateway project coming to move our products in and out of this province without difficulty. But I have to say that I will continue to create the dialogue that's necessary to reduce the deadlocks that are going on in my riding on the bridges and the roads leading into and out of the Seymour riding.

Having said that, I will close by saying that I'm certainly pleased with this budget. It'll do great things for this province, even more so than in our previous budgets where this government has changed the status of British Columbia from a have-not to the number-one province in the country. On saying that, I will support this budget, and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak.

D. Thorne: I rise to speak in response to the budget speech. Since May I have been honoured to represent the residents of Coquitlam-Maillardville in this House. As all of you know, the learning curve for a new MLA is steep, and one must climb quickly. Balancing life in Victoria with duty to my own community in Coquitlam is certainly a challenge, but I am humbled to have represented this province at many community events and to have met with countless groups who represent a cross-section of interests.

In order to communicate with as many community residents as possible, I have recently hired an additional constituency assistant. Joy Mo came to Canada from China about five years ago and is now helping Linda and me to reach out to the community, particularly to those who have recently moved to Coquitlam.

I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to Dr. J. Crosby Johnston, an outstanding Coquitlam resident who died on January 31 at the age of 93. A strong advocate of health prevention, most notably in the area of cancer, Dr. Johnston was a recipient of the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award for service to his community — particularly seniors. He served as president of the Dogwood Pavilion Seniors Centre in Coquitlam and on many civic committees, including crime prevention and people with disabilities. He volunteered for Eagle Ridge Hospital and the Alzheimer Society.

[1025]

Dr. Johnston was made a freeman of the city recently, the city's highest civic honour. His dedication to his community will be greatly missed.

I would also like to offer my best wishes on the retirement of pharmacist Bev Harris, who has worked at the drugstore at Como Lake village in my riding for 41 years. During this time Ms. Harris has been tireless in promoting health, particularly in the area of smoking cessation. She has spent countless hours working on the College of Pharmacists policies regarding the harmful effects of tobacco smoke. She has lobbied all levels of government on the dangers of smoking, with a particular focus on youth.

One of her pet peeves is that pharmacists, who are health professionals, are required to dispense smoking cessation products while working in drugstores that continue to sell tobacco. Sadly, Ms. Harris is retiring without having changed that. But I know she will continue her work in this area, so the government should take notice.

I also wish to congratulate those who were recently elected to the city of Coquitlam council and the school board. As a former councillor for nine years, I know the commitment of time and energy involved in serving our citizens. Best wishes to our new mayor, Maxine Wilson, and to all those elected or re-elected to Coquitlam city council and the district 43 school board.

I'm also delighted to welcome Dawn Black as the new Member of Parliament for New Westminster-Coquitlam. Dawn will be a passionate and hard-working advocate for citizens in her federal riding, which includes my constituency of Coquitlam-Maillardville.

My constituency office has received hundreds of phone calls and visits from people with a variety of concerns. Some of these residents were looking to the government's budget for solutions that would improve their daily quality of life. Unfortunately, they have been disappointed. Everything from hydro costs to car insurance rates to medical service premiums has increased in the past year or so, and there is nothing in this budget to assist low- and middle-income families.

One of the main areas of concern for my constituents is health care. This is the seventh budget for this government, and they still have not fulfilled their promise to seniors to build 5,000 new long-term care beds by this year, 2006. There is little in this budget for those waiting for surgery. I am one of a group of opposition MLAs who have been meeting regularly with doctors and officials from the Fraser Health Authority to try to ensure that decisions which change the delivery of service in our health region are given good public scrutiny. In particular, I'm monitoring the waiting lists for eye surgery and orthopedic surgery which, since the closing of St. Mary's Hospital by the government in the last two years, have become areas of great concern to Coquitlam-area residents and, also, to many of our physicians.

An example would be Dr. Kevin Parkinson, who I'm sure you all know, who is a well-known ophthalmologist. He has the longest waiting list for cataract and eye surgery at the Maple Ridge Hospital of any waiting list in the province as a result of St. Mary's Hospital closing.

I wanted to just mention something about our youth, which is a particular area of concern for me and has been since long before I was elected. Some of our most vulnerable youth are those dealing with various addictions. At the moment there is particular concern around those addicted to crystal meth. This budget announced \$2 million over three years for education on crystal meth, but clearly we need more than education. We need help for the people who are already addicted, particularly our youth.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

We need an immediate increase in funding for detox beds in the province. A crystal meth task force has been organized in Coquitlam, and I've been attending their meetings. The members are a cross-section of community workers and elected officials working together to advocate for treatment facilities and to heighten awareness regarding crystal meth and the social and health issues which result from its use.

Recently I resigned from the board of directors of the PoCoMo Youth Services Society, which was a community organization that I founded in 1992. This group remains dear to my heart. PoCoMo reaches out to Tri-Cities youth who are not accessing the community services that they so desperately need to lead healthy and productive lives.

PoCoMo's reach-out bus is different than any counselling office or crisis phone line, because it goes on the road to find young people who are hanging around with nothing to do. It averages contact with 40 young people a night — youth who need connections to community services, education on drug and alcohol prevention, and trained adult mentors. Unfortunately, this old bus is in and out of the repair shop while the PoCoMo staff, who should be doing hands-on work with youth, are writing grant applications and holding fundraisers to keep this bus on the road. This bus barely skims the surface of the services that are desperately needed by youth at risk in the Tri-Cities, but it's a concept we know works.

[1030]

In ten months PoCoMo youth workers have made contact with more than 2,200 young people, many of whom are at risk. These children and youth keep coming back, because the bus offers them a safe place to talk and the chance to build trusting relationships with adults. This is a perfect example of a community service which should receive ongoing operational funding through the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and unfortunately, it does not. Once again there was nothing in this budget to help people who come to the bus or young people with addictions and mental illness. Frankly, I find this lack of attention, year after year after year, shocking.

Riverview Hospital is in my riding, so I am constantly aware of the need for mental health services. Housing for addicted and mentally ill youth and adults is crucial. Unfortunately, lack of attention has many of

them ending up on the streets, swelling the ever-increasing numbers of homeless.

I wanted to say something about the youth in my community and education, as well, before I leave this topic. Youth in my community are very affected by the budget's failure to address the serious problems of class size and class composition throughout the province. School district 43, the third-largest in the province, has more special needs and ESL — English-as-a second-language — students in each class, on average, than many other classrooms around the province.

More than 25 percent of the schools in the Tri-Cities have four or more ESL students in a class; 10 percent have three or more. The provincial average is 5 percent. This is an astounding difference. There are also more special needs students in Coquitlam classes than the provincial average. Many teachers from the district have talked to me about the extra time and energy it takes for them to deal with these special needs and ESL children. It is time for this government to stop ignoring the problems that relate to class composition and class size.

Also of concern to youth are the cutbacks made to apprenticeship and skills training. In the 1990s British Columbia had one of the best apprenticeship programs in Canada. Unfortunately, after 2001 this government dismantled that program. A huge shortage of tradespeople has resulted, and now this budget tries to address this problem by putting a bit of money back in and some tax credits. As far as I can see, it's far too little too late.

The wait-list for social housing has soared to 14,000 from 10,000 under this current government. Only \$8 million over three years was allocated in this budget to address housing and homelessness, and there is no reference at all to housing targeted for people with mental health issues and addictions. Instead, this government has announced that it will be getting out of the business of providing social housing and is moving to a rental subsidy program.

Thank goodness, in my riding a group of dedicated service providers and caring citizens has formed a housing coalition to promote the construction of affordable and safe housing. They are not willing to stand by while this government abandons low-income families who need safe, clean housing. I will continue to meet with the coalition and do everything I can to support their efforts.

Transportation and traffic issues figure prominently in the budget — in particular, the controversial Gateway project. In regard to this megaproject, I agree with the comments of the former mayor of Vancouver who is now the Premier, who was quoted as having said in 1991: "We cannot spend our way out of transportation problems. Roads, bridges, SkyTrain just won't do the trick, any more than they did in the past." The previous mayor of Vancouver called for smaller-scale projects that would be more sensitive to community needs.

The Gateway project includes several separate projects, some of which are more acceptable to a larger

group of taxpayers than others. It appears that dealing with goods delivery along the north and south perimeter roads and the planned Golden Ears Bridge and the Pitt River Bridge replacement have fairly wide approval. However, I believe there is much concern about the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge, the widening of Highway 1, the attached toll fees and the lack of rapid transit as a major consideration on the new twinned bridge.

[1035]

I am concerned about this emphasis on rapid transit, and I'm therefore pleased that there will be many public meetings where citizens can give their feedback. Hopefully, there will be a large turnout for the public meetings in my riding, which are on Saturday, April 22 from 10:30 to one at the Coquitlam Public Library and Tuesday, April 25, from six to nine at Planet Ice. I will be attending both meetings if possible but definitely on April 22, and I look forward to discussing the various aspects of this project with many of my constituents.

We have had traffic gridlock problems in the Tri-Cities area for many, many years, and it appears that there may finally be a little relief on the way as TransLink moves forward with a proposed rapid transit line from Lougheed Mall to Coquitlam Centre. I look forward to more discussion on the Gateway project.

My constituents work hard to provide a decent standard of living for themselves and their families. They are mainly average British Columbians who have paid the price so this government can brag about a surplus budget. Instead of helping those who have been hard-hit by cuts over the past four years, this government continues to impose more hardship with increases in many, many fees — such as hydro fees, car insurance rates, medical service premiums, to name but a few. Those who had hoped for relief, as I stated earlier in my statement, have once again been disappointed.

I just wanted to say a few things about some of the volunteers in Coquitlam. We have many dedicated volunteers who contribute daily to our quality of life. Recently I enjoyed attending the 35th anniversary of Christmas Manor seniors residence. Named for former Coquitlam Mayor Jimmy Christmas, it has provided affordable housing for thousands of seniors over the years. The Burquitlam Lions Club assists with the fundraising that provides the extra services and the building upgrading. Congratulations to the board of directors, the staff and the residents on this wonderful anniversary.

The Tri-City Women's Resource Society is another hard-working group who continue to provide valuable services to women and their families in spite of cuts to government funding. They will again be celebrating International Women's Day on March 8 with a fundraising breakfast at which I will be speaking.

As the new opposition critic for women's programs, I am disappointed that women's centre funding was once again overlooked in the budget. A paltry \$1.7 million — coincidentally, the same amount that was

added to the Premier's office budget this year — would fund all 37 women's centres across this province. The failure to provide these funds shows a government lack of respect for women who face challenges in our province.

In spite of increases to funding for transition houses and victims of violence, the importance of the front-line volunteers and counsellors in women's centres has once again been undervalued. The resource and referral services provided by these centres are absolutely essential so women are aware of and can access the support services available to them. One wonders if the original decision to cut operating funding to women's centres was philosophical rather than financial. The women of this province deserve better.

Many environmental and streamkeeper groups provide valuable services in my community and help the local government and the provincial government in providing these services, because they are free. The Burke Mountain Naturalists offer year-round education and conservation programs, many of them centring on the Riverview lands, Colony Farm Regional Park and Pinecone Burke Provincial Park. Their numerous activities — such as guided nature walks, bird counting, nesting rehabilitation and monthly guest speakers — educate Tri-City residents to appreciate the natural world around us.

The Como Watershed Group participates in an integrated planning strategy for the watershed as well as trail planning and habitat revitalization. Recently they developed the Watershed Wise program, an education and awareness resource program designed to increase the understanding and value of urban watersheds and wild spaces. The Riverview Horticultural Centre Society continues to advocate on behalf of the preservation of the Riverview lands by conducting walkabouts, public meetings and giving input to the various levels of government. They're a small but dedicated group who continue to be vigilant in protecting and enhancing the outstanding natural resource that we have on the Riverview Hospital site.

[1040]

Sports are an important activity in Coquitlam. Recently I was asked to support the B.C. Lacrosse Association's application to host the 2008 world under-19 men's field lacrosse championships. We have now received word the application was successful, and therefore in July and August 2008, hundreds of athletes from countries such as the United States, England, Wales, Germany and Japan will gather for ten days in Coquitlam. Coquitlam has a rich lacrosse tradition, which makes it the ideal venue for this exciting event.

The Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce continues to be very active in my riding. Every year they hold an annual president's awards gala. This year Vivien Symington of Club Aviva was awarded the Outstanding Small Business of the Year Award for her commitment to offer a wide range of gymnastics experiences, including some groundbreaking work for children with disabilities.

Other winners included AMEC Dynamic Structures for outstanding business and newsmaker of the year; Ken Woodward of Unistrut Building Systems for chamber member of the year; Billy Weselowski of InnerVisions Recovery Society for a Legacy Leadership award; and Robert Farr and Jim McKinley of PTI Punch Tools Inc. for entrepreneurial spirit. The special award went to Linda Balzer, who was awarded Citizen of the Year for her community service, including her involvement with Rotary, the chamber of commerce and the Terry Fox Hometown Run.

I wanted to finish with some comments on my critic area. Last fall I was pleased to take on the opposition critic area for Childcare, as I have worked all my life towards providing a healthy and safe society for all children. High-quality, accessible, affordable child care is a huge part of that work. Unfortunately, last week's Speech from the Throne ignored this important policy area. I urge the government to put children first.

When we talk about the future, I think of our children. The qualities that we value in members of our society who contribute to healthy communities begin in the earliest childhood. Studies worldwide repeatedly tell us that early support makes a positive difference to the lives of children and their families. We all benefit from happy, healthy, educated children. The decisions we make every day affect these children.

It is so important to remember that when we talk about child care, we mean: as a supplement to parental care not a replacement. In today's society, that supplement that we call child care is not a luxury. To the majority of young families it is an absolute necessity.

I'd like to just quote briefly from a *Vancouver Sun* article from January 30, 2006. "According to a recent Vanier Institute of the Family report, although 90 percent of Canadian adults report that a two-parent home in which parents are able to raise their children is the ideal child care arrangement, 90 percent believe that a broad array of child care options should be available within a society of diverse values and...family forms." Parents say these options should include grandparents and other relatives and trusted friends, but "there is no question," the report says, "that quality child care in Canada must be improved." We should not undermine one at the expense of the other.

I'm particularly concerned about the \$633 million this province was supposed to receive over the next four years, as announced in September by the previous federal government. This agreement was intended to provide stable funding for children under six years old in British Columbia. Our new Prime Minister's \$1,200-a-year bonus to parents, while welcomed by many, clearly threatens a national child care plan that supports all children. The \$1,200 a year for children under six doesn't pay for badly needed child care spaces. As a taxable allowance it will do little to cover the real cost of child care. It will not increase the number of quality child care spaces.

For example, it will pay for roughly one month of high-quality child care in the Vancouver area. This is of little help to middle-class parents whose budgets are

already stretched to the breaking point. The Prime Minister said he will terminate child care funding to the provinces after the second year, which will be in 2007.

The Premier has said that under this new Conservative government he would continue to advocate for funding of key projects like Pacific gateway program, but he remains silent on other important programs, including the child care agreement that will help families that rely on child care.

[1045]

Premiers of Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba, which have also signed five-year funding agreements with the federal Liberals, have said loudly that they do not want to see these agreements cancelled. Quebec Premier Jean Charest has said the new federal Conservative government is welcome to give families \$1,200 a year per child, as long as those payments are in addition to the existing deal, not instead of it.

Recently the vice-chair of the B.C. government's Provincial Child Care Council, Heather Northrup, resigned her position over the B.C. Premier's unwillingness to fight for the federal child care agreement. Ms. Northrup was the parent voice on the hand-picked provincial council. She cited the B.C. government's failure to speak out on behalf of the agreement as the key reason for her resignation. She also stated her fear that parents can now expect to see escalating fees, the closing of child care centres and a reduction in the quality of child care.

On January 31 the B.C. Liberal government quietly passed the deadline for releasing their supposed child care action plan, which was due on that date — a key requirement of the federal-provincial early learning and child care agreement. I urge the Premier to work with the other provinces and the Prime Minister to try and resurrect this agreement. Termination will certainly create uncertainty for the future of B.C. programs that rely on federal funding.

Three years ago there were more than 500,000 children under 12 years of age in British Columbia. More than two-thirds of these children had mothers in the paid workforce. Of course, a percentage of these children had stay-at-home parents or grandparents to provide care, but with the cost of housing and transportation in this province, those children are in an increasing minority.

The workforce is increasingly seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Children need quality, licensed, flexible child care options. These options should include neighbourhood-based, licensed day care centres, quality family day cares and preschools. With the proliferation of shift and part-time work, many families need workplace-based child care centres, as well, that offer flexible hours.

One of my constituents, Heather McCormack, ran a licensed day care for 16 years. She originally started the day care because of frustration that she herself faced in trying to find quality child care for her own children. As a former interpreter for the deaf who pioneered providing sign-language services for the deaf and hear-

ing-impaired and who also taught English literature to the deaf, Ms. McCormack was a highly marketable mother who could not find quality child care.

Sixteen years later she speaks eloquently from a business point of view and a parent's point of view and has recently started a new business. She now does referrals of quality child care for parents who are looking for help in finding child care and in starting child care centres. She assembles information, including: operators that have had criminal record checks, programs and outings that are offered by different centres and day cares, and the disciplinary philosophies and level of education of the caregivers. This is a wonderful service for parents who can afford it, but we know that quality child care is expensive, and we know that many children in this province are still in substandard child care services.

There is a growing need for infant-toddler care as well. One-year maternity leave is fabulous, but what happens to the people who go back to work and need care for their 13-month-old? Ms. McCormack put it eloquently: "Some people are in a position where they have to work, while others simply love their jobs. They all want the balance that high-quality child care offers." Ms. McCormack believes that the government needs to change categories for licensed child care facilities to accommodate the growing number of toddlers in this province.

Coquitlam is not unique in this requirement. Parents all over the province are going back to work when maternity leave runs out. Waiting lists for quality child care spaces are already too long. Costs are rising, as is the demand.

Kelowna, with its rapidly growing population, is just one example of a city in child care crisis. Miranda Chowkin, in an article in the *Daily Courier* in January 2006, was shocked to find only ten child care centres in Kelowna, and only two had a few spaces available. Working parents in Kelowna pay close to \$1,000 a month for child care for a child under three and around \$650 for older children. Families who receive government subsidies are required to pay the difference between this day care fee and the subsidy, which is about \$400 a month. Most families on limited incomes cannot afford this.

[1050]

The Leader of the Official Opposition has called on the Premier, as well, to join with other provincial leaders in demanding that the new Conservative government live up to the existing federal agreement with the provinces on child care. This Premier has a responsibility to advocate for our children. His government promotes economic investment such as the Olympics and the Gateway project, and many studies confirm that quality child care is also a smart economic investment. This government needs to accept that and move ahead and get this child care agreement back on the road.

The YWCA in Vancouver has called on this government to honour and build on the provincial child care agreement, stating that the labour force is economically dependent on women and their contribu-

tions in the labour force. If all of the women stayed home to raise their children, the costs to this economy, according to the Y, would be staggering — an estimated \$83 billion, so don't let's think this is not as economic a thing as is the Gateway project or any of the other priorities of this government.

We have in place taxation policies and other government support that subsidize parents who stay home to care for their children. This support includes maternity and parental leave and spousal tax credits. What is missing is stable, affordable child care options for working parents in British Columbia.

Thank you very much for letting me speak today.

Hon. J. van Dongen: I'm very pleased to rise today to give my comments in response to the budget for 2006-2007, a balanced budget that I am proud to support.

I'm very honoured to be here today as the MLA for the constituency of Abbotsford-Clayburn, one of the most diverse and rapidly growing constituencies in British Columbia. Abbotsford-Clayburn is certainly well known for its traditional agriculture industry but also enjoys a thriving small business sector; active sports, recreation and arts communities; and a rapidly growing urban residential sector.

In the past year the Conference Board of Canada has declared the Abbotsford and Mission area as the fastest-growing economy in Canada. I think there are three things that contribute to that, the first being our agricultural industry. We have almost 20 percent of farm-gate sales in British Columbia within the city of Abbotsford. We have a very strong and diverse agricultural industry with significant growth in a number of our commodities, particularly the blueberry industry and the greenhouse industry, for example, that are doing very innovative things in terms of getting new products and getting into new markets around the world.

We also very recently hosted the Pacific Agri Show, which is the largest trade show and education opportunity within British Columbia for farmers and agribusiness. We had a big ag-aware dinner that was sold out a month and a half before it actually happened, where 500 of really the most progressive growers, orchardists, ranchers in British Columbia gathered, in particular, to honour outstanding young farmers that will continue the tradition of progressive and innovative agriculture in British Columbia.

This past week we hosted the council of organic associations of British Columbia in their efforts to grow and expand that important part of the agricultural industry. So we're very proud of our agricultural base.

We also have new growth and new development in other areas — namely, the Abbotsford Airport. The Abbotsford Airport is a very rapidly growing, convenient, well-connected airport that gives us great potential for growth in domestic and international flights. It was a pleasure for me to be able to fly back from Ottawa and actually fly directly to Abbotsford and save that long drive from the Vancouver Airport.

[1055]

We also have a very actively growing and developing repair and maintenance business around the airport and a number of other associated aerospace businesses. Cascade Aerospace is becoming a very important player in a very, very competitive marketplace and was a partner in recently winning a federal contract for \$400 million worth of maintenance work, which we're very proud of.

The other thing that is happening in Abbotsford and is part of a regional effort to improve our infrastructure for health care — something that has been long-awaited — is our Abbotsford regional hospital and cancer centre. This is a \$300 million-plus project, the largest construction project ever in the city of Abbotsford and in the Fraser Valley region. This building, which will house the most modern of technology and the most capable of people that we can find in our health care system, is rapidly growing. It's a very large facility. We're seeing it built right in front of our eyes with 250 workers on site — a very impressive facility that is going up as we speak.

At its peak in about May or June there will be 400 workers on site building the facility and, by all accounts, doing a really high-quality job. The MLA for Abbotsford–Mount Lehman and I met with the workers just before Christmas and had a real opportunity to tour the site and dialogue with people working on the job.

We see some major economic contributions from this new facility in that there will be a significant increase in the number of health care workers, nurses and doctors that will be working in this new hospital and cancer centre. We'll see a growth of about 400 health care professionals that will be working in that facility. We are already seeing inquiries and people making plans from all over North America to take up residence in Abbotsford in order to participate and work in this new health care facility. So we also see that as part of the dynamic growth that is taking place in our community.

The city of Abbotsford also has an energetic community committee that is working together to capture opportunities for the 2010 Winter Olympics for our athletes, our businesses and our community.

The city of Abbotsford also has caring and dedicated social service organizations that deliver a wide range of assistance to people on issues such as family support, epilepsy, helping people with mental health issues, schizophrenia, immigration, English language training and workplace fairness, just to name a few examples.

Abbotsford has also been known for its active and thriving business community with an award-winning chamber of commerce providing leadership on business and community issues.

In speaking to the budget itself, I think the first important thing to note is that, again, the budget is balanced. This follows a commitment by our government — a legislative commitment — to balance our provincial budgets every year. The fiscal plan forecasts

surpluses of \$600 million in fiscal year '06-07, \$400 million in '07-08 and \$150 million in '08-09.

It's important that our budgets remain balanced. There are very critical spending priorities that are government's responsibility to balance. But we want to live within our means on a long-term basis, and I think part of that requires prudence and a careful assessment of revenues and expenditures over time. This particular budget does that, in terms of the forecast allowances that have been established in the coming three years and in particular to envision and to plan for possible risks on the revenue side.

[1100]

British Columbia has been the beneficiary of some very significant revenues on our income side that have been there for us to pay for things like health care and education. But they're dependent on continuity and consistency in these prices and natural gas prices. Natural gas prices, for example, have been very volatile — a big range of swings in gas prices in the past year. The Minister of Finance has built that into the fiscal plan. A \$1 change in the price of natural gas can result in a \$300 million change in revenues to the provincial government. So that is a very significant factor that I'm pleased the minister has built into the budget.

We see that there is a lot of surplus natural gas in storage right now — a record amount of gas in storage — so we expect further softening in prices. But I think it is important to emphasize that these resource revenues are the result of an aggressive program by the Minister of Energy and Mines, his ministry and the industry to grow our resource industry and develop those revenues that will help pay for important public services such as health care and education.

One of the highlights and features of this budget is that our debt levels remain stable. Debt is forecast in the three-year plan at \$27.9 billion for '06-07, with a slight increase to \$29.9 billion in '08-09. Again, it remains a principle of our government to maintain debt at affordable and manageable levels. One of the key measures to monitor that is to compare our taxpayer-supported debt-to-GDP ratio over time, something that is very important to our credit agencies and very important to ensuring that we have competitive costs for borrowed money and that we get the best possible interest rates that can be achieved. Our taxpayer-supported debt-to-GDP ratio continues to trend down slightly over the three years contemplated in this budget.

The budget documents also note a change in the way that that ratio is calculated. This is a reflection of the fact that our government, early on in its mandate in 2001 — in fact, in the first 90 days — committed itself not only to balanced budgets, but also to generally accepted accounting principles established by the accounting profession, so that British Columbians can have confidence in how the books are actually laid out by the government. It's the accounting profession that sets out the accounting standards for government in doing that. We're the first province in Canada to do that, and certainly we have dealt with a lot of wrinkles

in that process that have sometimes had implications for management of government. But again, having that independent advice and recommendation as to how the books should be established is intended to give the public confidence, and I'm pleased to support that.

Implicit in strong revenues is a strong economy. Our economy does remain strong, with a very low unemployment rate — in fact, the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years — a strong domestic industry and continued focus by our government in developing exports on a broad basis.

The budget is based on an estimated 3.6-percent growth for 2005 in our GDP and 3.3 percent for 2006, with a medium-term estimate of 3.1 percent — again, an attempt to be cautious and realistic in our expectations that, over time, the economy is not always in the boom part of the cycle and that we have to anticipate ongoing changes in the economy and the mix of activity that we have.

In 2005 British Columbia led the provinces in employment growth: 67,800 new jobs, an increase of 3.3 percent.

[1105]

I'm going to give way to the member that wants to make an introduction, Madam Speaker.

D. Hayer: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

D. Hayer: It gives me great pleasure today to introduce 45 students from grade five visiting here from Erma Stephenson Elementary School in my riding of Surrey-Tynehead. Joining them are their teachers Ms. Lisa Warnock and Mrs. Kristi Marasa, as well as several parents who have brought them here and volunteered to learn about the government. Will the House please give them a round of applause to make them welcome.

Debate Continued

Hon. J. van Dongen: I'm just resuming my comments about the economy. We've seen strong investment in the economy. Real business investment in British Columbia increased by 5.9 percent in 2005 — strong investment in machinery and equipment, non-residential construction and, as we know, a very strong real estate and construction industry as well.

Over the medium term the Economic Forecast Council, which is an outside group of 13 private sector economists that advise our Minister of Finance on an ongoing basis, indicate their belief that B.C.'s strong domestic economy will continue to be supported by strong job growth, increased residential and non-residential construction, healthy consumer spending, continued demand for B.C.'s natural resources, growing trade with Asia and B.C.'s improved fiscal position

— plus an anticipated buildup towards the 2010 Olympics.

We have a lot to be proud of in terms of the economic activity and the employment levels we've developed. As I said, that is an important foundation for the revenue side of this balanced budget for 2006.

I want to now make some comments on the spending side, starting with the largest single expenditure in government, and that is our important health care system, our public health care system. In this budget we're adding an additional \$301 million to the budget, bringing it to \$11.9 billion. It's important to emphasize billion dollars. Even \$1 billion is something that most of us can't comprehend. This is almost \$12 billion.

When I was first elected to this position, the health care budget in this province was slightly under \$6 billion. So in a ten-year period of time we've seen a doubling of the health care budget, basically reflecting increased aging of our population, increased costs for technology, major increases in compensation to many of the health care providers such as doctors and nurses, and a continuing effort by our government to improve services to everyone in our communities who needs our health care system.

I find that many of us, when we're in good health, don't always appreciate the health care system. But when you need the system, when you need some kind of health care service, very often it then becomes the most important service in government. Health care is 44 percent of our budget in British Columbia. That figure ten years ago was 33 percent, Madam Speaker, so you can see the budget growing in absolute terms — doubling from \$6 billion to \$12 billion — and see an increase as a percentage of the total provincial budget, which puts increased pressure on other parts of our budget.

I want to highlight a couple of things. One is the ActNow B.C. program, which is a \$15 million part of our Ministry of Health budget. It really is an effort by our government to work more on the prevention side of health care to provide a range of activities and programs that will improve prevention, will get people involved in taking more responsibility for their own health care and will make us more active and conscious of what we eat. It includes things like the school fruit and vegetable program, which will be rolled out in more schools in the coming year.

[1110]

The next major spending item in our budget is education, both kindergarten-to-grade-12 and post-secondary. Again, we see significant increases of investment in those budgets of \$112 million for 2006. That is in addition to over \$400 million that we will be adding in the next three years. We see this at a time when in the past eight or so years we have seen declines in population of students in the K-to-12 system. We've seen the significant increases in spending, so every year we are seeing across British Columbia fewer students in education K-to-12 but more money being invested for those students. In school district 34 we continue to see slight increases in the number of stu-

dents, reflecting the continued residential growth in our community.

In addition to health care and education, both K-to-12 and university, this budget puts very significant dollars into the capital side — not just operating dollars, but capital spending. We continue to make major investments in building classrooms, in our transportation system and in our health care facilities.

I just want to highlight some of those. In building classrooms, we will invest nearly \$3.4 billion in infrastructure and our health care system. That includes K-to-12 and universities over the next three years, \$955 million to replace, renovate and expand K-to-12 facilities, and we will continue the \$1.5 billion program that we started a few years ago to upgrade schools that don't meet the necessary standards for earthquake. That number also includes \$2.4 billion for post-secondary institutions with new or expanded facilities all over British Columbia — Northern Lights College in Fort St. John, Douglas College, Simon Fraser University, College of the Rockies in Cranbrook, University of Victoria and University of British Columbia. I think that sometimes we don't realize the degree and amount of investment that is taking place in our education system.

In the area of transportation, one of the things that we did early on in the part of our term is develop a provincial plan for transportation. I recall at the time that the ticket for this was about \$10 billion in terms of transportation projects when we prioritized the needs all over British Columbia. This budget invests significant dollars in a whole range of transportation projects. Again, it's always an important but critical effort to try and balance the needs in communities all across the province, both in rural British Columbia and in the lower mainland. I find very often that there are different perceptions about the needs in each of these regions. In the lower mainland we do have a very significant population and do have very significant traffic pressures both in terms of moving people — commuters and transit needs — and in the area of moving goods to our various port facilities.

We've got investments taking place in the Kicking Horse Canyon project, phase two, a major project there to improve safety on that highway, and the new Pitt River Bridge, which is one relatively small component of the Pacific gateway announcement that we will be continuing to roll out together with the federal government.

The Sea to Sky Highway. We see major improvements working through on that highway — a \$600 million project. I had occasion to visit Squamish for the eagle festival with my family in early January, and I had a chance to see some of the major upgrades happening on the Sea to Sky Highway. Certainly, parts of that project were finished a year and a half ahead of time, showing the kind of energy and commitment that the construction industry is bringing to that project.

[1115]

The new bridge for Kelowna — again, a serious choke point for traffic in the Kelowna area. I've had occasion to visit there as well in recent months. A lot of

work is being done on roads in the north to support the growing oil and gas sector. If we don't have the roads and the infrastructure to get oil and gas rigs in and out, we don't enjoy the revenues of that resource sector.

In my own riding I want to highlight the Mt. Lehman Interchange, which has been progressing very diligently. It's a partnership between the city and the province — a \$24 million project expected to be finished, I think, in October this year. But we already see some great improvements taking place in that interchange.

Also, Highway 11, which the member for Abbotsford–Mount Lehman and myself use on a regular basis. The second phase of that is now in the preload stage — another \$24 million project. It's a very important link between Mission on the north side of the river and Abbotsford and will be an important link for people in Mission to use the great new services that will be afforded by the Abbotsford hospital and cancer centre.

I've mentioned the Pacific gateway project. This is a far-reaching, forward-looking effort to plan our needs for moving goods, in particular, and people to our growing port facilities. This is going to be an important part of B.C.'s growing economy in the future, giving us the ability to take advantage of the rapidly growing Asia-Pacific economies, including China. We very often talk about China and its growing presence on the global stage in terms of trade. I also want to emphasize that countries like Japan, which is our second-largest trading partner, continue to have a significant trading influence in our economy.

When I speak about capital expenditures, I want to highlight one particular investment in the city of Abbotsford that's in this budget. That is a new \$13 million high-security level-three containment laboratory, which will be an expansion of our Animal Health Centre in Abbotsford — a provincial animal health centre that has a high level of capabilities to monitor, test and manage various types of diseases.

This budget will also contribute additional dollars to the operating side of that operation. This expansion really has its roots in the experience that we had with the avian influenza incident in 2004 where we collaborated closely with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to bring that very contagious, high-pathogen virus under control. Out of that we learned as a province and as a country that it is important to have the right facilities in the regions where we have agriculture and to be able to react very quickly in terms of testing and ongoing monitoring.

[1120]

The quick response that was made possible by partnering with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to put additional dollars and people in facilities on a very short-term, immediate basis when we had the avian influenza incident helped us to bring it under control. This investment will significantly expand our capability, will provide safety for workers — which is very important when you're dealing with potentially dangerous pathogens — and will also improve our response.

I think that having the right facilities will be a good complement to the skilled technicians and veterinarians that we have at the Animal Health Centre. In working with Dr. Ron Lewis and his staff, I was very proud of the job that they've done for us on the avian influenza incident and many other disease control issues that they look after for the province.

I want to now comment on one of the key things that the Minister of Finance tried to focus on in this budget, and that is providing services to children and families. In the budget that was tabled in September, she focused on seniors, but this budget puts in place some very significant additional dollars to improve services for children — a total of \$421 million over four years to provide support for vulnerable children, to enhance services to children with special needs and to provide better support for caregivers and family members. Of this \$421 million, \$72 million will add more social workers and other front-line staff and provide additional support to families, parents of foster children and that kind of thing.

I want to say that I appreciate the great relationship that we have in our constituency office with the Ministry of Children and Families in our region, and I know this additional support in the way of more social workers will be welcomed by them. Of this \$421 million, there will be \$100 million set aside to enhance the child protection system and, particularly, to target early intervention. We all know that early intervention pays off in terms of supporting children at risk and families where it may be obvious at an early stage that there could be difficulties in the future.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

There is \$34 million to increase funding for the child and youth mental health plan and to better serve the approximately 140,000 children and youth in British Columbia with mental health disorders. It's my experience that mental health is a very serious and pervasive issue in our society and, I think, very often is at the root of situations of low income or people that end up in prison, because they haven't had the right assistance to deal with mental health issues. I'm pleased that our government is putting additional resources into this area.

H. Lali: I rise to speak on the 2006-2007 budget. This budget has been described by a number of different adjectives by different people, and after having a closer look at this, there's one word that aptly and accurately describes what this budget is all about. It's about denial. This is a budget from a government that is in denial, that continues to put forward budgets that do nothing to enhance the quality of life for people in rural British Columbia, for seniors, for youth and for single moms. It continues to deny the problems that this government created when it got into office in 2001. The negative effects of those have been surfacing for the last few years now and are beginning to surface on a greater scale. This government continues to deny that

it is happening and continues to deny that it is as a result of its negative policies of the last five years.

We hear members of the government side keep talking about what this budget is all about and what it's going to do. More appropriately, we should talk about who this budget is not for and what it's not going to do because of all the people who have been left behind.

[1125]

This is not a budget for seniors. This is a government that has taken so much away from seniors in the last five years, whether it's Pharmacare or lack of long-term care beds or not being able to have an appropriate health care system for those who need it now. They are doing very little to actually put back what has been taken, but it doesn't talk about seniors. It's not looking after the interests of seniors in this province.

This is not a budget for families either. As much as the Liberals like to talk about how much money they're putting into children and families, the fact of the matter is they have taken so much more away from children and families over the last five years. They now — after they've put a little bit of it back — want the people in British Columbia to give them a huge amount of credit for doing something for children and families, when in reality it's not even up to par in terms of what they have taken away.

This is not a budget for rural British Columbia. We're still waiting for the Premier and the cabinet to bring forward a budget that really would speak to the heartlands. Instead, what we see is the continued draining of resources and capital from rural British Columbia into Victoria and Vancouver and very little of it actually coming back for the residents of rural British Columbia.

This is not a budget for aboriginal reconciliation. We saw the government, last year, put in \$100 million. Finally they're going to put something on the table after taking hundreds of millions of dollars away in terms of programs and funding for aboriginal programs. They finally put \$100 million of that back for capacity-building and bringing the aboriginal people to the table in terms of doing treaty negotiations and other business that has to be done, but that was it. It was last year, and this is this year, and there's nothing there. There's nothing next year, nothing the year after that. Actually, when they look at the title Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, we're still wondering where those relations and the reconciliation are. There's no commitment from this government to support the aboriginal people in this province.

This is not a budget for women. The Ministry of Women's Equality was eliminated as one of the first acts by this Premier, this cabinet, this Liberal government when they took office in 2001. To this day we're still waiting to see... Even with surplus budgets coming up for the Liberals, the Ministry of Women's Equality is a thing of the past for this government and women's programs.

You see that the Premier's office has had the largest increase of any budget, in terms of the Premier's opera-

tions. For the \$1.7 million increase to the Premier's budget, for that amount of money, all of those women's centres that were closed, the funding that was drastically cut.... If they would have put that money in there, I think there would be a lot of women in this province who would be happy in terms of the services it would be able to deliver, but there's no commitment from this Premier or from this Liberal government.

Again, this is not a budget for single moms. When it comes to child care, we see that as Prime Minister Harper is reneging on the federal government's promise that Prime Minister Martin had left behind for a child care program, Quebec, Ontario and other provinces are jumping up and down and screaming that there should be a child care program, but this Premier has been silent. He agrees with the Prime Minister through his silent acquiescence.

It is the opposition and single moms and the women's groups across this province who are speaking up and saying to this Premier and to this Liberal government that the Premier needs to take a stand alongside the other provinces and hold the Prime Minister to task on a promise that was made by a previous federal government in terms of executing an effective child care program, but we won't see that happening from this Premier.

This is not a budget for youth. As much as this government likes to brag how good it is for youth, when you look at the reality, it speaks something different than what we hear from the members opposite. For instance, they talk about 25,000 new spaces, but there are no new seats being added to the colleges and universities with this budget. The government announced these 25,000 new seats in 2004, but that announcement today does not add more seats. There's nothing in this budget to make it easier for students to go to college or to university.

[1130]

Then when you look at tuition, fees have more than doubled, and the provincial student grant program has been completely eliminated by this government. Enrolment continues to decline at colleges in smaller communities throughout British Columbia. It's a real shame.

This government, which tries to call itself the education province for setting up an education province.... When you look at the reality, it's doing everything it can to gut education, especially for those residents, those youth, who live in rural communities. They'll have a tough enough time, trying to travel hundreds and hundreds of miles to get to urban centres to access education, only then to find out that their tuition fees have more than doubled. There are no supports for students, and especially for aboriginal students, who have it even tougher. When those students that come from aboriginal reserves, where the unemployment rates are five, six, seven, eight, ten times higher than they are in the communities, in the municipalities.... They're even having more of a tough time trying to access education, but this government does nothing to support that.

This is not a budget for workers either. This government continues to gut those rights that were earned by workers in this province. It is on a drunken spree of union-bashing and eliminating unions and contracts, ripping up contracts and deunionizing workplaces, contracting out. HEU workers, for instance, were rehired at privatized jobs at half the rate they were making before. So they've gone from family-supporting jobs to minimum-wage jobs. There's no commitment by this government to workers in this province.

This is also not a budget for immigrants. There's no funding for settlement programs by this government. Also, when you look at ESL funding, which was drastically cut by this government.... There have also been drastic cuts to ESL training at B.C.'s colleges since 2001. For example, at Vancouver Community College in East Vancouver, which is B.C.'s largest public English-training institution, there's been a 40-percent decline in enrolment since 2001, because classes aren't available. That's the kind of commitment that this government has to immigrants — or should I say the lack of commitment by this government?

Let's talk a little bit about what this budget is actually about. This is a budget for the haves and not for the have-nots. This government continues to reward those people in society who need it the least or who are more able to fend for themselves and do not need any kind of government assistance or intervention. This is what this is about. This government is about established interests. This government is about those interests that subsidized their election platforms during elections. That's who they are looking after. They're looking after the top 10 percent — the richest 10 percent in society — and big corporations. That's who they're looking after. They're not looking after the little guy. They're not looking after the ordinary worker.

This is a budget for a government in continued denial, not one that is proactive. I talked earlier on in my opening statement that if there's one word that would describe what this budget is about, it's about denial. This budget is about continued denial. There are so many problems, whether it's in health care or in the education field or in children and families or aboriginal reserves. Everywhere you look there are problems and there are crises, but this government continues in a state of denial and will not look at anything proactive to make sure that those issues and problems are going to be alleviated.

This is a budget of an uncaring Premier and an uncaring Liberal government, not one providing hope for those who need it the most. I'd like any of the Liberals to stand up and tell me where it is that they're actually providing hope for people in British Columbia, because they are not. They are not providing hope for the people, because that's what they are looking for.

[1135]

This government talks about the new era of prosperity and how everybody is benefiting, but when you look at the stats, when you look at the reality, the rich are getting richer. Those 10 percent that I talked about, that is their universe. The 10 percent where all of the

funding for their elections comes from — they're looked after quite well. So the state of affairs in this province is the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and that middle class is shrinking.

When you look at the tax breaks and the tax incentives, they are not for the middle class. Yes, they did the bottom two rungs of the lower-income cycle, but they certainly gave the biggest tax breaks, starting in 2002, shortly after they took office, to the richest 10 percent of the population in British Columbia. The middle class and the lower-income class continue to suffer at the hands of this government. Again, this is a budget for corporate British Columbia and not for ordinary workers and their families, and I've said that earlier.

People in my hometown of Merritt, people in my constituency are still waiting for the supposed dividends of this new era of prosperity. In a community like Merritt, yes, the unemployment rate is low — the Liberals like to brag about that — but when you look at the poverty levels in that community, it is one of the poorest communities in the Thompson-Okanagan region. That's the reality. The dollar just isn't stretching as far because of all of those minimum-wage jobs that are coming up. The family-supporting jobs — the good, union, family-supporting jobs — are being eliminated by this government. Actually, since the Liberals took office in 2001, upwards of 150 good, family-supporting jobs — public sector jobs — were eliminated by this government.

This is a budget designed for protecting the status quo, and not for those wanting positive change and a brighter economic future for their kids. Parents want to be able to know that they can actually afford an education for their children when they go off to college and university. People want to know that there are going to be quality jobs available for these students once they get out of university, so they themselves can support their own families instead of having to go out and look for two or three or four jobs, as so many British Columbians are doing right now.

But that's not what this government is interested in, this Liberal government. It still continues to do the same old, same old, and doesn't care for the future of our students who will be coming out of colleges and universities or for those youths who will not be going to university or college either.

This isn't a budget about health care. When you look at the health authorities... The Liberal government has set it up as a buffer so that they don't have to take the blame for anything. When anything goes wrong, they can point their fingers at the health authorities and say: "Go talk to the health authorities." But when you go to talk to the health authorities about their problems, they say: "We don't have a mandate. We don't have the funding. That would be the ministry's responsibility. Go talk to the minister. Go lobby the Premier and the cabinet to get those things done." Yet they put the health authority in place as a buffer so that they don't have to take the flack. That's why things are not getting done in this province.

When you look at the small communities throughout my riding — like Keremeos, Princeton, Hope, Merritt, Logan Lake, Lytton, Lillooet and about 50 other smaller ones — there's a lack of access to health care because those health care services have been pulled out of those small communities. They have gone to the regional centres like Kelowna, Kamloops, Chilliwack and Vancouver. There are so many people in Yale-Lillooet who are either below the poverty line or just above the poverty line. When you're on welfare or you're a working poor or a lower-income individual or a senior, you don't have that access. You don't have the money to be able to access the transportation that you need to get out to Kamloops, Kelowna, Chilliwack or Vancouver to access your medical services.

[1140]

If they have to use an ambulance to get out to one of these places and are stuck with the ambulance bill, they can't pay. So many of these people are going untreated because of their inability to pay some of the user fees that this government has brought in, as well as the access to transportation for those procedures that are not available in Merritt, Hope or Princeton. These people have to go to Penticton or Kelowna or Kamloops or Chilliwack to get their procedures. They forgo getting those procedures, because they don't have the money to get out there. This government has shown no care — not at all — in terms of helping those individuals in rural British Columbia.

That is just my constituency I'm talking about. There are so many rural constituencies in this province and hundreds and hundreds of small communities where that problem is repeated over and over and over again. And all you get from the officials at the IHA or the other health authorities, whether it's the Fraser Health Authority or elsewhere, and from this government is denial and denial. We get up here in question period and pose questions to the Minister of Health, and all he repeats is that same denial.

Nobody wants to take responsibility. The regional health authorities won't take the responsibility. Neither will the Minister of Health, neither will the ministry, and neither will the cabinet — and especially not this Premier. One has to ask the question: does anybody on those opposite benches actually care about the health and well-being of the people of British Columbia — for those seniors, for those lower-income individuals who don't have access?

We don't see anybody standing up on the Liberal side being a champion for those people who can't get affordable health care and can't get access to health care because this government has put that health care out of their reach.

It really puts an untruth to the promise that was made by this Liberal government — health care when you need it, where you need it — because it's not happening. It's not happening in my constituency. It's not happening in the Kootenays constituencies, the Cariboo, the north, the north Island and so many other places in this province.

When I look at transportation, this is a budget for urban British Columbia, the lower mainland, and not for those living north and east of Hope, British Columbia. Hon. Speaker, when you look at all of these megaprojects that the government wants to embark upon — the \$3 billion Gateway project — they're in the lower mainland. The Sea to Sky Highway, which has now ballooned from the first \$600 million to almost \$1.5 billion, is in the lower mainland. Just recently there was the announcement about a future \$2 billion plan for the George Massey Tunnel and area. Again, it's in the lower mainland.

We've been waiting for five years, and we're wondering: what's in it for rural British Columbia? Members opposite mentioned some of the projects that were long overdue that are being executed, and that's it. When you look at the Coquihalla Highway system, when you look at our secondary roads, when you look at the state of the bridges and some of the side roads and smaller rural roads in rural British Columbia, you're finding that they continue to be neglected. But the Premier has no problem finding \$6 billion for megaprojects all in the lower mainland at the neglect of rural British Columbia and Vancouver Island. It's about time that we saw some fairness and balance in terms of the transportation projects that this government is delivering. It's time that this government actually starts looking after the heartlands.

This is a budget that continues to reward, as I mentioned earlier, those who need government help the least and not the disadvantaged, who are looking for a caring and compassionate government. I've talked about seniors, and I've talked about youth and women and immigrants. Then there are so many other groups in there that this government is completely ignoring — for instance, the people with mental illnesses and those folks who are abused and children who are abused either by loved ones or when they are left in others' care. When we talk about those issues.... This government doesn't raise them. It doesn't raise them at any avenue, and one wonders why.

[1145]

There are people out there who are looking at this government to help them. The physically and the mentally disabled are another group of people in there, but there's very little that this government is doing to ensure putting in effective programs and helping these individuals.

As I was talking about this budget to some people in my riding, an individual actually came up and said to me: "This is a budget for the greedy, not for the needy." I looked at it for a minute, and I thought: you know, for the last five years that's what it's all been about, because this government continues to look after the interests of those people in our society, the richest 10 percent, who are the very people who need government help the least. But when government is supposed to be there for those people who are in those disadvantaged categories, this government is nowhere to be seen in terms of helping those people.

We've seen these members of the opposite side continually talk about the economy and say how great it is, and they like to take all sorts of credit for it when in actual fact the credit goes elsewhere. When you look at the oil and gas moneys that were coming in a big wave for this government, it was an initiative, the oil and gas initiative, put in place by a previous NDP government to fix the oil and gas roads. It was \$102 million project over five years.

When I was the Minister of Transportation and Highways, it was put in place at that time. The oil and gas royalties restructuring was done by Dan Miller, who was the minister for the north at the time, and as a result, this government is reaping the dividends.

This Liberal Party, when they were on this side of the House, railed against the NDP day in and day out in terms of gaming. They were saying: "Oh, we're seeing a massive expansion of gaming." The member for Kamloops-North Thompson got up day in and day out on his high horse about that. Yet when this Liberal Party got into government, they were the ones who had the massive expansion of gaming, more than doubled in this province, and as a result, you're seeing the money from gaming coming in — not to mention, also, the lowest interest rates for a long, long time that are spurring a construction boom in this province.

You're seeing all of these factors and others — with the economy, federal transfers. When the NDP was in office, we had massive cuts to our transfers, and those transfers are now beginning to come back. When you look at all of that, all of those things are bringing enough money into the provincial coffers that it's exactly equivalent to the amount of the surplus that this government has had.

When you look and you ask Liberals to name one initiative that this Liberal government put in place that has helped the economy, not a single one can stand up and actually point to one — not a single one. But when you look at the reality, all around you see homelessness has increased more than 100 percent under this Liberal government. Food bank lineups in some communities have more than tripled since this Liberal government took office. Real incomes are falling, and it's as a direct result of the policies that the Liberals have put in.

They'll brag about jobs. They'll talk about how we have the lowest unemployment rate in a generation. Well, if they would look back to 2001, when the NDP left office, at that time we had the lowest unemployment rate in a generation as well. Their policies skyrocketed that unemployment rate to nearly 10 percent, and it was the fortune of the Canadian economy and all of the things that I've talked about that turned it around.

The kind of jobs that are being created in British Columbia are low-paying, minimum-wage jobs — not the quality jobs, the family-supporting jobs. Those aren't the ones that are being created. It's the McJobs that are being created.

They like to call this the education province. Again, the reality is the increase in tuition fees, the lack of

spaces, the 120 schools that were closed and the 2,500 teachers that were fired. So what we've got now are overcrowded classes — 9,000-plus in this province — and this happened after the Liberals took office.

If you look at health, the wait-lists are increasing. Seniors can't even die in dignity anymore. Acute care beds have been cut, and with the surplus now, the Liberal government refused to reinstate acute care beds in those communities where they were taken out. Again, we still haven't seen the promise of 5,000 long-term care beds come into fruition.

[1150]

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

The fact of the matter is that those who paid for and built our world-class health care system — our seniors — are now being systematically denied access to health care, now that it is their hour of need for health care.

When you look at the Liberals, they'll talk about how they put so much money into children and families, after they took hundreds of millions of dollars away, but we still have the highest child poverty rates of any province in this country. That is a blot on the record of this Liberal government, and it is something they should be ashamed of.

You know, the Premier made much ado about the fact that he was creating a heartland strategy and how things were going to be wonderful in the areas north and east of Hope. We're still waiting for that strategy to unfold, if indeed they have a strategy. But what we're finding is even now, with the pine beetle infestation that is taking place and the positive attention that is needed, the foremost attention that is needed from this government is not there because they still don't have a strategy in place.

When that pine beetle cut is not there any more, what are those rural communities going to do? How are they going to survive? How are those people going to be able to pay for their mortgages and car payments? How are they going to be able to send their kids to school if they don't have a job?

This government still has no strategy in place to deal with the negative effects of the pine beetle once that cut is gone in our forest sector, and those forest-dependent communities need that. They need that from this government — to start planning and to start a strategy — and it isn't happening. We're still waiting for it.

We're still waiting for the transportation dollars to come in to rural British Columbia, into the heartlands

— and it's not there. We're still waiting for health care when you need it and where you need it. It isn't happening. Wait-lists have soared, especially in rural British Columbia, due to the negative policies of this government. We're still waiting in the heartlands for this Premier to have some heart and put in a strategy over there.

We're still waiting on the education front for this government to make it easier for access not only to secondary but also to post-secondary education for students in rural British Columbia. So many schools in those rural communities have been eliminated, where kids have to be bused in for an hour and a half or two hours, one way, every day. They're still waiting for some alleviation from this government in terms of the pain that they have to suffer.

People are still looking in rural British Columbia for this government to put some heart in the heartlands because what they've seen is this uncaring Premier and this uncaring government tear the heart out of the heartlands over the last four or five years. He's turned the heartlands into the "hurtlands," and we're still waiting. Methinks it isn't going to happen in this term. People are going to get their change in the next election.

Hon. C. Richmond: I look forward to taking my place in debate on this budget and addressing many, many topics, including some of the wonderful things that are in this budget.

Yes, I will address the heartland skills and training. It's nice to see that the member for Yale-Lillooet really likes that term now. He used it several times in his speech. I will be addressing that and comments about tax reductions and some of the wonderful things that are going on. But noting the time, Mr. Speaker, I'll have to reserve my speech till later today, so I move adjournment of the debate.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: The House stands adjourned until two o'clock this afternoon.

The House adjourned at 11:54 a.m.

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Published by British Columbia Hansard Services, and printed under the authority of the Speaker by the Queen's Printer, Victoria. Rates: single issue, \$2.85; per calendar year, mailed daily, \$298. GST extra. Agent: Crown Publications Inc., 521 Fort St., Victoria, B.C. V8W 1E7. Telephone: (250) 386-4636. Fax: 386-0221.

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