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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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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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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2006

The House met at 2:04 p.m.

Introductions by Members

Hon. C. Richmond: In the gallery today I have two very, very good friends visiting from Kamloops, Joan and Murray Mason. Murray is a trumpet player in that great musical organization known as the Kamloops Rube Band. They are here with their good friends Mr. and Mrs. Vidal, and I would like the House to please make them welcome.

C. James: There are a number of members of the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Local 378 in the chamber today. This union, as people may know, represents employees at ICBC, Accenture, B.C. Hydro, Terasen Gas, BCAA and other employers. It's my pleasure to introduce the executive members: Andy Ross, president; Lori Mayhew, secretary-treasurer; David Black, vice-president; Pat Junnila, a vice-president. Would the members please make them welcome.

[1405]

R. Cantelon: I rise today on behalf of my colleague the Minister of Children and Family Development, who is travelling to Ottawa. It is an honour for me today to make an introduction of more than 50 students and teachers from the great Georges P. Vanier Secondary School, located in the beautiful Comox Valley. I would like to ask the House to join me in making them feel welcome.

L. Krog: I would ask the House to make welcome three members of the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union — representatives here today: Guy Beaulieu, Audrey Barnes and Sharon Thomas.

I. Black: It is my pleasure this afternoon to introduce Heather Dalcourt, who is a senior member of the British Columbia business community. She is a leader in her field of human resources, and she is currently serving as vice-president of human resources of Open Solutions Canada, which is also my former employer. She is a colleague, a mentor and a dear friend. Would the House please join me in making her feel most welcome.

J. Horgan: I have the pleasure to introduce today Jinny Sims, the president of the B.C. Teachers Federation. She's joining us in the precinct today.

Accompanying her from Parksville-Qualicum is Jill McAffrey. Would the House please make both of them welcome.

S. Simpson: I'm pleased to join with the Leader of the Opposition in also welcoming some members of the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union, who are here meeting with members of the Legis-

lature. Marilyn Bridges, Dave Park and Steve Toomey are proud employees of some of our Crown corporations, which we're all proud to keep.

C. Trevena: I'm very pleased to introduce two constituents, friends and supporters who live on Malcolm Island: Jennifer Lash, who established Living Oceans Society, and Oonagh O'Connor, who works for Living Oceans. Both are committed professionally and personally to the rural community in which they live, bringing up their children there and investing in the present and the future. I hope the House will make them very welcome.

C. Puchmayr: Today it is a great pleasure to introduce a UBC social work practicum student who is volunteering in my office in New Westminster two days a week: the brilliant Erin Mackintosh. Make her feel welcome.

S. Hammell: I have a number of introductions. In the gallery is Marilyn Bridges, a constituent of mine, newly moved from Nanaimo. I welcome her to Surrey-Green Timbers, and I would ask the House to welcome her here.

I also have two members of the BCTF executive: John Chisamore and Lynda Toews. They're both in the gallery. Would the House also please welcome them.

R. Austin: It's my pleasure today to introduce three gentlemen who are visiting here in the precinct: Chris Ayling, Chris McPherson and Dave McPherson. They are also members of the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union. I ask the House to please make them welcome.

J. Horgan: I appreciate the second opportunity to introduce in the gallery today the most important woman in Malahat-Juan de Fuca, who I'm fairly confident voted for me. I'd like the House to please welcome my alpha and my omega, the love of my life, Ellie Horgan.

B. Ralston: There's not much left between the alpha and the omega, I'm afraid.

I'd like to introduce today Lori Winstanley, who is currently the communications director for COPE 378 after a distinguished career in both public and private sectors and, not coincidentally, an important role in the last campaign. She was my campaign manager. Please welcome Lori Winstanley.

[1410]

Tributes

SADHU SINGH DHESI

D. Hayer: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to advise this House that Mr. Sadhu Singh Dhese, a prominent community leader, passed away this Monday, February 27, 2006. Mr. Dhese was actually involved in many community

organizations. He served as president of Five Rivers Community Services Society and also as a senior executive member of Akali Singh Sikh Temple in Vancouver and had been serving there since 1975. He addressed many issues that affect our Canadians here. I would like to send our condolences to his family.

**Statements
(Standing Order 25B)**

WILLIAMS CREEK RESCUE

R. Austin: I rise today to commend the heroic actions of Ernie Sande, who resides in my riding of Skeena. This winter Mr. Sande, at great risk to his own life, dove into Williams Creek to rescue a man who was trapped in the currents in the river. I'm pleased to say that both men survived.

Williams Creek flows into beautiful Lakelse Lake close to where Highway 37 passes over the creek. Williams Creek contains dangerous currents and logjams and has taken lives in the past. In the summer of 2004 a young boy was tubing down the river when he was caught in a logjam, and tragically, he did not survive.

On the evening of Sunday, February 12, while driving on Highway 37, a car skidded on black ice and flew off the bridge into Williams Creek. While the driver was escaping from the car, a second car skidded in the same place but managed to stop safely at the side of the highway. The driver noticed there was something in the water and pulled out his flashlight. He was shining his flashlight in the water of Williams Creek when Mr. Sande drove by and stopped. Seeing there was a man trapped in the current in the creek, Mr. Sande dove into the water, taking a great risk and endangering his own life.

The man in the current was treading water but appeared to be tiring. Mr. Sande swam up to him and threw out his jacket for the man to grab. Hypothermia and exhaustion appeared to be taking its toll, and the man didn't appear to understand what Mr. Sande was doing. After the fourth toss, the man grabbed the jacket. Mr. Sande swam to safety, dragging the man with him. By this time other help had arrived and assisted the man who drove into the river. Mr. Sande simply got into his truck and drove home.

I ask that all members of the House join me in acknowledging Ernie Sande's selfless act of bravery.

PARTICIPATION BY BRAD LENNEA
ON PARALYMPIC SKI TEAM

R. Hawes: In 1991 Mission's Brad Lennea was a normal, healthy 19-year-old. He was athletic, an avid skier, and undoubtedly, like all teenagers, he felt invincible. Then — boom — a tragic car accident severed his spinal cord and left him a paraplegic. I can't possibly comprehend what could have gone through his mind in the following years, but as a parent I can imagine the anguish and despair of his parents Al and Barb — all

their hopes for him gone in the split second of that terrible car wreck.

Three years later Brad discovered sit-skiing. By 2002 he had been named to the national development team, where he began competing in World Cup events. For the 2003-2004 season he was part of the World Cup team, and this week Brad Lennea will join athletes with disabilities from all across Canada to compete in the Paralympic Games in Turin, Italy. He'll be competing in speed events, where his specialty is the super-G.

Brad says: "Sport has given me a life. I wasn't sure what to expect from life before. The more I got involved with disabled skiing, the more it consumed my life. Now every decision I make in life revolves around skiing." His personal motto is: "Don't just sit there watching life go by. Get out and ride."

And Al and Barb, his parents? I don't think you could find a prouder set of parents. Brad and the other Paralympians truly symbolize what the Olympics are all about: the pursuit of excellence and being the best that you can be.

Imagine for a moment the courage it must take to overcome the kinds of obstacles faced by our disabled athletes. These are truly remarkable people who have risen far above their personal impediments to provide an example of dedication, commitment and fortitude for all of us. Please join me in wishing Brad Lennea and his teammates the best in Turin.

Bring home the gold, Brad.

[1415]

NANAIMO CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

L. Krog: I'm proud today to talk to the House about the child development centre. This was a society incorporated in 1967 by a number of parents in Nanaimo whose children had special needs. The mission was to work with children and youth with special needs and their families. Today it serves over 1,600 families annually in Nanaimo. It has 700 active files at any time. It has a staff of 49 regular employees and 25 support workers. It provides all sorts of assistance to families working with occupational therapy, feeding and toileting — in other words, the kids who need the most assistance in our society.

Seventy-five percent of its budget comes from the government — the Ministry of Children and Family Development — from the Vancouver Island Health Authority and from the local school district, and 25 percent comes from fundraising. They sponsor annually what is known as the Silly Boat Regatta, which I invite all members of this House to attend on July 16 this year.

They would like to deliver more services, though, hon. Speaker. I ask that all members of this House continue to support similar charities in their communities as well, which provide this very valuable service.

I want to conclude by extending to the Minister of Children and Family Development an invitation to attend there. I anticipate him going there soon to view this very important organization in this community.

LEASEHOLD BUILDINGS
AND HOUSING POLICY

L. Mayencourt: I take this opportunity to discuss a housing concern that's been brought to my attention by West End leaseholders and a number of seniors that live in the West End. The concerns are of particular importance to me because of the potential scope of this housing challenge. You see, there are leasehold buildings in lots of ridings in this province.

Many seniors have invested considerable savings into leasehold tenancy arrangements because of the affordability of this legitimate part of our housing stock. It allows them to reside in the beautiful communities that are conveniently located throughout the lower mainland.

One example of the challenge is the 40-year-old El Cid. It's a well-known leasehold building which is centrally located in Burrard. In late December residents of the El Cid received four working days' notice to accommodate a 350-percent increase in their maintenance fees for repair costs for work on the exterior of their building.

Leasehold buildings are not permitted to save up for maintenance like condominiums, so when repairs are needed, the tenants have to pay for them within the year of the repairs. The work, in this case, is extensive, and it will take three years. This is a hardship for those seniors for three years solid.

Additionally, tenants don't get a place at the table when repair decisions are made, so they have no way of assuring themselves that they are getting the best value for their maintenance dollars.

Leasehold tenants are not covered by the Strata Property Act or the Residential Tenancy Act. This is wrong. They are orphaned, and it is time to provide these seniors with a new protection under a new housing strategy.

The situation at the El Cid is a dramatic reminder that it often would be good for us to review and consider current policy and make changes when they're necessary. I look forward to additional meetings with the concerned leaseholders in my riding and in other communities, management representatives from leasehold management companies, as well as concerned constituents in the West End who see the need for some standardization and accountability in the controlled processes for this market.

MEMORIAL FOR WILLIAM LLOYD FEDEWA

R. Chouhan: Mr. Speaker, last Sunday, February 26, over 100 people got together at the Operating Engineers Hall in Burnaby to celebrate the life of Lloyd Fedewa.

Lloyd was a fine human being whose lifetime commitment to the betterment of common men and women knew no boundaries. Many speakers spoke at the memorial to highlight many memorable moments of his life in Burnaby. One of the speakers was my friend Art Kube.

Art had the privilege to work with Lloyd, and I share some of the comments made by Brother Art Kube on Sunday:

Lloyd was a peacemaker who always felt the unity of workers' organizations was paramount and should never be jeopardized by individual agendas and personal egos. He dedicated his entire life to work for the labour movement, the New Democratic Party and its predecessor, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. He did more than his share to fight for the establishment of many social benefits we all enjoy, and in his retirement when he saw these benefits attacked, he joined the fight to protect them.

As a member of Seniors on Guard for Medicare, he was always there when called. He had the lifetime commitment to defend Medicare that could not be turned off just because he was retired.

[1420]

As a true socialist and true social democrat, he believed in the innate worth of every human being, but most of all believed in the collective strength of workers. Nothing reflects Lloyd's belief better than Ralph Chaplain's first words of Solidarity Forever.

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,

There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun,

Yet what force is weaker than the feeble strength of one?

But the union makes us strong.

Lloyd, you worked long and hard in the vineyards of human progress. You did your share. You have our respect and gratitude.

Lloyd was born in 1927 and passed away on February 16, 2006. We are all richer for having had Lloyd in our midst.

EXPANSION OF LIONS GATE HOSPITAL

K. Whittred: I rise today to tell you about the \$22 million expansion and redevelopment of Lions Gate Hospital's emergency room. For this landmark and pillar of the North Shore community, the redevelopment will ensure that the Lions Gate Hospital will continue to meet our community's health care needs for decades to come.

Once completed in late 2007, the new ER not only will improve efficiency for patients but will create 27 new treatment spaces, establish a second triage station, build a separate entrance for ambulances, and create an innovative paperless and wireless environment, which will be the first for Vancouver Coastal Health.

In addition to the \$8.2 million funding from Vancouver Coastal Health, this project was made possible due to the tireless efforts of the Lions Gate Hospital Foundation. Bringing the community together, the foundation raised \$14 million, including a \$5 million contribution from Jimmy Pattison, and they did it ahead of schedule. I would like to congratulate the foundation's president Judy Savage and all the volunteers for their successful campaign to improve our community's hospital. They indeed exemplify the qualities of what makes British Columbia great.

Oral Questions

REVIEW OF SENIORS CARE IN HEALTH FACILITIES

K. Conroy: Yesterday the Minister of Health said he would look at the case of seniors who have passed away alone, away from their families, and determine if a further review would be required. My question to the minister is: will he now commit to expand the inquiry to look at all the cases of seniors being separated from their families in addition to Mrs. Albo's case?

Hon. G. Abbott: Since yesterday at one o'clock when I received the correspondence from the member opposite, I have asked and directed my staff to gather all relevant information in respect of the four cases that were summarized in the material that was forwarded by the member. Staff have now undertaken to do that. That report will be underway. They are working closely with the Interior Health Authority, but officials also feel that it's important that they have independent contact with the family as well.

As the member probably knows, there are some responsibilities we have to fulfil in terms of securing permission from the family under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act to gather and appropriately disseminate information around that. This will be a thorough review and certainly not a hasty one.

Mr. Speaker: The member for West Kootenay-Boundary has a supplemental.

[1425]

K. Conroy: Yes, the minister has only had 24 hours, and I'm glad to hear that he is looking at this with urgency, because it is an extremely urgent matter for families like Winifred Guesford's. Winifred was moved to Grand Forks because there were no beds available for her in Trail. The family wants her home. They want to be able to be near this 90-year-old woman so that they can support her. We want to hear that the minister will expand this inquiry, so that the Guesford family is not dealing with the same tragic situation the other families are facing in Trail.

Hon. G. Abbott: I thank the member for her question and for again raising one of the cases that was raised in her letter yesterday. Again, our sympathies, our condolences are to the family, undoubtedly as they continue to work their way through these difficult issues.

I think in some respects the member answers her own question, which is that we need to review such cases with the care, the thoroughness, the deliberation, the thought and the wisdom that I'm sure the family would hope and expect from us. If we can do that, if we can do such thoughtful work, we do minimize the chances of such things happening again, and we do, as a consequence, improve outcomes for all families facing similar situations in the province of British Columbia.

Mr. Speaker: Member for West Kootenay-Boundary has a further supplemental.

K. Conroy: Well, in fact, you do have the particulars about the Guesford family, but it was not in my letter yesterday. It was in a letter from the family that was sent to you, because Mrs. Guesford has not passed away, fortunately.

Let me quote Mrs. Guesford's family: "We are not waiting to hear condolences from the Minister of Health. Bring her home to Trail now."

Again, will the minister commit to a full inquiry into why the seniors are not getting the care they need in home communities while their families need to be nearby?

Hon. G. Abbott: I think the last thing that any member of this House should want is a rush to judgment. Again, it is very important that when one considers these kinds of individual family cases, one not only has an opportunity to have contact and appropriate contact with the family to learn about their experience, but it's also very important to understand what the medical practitioner's advice was in these cases. It's important to understand what other caregivers may have to offer in terms of our understanding of a situation, and it's important that we understand from the administration — from the officials involved — whether they believe that appropriate protocols and policies were followed.

I appreciate that one might like to have these answers within an hour or within 25 hours, but these are serious, important and sometimes complex cases. It's important that we have balanced judgments in the final analysis.

AVAILABILITY OF SENIORS CARE BEDS IN WILLIAMS LAKE

C. Wyse: The issue of seniors care involves a larger area than just the Kootenays. About four years ago Interior Health Authority closed two long-term care facilities for the elderly in Williams Lake. Those closures led to the loss of more than 80 beds that the community said were needed to provide care for the seniors.

Presently in Williams Lake there are nine seniors requiring long-term care beds in Cariboo Memorial Hospital, receiving care; seven further seniors identified requiring long-term care beds in local facilities not staffed to provide these services; close to 40 seniors receiving care out of Cariboo Lodge, which is one of the facilities that was closed; and in addition, seven seniors waiting in Kamloops to return home to Williams Lake.

My question is to the minister. Why did the Minister of Health allow closure of senior care facilities in Williams Lake before replacement facilities were available?

[1430]

Hon. G. Abbott: The issues in Williams Lake are ones that are similar to jurisdictions or to communities elsewhere in the province. What we had on taking office in 2001 were many facilities across this province that were simply inappropriate for the level of care they were offering. What we had were facilities that

were intended to provide residential care — that is, complex 24-7 care — for seniors. What one found with many of those facilities was that they sometimes didn't meet building codes, sometimes not fire codes; had narrow hallways, narrow doorways, inappropriate sanitary and dining facilities. As a consequence, we undertook, as a government and through the health authorities, remediation of much of that stock.

Williams Lake has had some closures. They have also had openings.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Cariboo South has a supplemental.

C. Wyse: The issue in Williams Lake still remains the number of seniors that are not receiving care four years later. The community clearly indicated and advised the Interior Health Authority that IHA's estimate of seniors' need for our area was wrong. Questions have arisen around the provision of respite care that is available to the caregivers in this area. Seniors are being kept in the hospital, where long-term care beds are the solution. Two facilities were collapsed into one private, for-profit facility to provide for seniors. The Premier's promise of choice for seniors does not exist in Williams Lake.

My question to the Minister of Health: will the minister expand the investigation involving seniors care to include the Williams Lake area?

Hon. G. Abbott: In Williams Lake we have added capacity on both assisted living and on residential care. The aim in Williams Lake — the aim in every community — is to attempt to find a good balance between demand and capacity. I know that under the former government they had a policy in terms of access to residential care that involved, really, first on the list regardless of level of care need. We've moved away from that, appropriately. I think the Interior Health Authority, in fairness to them, works very hard to try to ensure that in every community, including Williams Lake, there is an appropriate balance between capacity and demand.

I have not heard the figures that are cited by the member before. If he would like to provide me with any additional information he has, I'm glad to discuss it with the Interior Health Authority. But again, I think they are working very hard to try to meet the needs of seniors and particularly the frail elderly in Williams Lake.

REVIEW OF HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

C. James: Well, it's very clear from the answers we've received thus far from the Health Minister this week and last week that the Health Minister doesn't listen to seniors and their families, that the Health Minister isn't aware of what's going on in his own ministry.

Perhaps the Health Minister would like to listen to one of his own colleagues. I'd like to quote the member for Kamloops on health care. In November the member

for Kamloops said: "We're turning away people who have important surgeries. A brain tumour wasn't able to be done. The emergency room can't operate properly. We seem to be lurching from one crisis to another. Every week there is another one and another one."

The Health Minister left the Premier and his brother-in-law alone on their Europe tour so he could stay here and fix things. I'd like to again ask the Health Minister: will he agree to appoint an independent third party to review health care in all five regions?

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

Hon. G. Abbott: There's one thing that's very clear from the discussions we've had this week and last week. It is that the Leader of the Opposition is entirely precipitous in forming judgments before she has the facts. That would appear to be what is entirely clear from that. I am astonished...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.
Continue.

[1435]

Hon. G. Abbott: ...that the Leader of the Opposition would move from four concerns about four particular cases to what sounded to me like a general condemnation of the five health authorities we have in this province. She is moving to judgments before she has all of the information. I would have thought that she would like to have all of the information to have a comprehensive analysis of that information and then form her judgments, as opposed to forming judgments and then trying to find ways to justify those precipitous judgments.

Mr. Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition has a supplemental.

C. James: It's very clear that the Health Minister doesn't want to look at the facts. It's very clear that the Health Minister isn't interested in the information. If he were, he could have actually read the clippings last week and received the same information that we provided to him this week. Perhaps he would like to listen again to his colleague from Kamloops...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

C. James: ...who told his local newspaper that the Minister of Health was in fact aware of the situation and the problem. I'd like to quote again from the member for Kamloops. He's quoted as saying: "It's not good enough. In fact, it's very bad. I phoned the Minister of Health, and said, 'We've got to do something.' The

Minister of Health said it's in his hospital too. It's in Kelowna. We have to get to the bottom of this problem and fix it."

In just two years this government has cut 387 acute care beds and 935 long-term care beds in the Interior Health region alone. That's why there are 53 percent more seniors...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

C. James: ...occupying acute care beds, and that is why patients are being turned away. That's why surgeries are cancelled. It's very clear that's why seniors and their families are being forced to move from communities. Again to the minister: if he really wants to get to the bottom of this problem, why won't he do a review of what's going on in his health regions?

Hon. G. Abbott: It's interesting. The Leader of the Opposition says, "Look at the facts; look at the facts," and when I attempt to look at the facts, she condemns me for looking at the facts. I don't really understand what the Leader of the Opposition is attempting to do here.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members, we listened to the question. We'll listen to the answer.

Hon. G. Abbott: The Leader of the Opposition says — and perhaps this might give us an indication of how a future NDP government might operate.... It sounds remarkably...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. G. Abbott: ...like an old NDP government. That is, they make up policy. They generate their ideas based on last week's news headlines. That's the way we can expect the NDP to operate. That's what the Leader of the Opposition tells me I should do. "I saw clippings from last week." I should form judgments based on that. It's absolutely wrong.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members, let's listen to the question.

D. Cubberley: The minister suggests that the opposition wants an answer to appear in an hour. What we're saying is that we want the minister to agree to expand the investigation to look at the systemic problems that result in seniors being separated from their families. It's interesting that the minister refuses to consider a broad inquiry into the treatment of seniors and the B.C. bed crunch.

[1440]

The pattern of denial continues. Given that he thought the issue important enough to bail on the Premier's family health tour, one would have thought he'd be ready to address the systemic reasons for seniors' separations — like maybe even absorb that internal IHA report that documents the crisis in care beds.

As it happens, though, the Premier and his brother-in-law are in Sweden today. Can the Minister of Health tell us if they're planning to visit long-term care facilities and learn about eldercare in Stockholm?

Hon. G. Abbott: There are many things to be learned internationally; there are things to be learned nationally and provincially. For example, the Leader of the Opposition might learn, if she looked carefully at Royal Inland Hospital, that some \$26 million has been spent to upgrade, improve, modernize and expand the emergency room. She might learn that a new MRI scanner was added in October of 2004 to Royal Inland Hospital.

Mr. Speaker: Direct your questions through the Chair, minister.

Hon. G. Abbott: She might learn that ten more physicians have been added to the Kamloops area and that a 44-bed neuropsychiatric centre has been added to Kamloops and the Interior Health region.

There is so much to be proud of in the province. I don't understand why the Leader of the Opposition constantly wants us to go to the Manitoba model.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. The member for Saanich South has the floor.

D. Cubberley: Well, isn't it interesting that after bragging about all the things that have been done at Royal Inland Hospital, the one thing that the minister doesn't mention is that there aren't enough acute care beds in the hospital?

It's fascinating. They were cancelling surgeries there again last week. It's exactly the same phenomenon the member for Kamloops was talking about the week before or the month before and the one that the minister agreed he saw happening at his Shuswap Lake General Hospital and at Kelowna General Hospital.

You know, I don't imagine that the Premier is going to look at eldercare, because probably his brother-in-law would steer him away from that. But were the Premier to look at how eldercare works in Sweden, he might find out that the Swedes invest 3 percent of their GDP in it, while we put in 1.2 percent in Canada. He'd also learn that the health outcomes for seniors there are far better than ours. But I get a sense that the minister isn't really interested in what they do in Sweden, and he's clearly resistant to learning about what's going on with seniors here in B.C.

Mr. Speaker: Does the member have a question?

D. Cubberley: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Could the minister perhaps tell the House just what it is he's so afraid of learning?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.
Minister of Health.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members, could we listen to the answer.

Hon. G. Abbott: I think the member may have been practising his question in a mirror earlier and got confused about which was the question and which was the answer.

We have nothing to be afraid of. In fact, we have everything to be proud of in British Columbia — everything. Over the past five years we have invested over a billion dollars in building the continuum of care for the frail elderly in this province — whether it's assisted living, supportive housing, residential care. Over a billion dollars has been invested in that area.

By the end of 2006 we will have about 3,400 incremental new seniors housing, residential care and assisted-living units in this province, and we can be enormously proud of that.

We can learn lots internationally — in answer to the member's question — but we've got lots to be proud of here at home. The member should be proud and the official opposition should be proud as well.

[1445]

HEALTH CARE RESEARCH TOUR

M. Farnworth: I find it interesting that the Minister of Health would complain about how this side would make health policy when the major item in his throne speech was about future health policy on a four-day trip to Europe, which he didn't even go on.

My question to the minister is this. He stated that he didn't go on the health care trip — the Premier's family health care trip — to Europe because he wanted to stay here and get to the bottom of the Albo family case. Yet since that time, every time questions have been asked in this House, he has been dismissive and has refused to expand the inquiry.

In order to reassure the public that the real reason why he stayed behind here is to deal with the problems in Interior Health and the problems around the Albo family case, will he agree to expand the inquiry? Or if he refuses, will he just confirm that the real reason he stayed behind and did not go on the Premier's family trip was to snub the Premier because he was not involved in the planning of the trip and that the real Health Minister went on the trip?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. G. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, it's difficult to proceed with the heckling from my own side of the House. Snubbing the Premier is among the practices I attempt not to engage in.

The member's question actually is utterly absurd. The reason why I have stayed in British Columbia is because I believe very powerfully and very passionately that the Albo family deserves some answers to the questions that were raised by the unfortunate situation that their mother and the family were confronted with. That is entirely the reason why I am in British Columbia rather than looking elsewhere.

It's still an important fact-finding mission that the Premier and others are engaged in. I'm sure we will learn very important things from that, but in this case it was not a difficult decision for me. I believe, as I said, powerfully and passionately that the family deserves the answers. They deserve them in a timely way.

CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATIONS

A. Dix: My question is to the acting Premier, the acting Minister of Children and Family Development. The Ministry of Children and Family Development's standard for completing child protection investigations is 30 days, reflecting the urgency such inquiries require.

Can the minister tell this House how many current child protection investigations have been ongoing for more than 365 days, or 12 times longer than the ministry's own standard? Can the minister further tell this House how many current child protection investigations have been ongoing for more than 1,000 days, or 33 times longer than the ministry's own standard?

Hon. L. Reid: I'll take the question on notice.

J. Brar: I would like to ask the Solicitor General about one of those deaths. Three-year-old Halaina Dawn Lascelle was murdered by her caregiver uncle on April 30, 2001. That's been almost five years. The ministry, doctors, mental health counsellors and police all had contact with the family prior to the murder, but there has been no public accounting of any agency's actions leading up to Halaina's death. In December the Coroners Service said its review was still not done.

Will the Solicitor General tell the House today when the review of this 2001 death will be completed?

Hon. J. Les: I am not familiar with the specifics of the case that the member cites, so I will take the question on notice and return to the House with the appropriate answer.

MEDICAL SUPPLEMENTS FOR DISABILITY BENEFITS RECIPIENTS

C. Trevena: I would like to ask the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance a policy question in light of his avowed commitment to people with dis-

abilities. I would like to know from the minister: when someone is applying for a medical supplement, someone who is on disability, what weight is given to the administrator's view vis-à-vis the doctor's own view?

[1450]

Hon. C. Richmond: The policy is that anyone applying for medical emergency assistance who is a PWD case must have a doctor's certificate backing up their claim. Without that, we will not issue medical emergency supplies. The doctor's decision in this case carries the most weight.

Mr. Speaker: The member for North Island has a supplemental.

C. Trevena: I do, Mr. Speaker.

I'm very happy to hear that, minister, because I have received a very sad case of a man who is HIV positive, who's receiving a disability benefit. He's on PWD, and his specialist says he needs nutritional items to prevent an imminent danger to life. He was turned down, and his reconsideration was turned down, the reconsideration officer stating that the doctor's assessment "has not confirmed that your severe medical condition causes a chronic, progressive deterioration of health." I would like to hear from the minister how an imminent danger to life is not a deterioration of someone's health.

Hon. C. Richmond: In all of these cases, they are much more complicated than are usually laid out by the member. I appreciate that the member has concerns about these cases; we all do. But they only hear one side of the case. If the member would provide me with the file on this case — I'm not familiar with it, nor can I comment on a specific case — I'd be very happy to look into it.

GOVERNMENT ACTION ON
CLASS SIZE AND COMPOSITION
IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

J. Horgan: Last fall we had an unprecedented disruption in our public school system. We learned the lesson, or we should have learned the lesson, that class size and class composition are vitally important to students, to teachers and to parents. My question, after four months, is a simple one. To the acting Premier or the acting Minister of Education, and perhaps to the Minister of Labour: what substantial effort has the government put into resolving this problem?

Hon. M. de Jong: It's a good story, and I appreciate the member asking the question. We have seen unprecedented levels of engagement between the employer, school boards, teachers, parents. The round table is up; it's functioning. The conversation...

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

Hon. M. de Jong: ...is taking place. The discussion is occurring. There is a strategy being developed, and for the first time in the history of the province we've got the data. We actually know how many students there are in classrooms. We actually know where school boards are abiding by the requirements set out at law and where they're not.

While there is still a great deal of work to take place, I would think that all members of the chamber would, at this point in time, be celebrating the fact that the conversation, the discussion is occurring and that at last we have the data to make the necessary improvements.

[End of question period.]

Tabling Documents

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, I have the honour to present the Office of the Auditor General *Service Plan 2006-2007-2008-2009*.

[1455]

Hon. M. de Jong: By leave, I'm about to move the notice of motion which has the effect of splitting the Committee of Supply into two Houses, into Committee A and Committee B. I should, for their information, in advance of making that motion, by leave, alert members to the fact that after conversations with the Opposition House Leader, the estimates debates that comprise the Committee of Supply will begin on Monday.

The Opposition House Leader and I have had an initial conversation about the three estimates debates that will take place in this chamber. There may be more, but certainly those three at a minimum.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would make, by leave, the motion that has the effect of authorizing the Committee of Supply to sit in two sections designated Section A and Section B.

Leave granted.

Motions without Notice

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY
TO SIT IN TWO SECTIONS

[Be it resolved that this House hereby authorizes the Committee of Supply for this Session to sit in two sections designated Section A and Section B; Section A to sit in such Committee Room as may be appointed from time to time, and Section B to sit in the Chamber of the Assembly, subject to the following rules:

1. The Standing Orders applicable to the Committee of the Whole House shall be applicable in both Sections of the Committee of Supply save and except that in Section A, a Minister may defer to a Deputy Minister to permit such Deputy to reply to a question put to the Minister.
2. Subject to paragraph 3, within one sitting day of the passage of this Motion, the House Leader of the Official Opposition may advise the Government House Leader, in writing, of three ministerial Estimates which the Official Opposition requires to be considered in Section B of

the Committee of Supply, and upon receipt of such notice in writing, the Government House Leader shall confirm in writing that the said three ministerial Estimates shall be considered in Section B of the Committee of Supply.

3. All Estimates shall stand referred to Section A, save and except those Estimates which shall be referred to Section B under the provisions of paragraph 2 of this Order and such other Estimates as shall be referred to Section B on motion by the Government House Leader, which motion shall be governed by the provisions of Standing Order 60A. Practice Recommendation #6 relating to Consultation shall be applicable to this rule.

4. Section A shall consist of 18 Members, being 11 Members of the B.C. Liberal Party and 7 Members of the New Democratic Party. In addition, the Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole, or his or her nominee, shall preside over the debates in Section A. Substitution of Members will be permitted to Section A with the consent of that Member's Whip, where applicable, otherwise with the consent of the Member involved. For the second session of the Thirty-eighth Parliament, the Members of Section A shall be as follows: the Minister whose Estimates are under consideration and Messrs. Cantelon, Hayer, Horning, Krueger, Lee, Lekstrom, MacKay, Nuraney and Yap and Ms. Polak and Ms. Roddick, Messrs. Bains, Chouhan, Cubberley, Evans, Farnworth, Fraser and Ms. Conroy.

5. At fifteen minutes prior to the ordinary time fixed for adjournment of the House, the Chair of Section A will report to the House. In the event such report includes the last vote in a particular ministerial Estimate, after such report has been made to the House, the Government shall have a maximum of eight minutes, and the Official Opposition a maximum of five minutes, and all other Members (cumulatively) a maximum of three minutes to summarize the Committee debate on a particular ministerial Estimate completed, such summaries to be in the following order:

- (1) Other Members;
- (2) Opposition; and
- (3) Government.

6. Section B shall be composed of all Members of the House.

7. Divisions in Section A will be signalled by the ringing of the division bells four times.

8. Divisions in Section B will be signalled by the ringing of the division bells three times at which time proceedings in Section A will be suspended until completion of the division in Section B.

9. Section A is hereby authorized to consider Bills referred to Committee after second reading thereof and the Standing Orders applicable to Bills in Committee of the Whole shall be applicable to such Bills during consideration thereof in Section A, and for all purposes Section A shall be deemed to be a Committee of the Whole. Such referrals to Section A shall be made upon motion without notice by the Minister responsible for the Bill, and such motion shall be decided without amendment or debate. Practice Recommendation #6 relating to Consultation shall be applicable to all such referrals.

10. Bills or Estimates previously referred to a designated Committee may at any stage be subsequently referred to another designated Committee on motion of the Government House Leader or Minister responsible for the Bill as hereinbefore provided by Rule Nos. 3 and 9.]

Motion approved.

Orders of the Day

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

Budget Debate (continued)

Hon. C. Richmond: It is a privilege to take my place in this budget debate, and like all of the rest of the members, I consider it an honour. In fact, every time I enter this chamber, I realize how privileged I am to be here. So few people ever get the chance to do what we do. I believe it numbers a little over 800 since this place started, so we are indeed privileged to have been elected to serve our constituents.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

I wish to thank the people of Kamloops for sending me here again to represent and serve them, and I will do so to the best of my ability.

Before I get into the meat of the budget, however, I would like to make a few comments regarding some of the statements by the members opposite. The member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca admonished us yesterday about the role of the opposition, and he did it in a very pleasant way. I don't take offence at it, because he's my friend. He told me he was. Whether I like it or not, he's my friend. He did it in a very engaging way. Most of us have been here long enough to know what the opposition's role is. He went on to ask us to stop reminding people of the '90s. Well, my friend, it's our role to do just that, especially when your recollections of those ten years differ from ours.

The member for Alberni-Qualicum in his opening remarks said some things that I think cannot be left unchallenged. He made the claim that things in the '90s were really good under the NDP, such as the employment and balanced budgets. He even mentioned the minimum wage. I would say to him that I don't think it really matters what the minimum wage is if you're unemployed. Does it matter whether you're unemployed at \$6 an hour, \$8 an hour or \$10 an hour? I don't think so.

I don't know where he was during the '90s, because he had not yet been elected to this place. I certainly can't believe that he was here, because I remember a decade when we had double-digit unemployment, as high as 16 percent in the interior, and a debt that was spiralling out of control. In fact, it doubled in the ten years they were in office. I think he conveniently forgets the 375,000 people that were on welfare during the '90s.

I recall tradespeople leaving our province in droves to find work. I remember a mining industry that was literally put out of business, a forest industry that was on its knees due to high stumpage rates to pay for Forest Renewal B.C. and the onerous Forest Practices Code. I also remember the jobs and timber accord that was going to create thousands of jobs.

[1500]

They also forget, I think, that during the '90s the rest of the country was enjoying pretty good economic times. So in 2001, contrary to the member for Alberni-Qualicum, we inherited a fiscal mess, not balanced budgets as he claims. The words "structural deficit" come to mind. We had to take some drastic measures to put this province back on a sound fiscal footing, which we have done. We have a positive, progressive budget that is truly balanced. We have a surplus with which to enhance programs and pay our employees the kind of wages they deserve.

Hon. member, you will not convince anyone who lived through the dismal decade that everything was wonderful. It was a disaster.

Then there was the member for Cariboo South, who put out a news release. I'm not quite sure what it was designed to do, but I'm sure it frightened a lot of people when he spoke about things that he only imagined. I'm sure he can do much better than that.

I want to talk for just a moment about how this budget impacts working men and women throughout this province. It's a positive, forward-looking budget made possible by a robust economy. It benefits those who need it most: the working people, children and seniors.

First there is the increase to the homeowner grant for seniors — for everyone. I just want to find the exact number. The basic homeowner grant will increase by 22 percent to \$570, the first increase in the grant amount since 1993. The grant for seniors, disabled people and veterans will increase to \$845 from \$745. So to say that it doesn't benefit ordinary people in this province is just not correct.

Let me read out a couple of things right from the budget: \$421 million to enhance programs and services for children; \$400 million to expand skills and training opportunities; and \$733 million in tax reductions over four years, approximately two-thirds of which will benefit individuals. These are the working people of the province. So when we hear from the other side that it does nothing to benefit ordinary British Columbians, it's just not true.

We have a surplus, as I said. One dollar out of every two in that surplus will go to the working people, the people who work for the government and provide the services we all need. I don't think they will convince anyone who lived through this decade that everything was wonderful.

All this is possible because of the vision of this government under the leadership of the Premier. Thanks to the policies we introduced and the path we have set for British Columbia, we rank highest among the provinces with a job growth rate last year of 3.8 percent, more than double the national average of 1.4 percent. Since December 2001 B.C. has created almost 275,000 jobs. More than 90 percent are full-time jobs. They are in B.C.'s leading industries of manufacturing, construction and exports, and we're continuing to perform impressively.

This incredible job growth has no doubt contributed to B.C. having the fastest employment growth. In

fact, our unemployment rate of only 5.1 percent is the lowest since 1976. In my own riding of Kamloops I am particularly pleased because our community has the lowest unemployment rate in the province at only 4.1 percent. Let me hark back to April 2001 when it was 14.1 percent. It is now 4.1 percent, the lowest in the province. What a difference — a difference that has moved us to the threshold of the golden decade and a whole new age of prosperity.

You can feel the excitement if you travel around the province. All you have to do is walk down the main street of my hometown, and you can feel the excitement and the positive attitude people have towards their future. They're telling me how excited they are about it and how they're looking forward with confidence for the first time in a long time. You can see it manifest in the home-building boom that is taking place in Kamloops.

[1505]

Thanks to the fiscal responsibility of this government we now have the means to invest in our future. In fact, we've been able to plan for not just one year, two years or three years at a time, but for a whole decade. This year the 2006-2007 budget for the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance is more than \$1.35 billion. It's an increase of more than 6.5 percent over last year, an increase that means we'll be able to continue to meet the needs of British Columbia's most vulnerable citizens in more than 100 offices around the province while continuing to improve our services to make a real difference in people's lives.

At the heart of this ministry is our care and concern for the well-being of all British Columbians and their children. They are the future, as we all know. With this budget, we're able to provide the programs and services to make a real difference in the lives of B.C. families and allow our youngest citizens to build futures they can be proud of.

I just want to take a few minutes to give you a few statistics that I think are really worth putting on the record. The province's economy has really soared in the last two years, and most of the figures that people quote, from the opposite side, especially.... The member for Esquimalt-Metchosin spoke of child poverty. Well, first of all, their figures are two and a half years out of date. A lot has happened in British Columbia in the last two and a half years.

In the mid-90s an astounding 135,000 children were in families on income assistance. More than 10 percent of the child population, or one in seven children, were in families who were on income assistance. In December 2005 there were 35,000 children on income assistance, down by 100,000 to 3 percent of the child population, or only one in 30 — so from one in seven in the 90's to one in 30 at the moment who are in families who are on income assistance. I don't think we could do better for children than to make sure that their parents have a job and are earning a good living.

B.C. has the best health care system in Canada, as we've just been told, and it's excellent for children. So we do care about what happens to children. In low-

income families they receive free basic dental and optical services. There are no MSP charges for a family of four with a net income of less than \$29,000 a year — an increase of \$4,000 in this threshold. We significantly increased the income threshold for receiving a full child care subsidy from \$21,000 to \$38,000, raising subsidies for about 6,000 B.C. kids and making 6,500 more eligible for subsidy support. We reduced or eliminated provincial income taxes for about 730,000 British Columbians.

So when I hear from the other side that we've done nothing for the middle class, as I heard this morning, I think they're looking right in the face of statistics and facts that say otherwise: reduced or eliminated income taxes for about 730,000 British Columbians, providing substantial relief for low-income families. In fact, in the bottom two income tax brackets people in British Columbia pay the lowest income tax of anyone in Canada.

I want to just quote a few more of the items from the budget that we are doing for children.

It provides an additional \$421 million over four years to help ensure the well-being of vulnerable children: \$72 million to add more social workers and other front-line staff; \$100 million to enhance the child protection system, targeting early intervention services so the safety and well-being of children can be ensured in their families and communities; \$34 million to increase funding for phase 2 of the child and youth mental health plan; \$36 million to reduce wait-lists for services to children and youth with special needs; \$31 million in additional support to implement five regional aboriginal child and family development service authorities; \$2 million for the crystal meth secretariat to integrate and coordinate efforts to combat the production and use of crystal methamphetamines; \$112 million in additional funding for K-to-12 education; \$4 million to double the school startup supplement, the first increase since 1993.

[1510]

So when I hear that we're not doing anything for children, I'm sure that the members opposite have not read the budget.

I think we all recognize that one of the best ways of helping children on income assistance is to make sure that their parents have good jobs — in other words, to help them break free from the cycle of poverty. We know children in working families are better off than those supported by income assistance. They do better in school, and they do better later on as adults in the job market. That's why we're investing over \$70 million a year in employment programs, programs that we continue to develop and improve to best meet the needs of British Columbians on our caseload.

When I think about our employment programs, I remember one of our former clients, a single mother of two in New Westminster who had been cycling on and off income assistance for the last decade. Through our job placement contractor, we helped this woman get a good job as an administrative assistant at Vancouver International Airport's new terminal. Normally, we don't expect letters of thanks — it's really thanks

enough to see British Columbians living happy and fulfilling lives — but this woman wrote us. She said: "This is the most amazing job I've had in years. I love this job. I was consistently treated with fairness and respect, and I am proof that the system works."

The system does work. It works very well. To date, more than 44,000 of our clients have been placed directly into jobs — good jobs like painters, security officers and hotel desk clerks. We've encouraged thousands more to find jobs on their own — in fact, over 112,000 British Columbians no longer rely on income assistance, including 48,000 B.C. children in those families. This gives us the resources to provide some extra support and services that really make a difference in people's lives.

We know that low-income families can use additional supports. That's precisely why we've enhanced our Healthy Kids dental and optical coverage for low-income families: because we are committed to the health of B.C.'s children. It's also why we eliminated the provincial income taxes for about 730,000 British Columbians.

Now we are able to double the school startup allowance to help clients with the extra costs of sending kids to school and to ensure B.C.'s children have the tools and supports they need to succeed in the classroom.

There is another group of British Columbians we've made a commitment to, and that's our most vulnerable citizens: people with disabilities. These are the people who now make up the majority of the ministry's caseload. In fact, the number of persons with disabilities on our caseload has risen by 36 percent since 2001.

We made building the best system of supports for people with disabilities one of our government's five great goals, and one we always said we would achieve with a balanced budget. Yesterday I had the privilege of chairing the minister's council for people with disabilities, and it was heartening to see these people, first of all, realize that they're now being included in our society. We're not just making our society accessible to them; we're including them.

About three weeks ago I had the good fortune of presiding at a little ceremony out in Saanich put on by the Triumph group, one of our service providers. They work with people with disabilities. The occasion was the placement of their 1,000th client into a job — the 1,000th person with a disability by this one service provider into a job.

[1515]

It was really a great event to see. Not only was it heartening to see this person performing a valuable service, an employer who understood this person, but when he got up to speak.... When he finished — let me put it that way — there wasn't a dry eye in the place. Even the hardened journalists and cameramen said they were touched by his story. To put it in his words, and I'm paraphrasing: "I was on the scrapheap of life until somebody saw that there was something good in me somewhere and gave me that hand up and that assistance to get back into the workforce."

He credits his wife, and he thanked God, but he credits two people more than anyone else: his service worker, who saw something in him and had faith in him, and the employer who hired him. I just say to anyone out there who's watching: if you're an employer and you're able to hire someone with a disability, please do so. They will not only brighten your life, but you'll have the most loyal employee that you ever had in your company. Maybe some day you could have a little ceremony to celebrate the fact that you have some disabled people working for you, and you'll feel good about it, and so will they.

The other thing that was heartening yesterday at our meeting of the council of disabilities was the fact that the mayor of Vancouver, His Worship Sam Sullivan, was there and took the Olympic flag. It really was the highlight, I think, of Canada's presentation at the Olympics. It was really heartening to see, but especially heartening for people with disabilities to see that man on the stage with the flag in his wheelchair and waving it around.

Sam, we can't thank you enough for that. You really stole the show, and we're looking forward to seeing you at 2010.

We're also looking to see a lot of people, because we tend to forget the latter part of the Olympics. We say the Olympics and the Paralympics, and we tend to forget that. But these people don't. They look forward very much to that, and I'm with them. If we can possibly do it, we would like to see some of the Paralympics included, as a demonstration if nothing else, right in the Olympic Games so that people, when they're watching by the billions, can see these people even in a demonstration sport.

I know they'll have to get the venues ready, and it'll take ten days and all that. But they could do a demonstration. So we're going to work very hard to see that we move past accessibility and move to inclusion. We want these people included in what we do in our lives.

We invested an extra \$55 million a year to increase disability assistance by \$70 a month last year — now up to \$856 each month — benefiting more than 70,000 people with disabilities. This was the largest increase in the history of the province, making B.C.'s disability rates the highest income assistance rate in the province and the third-highest in Canada.

Many people with disabilities have told me how important it is to them to have an opportunity to work or volunteer in their communities. That's why we're investing \$21 million in specialized employment programs just for them to allow them to work or volunteer as they are able. To boost their opportunities, we created the Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities to encourage and support employers to hire people.

We established a \$20 million Disability Supports for Employment Fund, providing more than \$1 million each year to organizations to help those with disabilities in the workplace. We've also, as promised, raised the earnings exemption for persons with disabilities and persistent multiple barriers to \$500 a month, the third increase since we came into office in 2001.

The earnings exemption means persons with disabilities have the opportunity to have an income of \$1,356 each month in addition to their full support and shelter support they receive from us. Similarly, persons with persistent multiple barriers can now have an income of \$1,108 each month. People with disabilities have told us the earnings exemption has gone a long way in helping them pursue their employment goals and achieve greater personal and financial independence.

We want British Columbians with disabilities to enjoy opportunities in the workforce, confident in the knowledge that our programs and services will continue to support them. It's clear from the extent of these services and supports across the government that all British Columbians are benefiting from our strong and promising economy. That's why it is really a special pleasure for me to stand and respond to this budget today.

[1520]

I haven't managed to hit all of the places where the budget benefits people in British Columbia, particularly in my area, where tradespeople right now are so hard to find. You can hardly hire a carpenter, a plumber or an electrician. So I'm happy to say that we're investing \$400 million more over four years into skills and training, because we're certainly going to need them. We need them right now.

We had an excellent round table up there on the economy and small business, thanks to the Minister of Small Business and Revenue. He came up, and we had an excellent round table and listened to the people's concerns and challenges that they have in hiring people. To quote the minister, it's managing success. Or we could put it another way: they're positive problems that we have now. We have jobs chasing people instead of people chasing jobs.

The hospitality industry in my area — and it's probably true around the rest of the province — has a very difficult job hiring people, because everyone is working. We have people coming right onto job sites, trying to poach tradespeople away from other builders by offering them \$5 an hour more to come and work for them. What a change from 2001, when we had an unemployment rate of 14.1 percent. We're now at 4.1 percent.

I see there was a quote today from an economist with the Central Credit Union. He was talking about the growth in new jobs in the Kamloops-Kelowna markets. He said they will soar to close to 20,000 for this year. He said: "Total employment last year was 244,000." This is in the interior. "Our change in employment last year was 14,000. We're forecasting an additional 10,000 jobs this year and 9,000 next year."

Listen to this. He says that the unemployment rate is expected to fall in the Thompson-Okanagan region this year to 3.7 percent; 3.7 percent is what he's predicting for the unemployment rate. I don't think it's ever been so low.

Somebody dug out a quote from the Leader of the Opposition, who at that time was not.... Yes, she was.

The Leader of the Opposition in Surrey in September 2003 said: "What do we need to do to stimulate the economy? We need to get people back to work. It's jobs that are going to fix this province." That quote is from the Leader of the Opposition in 2003, and I think she was right. It is jobs that are going to fix this province, and that's exactly what we've done. We have more people working now in British Columbia than at any time in our history and an unemployment rate that is lower than has ever been recorded since they started keeping statistics.

That's why it is a real pleasure for me to stand and respond to this budget and to support this budget. This is truly the dawn of a golden decade for B.C. I firmly believe that, and as the Finance Minister said, this is only the second budget out of five that this government will bring in, in this mandate.

If we don't see quite everything we want to see in this budget, just wait, folks. Stay tuned to this station, as we used to say in the broadcast industry. For people who can work, there are jobs. For children and low-income families, there are extra resources for a brighter future. For people with disabilities, there are greater supports and opportunities. For all of us, there is prosperity in communities throughout British Columbia.

Madam Speaker, I support this budget, and I thank you very much.

M. Sather: Madam Speaker, the Premier says that he wants a discussion on health care and that no one should be concerned or fearful about this discussion — that it is only that: a discussion. The member for Maple Ridge–Mission actually said that I should be ashamed for having any questions about this discussion we're about to have. Members on this side of the House and people in this province are concerned about the direction of health care under this government. They're concerned that this government is indeed intent upon further privatizing our health care system.

[1525]

The Premier, I understand, is now on a tour of countries in Europe, including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway and France. I do hope that when he goes to Norway, if he has not already been there, that he has some lutefisk while he's there. I can tell you that it is a fine Norwegian dish that I used to enjoy often as a young man. Having it with a bit of mashed potatoes and melted butter and flatbread — there's nothing that can beat it. Even though it may turn your cutlery blue, it's definitely a health food. I'll be talking to the Premier when he comes back to see if he did enjoy a little lutefisk in Norway.

Dr. Vertesi, the Premier's brother-in-law and chief advisor, as we know, is on this trip with him. The Health Minister has been dropped from the itinerary. The Health Minister says that he must stay here in British Columbia to look after the needs of our health care system here. We will take him on his word about that, because there definitely is work to be done.

Dr. Vertesi has determined that he will steer the Premier away from seeing the wrong things. I'm won-

dering if Dr. Vertesi was afraid the Premier might notice that the social assistance program in Sweden is far more sustaining than ours. Or he might notice that dental care in Norway is covered by the public medical plan.

The Premier wants to update, as he says, the Canada Health Act. The government wants to add the requirement of sustainability to the Canada Health Act. The Premier says that our health care system — in fact, the health care system throughout Canada — is not sustainable. He has mentioned the World Health Organization rating of Canada as being 30th amongst nations in terms of health care.

However, it should be observed that the World Health Organization used a number of determinants in that study that they no longer use. To the best of my knowledge, they haven't put out a study since that time rating countries with regard to health care.

How unsustainable is our health care system, and how does it compare with those of the U.K., Norway, Sweden and France? Our aging population is often cited as a growing cause of instability or unsustainability in our system. All of us that are, I guess, the aging baby-boomers are somehow thought to be responsible, at least in considerable part, for the burden that is descending upon the health care system. However, studies have shown.... The Conference Board of Canada estimated that aging alone would only account for an increase of 1 percent in health care costs per year.

Canadians and British Columbians pay higher co-payments and deductibles for prescription drugs and health services outside of the Canada Health Act — the so-called ancillary services such as chiropractor, physiotherapy and massage. This results in Canadians and British Columbians having to pay a higher percentage of out-of-pocket payments than they do in the United Kingdom, Sweden, France and Germany.

The Premier might want to reinstate, perhaps, some of those cut services — the chiropractic services, the physiotherapy services, the massage services — just to even things up a bit with those countries in Europe that he is comparing us to.

I mention that the Premier might want to look at the social service system in Sweden, which is far more sustaining than ours. Perhaps we should have a wide-ranging discussion on the determinants of good health, such as that you need to have a reasonable level of basic necessities in order to remain healthy — such as a pair of shoes that are ordered by your doctor to keep your feet dry, for your child; such as dentures to chew your food rather than being offered a blender.

[1530]

The drive to further privatize our health care system is curious in one respect: public health care is actually a major advantage to business. Having to provide private health care coverage for the basics that are covered by medicare is much more expensive for business. Why, then, would the government want to privatize? Why would they want to increase privatization of health care? There's no doubt, at least on this side of the House, that that is the intent of this government.

I think the answer is this. This government is driven by the notion that the private sector should prevail as much as possible. You will recall, Madam Speaker, that when this government was first elected in 2001, they said to the people of British Columbia that they would look into everything that didn't need to be delivered by government. Since that time they have gone on to give away more and more publicly administered services to the private sector — hospital cleaning, laundry services, food services, administration of the Medical Services Plan by Maximus, the B.C. NurseLine, and on and on it goes.

Although medicare gives business an advantage, this government would like to see the private sector deliver health care and the consumers pick up the tab in the form of increased fees to access that service. Just ask the Cambie Surgery Centre, where it costs those that use this service over \$1,000 a year to access it.

The Premier says that everything the government does will be within the Canada Health Act, but at the same time, he wants to bring in more private health care and update the Canada Health Act to remove impediments to privatization. That's a nice little game the Premier has going.

The Premier is going to visit some countries in Europe, because it's widely recognized in Canada that American health care results in tens of millions of citizens without basic care and is not a good model. The Premier needs to remember, and the government needs to recognize, that we don't live next to Sweden, Norway, France, the United Kingdom. We live next to the United States, and that has an important bearing on the situation here.

We have a North American Free Trade Agreement within the United States, Canada and Mexico but, of course, no such agreement with European countries. This changes the dynamics considerably for our health care system. The exemption for health care under NAFTA — and there presumably is one — depends on a fully public system delivered on a non-commercial basis. Once privatized, Canada can no longer claim national treatment for our health care system. This would give the right to U.S. for-profit health care corporations to set up in Canada. Subsequent challenges to the Canada Health Act would likely be held under a secret NAFTA tribunal, not the Supreme Court of Canada.

Once established in Canada, these countries could sue for compensation if we try to regain control of health care. NAFTA has no ongoing amending process, unlike other agreements under the World Trade Organization. To that degree, it is a locked-in agreement. It would require the agreement of all three countries to unlock the provisions of NAFTA. For example, challenges that our health care services are exempt under NAFTA — that is, if they remain in public hands — would depend on our success in the dispute settlement processes. Members will know the difficulties we've had under that process with regard to the softwood lumber dispute, and understandably, British Columbians don't have a lot of faith in it, at least at this particular time.

Within days of the Supreme Court decision limiting Quebec's right to limit private health care, American corporations announced their intention of moving into Canada using their rights under international trade law. These corporations are looking at primary care, which is what we receive from our doctor in our doctor's office, as well as acute care and hospital services. They would join for-profit health care corporations already operating in British Columbia — Maximus, Sodexho, Compass.

[1535]

Dr. Jacques Chaoulli is the Montreal doctor who launched the Supreme Court ruling, as we know. A longtime advocate of privatized medicare, Dr. Chaoulli went to the United States shortly after the ruling. He was quoted as saying: "I would like to make a team with American entrepreneurs and go to Canada and create a private, parallel health care system." This is the same thinking that is behind the actions of this government — selling off public health care services to the private sector.

User fees are a hot topic in the health care discussion. I'm sure that the Premier is talking to people in Sweden at this time about user fees. However, in Sweden health and social welfare are considered one. Everyone is entitled to generous sick benefits. Parents are entitled to 12 months' leave after the birth of a child. Publicly funded day care is provided. Dental care is covered for all children. Private health care is far more generous than we enjoy here.

User fees in Sweden and France are differentiated from ours by the wider and more accessible basket of health services in those countries. Patient satisfaction in physician choice is high in France. User fees in B.C., on the other hand, are co-occurring with cuts to services for seniors and the poor.

One of the stated benefits of user fees is that they discourage frivolous use of the system. Although this has intuitive appeal, there are unintended consequences. Studies have shown that while user fees reduce physician visits, hospital visits increase. If you're not going to your doctor to get your blood pressure tested, you're more likely to end up in hospital. In other words, preventative care can suffer. There is overwhelming evidence that user fees put the heaviest burden on the poor and impede their access to necessary health care even when low-income exemptions are in place.

There are serious problems in this province with senior care, as we know. We've heard many of those problems discussed in this House with the minister with regard to the placement of seniors in care homes. The minister says these are unique events and not indicative of current delivery of health care.

In fact, as has been pointed out by this side of the House, the government's first-bed policy is directly linked to these tragedies. The government has bragged in recent years about how they have eliminated wait-lists for seniors care homes. However, health care workers are certainly aware that they have to prioritize. They have to have a wait-list.

However, what the government has really done with the first-bed policy is to say: "You, senior, get the tap on the shoulder. You're being sent to the first bed available, and off you go. You may be placed in your community, or you may be placed a long distance from your community. It matters not. Your spouse of 50 or 60 years may not have the means or capability to visit you regularly, but it matters not."

If you refuse, or your family refuses, you're not put to the bottom of the unofficial list; you're taken off the list, according to what Fraser Health Authority officials told us last week. This draconian and uncaring policy brings great shame upon this government.

The government says that we should not question their intentions for health care, but when one looks at how uncaringly this government has treated one sector of our society — that being our seniors — and at how their health care and the sanctity of their families is given such short shrift, it is clear that the shame rests with this government. I would be remiss and our caucus would be remiss if we did not question intently the intentions of this government when it comes to health care.

[1540]

The government says that it doesn't matter who delivers the service, as long as the public pays. The member for Bulkley Valley-Stikine mentioned last week, I believe it was, that when one is lying in the hospital bed in need of services, you don't question that. True enough, but we must look at the broader picture and not only when we're lying in that hospital bed.

An extensive study by McMaster University, that I think the government is aware of, found that in private hospitals adult mortality was 2 percent higher and infant mortality was 10 percent higher than in public hospitals. At that rate if all Canadian hospitals were private, there would be 2,200 more deaths — which is greater than the number that die from colon cancer, suicide and car accidents. So it is a significant difference. Similar results were found in studies of care homes.

A likely cause of this differential is that private hospitals tend to have fewer and more poorly trained staff and greater staff turnover. We've seen that with the privatization that's happened with our cleaning services in the hospitals. We heard members of the government say a number of years ago that those workers didn't deserve \$17 to \$23 an hour. Knowing that, the going rate for housecleaning, at least where I live, is about \$20. How can it be that a person that cleans a house is worth \$20 an hour, but someone that's cleaning our hospitals, making sure that diseases are not inadvertently spread, is not worthy of that remuneration?

Studies have also shown that private nursing homes spend less money on food. Outsourcing of food services has been a big problem in British Columbia. In my constituency at the Ridge Meadows Hospital since last fall the Fraser Health Authority, with the blessing I'm sure of this government, has instituted a re-thermalized food system. My office has been inundated

with complaints about this system since that time. It's bad enough for people that are in hospital for a short time, but it's tragic for those who are in the care homes and are having to receive these unpalatable meals every day.

The Fraser Health Authority has told me that they're not saving any money, at least at this point, on this introduction of re-thermalized food, so one doesn't see any incentive there for it. They have also told me that the nutritional value of this food is significantly important, and that is one of the reasons for doing it. Yet when I asked for information on that, the FHA told me that the information they got in fact was from the manufacturers. The minister, in announcing his audit of health food services in hospitals, mentioned that there will be a study of the nutritional value, but it won't be done for almost two years — at the end of 2007.

We're told by this government that the delivery of health care services privately is more efficient. In fact, the public health care system is more efficient than the private system. Economies of scale in the larger public system reduce paperwork and lower transaction costs, and drug costs can be reduced through reference-based pricing, which Madam Speaker will note that this government has maintained from the previous administration.

What is happening is that private delivery services are creaming off the services that can be more inexpensively provided on a volume basis — such as cataract surgery or hernia operations. However, if something goes wrong with a patient in one of those private clinics, they go back to the public health care system, and there is no way for the public system to recover those costs.

The government has a good privatization gig going here. They bring in private delivery and say they're saving the taxpayers bundles of money through efficiencies, but then refuse to provide the public with the facts because the private contracts contain proprietary business information.

[1545]

In the case of my constituency, I have asked the Fraser Health Authority three times for information on the economics around the introduction of re-thermalized food, and I've been assured that I will receive that — soon, I will hope.

The Premier says that we're going to have a discussion about health care, and there's no cause for concern. It's only a discussion. The Minister of Health perhaps rather dangerously paraphrased Chairman Mao the other day in saying: "Let a thousand flowers blossom. Let a thousand ideas prevail." The minister should be aware that after Mao launched those famous words that preceded the Cultural Revolution, he quickly decided that a free discussion of ideas was not such a good idea, and he moved to rather harshly and dramatically reassert absolute control of the state.

It may be that the Premier or perhaps Dr. Vertesi is having some thoughts that the Minister of Health may be backsliding into previous, unhealthy, undesirable ways of thinking. They may want to institute some thought reform for the minister. I hope that they don't

act precipitously, as the minister has commented earlier. We can only hope that the minister is going to fare better than those other unfortunate intellectuals who took Mao at his word.

Hon. R. Thorpe: It's a pleasure to rise in the House today to speak about the balanced budget of 2006, a budget that gives British Columbians growing confidence. One of the things that our Premier has recently said is: "With our government, we're going to lead. We're going to build. We're going to show the rest of the world what you can do with a province like British Columbia." In fact, this balanced budget of 2006 is yet another result of all the hard work that British Columbians, working together with their government, have achieved since 2001.

This balanced budget will result in more social workers and other front-line workers to support and improve the services for our families at risk and our children with special needs. Also, this budget gives the highest level of funding ever, on a per-student basis, in the history of British Columbia. The new investments we are making are very affordable for British Columbians, and we believe very strongly that the result will be the ongoing growth and development of our very, very strong economy.

We've also in this budget introduced tax changes to make sure that both individuals and small businesses — and others — remain competitive and that our tax system is fair. We've also in this budget laid out a \$6 billion fund for compensation for increases to the employees and public servants who serve British Columbia so well. This budget is very bold. It has vision, and yet again, it demonstrates leadership.

I have the privilege of representing Okanagan-Westside. In the communities that I represent, we always work in partnership. We work in partnership with the elected officials in our communities to achieve the goals that we want to achieve on behalf of our citizens and our communities.

[1550]

I'd like to acknowledge some new leadership within the Okanagan. I'd like to congratulate Mayor Sharon Shepherd in Kelowna, Dr. David Gregory in Summerland, Mr. Graham Reid in Peachland, and the three directors on the Westside, which I represent, for their re-election. I'd also acknowledge the excellent leadership and community involvement of the Westbank First Nation under the leadership of Chief Robert Louie and his council.

Together we are able to establish our priorities and to move on the things that are important for our communities, whether it be increased health care for our citizens, our children — in my case, my grandchildren — and, of course, our patients.

With respect to education, over the last month and a half I've had the opportunity to visit teachers in their schools, to be in the classroom with students. I would like to thank all of the teachers, the administration and the students at Peachland Elementary for the day I spent in their grade four-grade five class. Then to an-

other half-day I spent in Summerland Middle School with grades six, seven and eight....

Those are actually very inspiring experiences and ones that I treasure, because you get to see the dedication of our teachers, of our educators, of our administrators. You see the youth, and you see the excitement of our youth. To me — as my assistant at home, Mike Reed, knows — when I can spend time in the school versus any other things that I do as an MLA, that makes my day. It makes my year, and I'm full of excitement when we have the opportunity to do it.

This budget, *Growing with Confidence*, is our second budget in a series of five budgets that we will release and bring forward to all British Columbians before the next election. It's about our future, as we may recall — although listening to the opposition from time to time, they seem to have short memories.

Our financial update in September focused on increased services and benefits to our seniors, to those British Columbians that have worked so very, very hard to build the province that we have. This budget focuses in on our children. It talks about improving and expanding services for our children — in fact, some 421 million new dollars for our children today, tomorrow and in years to come.

It also focuses in on — and I will get into further details — skills and training. As the Ministry Responsible for Small Business and Revenue, we are currently in the process of visiting communities throughout British Columbia and talking to small business owners and operators. They are telling us that there are tremendous opportunities. They are telling us of the success they're having.

One of the things they were asking for is: could the government work with them to maybe introduce a tax credit for skills and training? In fact, this budget does that — \$90 million to work with employers and employees and other groups in the province to create opportunities in every community in British Columbia. This budget has over \$400 million committed to moving forward on the skills and training initiatives of British Columbia.

Of course, we look at the investment with children. We look at the investment in training and skills. We also know, unlike our colleagues over there, that it's important to have a very competitive tax regime, one which actually encourages our best and brightest to stay in British Columbia. As we've seen, our best and brightest returned to British Columbia after they were driven out in the '90s.

Our budget this year introduces competitive tax changes to the total of \$733 million, with \$483 million of that going to individuals — actually putting the money in individuals' pockets so that they can make decisions. I can tell you that I believe individuals are going to make better decisions every time about how their money should be spent than big, centralized government, as my colleagues over there advocate.

Also, the budget introduces some \$250 million for small business and medium-sized businesses so that they can stay competitive. It streamlines and simplifies some of our tax codes.

[1555]

This budget, obviously, is balanced, because our government had committed ourselves — and will always be committed — to balanced budgets and prudent, fiscal management. But this budget should give all British Columbians, even those on that side of the House that for some reason do not want British Columbia to be successful.... This budget is actually about growing with confidence in British Columbia.

I did mention that \$421 million will go to improve and expand services for children — \$72 million to add more social workers and front-line staff, to improve supports for grandparents and other relatives looking after their children and to increase the transportation allowance for foster parents by 50 percent — the first increase in more than ten years. That is what a strong economy can do.

Apparently, on that side of the House, they didn't have a big interest in foster parents and didn't even consider increasing the transportation allowance to help those.... Now in British Columbia, because of the growth of our economy, we actually do have choices — choices that we can make to help children and help families.

Thirty-four million dollars increased funding for phase two of the child and youth mental health plan to better serve approximately 140,000 children and youth in British Columbia with mental health challenges. This is actually about caring. And \$36 million to reduce wait-lists for services to children and youth with special needs and their families.

As I said earlier — and I'm very proud to be a grandfather — my grandson was three years old yesterday. Sometimes he acts like he's 16, but he's only three. As I watch the development of my grandson and other folks' grandchildren, I think it's really, really important — very important — that we make sure that we have those resources and testing and availability so that our youngsters of today, our children of tomorrow, our leaders of the future actually can be tested, and we can work with them. We all know, on both sides of this House, that when we can invest in our children at an early age, we all benefit. I know we all can agree on that.

We also are looking at another \$100 million to enhance the child protection system, to target early intervention services so that the safety and well-being of our children can be assured in their families and their communities.

In this budget we also announced a further \$2 million for the crystal meth secretariat to integrate and coordinate efforts to combat the production and use of crystal meth. I can tell you that I've already had the opportunity to present a \$10,000 grant to an organization in the community of Summerland that cares.

The Summerland Asset Development Initiative is an organization that was formed within the community, by volunteers in the community, who actually put their own money on the line and signed bank loans so that they could help the youth of the community. I was so pleased and proud to be able to present them the funding with which they'll now move into the next

phase of educating and making sure the youth in Summerland are aware of the dangers, the pitfalls and some of the serious ramifications that come from that scourge, crystal meth.

Of course, I mentioned earlier another \$112 million for additional funding for K-to-12 education. Again, the highest levels of per-student education is in the province of British Columbia. And a \$4 million addition to double the startup program supplement. This is the first increase since 1993. This will help 29,000 school-aged children of families on income assistance. It'll help them by doubling the funds that they have available to them when school starts every year.

This is good news. This is very good news to help our children of today go to school and have the things they need so that they can focus on their education.

Skills and training is a very, very important aspect of our budget. It is \$400 million committed over the next four years to increase training and skills development and to help more people connect with opportunities to achieve their potential.

[1600]

As I mentioned, as I have travelled around the province, community after community, small business operator after small business operator, chambers of commerce and other organizations have said: "You know, if the government could come out with a new tax credit program, in consultation with industry, to expand training opportunities, that would be seen as an unbelievable opportunity and a step forward to help us in the traditional construction trades and in our emerging industries."

Well, with the booming and growing economy of British Columbia and the growing confidence in the economy of British Columbia, this budget announces \$90 million of funding so that we can move forward with a new tax credit program to assist in skills training development. It also puts forward \$39 million for the Industry Training Authority to increase apprenticeship training through public and private training institutions.

This is more good news: \$50 million for a natural resources and applied science endowment to support economic development and diversification through research and sciences and engineering. This is good news. British Columbia is now on the global map for high tech, biotech and other scientific developments. We have, through our post-secondary institutes throughout the entire province, developed excellent commercialization opportunities, and now this is going to give us even more emphasis so we can move forward — and \$145 million in this budget in additional operating funds to post-secondary institutions to help create 25,000 new spaces in British Columbia by the year 2010.

Madam Speaker, I know that you and I share in the excitement of the opportunities in the Okanagan, with the new Okanagan College and the opportunities it brings forward and with UBC Okanagan and the opportunities it's bringing forward. Now, the students in the Okanagan don't have to travel away for their edu-

cation. They get to stay at home. With this increased access, they are learning at home. We are building at home. We know that commercialization is going to take place around our colleges. We know it's going to take place around our universities, so again, we are diversifying the economy in the Okanagan through this budget. We're diversifying the economy at the University of Northern British Columbia, through the colleges in northern British Columbia, in the lower mainland and in Victoria.

This is good news, and this budget... Because of the growing economy of British Columbia, because of the sound fiscal management in the province, we now have choices. One of the choices was to invest \$145 million in post-secondary education funding. I hope that the members on the other side of the House will actually vote in favour of this budget, because I'm sure they're for additional funding and increased funding for post-secondary education institutions.

Also it provides for \$45 million to Genome British Columbia. I know that when I was the Minister of Competition, Science and Enterprise, I worked with these folks at Genome B.C. Let me tell you, we have been able — through the leadership of the Innovation Council and the organizations that came before them, the Science Council — to attract the best and brightest to British Columbia from around the world. There's no question that great things are happening because of Genome British Columbia.

A further \$70 million is invested in the Michael Smith Foundation, a foundation that has a world-renowned reputation. We can only continue to grow on that reputation for all British Columbians — plus \$15 million for the Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation, a group that my wife and I, unfortunately, have had personal experiences with in our family. When we all work together and when we support our local Alzheimer foundations and fundraising groups in our community, I am confident that in time and over time, together we will find a way to wrestle this unfortunate disease to the ground.

[1605]

I've heard, unfortunately, members of the opposition make light of the \$309 million over four years to improve the homeowner's grant program in British Columbia. For some reason, they're not happy that homeowners and taxpayers in British Columbia, for the first time since 1993, are going to see increases in their homeowner's grant. Well, on this side of the House we support that. I can tell you, I will be voting for that. It will be interesting to see if members over there, whether they be from Vancouver or from the Cariboo, vote for homeowners or vote against homeowners. It will be interesting to see.

It will be interesting to see if they vote to support this budget and to support increased funding to seniors, people with disabilities and our veterans, whose homeowner grants will increase from \$745 to \$845. Surely members on that side of the House know the importance of seniors, know the challenges of those with disabilities and know what our veterans have

sacrificed in years. Surely they'll vote in support and stand up with those folks and put a few more dollars in their pockets.

R. Cantelon: I seek leave of the House to introduce three special guests.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

R. Cantelon: We have with us today three executives from Pope and Talbot who are travelling here and visiting our community. I'd like to introduce Paul Sadler, the general manager. I'd like to introduce, also, Michael Hovey, the fibre manager for that mill. Especially, travelling to us from the United States today is Angel Diez, who is the vice-president from the parent company in Portland. Would the House please make them feel welcome.

Debate Continued

Hon. R. Thorpe: This budget, *Growing with Confidence*, also increases the threshold for homeowners that qualify for the full grant. It will be increased to \$780,000 in assessed value — again, encompassing. Ninety-five percent of the homeowners who had been eligible will remain eligible for the homeowner's grant in British Columbia.

One item that I'm particularly pleased with is that the eligibility for the additional grant will be extended to include more people with disabilities. I must thank an individual from Penticton, British Columbia, for drawing to my attention an administrative challenge to the homeowner's grant. Working together with Ministry of Finance officials and Ministry of Small Business and Revenue officials, the Minister of Finance was able to introduce a change that streamlined and simplified the eligibility for those with disabilities. That is good news for all British Columbians.

Also, through the small business round table and the PST review that we've been conducting around the province — some 12 communities so far — we were able to make a number of changes. The Finance Minister was able to make and announce a number of changes that will increase the expansion and clarification of PST exemptions for machinery and equipment. We'll also be eliminating PST on labour charges for maintaining and modifying computer software, which was brought forward by the IT industry in British Columbia.

Also, as the Minister of Finance said, increasing the surtax — or, as the former NDP government used to call it, the luxury tax — on vehicles so that those who live, as I do — and others in this House, some on that side — in the interior of British Columbia where pickup trucks and four-wheel drives are actually needed to go to work, will actually give those individuals and families the clarification and exemptions they need because now the surtax has been moved

from \$49,000 to \$55,000. Again, this is very, very good news.

[1610]

Also small business throughout British Columbia said that access to capital and financing is an ongoing challenge and issue. Well, the Minister of Finance has announced that the small business venture capital tax credit program is being increased from \$20 million to \$25 million, which will see the opportunity for between \$17 million and \$20 million of equity to be raised in the province to help those very individual small businesses that say they need access to financing and capital.

We will be, in the coming months, working closely with the Small Business Round Table to see if there are other opportunities in the area of financing and access to capital that in partnership with financial institutions — whether they be the banks or the credit unions — we can develop a framework so that we can continue to grow our small business sector with confidence in British Columbia.

One very important part of our budget, *Growing with Confidence*, has to do with our negotiating framework for our some-300,000 public sector workers in the province. Our government has put forward \$6 billion for a negotiating framework. Again, some members on the opposition side have been critical that a government would do that. You know, this is in recognition that we do have a strong economy. It's in recognition that we cannot do things the way they have always been done in British Columbia, especially in the '90s, because if we do things the way they were always done in the past, we'll always get the same results.

It's time for a new approach. It's time for a leadership approach. It's time for making sure there's flexibility in our negotiating frameworks so that market conditions and marketplace challenges can be addressed in the negotiating framework.

We've created a \$1 billion incentive fund that's available to workers, to union members and to unions, provided the contracts are signed and sealed by March 31. If 300,000 workers accept that, on average it would be just over \$3,300 per employee for the public sector of the province. That is very good news. Let there be no mistake about it. That fund expires on March 31. What is not used will be, according to the law of the province, paid down to debt.

I'm encouraged by what I hear: that there are some very positive negotiations taking place. I hope that British Columbians are well served by their union memberships and by their union leaderships as we all continue to grow with confidence in British Columbia.

There is \$4.7 billion for four years of compensation increases, and then there's up to a \$300 million dividend in 2009-2010 if the province exceeds its surplus target of \$150 million. In the past the negotiating framework was a one-size-fits-all. This is a much more flexible, creative approach that retains affordability, sustainability and better services for taxpayers' dollars.

In the final analysis, and I'm sure members on that side — perhaps not all of them, but some of them — would agree that it is actually the taxpayers' money

that is being used here. It's not government money; it's actually taxpayers' money. We do have a responsibility to make sure that we spend the taxpayers' money just as many of us spend our own moneys.

There is so much that I could talk about in this budget, so much good news, but let me just talk about an area that's very important in the Okanagan, the region that I do represent. It's about tourism and international opportunities. This budget, *Growing with Confidence*, adds \$50 million over three years to help us achieve the goal of doubling tourism and taking advantage of the international exposure that the 2010 Winter Olympics will give Canada and British Columbia.

[1615]

There will be \$15 million for new funding for tourism initiatives and \$6 million to build gateway tourism centres at Peace Arch and Merritt. I know that the member who represents Merritt is very, very excited and — no doubt because of this initiative in his own riding — will be voting for this budget. He'll be voting yes, so why would he ever want to vote against his budget — about the new centre in Merritt? Why would he vote against that? But time tells all.

There'll be \$5 million to help develop all-season resorts — whether it be adventure tourism or public recreation opportunities as part of our resource strategy — \$3 million to support hosting major international and national community-based sporting events; and \$21 million to promote foreign direct investment in B.C. and to take advantage of the economic opportunities that the 2010 Winter and Paralympic Games bring to British Columbia. We will be focusing on the Asia-Pacific, which offers us great opportunity.

Noting the time, Madam Speaker, I should just talk quickly about health care. Health care in this budget receives an additional \$301 million. We have gone from funding of \$8.9 billion to \$12.3 billion. This budget talks about protecting the Canada Health Act — the universal, accessible, comprehensive, portable, public-administered Canada Health Act — but it also says we have to look at sustainability.

I am very, very troubled, because when I'm at home my constituents say that we want a health care system that's sustainable, but when I hear members from that side of the House they're against sustainability in our health care. I don't understand that, but I look forward to the debates as we move forward.

With respect to education, again, this \$112 million increase in our education budget takes per-student funding to a record \$7,338 in 2008-2009 — the highest level of funding in the history of the province. It also brings into fact partnerships between schools. I must mention the Summerland Middle School and principal Katie Hicks and the teacher Kevin Bond, who are working in partnership with the Canadian Home Builders to teach students in their middle school about trades. This budget also gives us the opportunity for the expansion of Mount Boucherie Senior Secondary.

In closing, Madam Speaker, this is a budget that's growing with confidence, made by choices that all Brit-

ish Columbians have participated in as we continue to move forward the great economy of the province of British Columbia.

S. Simpson: It really is a pleasure to get my second opportunity here to speak to a throne or a budget speech, and I'm very pleased to have that opportunity.

I'd like to start by congratulating you, Madam Speaker, on your reappointment. You did a fabulous job for us in the last session, and I'm sure you'll continue to do that in this session.

One of the things that I appreciate more now, having been in this place for a few months, is, really, the commitment of all members in this House. I understand and certainly appreciate more the challenges that we all face, as I've had some time to be here. I realize the commitment that our families make when we come to this place, and generally I think we all can be thankful that most of our families are very tolerant about the time demands that we have on us. I would like to thank all of the members for their commitment and certainly all of their families for putting up with what we have to put up with.

At this time I'd like to thank the people of Vancouver-Hastings for their confidence in me and for their continued support. I hear from members of my constituency every day, who bring me ideas, who talk to me about the things that we do here, who talk about the issues that are important to the people of Vancouver-Hastings. I value that very much. It certainly helps to inform the work that I do here, and it helps very much for me to continue to understand and stay grounded in the constituency of Vancouver-Hastings and in the challenges that face the people of that community.

[1620]

It certainly is a community where there are many challenges. It's a community where there is significant poverty. Over 20 percent of the people of Vancouver-Hastings live below the poverty line. It's a community where there are many challenges around health issues. There are issues around addiction. There are issues, certainly, around crime. There are issues around housing costs. Housing is a huge issue in my constituency, and I will look forward to speaking about that a little bit more as I go along.

It's also a very diverse constituency. About 40 percent of my constituency are Chinese-speaking, and that brings a very rich and exciting culture to the community. Whether it be on Hastings Street or Commercial Drive, it's always a pleasure to be able to walk those commercial streets and engage with people and engage with all of the excitement and the dynamic energy that flows on those streets.

One of the things, when I look at this budget, is.... I tried to decide for myself. What was the best way to basically frame this budget, and what did I really think it was all about? I think I've decided that what this budget is mostly about is damage control. It's damage control on the part of government. This is a government that started to radically cut and slash programs for British Columbians in 2001, and as will often hap-

pen when you have inept management and inept leadership, it gets itself in trouble. Clearly, this government got itself into an awful lot of trouble over the last four or five years as it dug more ditches than you could imagine.

As a consequence of the inept and incompetent leadership that sits on the government benches, we now have this scramble to try to put the pieces back together again, so we have the budget of damage control. These comments about the level of management skill on that side don't just come from me. I was interested in those comments when they were made by Norman Spector, a pretty well-respected conservative political commentator in this province.

You all know Mr. Spector as having worked for previous governments in this place — Social Credit governments — and for Conservative governments in Ottawa. Mr. Spector, in comments, talked about how incompetent and inept the management of this government was. I heard him saying that on *Voice of B.C.*, and I thought, well, he said it once so, you know, so much for that. But he just continued to repeat himself as he went through ministry after ministry and said that this minister has bungled this and that minister has bungled that — and isn't it incredible how they could do this and not know that they were making bad decisions and poor decisions?

The reason for this lack of a solid foundation for this government, the reason this government isn't able to accomplish things for most British Columbians, is a narrow-minded ideology that just permeates that government — permeates the ministers and the back bench. It's an ideology that is based on some pretty simple positions. It's an ideology that says that the private sector is good. It's an ideology that says government is bad. It says that people should look out for themselves regardless of their circumstances and that government has limited or no responsibility to keep the social safety net in place.

So I was thinking about why that's the case and why, in fact, the government seems to function in such a dismal way. Part of the problem, I started to realize, is the unrelenting need of our Premier to control everything in this province. It seems to be infectious how that works its way through his office. We saw the results of that in this budget. The biggest single increase in any ministry was the increase in the Premier's budget, as he had to get his tentacles and hands on more things in British Columbia and take more control of what goes on in our province.

Now, part of the reason for this is apparent as we're seeing what we're seeing happening, as we see minister after minister on that side of the House being usurped of their authority by the Premier as he takes control of their ministries. We're seeing more and more of that all the time.

[1625]

History, I believe, will show us that when you have the kind of autocratic power that sits with the Premier right now, sits in the hands of one person and the people who are around him — his deputies, the minions

who are around him — it leads to a level of centralization that ultimately will lead to failure. What we saw is the train going off the tracks here, very clearly. And now the government is trying to throw some money at Children and Families and other ministries to put some pieces back together.

What has the Premier actually done here? Well, we started with.... The Premier clearly took over the Ministry of Children and Families. We saw that when the minister had senior staff changed, senior staff sent off to the universities, reorganization, hiring consultants from South Africa. It appears that all of this is going on without the minister's knowledge.

We saw the Premier take over health care. The Premier is driving the health care agenda in this province. He's driving an agenda of for-profit health care, and he's doing it not with the advice of his minister but rather with the advice of his brother-in-law, a well-known ideologue and advocate for a two-tiered system — a system where the size of your bank account is much more important than your need for care.

The question, really, in health care now is: will the Health Minister need to get the approval of the Premier's brother-in-law before he can act on critical matters in his ministry? And I guess that time will tell as this dialogue on health care goes forward.

The Premier appears to have taken over most responsibility for education, including relations with the teachers and with the round table. It appears that the Premier drives the agenda at the round table, and when he's too busy to attend there, he sends the Minister of Education in his place.

In Environment the minister's plan to promote the commercialization of, and private resorts in, our provincial parks is only on hold until the Premier can get back to sign off on this. Some have even suggested that the Minister of Environment may not actually like this idea too much. He may agree, actually, with most of the people in this province, who don't think the commercialization of our parks is a good idea. You know, the reality is that he's been put in this place by his boss. It is the Premier's office that negotiated the LRMP agreements on the coast, not the minister. Those negotiations went through the Premier's office — though the minister, I would note, was allowed to come along for the announcement.

These are some of the most intrusive examples on a growing list of instances of the Premier's office taking increasing control of British Columbia. Too often this is the story of Jessica McDonald and Martyn Brown, the Premier's unelected brain trust, running B.C. with the Premier's blessing rather than having the people who are elected to do the job running B.C.

As a result, this approach to policy development in B.C. becomes more narrow by the day. It becomes more ideological and less consultative, less transparent and, clearly, less accountable with every decision made by the bureaucrats who think that they know better than British Columbians and they know better than British Columbia communities. This very approach is

eroding the fabric of accountable government, and we see it time and again.

What about the budget? The budget is about what were radical cuts in the previous number of years now coming home to roost. It's about missed opportunities that continue to be unmet and are now becoming critical. In Vancouver-Hastings, as with many other constituencies across British Columbia, these policy decisions and the lack of resources are quite devastating.

Some of the areas that we see around that, if we look at the budget and we look at housing.... Housing is a very big issue in this budget. What we see, in fact, is almost no money for housing. There's \$8 million over three years in the housing budget. Of that, \$5 million is spread over a couple of years for a multi-year homelessness initiative, and \$3 million — or \$1 million a year — for outreach teams. What isn't in there is any money for housing. There are outreach teams to go out and find homeless people and see if you can connect them with shelters, but there's no money to deliver housing.

[1630]

For the past four years we have seen B.C. Housing, under the direction of this government, having its housing eroded. What we saw, of course, was the government cancel 1,000 units the day it came into office, and they have now succeeded in one major growth area, along with all the other growth. This government, since the time they came to power in 2001, have succeeded in increasing the waiting list for people who need social housing from 10,000 to 14,000 people. The waiting time to get into social housing over the term of this government has increased from three to five years.

According to B.C. Housing's own statistics, 69,000 households in B.C. spend more than 50 percent of their income on rent. We've seen homelessness in my community in Vancouver; in the GVRD, double. What is the response to all of this? The response from the Minister Responsible for Housing in January in the *Times Colonist* was that the day for low-rent government-owned housing has passed. The minister went on to say that government wants to shift from owning housing projects, which stigmatize and ghettoize low-income people, to providing rent subsidies towards privately owned units.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

Well, people who actually know something about housing — unlike the minister, who has no sense of social housing in this province, no sense of its value.... The minister just does not grasp the role of social housing in British Columbia. What we know is that the provision of units is essential. You need to create housing stock when you're in housing markets where in fact you don't have rental housing vacancies. We know that. In Vancouver that's our challenge.

We have a minister who is ripping up the social contract in British Columbia. Housing is the most critical issue in Vancouver, and it's being ripped up. It's

being ripped up in communities across the province. It is shameful that this government has abandoned those 14,000 British Columbians waiting on the list for housing. They've been abandoned by this government and just told: "Do for yourself, because we don't care."

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Member, member.

S. Simpson: It's a shameful performance.

Deputy Speaker: Member, through the Chair.

S. Simpson: Through the Chair, Madam Speaker.

In the recent housing service plan the government was very clear. The government has become very clear that family housing and housing for the poor simply aren't on the list anymore. They don't count. They don't count with this government. They are the unworthy poor. This is a government that has identified the worthy poor and the unworthy poor, and for tens of thousands of British Columbians, the unworthy poor have been dismissed by this government. Housing is one of the areas where that's most evident.

An Hon. Member: Government in denial.

S. Simpson: Government in denial — absolutely.

Who are those unworthy poor? Well, what we know is that every month about 24,000 children in British Columbia use the food bank, and poor kids means poor families. We know that based on the last numbers available, British Columbia has the highest child poverty rate in Canada, and that's according to Statistics Canada. We have the highest child poverty rate in Canada. The 2003 rate was almost 24 percent. Almost one in four kids in this province lives in poverty.

Those are Statistics Canada's numbers; they're not mine. One in four children lives in poverty, and this government has just dismissed that. They've dismissed those kids. And this is well above the national rate, which runs at about 17½ percent. The national rate is tragic enough, but in British Columbia we can have it be one in four and this government just thinks that's fine.

[1635]

You know, it's interesting that we've heard on that side at times about welfare and social assistance recipients and how the numbers have been reduced for the number of people on social assistance. I think the number was almost a 37-percent reduction from 2000 to 2004 in people on assistance. But the interesting thing was that child poverty went up by 4½ percent over the same time.

When you start to figure that out, Madam Speaker, it starts to become evident that the challenge we face here is that people have dropped off the list not because they're not needy, not because they're not vulnerable, but because this government has manipulated programs in a way that doesn't allow them the support they need. They've ripped the social safety net up.

They've torn it up. They've thrown it away — dismissed it. They've torn it up and dismissed it.

It's a tragic situation when that happens, and unfortunately, it doesn't happen to just children. We have seen this situation happening with seniors around health care. We've had the discussion around health care in this House on many occasions.

What do we know? We know that the broken promise — seven budgets since this government was first elected, many commitments around long-term care.... As the Minister of Health has admitted, of those 5,000 long-term care beds that we're going to get, we've got about 600 of them so far. We've got about 600 of them there. This is just another failure. This is the government of talk, of no action. This is the government that says: "We will do for our friends. Everybody else, stand aside."

The minister admitted this. The minister has admitted that he is 4,400 beds short on his promises — 4,400 beds short. Just another performance in the shameful performance of this government. One embarrassment after another when it comes to the interests of British Columbians.

An Hon. Member: They don't care.

S. Simpson: They don't care. You're right.

What about education? Education is pretty important. We hear that all the time. That's true. So what have we learned? Well, what we've learned is that since 2001, tuition fees have doubled at our colleges and our universities. But that's only one thing.

What about medical premiums? They went up 50 percent over that time. Prescription costs have increased for seniors. All at the expense.... Everybody's being nickel-and-dimed by this government. It's shameful.

What about the environment? Let's talk about what this government has done for the environment over the last four years. What we know is that they've cut the budget. Starting in 2001 they started cutting the budget by about 30 percent. They reduced the budget. They eliminated conservation officers, park rangers, biologists and science technical officers. They eroded the Environment Ministry in a dramatic way, and that's probably.... First of all, they got rid of the Environment Ministry and created Water, Land and Air Protection — or, as people who are concerned about the environment affectionately used to call it, earth, wind and fire — because it really was sort of this approach across the province. They brought the Environment Ministry back, as we know, and we know that we now have a minister.

As we said at the beginning of this session, we congratulated the government for finally listening to British Columbians once every five years, a good thing to do, and returning the Ministry of Environment. They did that. But of course, the next thing we need to do is say: "Okay, you brought back the name. What about the actual delivery of the services? What about the sci-

ence? What about the enforcement? Did you bring that back?"

What we know is that this government adopted a new approach to environmental control, as it has adopted a similar approach in many ways. It was an interesting way to cut budgets and slash staff, and they went for a results-based approach. A results-based approach is not a bad thing. I don't have a problem with that. The notion that.... If folks can go out and they can do the job and they can meet the standards and you can be sure of that, that's not a bad thing.

[1640]

However, results-based approaches only work if you have the audit and oversight functions in place to ensure that the job you expect is being done is, in fact, being done. We don't have the audit and oversight function in place in this province. The ministry has been gutted. As a consequence, there aren't the people on the ground with the skills to do the job. The people who are there are working extremely hard, but they can't do the job because the government simply hasn't allowed them the resources and provided the resources to be able to meet the needs of our environment. It is about cuts, and now it is about a lack of services.

What about some of the other issues? Just to touch on a couple of other issues.... Climate change. We've heard from the government.... The momentary times they will discuss the issue of climate change — because it doesn't seem to be too big an issue for this government — they refer to the plan that British Columbia has. It isn't signed onto Kyoto, but the plan that we have — and fair enough. We now have a plan, of course, that's essentially based on carbon sinks. It has no standards. It has no objectives to meet. There's nothing like that in the plan, but it does tell us carbon sinks will be our way out of climate change issues.

We now have the beetle epidemic, which is going to take away the capacity to have those carbon sinks, in many cases, as we remove the beetle wood. But we haven't yet heard from the government about how they're going to adjust the plan to deal with that and about whether there are any resources to be applied to deal with that.

We also hear about species-at-risk, and we've heard about SaRSCO and the committee of government to deal with species-at-risk. We have three species or so on the list — two of them close to extinction now. It seems that the trick here is if you can get on the species-at-risk list, you're probably doomed in this province — the spotted owl and the caribou, right there, the murrelet. So if you make that list, your time is probably done if you are a species in British Columbia.

An Hon. Member: An endangered species.

S. Simpson: An endangered species. Well, in the parks, of course.... Well, we'll be selling those parks off soon. It certainly seems that way.

You know, one of the things that the government has prided itself on in this session — and it was very positive; it was a heroic effort on the part of a whole

diverse group of people — was the coast, the central and north coast LRMPs. In a very unique way, it brought first nations, the environmental movement, workers, industry and communities together. Over an extended period of time, starting back in the '90s through to very recently, they worked together with government to try to find the solution around resource management on our coastal communities. It's not complete, by any means, but those communities did good work.

The problem is that there are two critical pieces to this where, because of the government renegeing on the commitments that were made, we're not so sure this agreement will work. The first one.... There's to be \$200 million in this, and the strategic plan prides itself on this agreement. The agreement was to have two funds. One was a \$120 million fund for the first nations communities — \$30 million from the province; \$30 million from the feds; \$60 million from the private sector, mostly foundations — to allow first nations to start to move to conservation economies, transition their economies, have opportunities.

That fund seems to be moving ahead, and that's great. But there was a second fund. That was the socially responsible investment fund, and it was to be \$80 million — \$25 million for loans, \$55 million for venture capital. That fund was to be about \$56 million, \$57 million of private money and about \$23 million of government money. But the government, after four years of work on this fund.... In the fall the minister responsible called up the people who are putting the fund together and said, "We're not interested," and they walked away.

We now have all of the communities up and down the coast thinking they are going to be able to access not grant money but critically important venture capital and loan money to be able to move and transition their economies. But because this government has walked away from that fund, that money isn't going to be realized.

[1645]

Now we have a situation where those communities — and we're hearing from them, and we're talking to those regional districts and those communities — are very concerned because they don't know what the future holds for them, as the commitments that the government made as they partnered in this all of a sudden aren't worth much. It's kind of like torn-up contracts early in the term of this government.

You know, we need a new approach. The government talks about sustainability. Well, we define sustainability a bit differently than this government. We define it as really being a question of bringing the social, economic and environmental considerations together, putting them in balance, putting them in harmony and then adding engagement to that. Sitting down with communities. It's sitting down with the people who live in those communities, with their locally elected officials, with first nations and beginning to evolve solutions that will work for all British Columbians — not ramming things down people's

throats, not dismissing local governments but working with them to try to find solutions where all of the important considerations around social, economic and environmental interests are in fact kept in balance. That's not a practice that this government seems to be very good at.

You know, the challenge for this government in the budget really was to take the opportunity that was handed to it by a very good economy, by an economy built on commodity prices, an economy built on interest rates — neither of which this government has much to say about — and of course, an economy built on the biggest set of transfer payments any government in the history of British Columbia ever got. They bungled 2001 so badly.... This is the government that took a \$1 billion surplus and turned it into a \$2 billion deficit overnight, and then got the biggest transfer payments in the history of the province. You know, a \$1 billion surplus....

Interjection.

S. Simpson: We have never seen a government make such an inept...

Hon. R. Thorpe: You can't even say it.

S. Simpson: ...policy decision.

Well, it's stunning. It's stunning: the largest surplus into the largest deficit. That's because there's never been such an inept and dumb policy as the one they enacted on day one of their term.

An Hon. Member: But they won't admit it.

S. Simpson: They won't admit it. This is the government.... You know, they didn't even.... They weren't even prepared to take time to look at the facts before putting us in the ditch.

Well, I see my time's getting close, so just a couple of quick closing comments. First of all, of course, on this: this is also the government that's now running a \$3.6 billion deficit, because they don't know how to manage projects — like the Minister of Transportation, who can't run debts fast enough.

I look forward to continuing this debate with others.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: When you're ready, members. When you're ready, members.

Hon. R. Coleman: I'm pleased to rise today and speak in support of the budget. I've always watched the normal, traditional time period in this House, which is the period between about 4:30 and five o'clock, where there always seems to be a little bit more energy in the chamber — usually acquired by the ability of members to ramp up the heckling at that period of time every day. I'm glad to see that hasn't changed

in this Legislature. Even though in some days past — as members who have been here as I have for ten years will remember — it used to be a lot louder, and a lot more vociferous, even. We are now in a much happier place with how we run the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia.

I represent the riding of Fort Langley–Aldergrove. The riding of Fort Langley–Aldergrove is the birthplace of British Columbia. It is where the national historic park is.

[1650]

It is broken up into a number of very significant communities, albeit some smaller than others. They include Willoughby, Milner, Walnut Grove, Fort Langley, Glen Valley, the Salmon River, Aldergrove, Poppy, south Langley and others. The people that live in this particular riding are the most community-committed people I have ever encountered in my travels across western Canada and in the many communities I have lived in. They are, in my view, the volunteer capital of British Columbia. It is where the heart of B.C. lives. It lives in my riding, and I'm proud to say that.

I have been gifted to have served that riding now for ten years, in May. As I've served that riding.... As I was preparing to speak today, I was reflecting back on that ten years, but more so reflecting back on people whom I've come across and dealt with in that ten-year period: the people that have been helped with issues on an individual basis by a very good constituency staff; the people in communities who have given us ideas and feedback, both pro and con, on issues we want to do, both in opposition and in government; and the people who actually, as far as I'm concerned, are the voters — all voters — who give us the feedback to help us move the direction of government and build things like great budgets and great opportunities for our citizens.

One of those people is an individual who has actually worked for me for 17 years — an individual who worked for me way back in the days when I was in business. I find, looking back at that today, that it's actually 17 years this month. How could anybody put up with me for 17 years — with the exception of my wife, who has put up with me for 31? That lady's name is Sheryl Strongitharm. Sheryl has been the constituency assistant, the main one, the full-time employee in the Fort Langley–Aldergrove riding association for ten years and has done some remarkable work on behalf of British Columbians and should be recognized for that kind of dedication to the people of British Columbia.

I also serve a group of people in a riding that I don't think ask for very much, in Fort Langley–Aldergrove. In Fort Langley–Aldergrove, I think, most of all the people want to be respected. They want to be respected as people of British Columbia. They want to be respected as taxpayers. They want to be respected for the fact that they are an example of families working together to make their community better and their lives better in their community. And they want to be re-

spected for being people that reach out and lend a hand where people need it the most.

They do have some concerns and issues. It's these I want to spend a few minutes on today and address.

The first thing I want to talk about is the people that are outside Fort Langley–Aldergrove on either side of us, both in the Fraser Valley and the Greater Vancouver regional district. The city of Vancouver, the folks on the other side of the Port Mann Bridge, have continuously benefited from exceptional investments and infrastructure by British Columbians, whether it be the Alex Fraser Bridge; whether it be the counter-flowing of the tunnel to get people in and out of the city in the early days; whether it be SkyTrain from Surrey into downtown Vancouver, at the coast of billions; the RAV line, which is an additional expansion; the northeast sector line, which is coming; and the expansion of SkyTrain itself through Coquitlam and into Burnaby and back into Vancouver. They benefited greatly.

Almost two weeks ago I had to attend a function in Vancouver for six o'clock at night. I was going to attend the function in downtown Vancouver. I was expected to be there so that I would be able to be there for the start of the event at precisely 6:30. There was a reception from six to 6:30.

I live in a community that's about 30 miles outside the city of Vancouver. The afternoon is not supposed to be, theoretically, the rush hour; it's supposed to be coming out of the city, not going in. After two hours and 55 minutes, I accomplished the 50-kilometre trip into the city of Vancouver. I arrived just in time, after leaving at three o'clock in the afternoon, to attend the function I was supposed to attend. I sat for one hour and 28 minutes — I kept track — at the Port Mann Bridge.

[1655]

What did I see while I sat there for one hour and 28 minutes? I saw hundreds of cars, hundreds of trucks, all idling and polluting the environment in British Columbia. I saw people who wanted to get to their next job or get home to their families, unable to do so. I saw trucks carrying goods and services for the province and for our citizens stuck at the Port Mann Bridge.

I sat there, and I thought about this. I'm sitting there thinking: you know, sometimes there's no question why people continuously phone my office in Fort Langley–Aldergrove and tell me that they don't think we in Langley belong in the Greater Vancouver regional district — why they say to me: "You know, this is just not something that's good for our community." The Greater Vancouver regional district — and members of the opposition on the other side of this House — continuously oppose things for people in the valley, who are actually helping to fund infrastructure on the lower mainland.

We've been paying the gas tax in Fort Langley–Aldergrove ever since its inception. We've been paying that tax so you could have transit in Vancouver, and we were supposed to build infrastructure for the

movement of goods and services in British Columbia. We've been paying it with no benefit.

From Aldergrove today you cannot get on a bus and get to downtown Vancouver in less than two and a half hours. In Walnut Grove, which is an area of my riding, you should be able to — if there was any way to get across the Port Mann Bridge — get on an express bus and get to downtown Vancouver in less than 40 minutes. But there are no lanes at the bridge. There is no ability for the bus to get across. People talk about transit in the city of Vancouver, and they don't understand that you can't get there if the roads are blocked.

The Gateway project, for my riding, is absolutely critical. It is important to British Columbians, and it's important to Fort Langley–Aldergrove. Transport Canada itself estimates that we lose \$1.5 billion of economic activity just sitting on the movement of goods and services at the Port Mann Bridge every year.

I look at this government sometimes and say: what's different than the other guys? Well, they're actually prepared to do something about the Gateway instead of spending 20 years and 10 years in government talking about it and doing nothing.

Commuting times in my area have increased by a minimum of 30 percent in the last ten years. The loss of jobs, loss of opportunity, loss of ability for people to do business in British Columbia, our relationship internationally with ports into other places like Asia and areas where we want to ship goods and services, particularly as the Minister of Forests.... If I can't get those goods and services to the ships, and I can't get them into China and Korea and Japan and those other countries that want to buy our goods and services, we end up with a failed ability to actually move our goods and services and lose to the competition of the international marketplaces.

The lower mainland has grown by 750,000 people in the past 20 years, and it's expected that the population is to grow to three million by 2031. We had better accept some things. We had better accept the fact that we're going to have to densify how we actually build our homes and our communities as we move forward. We're going to have to accept the fact that when we talk about a livable region strategy, it doesn't mean that a livable region strategy is everything for Burnaby and Vancouver and nothing for the Surreys and Langleys of this world.

It is not about a level of government like the Greater Vancouver regional district, which actually is not accountable to the taxpayer but tries to enforce its will on the ability of communities to become truly growing and sustainable communities and to create jobs at home rather than having people commute from one side of a bridge to the other. They are, frankly, the biggest single impediment today in my area. With their attitude towards green zones and how they manage water and sewer — which is still back in the 1950s with regards to how they do it versus how, internationally, people can do it better — and how they think that they know better on the other side of that bridge.... The city council in Vancouver still thinks.... I heard today —

imagine this — that there are two of them who are opposed to the Gateway project who can't tell you the last time they went over the Port Mann Bridge. But they're opposed to the project. One says they've never been across at all, and yet they're opposed to the project.

What I want to hear from the opposition is this. I'd love to hear one member from Surrey stand up and say: "I support Gateway. I support the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge and the south perimeter road, because I believe in goods and services, and I believe that the people of my community want this." One member from Surrey — I'd like to see them do that. I'd like to see an MLA from Surrey that's not a member of the government stand up and say that, because I know where the government members are, but I do not know where the opposition is.

[1700]

As I go through, looking at this budget, I see contrasts. I see contrasts that are really, clearly evident: the difference between who this government is and who the NDP were in ten years past and who the NDP are today. The NDP were government from 1991 to 2001.

There were 12,500 seniors receiving Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters in that ten-year period. In ten years, not once did they adjust the supplement for those seniors. Not once did they adjust the marketplace for rents going up. Not once did they take care of that vulnerable population of seniors in all the period of time that they were in government. Not once did they add to the program so that you could put more people, given the fact we had an aging population.

What's the contrast? For seniors they did nothing. For seniors we increased SAFER, in September. We made it available to more people so that 7,700 more people are eligible, on top of 12,500 people. That's the contrast between the two governments, between the two parties — the fact that we're prepared to stand up and do the job and take care of people.

There's something else that really bothered me for years when I sat in opposition and for years before I even came into government. There was a program where a person that was developmentally disabled could volunteer in their community and receive \$100 a month for that volunteer work. The budget for that actually allowed for about 1,200 people that were developmentally disabled in British Columbia to receive that \$100 a month.

But there were another 2,000 to 3,000 more people that were developmentally disabled that were unable, frankly, to be able to access it, because the funding wasn't there for them. They would be working in a volunteer capacity in communities with their providers and all of that, and one would be receiving \$100 a month, and one wouldn't. I always thought that was fundamentally wrong.

When you get your fiscal house in order, you can actually make some choices. You make choices about what else you can do, because you have the money. I am very proud that in this budget there is now the money sufficient for all people that are developmentally disabled in British Columbia to receive that \$100 a

month when they volunteer in their communities. I think that shows heart. I think that shows class. I also think it shows that we care and that the people who ignored that for ten years did not.

Everybody knows that there's a group of people in this province that are the middle class. We always try and pick whatever number it is for people to decide what the middle class is in British Columbia, but there are a group of people that are homeowners in B.C. — seniors and families — that have been paying, that haven't seen a change in their homeowner's grant in years. In this budget we gave them \$100 more in a homeowner's grant as a thank-you for them to contribute to the tax base and to British Columbia, because we care about their families, etc.

I look at this budget, and I look at what's gone on in the last five years. I look at the debates in this House at times, and I find that the two dots just don't connect. You know, it's easy in opposition, I have always said, to be opposition, because you know all the answers. You can always find some story that's going to poke fun or take a piece of an organization or a piece of a bureaucracy apart. I know that, because I was there on that side of the House doing that for five years.

I can tell you this. There has never been a time in British Columbia's history when there's been a larger investment made in the B.C. health care system. There's never been a time in B.C.'s history when the health care system has received the dollars and when government has made the sacrifice internally to other ministries and other choices in order to fund the health care system to the tune of close to \$12 billion. It's an exceptional amount of money, it's an exceptional increase, and it's an exceptional step on behalf of British Columbians.

I sit in this House every day, and I see somebody that wants to get up and have a minister, say, answer a question on one hour's notice about a specific case within the health care system. It's a \$12 billion operation, but in British Columbia....

[1705]

I want to tell you a couple of recent stories. One of my friends — and friends in this House — walked out of this Legislature last week after giving a two-minute statement, and he had a minor heart attack. He went to the Clerk's office. He was faint. He said he wanted to lie down. They brought in the first aid person, they called an ambulance, and he was in the hospital. Within three hours that individual had his angioplasty and shunt in and was saved because the health care system in British Columbia worked for that critical moment for that individual.

We have another member of our House that recently went and had an exam done and found out that he had critical pressure facing him with regards to his heart. He had a quintuple heart bypass. When you want to take shots at the health care system, remember this: there are operating room nurses, there are people in hospitals working every day — anaesthesiologists, doctors and surgeons that are there for the critically ill in the emergencies in B.C.

If you think there is a solution for every single health care problem that ever existed, you're wrong. Is there a solution to having a good, well-managed health care system in British Columbia? You bet. Do you know that we had the best outcomes for cancer in the country and one of the best in the world? Do you celebrate that from the opposition side of the bench? No. Is it easy to take a shot at somebody with regards to a certain level of care, where a situation has occurred that the minister says he will look into? Yes.

It's a lot easier if you'd look at the global issues around health care and look at what's happened to health care in the last five years. There used to be 55 different agencies and bodies across the province touching the budget of health care. There was no plan. There was no goal. There was no strategy to get to the next level. There was no recognition of the fact that you have an aging population and this demographic is coming at you like a tidal wave.

The fastest-growing age demographic in our province today is people over the age of 85. That tells you that the health care system is going to be a lot different as we move through the next ten years than it has been in the last 20. We're going to face some pressures with regards to an aging population and all the issues that come along with that.

As we do this, let's try and keep in mind that although we like to do our debates in health care in this House, there is not one person in this House that doesn't believe that that system should work for British Columbians. There is not one person in this House that isn't prepared to try and make the changes and adjustments and look down the road for the successes that should be there in health care in B.C. The reason for that is because I believe that as soon as you enter public life, you identify yourself as a person that wants to make a change, be productive and actually be positive in making those changes.

As I look at this budget, I look at the largest single investment in education in the history of the province over the last five years, in spite of the fact that by the end of this fiscal year we could be down as many as 50,000 students from where we were five years ago. Yet we haven't cut a dime out of education, but have actually added hundreds of millions of dollars to the system over the last five years. That shows your commitment financially to education and to the outcomes you expect.

As you do that, and as you get your fiscal house in order and can make investments in health care and education, you also find out by managing your business right that you end up with the ability to have some money to do some other things. For instance, we're going to have negotiations and some labour contracts....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, member, minister. It's hard to hear.

Hon. R. Coleman: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It was getting a little distracting over in the corner.

For the next number of weeks we're going to see what is us as British Columbians — and I talk about the people of British Columbia when I talk about this — saying to our public service workers: "We're actually prepared to make an additional investment in you." We've set aside almost \$6 billion for our labour market in the next year as we negotiate through to March.

[1710]

What have we done? We've said we have a billion dollars this year that under GAAP we would have put against the debt on April 1. But if we negotiate settlements with our employees by April 1, they will receive a signing bonus of up to \$3,300 per employee, because their contracts expire March 31. Then there's \$4.7 billion there for the negotiation to have contracts over the next number of years and the ability to add another bonus at the back end. That is an opportunity for us to actually sit down and work with our employees to settle contracts and move forward and do that. In June we want to do the same thing, when the teachers' contract expires, because we believe that's why we're able to do a number of things.

This government is the first government in 20 years to make a significant investment in public safety. This government actually added more police officers to the provincial police force, put together integrated units and added another 100 officers on top of it just for integrated traffic. They took the fine revenue, which government takes every year, and they're giving it back to municipalities to pay for policing so that they can reinvest in public safety programs in their community. Last year that number was \$46 million. This year it will be higher. No other government has ever done that. No other government has recognized that sending those moneys back to communities rather than keeping them in general revenue will help enhance public safety. That is a contrast.

We have dealt with issues on all kinds of aspects on behalf of British Columbians, and I want to talk about a couple of them that face my ministry today. Any person that's from the interior of British Columbia will know that we're facing an issue with the mountain pine beetle. Anybody on the lower mainland that has been reading any papers or watching any television over the last year or two will also know we're facing issues around the mountain pine beetle. The significance of its size and its breadth is something I don't think many people really understand. We're going to lose up to 80 percent of our mature pine in British Columbia over the next number of years.

When we became government in 2001, there was no mountain pine beetle strategy. There was no organization that was particularly focused on it. There was no plan to move forward. So the Premier put together a task force and went into the Cariboo, the Chilcotin in the north to start to build that plan.

We put together the beetle action plan. The one thing about the beetle action plan, I can tell you, is that it's like a living document. It's updated constantly because this infestation grows, and it changes, and frankly, it adapts. It is an infestation that is going to

have huge economic impacts on communities in certain ways, but it will also provide opportunities for communities in other ways. We have to be open to all of that. It's guiding our efforts in managing the beetle and supporting the communities. We've invested a significant amount of money in the mountain pine beetle action plan and the plans that go with it — \$100 million last year, \$100 million from the federal government. Over \$100 million in this budget alone, again, for mountain pine beetle. That money will go into everything to deal with the impacts that face communities with regards to this infestation.

As we do that, we need to build partnerships with first nations and communities, like we have with the community action groups in the areas that are working together to come up with the solutions — as are the first nations leadership and other communities in relation to that — and getting things done. We've raised the annual allowable cut a number of times in the interior of B.C. so that we can get at the actual wood. We've increased our reforestation through Forests for Tomorrow and all our ecosystem stuff. In addition to that, we've awarded new forest licences for people to do other things with the wood, like OSB and pellet plants and things like that, so we can find other opportunities for the wood.

We've signed a beetle action plan MOU with Alberta to try and see if we can stop it at the Rockies, to have a relationship so that we can slow it down. We have a commitment that still exists, according to the new government, of a billion dollars over a number of years, ten to 15 years, for the beetle — from the new government and from the last. The only group of people that wouldn't make that commitment were the people that the people on the other side of the House campaigned for in the federal campaign. Their only commitment was \$400 million. They weren't prepared to stand up to the plate and give a long-term commitment to British Columbia. But the federal government has given that long-term commitment to B.C. We're glad about that, because we think it's going to be important for building the plan and sustaining it as we go forward in British Columbia.

[1715]

If I was to stand here as the minister and say the only difficulty or challenge, frankly, facing the forest industry in B.C. today was the mountain pine beetle, I would be disingenuous to a great degree. We have issues at the coast. On the coast we have issues with the pricing of our logs, the pricing of our fibre, the fact that we're not getting it out of the woods, the fact that we need marketplaces for it. A lot of our mills are old and don't cut the same wood for the same market any more. All of those adjustments we're going to see in the next number of months with regards to the industry needed to have a plan as well.

We sat down with the industry, the community, the companies and the people that work in the forest sector when we worked on the coast recovery plan. That plan takes into account issues around stumpage, issues around how to tackle capital investment and attract it

back into the industry, and how we roll out together a long-term strategy for solid wood fibre in British Columbia — which we're working on, and we're going to continue to. I believe we're going to have substantive success with it.

As we do that with the interior, the coast and other areas of B.C. that are affected by how we might price wood or do stumpage — because there are other areas that don't have the pine beetle — we also have to take into account that we're facing an international challenge in the pulp market. The pulp and paper market has huge challenges. We need to work with that industry. I await the Competition Council's report, actually, in that regard so that we can start to work on those solutions, going forward, and build a long-term plan for pulp as well.

Something that didn't happen in the ten years of the NDP was a task force on homelessness. The Premier of British Columbia, our Premier today, started the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness a couple of years ago. He met with the UBCM and leaders from communities across B.C. and started to move money into the expansion of shelter beds and cold-wet weather strategies and those aspects that are important to the homeless strategy in B.C.

In doing that, he accomplished two things. We targeted dollars so that we would be able to help the homeless strategy in B.C. As we did that, we also raised public awareness and created leaders and advocates so that we could do these in communities across British Columbia.

In the next number of weeks we will unveil B.C.'s housing strategy. As we do that, it will be interesting, because these members across the House have already pre-designed everything that might be put into the continuum of housing in British Columbia in their mind and are out there criticizing something they haven't seen. That's great, because when they see it, they will realize it was much ado about nothing. It is just going to be important for the continuum of housing from homelessness to home ownership and everything in between as we build a future for the citizens of British Columbia. That's what it's going to be about.

I'm so proud to have had the last ten years serving the constituents of Fort Langley–Aldergrove. I am proud to have served in the official opposition in this House. I'm proud to serve in this government. I'm proud to be part of a government that has balanced the budget and put the books in order so that we can make choices for British Columbians based on solid fiscal management and a strong future for the people of British Columbia. I'm proud that we've changed the attitude towards B.C., that B.C. today is now a place to do business, a place to come to, a place to gravitate back to and a place to live. Because that's what was missing in the bad decade of the '90s but is not missing anymore in the golden decade of the 2000s.

G. Coons: Members, fellow British Columbians and members in the gallery today, I rise today on this occa-

sion to respond to the government's budget speech and how it may influence a unique and diverse riding such as North Coast. Being the representative of the northern coastal community, the impacts on health care, education, skills training, homelessness, seniors, the environment, first nations, and economic development are viewed differently than they are in larger urban areas.

If I may comment on the hon. member for Langley, who during her budget debate referred to — and excuse me if I'm wrong — getting the pulse of the riding or key issues at Tim Hortons or at Starbucks. In my riding, I'd like it on record, we have one Tim Hortons, and we don't have a Starbucks. We did have a Haidabucks until Starbucks took them to court. I would say that the key of the islands is at the Haida Rose Café. That's where I hang around.

[1720]

It's my responsibility to promote and advocate for the constituents in the riding I represent. I portray a genuine character, and I hope that the unique needs and many situations that symbolize and are found on the north coast, I can bring forth. It's an occasion of great disappointment to many British Columbians that this budget is long on rhetoric and promise and short on real solutions to what average British Columbians are looking for.

The Liberal transformation seems to be one that is hiding the true nature of the animal — one that is attempting to mask and undo the damage that this government has inflicted upon British Columbians for the last five years. We've experienced many, many past Liberal promises that we took as caring and looking out for British Columbians. Perhaps the title of Dr. Vertesi's book *Broken Promises* best symbolizes where this government has taken us.

Could we ever forget the cascading commitments and the broken promises — for example, the Premier announcing: "I don't believe in ripping up contracts. I am not tearing up any contracts"? But in 2002, in the wee small hours of the night, the Liberals rammed Bills 27, 28 and 29 through the Legislature, effectively ripping up collective agreements that covered health care, community social services, teachers and post-secondary educators. This legislation cleared the way for mass layoffs, larger classes, closed hospitals and expanded privatization of health care. The International Labour Organization and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women condemned the move, making this B.C. Liberal government a global embarrassment.

Remember this one? "The Premier and the B.C. Liberals recognize the importance of HEU workers to the public health care system. We will value them." But as we know, over the past four years the Liberals have ripped up health care collective agreements, fired 8,000 health care workers and imposed a 15-percent wage rollback on tens of thousands more.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Bill 29, the legislation that paved the way for widespread health privatization, was described by the *Globe and Mail* as an act of legislative vandalism.

How about these ones? "Protect B.C. Hydro and all of its core assets. Stop the expansion of gambling that has increased gambling addiction and put strains on families. Not sell or privatize B.C. Rail. The Ministry of Women's Equality will continue to exist as a freestanding ministry. A B.C. Liberal government will carry on the core funding for women's centres." The result of this promise was an end to \$1.7 million in funding to 37 B.C. women's centres effective March 31, 2004.

Another one: "A Liberal government wouldn't lower the minimum wage." But on October 29, 2001, the B.C. Liberal government announced a reduced minimum wage for students and people new to the workforce of \$6 an hour under the guise of a first-job training wage.

This government also promised the best in child care but delivered \$4 million in cuts. They promised a strategy for the heartlands, but they still have done little with the crisis in forestry, especially with the beetle-kill epidemic. They promised to build the best system of support for at-risk children, but they have only delivered chaos in child protection and the highest child poverty rate in Canada.

They promised to build — open and operate — an additional 5,000 intermediate and long-term care beds by the year 2006, but they closed thousands of long-term care beds. There still is no plan, no plan that I see, to keep this promise.

They promised that over the next years the government will enhance training, resources and authority for front-line social workers to properly protect children at risk. But they targeted the Ministry of Children and Families for the biggest cuts and left child protection in chaos. Unfortunately, we've all seen the results of that broken promise.

How can this Liberal government be trusted? Their past uncaring actions speak louder than words as now they bask in the glory of unheralded budget surpluses that came off the backs of women, children, seniors, students and the disadvantaged. It is quite appropriate that the latest poll indicates that the majority of British Columbians think the state of the economy is good. But despite that rosy picture, the situation is quite different for the many individuals and families that say they have not benefited from the improved economy. This is amplified among those British Columbians with below-average incomes — and I dare say, those especially in rural coastal communities.

The updating of the Canada Health Act clearly is a call for driving our health care towards privatization and a forecast that a two-tiered system is just around the corner, as the Premier and his seven-day, four-country junket of family and friends determines the future of health care in British Columbia. Perhaps the time, money and energy of this government would be better spent centred on a review of the 18-month, \$15 million analysis of our health care system that is already available and contained in the Romanow report.

[1725]

The Liberal move to regional health authorities may work in some parts of the province, but it does not work in isolated rural and coastal communities. Northern Health combined 16 former health organizations into one body — one body that is having difficulties meeting the needs of residents. It covers almost two-thirds of British Columbia's landscape, bordered by the Northwest and Yukon territories to the north, the B.C. interior to the south, Alberta to the east, and Alaska and the Pacific Ocean on the west.

The north has the highest projected growth rate of seniors in B.C. with a 48-percent projected increase by 2010. And 13 percent of the population is aboriginal, the highest proportion in the province. What do we see happening in Prince Rupert for seniors? We see cuts in home care. We see seniors forced to look after seniors. We hear Prince Rupert and area seniors demanding respect and attention from both Northern Health and this government.

"Broken Promises Frustrate Seniors," read last week's headlines in the Prince Rupert *Daily News*. Northern Health has closed beds, from 50 to 30, and is renovating those closed rooms to be office space, while there are numerous seniors on the wait-list. Since 2001, residential care beds in Prince Rupert have been cut by 27 percent. This cut in beds was with the knowledge from a project study report that indicated that the north coast health region is projected to have an increase of 50 percent in persons age 65 and over from the years 2001 to 2011, while B.C. will increase by only 28 percent.

This is shameful. The current outcry from seniors is focused around the promised Acropolis Manor adult day centre that once again is on delay, putting seniors at risk. This facility in 2001 had dire warnings in the project study, stating that if this facility does not proceed and is delayed, we will see the continuation of housing intermediate care and extended care residents in severely deficient and inappropriate accommodations. The original plans for the new Acropolis were cut from 80-plus beds to 50. This government needs to take immediate action to assist seniors and help residents in the north coast region.

I am pleased with the Minister of Health's response earlier this week when we discussed this issue in the House. He stated that he would "be glad to work with Northern Health to ensure that we get the outcomes the member is obviously looking for." That is a remarkable thing, and I look forward to some good news soon.

Last week we heard the story of young Leon Haldane, who experienced a Liberal magical roller-coaster ride from Prince Rupert. He broke his arm in Rupert, got his arm fixed and had to spend three days in a hallway, as there were no beds. They had a surgeon in Prince George for surgery on his jaw, but Leon was not a priority for a medevac and may have had to have a long wait. They may have lost the availability of the surgeon if they didn't go, so the hospital suggested they drive to Prince George. The family took their rent

cheque, packed up the family and drove the eight- to ten-hour trip, one way. They were away for four or five days and incurred gas, hotel, meal costs.

Mr. Speaker, I find this totally, totally unacceptable, and Northern Health officials indicated that I should go to the Minister of Health, which I did. The minister just shoved this situation aside, stating that it's the responsibility of Northern Health. So at this point in time, I'm a bit confused. Who is responsible for services, for quality health care when and where we need it?

Another young Rupert man recently was medevacked to Terrace and then medevacked to Prince George for emergency surgery and was not a priority for medevacking back to Prince Rupert, so his father told the hospital he would drive from Prince Rupert to Prince George — 900 kilometres, an 1,800-kilometre round trip. The young man was discharged at 9:30 in the morning and sat in the waiting room of the hospital with no clothes, no money and no food until 6:30 at night. This is not quality patient care anywhere in this province, but we experience it all too often here on the north coast. The constituents in my riding deserve better treatment.

How about a similar story of Chris Last, who after a horror show of miscommunications was lost for a full week in the Prince George Hospital after no bed, not a priority; a bed but bumped off the medevac list; medevac available but no bed, etc. The one-day in-and-out MRI in Prince George turns into another disaster for a Rupert family. For the January 1 rare cerebellum stroke to be diagnosed and for Chris to be returned home, it took until January 11 — from January 1 to January 11.

Last week there was the agonizing story of a 55-year-old Queen Charlotte City mother who was seriously ill, unable to walk, and apparently sent to Masset for physio, as a bed was needed. No one was expecting her, no arrangements were made, and she died within 14 hours, 150 kilometres away from friends and family.

[1730]

These stories all relate to how we need the north coast as a separate health region, and this government must rethink how health authorities are regionalized. It may work elsewhere, but it does not work here with the coastal challenges that we encounter.

I need to put into my remarks that there is definitely a need for an audiology clinic in Prince Rupert, and it is high on the list. I am pleased that the commitment from this government is there for assuring children have a strong start in life and that new investments are available for procedures that children need. The throne speech line of "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is one that is ringing in the ears of concerned professionals in and around Prince Rupert. Our community will count on support from the Strong Start B.C. initiative that will provide early diagnosis for child hearing problems. I look forward, also, to working with the Minister of Health on this initiative.

The government wants to define and enshrine the principles of the Canada Health Act in legislation.

That's what's caused chaos in education — when this government attacked teachers, disrespected students and enshrined class size in legislation. After Bill 27, which imposed a contract on teachers and forced school boards to take the blame for underfunding, forced them to dispose of thousands of teachers and support staff, this government passed Bill 28, which stripped negotiated contracts of class size language and all the supports for students with special needs. Class size was enshrined in legislation — the Liberal mantra — with a concept of district averages. We still hear and we still see the disastrous effects on class sizes and the composition of those classes.

This budget speech offers no plan to improve education, no plan to reduce class sizes or deal with the horrendous composition issues in classes and no commitment to improve relationships with B.C. teachers. The only promise is to visit school districts — but not locally elected trustees, with no mention of this government's plans for their repurposing of school boards — and to create a new cyber virtual school, a new option for learning. That again indicates the lack of concern for the real issues that need to be tackled in education.

The pledge of openness and transparency once again falls through the cracks as the Deputy Minister of Education takes a secret and covert sideshow across the province. The ministry workshops profess to eliminate or regionalize school boards. They attack negotiated contracts. They touch on the contracting-out of teacher and support-staff positions and create corporate principles at schools as this government attempts to introduce AO-based funding at each and every school — all this, contrary to the work already in progress at the education round table. It's hard to believe.

Health and fitness seem to be a high priority for this government, as they should be. The assurance that all students will have a minimum level of physical activity without exception is one that should focus on the reintroduction of elementary PE specialists, but especially along with the necessary funding to achieve that goal.

I'm pleased to see the commitments to have new initiatives put in place to help aboriginal students who have dropped out. Perhaps if this government had given school boards adequate funding during the past five years, the many current incentives and programs across the province that were forced to shut down would not have been forced to shut down.

The Cane Island alternate program in Prince Rupert had to lock its doors, as well as the Surrey aboriginal youth program that was shut down. This is a government that is attempting to undo the damage from its previous slash-and-cut agenda.

There was an indication in the throne speech that several steps had been taken to protect violence against women and that more will be added. After years of cuts to social programs and women's centres, this is far, far too late for the 34 missing and murdered young women along the highway of tears. I call on this gov-

ernment to take a leadership role concerning the deaths along Highway 16 from Prince George to Prince Rupert before any further atrocities occur to young aboriginal women in the north.

The importance of B.C. products and the new agricultural plan to help B.C. farmers is a great initiative, but this concept should also be the highest priority when it comes to supporting our own B.C. shipbuilders. We must ensure our tax dollars are spent in B.C. and not shipped out to highly subsidized foreign companies.

[1735]

How ironic is it that this government, after cutting training and apprenticeship programs and decimating the old Industry Training Authority, finally realizes there's a shortage of skilled workers? This government will reinvest \$39 million over 30 years, but this is after cutting \$40 million from the ITA since 2001.

They will also expand trades training and apprenticeships by encouraging employers to renew their efforts and investments in skills training. So they're going to encourage employers to renew their efforts. Again, this government shirks responsibilities to our youth and blames employers for their lack of effort and achievements. It's exactly what they did and still are doing to school boards — blaming them for the chaos and defunding that this government caused. Now they blame employers for the skills shortage. The B.C. Liberal legacy, in my mind, is: blame it on somebody else.

This government's commitment to sustainable, vibrant, creative communities in a province that lives in balance with nature is one to take real notice of. This reference is to the central and north coast LRMPs that have been given government approval. The Premier announced on February 7 that the Great Bear rain forest agreement will guide decisions based on recommendations from first nations, resource-based industry, environmentalists, local governments and the people who live in these communities.

As representatives for these areas, we all look forward to this new vision and anxiously await the fair and equitable funding promised by this Liberal government. The B.C. coast socially responsible investment fund and the Coast Sustainability Trust are the two key avenues, as well as the coast opportunities fund, that residents of the central coast, north coast and adjacent regions of British Columbia are finally going to have access to — as long as this Premier keeps to his commitments.

All communities that are forestry-dependent need added assistance from this government, and this fact cannot be ignored any longer. Coastal communities, small ports such as Stewart and Bella Coola, must have their concerns listened to. Initiatives need to be in place with the appropriate funding to support economic development in tourism and pocket cruise ships.

The hill of the Bella Coola Valley must have a focus to ensure safety and expedient travel. The region north of Meziadin in northwest B.C. could make a major con-

tribution if the needed power and infrastructure was in place. Empowering Highway 37 with the necessary consideration of the needs and aspirations of first nations should be a provincial priority.

I'm optimistic that this government's new relationship with first nations is one that will forge ahead based on mutual respect and recognition of aboriginal rights. If this government is really going to, as it says, "lead Canada and walk the path together to lasting reconciliation," I hope that in any disputes both the Premier and the Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation take a leadership role.

I'm truly disappointed that a key missing component of this budget was how this government was going to protect and oversee our environment — not one mention of the impact of climate change, despite having as one of its five great goals to lead the world in environmental management. The brief reference to alternative energy forming an integral part of the government's expanded energy will, hopefully, put to rest the pipedream of offshore oil and gas exploration along our pristine coast lines.

This government must focus on the full potential of sustainable energy in B.C. This must encompass the full adoption of technologies to meet the power needs of British Columbia residents and businesses using wind, tidal, solar, microhydro and the investigation of all potential energy sources available.

After the last four to five years, how can we trust this Premier — after his continual attacks on children, students, families, women, seniors, workers, the environment and first nations throughout this province, and especially the tax on the poor? He increased MSP premiums by 50 percent, doubled tuition fees, increased Pharmacare, drivers' licence and hunting and fishing fees. He raised gas taxes by 3½ percent per litre. He raised property taxes, sales tax, increased physio. Child care costs soared. New user fees. He started privatizing B.C. Hydro.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members, members.

Member, please direct all your comments through the Chair. Thank you. And members, please allow....

[1740]

G. Coons: Chair, I'll get to the rich....

Deputy Speaker: Member.

G. Coons: I'm sorry, Chair.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Please allow the member to speak without being interrupted. Thank you.

G. Coons: Mr. Speaker, this Premier started privatizing B.C. Hydro, raised electricity fees, and we're still experiencing the results of the selling-off of our public

assets — for example, B.C. Rail to CN. Our ferry fares are skyrocketing, as this government, without public input, handed off our marine highway to an anti-labour American who is a specialist in restructuring, to be privatized with devastating results to our many ferry-dependent communities. Our Premier did all this while in the same breath giving large corporations and the wealthiest in B.C. a \$1 billion tax cut.

It's not just the poor who suffer. It's the middle-income taxpayers who pay for the government's giveaways to big business and to the wealthy. Sales tax revenue is up \$835 million since 2001. Medical Services Plan premium income jumped \$467 million. Fuel taxes went up. Tobacco taxes went up. The only revenue that actually went down: corporate income tax. We can't trust them now; we can't trust them whenever.

Interjections.

G. Coons: Mr. Speaker, we couldn't trust them then; we still can't trust them now.

In conclusion, and ending on a couple of positive notes, I would like to give kudos to the government for its choice of the kermode bear as the official provincial animal, as it's the essence of the spirit of B.C. It does evoke the uniqueness of aboriginal heritage and the first nations' special relationship with land and body. Its protection and preservation is vital to many who cherish its magnificence.

Speaking of magnificence and encompassing cultural heritage, I had the opportunity to attend Hobiye, the Nisga'a New Year, two weeks ago in Prince Rupert. Once again the coming together of many nations in ceremonial dance highlighted the occasion. Over 900 drummers and dancers from 18 communities dazzled the thousands in attendance. I foresee our own 2010 opening ceremonies seriously grasping the real essence of the spirit of British Columbia with a huge contingent of thousands of first nations ceremonial dancers from every corner of this majestic province for the world to see. This would truly symbolize our new relationship and the spirit of all British Columbians.

Mr. Speaker, honoured colleagues, thank you for this opportunity. At this time I would like to adjourn debate until the next sitting of the House.

Deputy Speaker: I recognize the member for West Vancouver-Garibaldi.

J. McIntyre: It's a great privilege to rise on behalf of the residents of my communities in West Vancouver-Garibaldi and to respond to the 2006 balanced budget.

Our throne speech laid out our government's plan for continuing progress in achieving our goals for a prosperous decade. We're actively pursuing opportunities to continue moving forward with confidence and to engage our citizens in real dialogue in an attempt to realize the true promise of our province. I'm very

proud to be part of a team with a real leader that is not afraid to ask the hard questions — questions such as: are we prepared to change, to face up to the fact that our health care system is clearly not sustainable? What are the fundamental changes we must make to improve our health and protect our precious health care system for the long term? Does it really matter to patients where or how they obtain their surgical treatment if it's paid for with public funds?

As an aside, in my public opinion career I had a preview of answers to this latter question from focus groups with members of the general public. Guess what. The answer is: it likely doesn't much matter. I've long suspected that the public is far ahead of government on these types of issues, so I'm doubly pleased that our Premier is initiating this type of serious dialogue.

[1745]

Other questions raised: what more can we do to help all students in every classroom? How might we modernize our curriculum? What more can we do to ensure greater accountability to taxpayers? What's the appropriate mix of local autonomy and flexibility in decision-making?

I don't know about you, but as a legislator I'd sure like to know the answers to all these questions, and more. The Premier is demonstrating leadership by setting us on a course to engage British Columbians in fundamental discussions about the way in which we deliver health care and other public services, like education and social programs, to ensure that these services are sustainable over the long term for those who follow us — our children and our grandchildren.

Leadership is not being content to accept the status quo. Leadership is not being afraid of but, rather, embracing change. Transformation will be the hallmark of this term in office, but at the same time, in this budget we have reasserted our commitments to increase fund-

ing for our most prominent public services, health care and K-to-12 education, to the tune of \$301 million and \$112 million respectively in the three-year cycle.

Just to remind you, combined with previously announced increases, this brings these amounts to nearly \$2 billion in funding for health care and nearly half a billion dollars for K-to-12 over the next three years. That's \$437 million. As enrolment continues to decline, per-pupil funding will reach a record \$7,338 in 2008-2009.

The opposition better not continue to perpetuate the myth that this government has cut funding, as the facts — as validated by the Auditor General — certainly belie what they've been saying just to score political points. Fearmongering is not constructive. I've quickly learned that whatever we do, however much more we add to the pot, their attitude is that it is never going to be enough. So it's increasingly difficult to take NDP criticisms seriously.

Noting the hour, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to reserve the rest of my comments and move adjournment of the debate.

J. McIntyre moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Hon. B. Penner moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: This House stands adjourned until two o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

The House adjourned at 5:48 p.m.

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