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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

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Honourable Bill Barisoff

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THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2006

The House met at 2:03 p.m.

Hon. G. Abbott: I rise on a sombre note here today. All members of the House will be deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Mr. Alfred Albo earlier today. I know that my colleague from West Kootenay–Boundary will be rising here very shortly to add her condolences to this, and I appreciate her extending me this opportunity to make a few comments.

I was able to call the Albo family earlier today to extend to them condolences and to offer any support that they may need in what will undoubtedly be a very difficult period of their lives ahead. I advised them that our thoughts and our prayers were with them in this very difficult time.

Yesterday in a different venue I spoke of the patience, the understanding and the courage that the Albo family has displayed through the very difficult period of the passing of their mother, Mrs. Fanny Albo. Again, I know this is a very, very difficult new chapter of their lives that they will be entering, but I know those qualities of patience, understanding and courage will serve them well as they move forward with their lives.

I know this is difficult, also, for the member for West Kootenay–Boundary, and I appreciate that she is also going to join in adding her voice to these condolences.

[1405]

K. Conroy: I thank the minister for joining with me in sharing our condolences to the family. It is a very difficult and sad time with the passing of Alfred Albo.

The Albos and their families have been an important part of the Rossland community throughout their very long lives, spanning nearly a century. They have contributed enormously to the area. Their legacy lives on in the contribution they have made, as well as the large family that they have left behind.

In this very difficult time I would ask that the family's privacy is respected and for the family to know that all our thoughts and prayers are with them.

Introductions by Members

Hon. J. van Dongen: Today in the members' gallery I would like to acknowledge a special visitor from Kuwait. I would like to welcome His Excellency Musaed Al-Haroun, the Ambassador of Kuwait to Canada. He is accompanied by his third secretary Mesaid Al-Kulaib.

This is the ambassador's first official visit to British Columbia, and I'm pleased that he has travelled here to learn of some of the opportunities in British Columbia. I would ask the House to please join me in making them both very welcome.

J. Yap: I'm delighted at this time to introduce to the House a group of about 60 students from grades five to

seven — with several parents and two teachers, Ms. Ann Tolley and Ms. Mary Hardy — from a school that's in my riding, Ferris Elementary School. They're here in the precinct for a day at the Legislature. Would the House please make them feel welcome.

C. Trevena: I would like to welcome members of my constituency who travelled down to Victoria today and who have been in the precinct to raise their concern about our ferries.

I would also hope that the House will make people in the gallery welcome. I have here from my constituency Jim Abram, who is the regional director for our region, Comox-Strathcona regional district, and also the chair of Comox-Strathcona regional district; Bob Brown and Terry Hooper, both from the ferry advisory committee; Barb Van Orden and others from the constituency. I hope the House will make them all very welcome.

R. Lee: Today is a very special day for the member for Surrey-Tynehead, one of the hardest-working MLAs in this House. I wish the House would join me to wish the member a happy birthday.

N. Macdonald: Today in the House, Diane Wiest and Barry Nagel are here. They are formerly from Golden. As retired educators, they've come here to Victoria. The reason they're here, though, is to meet with Kevin Kotyluk, who is also with us. He is a hockey player; he plays for the Bakersfield Condors, here this weekend to play the Victoria Salmon Kings.

Barry and I taught Kevin back at Golden Secondary School. A great family, a family still back in Golden.... A great kid — if you can call a 6-foot-8, 230-pound young man a kid anymore. But please make them feel welcome.

Hon. C. Taylor: I'd like to welcome today — I know we can't say "old friend" anymore because that doesn't sound right, since none of us age, of course — a friend I've had for many, many years. We travelled the world together when I was a reporter for *W5*, and he was my producer. I'd like the House to welcome Pat Corbett, his lovely wife Anna, and Anastasia. Welcome.

[1410]

J. Kwan: Yesterday members of the Legislature attended a wonderful event hosted by Ducks Unlimited, a group that was promoting wetlands conservation education and environmental support for our communities.

Of course, yesterday they also had a silent auction to fundraise for their organization. In the midst of the presentation from their executive director, to which we were all dutifully paying attention, for a split second I did not keep my eye on the auctioning table. The member for Kamloops–North Thompson went in there and swiped, literally swiped, the article that I was trying to bid on. I had all sorts of evil thoughts, I must say, about him at that moment.

But today I came into the House, and lo and behold, the item that I was trying to bid for was sitting on

my desk. I was trying to bid on it for my daughter's birthday. It's a little treasure box that I hope to put little items in for her. So I would like to just take this moment to thank the member very much, and I will also say that I take back all my evil thoughts about the member.

V. Roddick: In the gallery today is a young man who's no stranger to public life. In the 2001 election, at age 19 he was the youngest person in the history of Delta South, perhaps even in the history of our province, to run for MLA. As a local entrepreneur and part-time host of Delta Cable TV's political call-in show *Online Live*, he donates much time to our community. I know one day we'll see him back in public office. My favourite quote of his is: "You can judge your age by the amount of pain you feel when you come in contact with a new idea." Will the House please give Justin Goodrich an enthusiastic welcome.

B. Lekstrom: Joining us today in the gallery is a good friend of mine from Dawson Creek, Mr. Dennis Armitage, who is down with his wife Sandy, who works for the Northern Health Authority. I have known both of these people the better part of my life. Along with being good friends, they are, more importantly, huge supporters of our community. Dennis is a businessman. He has his own business in Dawson Creek. As I indicated, his wife Sandy works for the Northern Health Authority and does a tremendous job on behalf of all of us in our region. Will the House please make them feel welcome.

C. Puchmayr: Today in the House, somewhere in this building — I think they had difficulty getting into the gallery — is a group of students from New Westminster's sister city, Moriguchi, Japan — a sister-city relationship since 1963, the oldest Canadian-Japanese sister-city relationship. Please welcome — I'm sure they're watching in the lobby on television — the students from Moriguchi, Japan.

J. Rustad: I'd ask the House to please welcome a friend of mine and constituent from my riding, Howard Lloyd. Howard Lloyd was a former MLA in this building, former member from 1975 to 1979 in the old riding of Fort George. He has been a tireless advocate for our area and a very hard worker. Would the House please make him welcome.

Hon. S. Bond: My friend Rick Hansen reminds me constantly that when we talk about the Olympic Games, we must never forget the important second set of games that follows, and that is the Paralympic Winter Games. I wanted to do that today in the context of the announcement yesterday of the Canadian members of the Paralympic Games team. We know that of the 33 members, in terms of the athletes, eight of those were from British Columbia.

Today on behalf of the members, my colleagues from Prince George North and Prince George-

mineca, we want to recognize someone who actually is from Prince George and who will be accompanying that team as an official who will participate. Joe Rea will actually be the coach of the wheelchair curling team. We are very proud of the work that Joe has done in our community over the years. He's a regional coach for Curl B.C. We know that the team will do very well at the Paralympic Winter Games. Today I certainly hope that we will recognize and embrace the Paralympic Winter Games with the same degree of enthusiasm and support as we did the Olympic Winter Games.

[1415]

Mr. Speaker: Members, I would like to draw your attention to several guests seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I'm pleased to welcome delegates to the second annual conference of the Canadian Government Houses, hosted this year by our own Government House. Joining us today with Mr. Herb Leroy, private secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor and director of Government House, are delegates representing Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and from Rideau Hall and the National Capital Commission. Would the House please make them welcome.

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

MARINE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

G. Coons: British Columbia is a world-class destination, and our province deserves a world-class marine transportation highway. B.C. Ferries is one of the largest and most complex marine highway systems in the world. It has 4,500 dedicated employees and provides year-round ferry transportation on 25 routes, supported by 35 vessels and 47 terminals. It connects ports of call throughout coastal British Columbia to many ferry-dependent communities that rely on our marine highways for a host of reasons.

Whether it's access to work, to school, to other modes of transportation; for timely access to medical care and hospital services; for access to assistance in the event of disaster; for sporting and cultural events or for bringing in tourists for needed economic boosts, over one-quarter of British Columbia relies on our valuable integrated transportation network.

B.C. Ferries provides an essential link and lifeline for many communities along the coast. Often unheralded, these marine highways operate a daily service transporting essential supplies, people and vehicles. The impact that B.C. ferries have on the economic and cultural well-being for much of British Columbia is immeasurable.

For those of us who travel on our ferries, we know the professionalism of our ferry staff, and it is beyond reproach. The engineers who work around the clock and during trying conditions are to be commended for their indispensable ability to keep our vessels at sea. The highly trained deck and catering departments en-

sure immediate response to incidents, both on the ship and with assisting mariners in need. Vessel crews keep our vessels seaworthy in spite of restrictions on maintenance time and very limited financial resources.

Without a sufficient and appropriate ferry service that is safe, reliable and affordable, most coastal communities cannot function. I encourage all in the House to join me in recognizing the importance of our marine highway.

DANIELLE WALKER

J. Rustad: I rise today to tell a story of incredible bravery from my riding of Prince George–Omineca. Last August, Vancouver rancher Caroll Walker and a 16-year-old daughter, Danielle, were checking on cows in a pasture. Realizing their six-year-old bull needed treatment for foot rot, Caroll approached the bull to administer antibiotics. The injured animal flew into a rage, charging Caroll. He turned to flee to some nearby trees but was caught in a soft patch of ground. The bull slammed into the rancher like a freight train, knocking him to the ground. It ground him down, stomping on his legs and flipping him up in the air like a rag doll over and over again. Caroll knew these might be his last minutes on earth and steeled himself for the end.

That's when his daughter Danielle charged in, yelling at the bull and punching it in the nose. She continued to yell and punch at the animal, ducking behind trees for cover when it turned towards her. She managed to keep the bull distracted long enough for her father to crawl away. Confronted by this fierce and courageous young woman, the bull backed down and left the father and daughter alone.

Caroll was hospitalized for several days after the attack with cracked ribs, dizzy spells and other injuries. The kind of selfless bravery that Danielle demonstrated is rare. It is also a testament to the human spirit and the love between a father and a daughter.

In recognition of Danielle's heroism, I will work to personally ensure that the Governor General knows of this brave woman's courage when she makes her visit to B.C. next week, and ask that she considers her for a medal of bravery. I ask the House to join me in saluting the actions of Danielle Walker and encouraging the Governor General of Canada to recognize her incredible bravery.

[1420]

MAILLARDVILLE FESTIVAL DU BOIS

D. Thorne: Today I'd like to tell the House about the Festival du Bois. This is the 17th annual folk music festival, which runs on Saturday and Sunday in Maillardville, which is the largest French community in British Columbia. This year we will be celebrating the last grey days of winter with a splash of bright colour. Our popular folk music festival offers a program that spans cultures, language and generations — a celebration of music that is global in scope, performed in a joyous informal atmosphere of a neighbourhood block

party. Festival du Bois offers fun for the whole family. The young public will sample music and dance of the world with a program especially for them.

Since it started in 1990, this festival has attracted thousands of visitors from western Canada, sharing with them the *joie de vivre* and cultural diversity of our community. The festival aims to promote French Canadian culture and language. For almost 100 years since the first settlers arrived, francophones have worked at Fraser Mills and built the francophone community of Maillardville. Today approximately 13,000 francophones and francophiles reside in the Coquitlam-Maillardville region.

This year our focus remains on French Canadian music and culture, with the multicultural twist of the many sounds of fiddles from all around the world. Through French traditional, Celtic, klezmer and Métis, the fiddle has seduced young and old with its passionate sound resonating like Cupid's arrow through the heart. For your pleasure we have blended the many interconnected styles of the fiddle in order to offer you an almost mystical experience. This weekend, come on out to Coquitlam and be part of this revival at the Festival du Bois. *Merci.*

APPEAL FOR BLOOD DONORS

D. Hayer: Anyone who watched the Olympic coverage over the past two weeks must have noticed the heartrending commercial from Canadian Blood Services pointing out that a blood donation is a gift of life. Many of the people featured in the commercials would not be alive today had it not been for selfless donations of blood from others. Those commercials also pointed out that the people who need the blood are not just those injured in horrific car accidents. They are also people suffering from terrible, horrific chronic diseases such as leukemia.

In fact, it is not so long ago that many of us in this House rolled up our sleeves to donate blood in the name of our Deputy Speaker — who, I am very pleased to note, appears to have beaten back that dreaded disease. In my own family in February 2003 leukemia also took its toll on my elder son, and while Alexander Singh Martinez Hayer wages a courageous battle, it is not yet won.

In the name of my son, in the name of our Deputy Speaker, in the names of our MLAs' families and friends, and in the names of those countless other people — more than 50 percent of the population will require a blood transfusion at some point in their lives — I urge everyone in this House and everyone in British Columbia to become a blood donor for life. It is a donation that costs nothing, but it can be priceless in saving someone's life. It could be the life of your fellow Canadian — a neighbour, a friend or a family member.

PAULINE WEINSTEIN

D. Chudnovsky: On Saturday night in Vancouver, a memorial will be held to celebrate the extraordinary

life of Dr. Pauline Weinstein. Polly died last week after a life devoted to social justice, to equality and to peace. Polly taught at Killarney, Eric Hamber and Prince of Wales secondary schools. She earned master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Oregon and UBC, and came back to UBC as an associate professor of education and mathematics.

In 1980 Polly was elected to the Vancouver school board and became chair. She was justly proud of the tremendous changes that took place under the leadership of that school board, among them the first multicultural workers, the first aboriginal advisory committee, the first race relations program, setting a kindergarten class-size limit of 22 students — all in the early '80s.

But Polly is best known as the chair of the Vancouver school board that refused to implement cutbacks imposed on the students of Vancouver by the Social Credit government. As a result, that board was removed by the government, and Polly Weinstein became a towering leadership figure in our community — standing up for our children, standing up for my children. At the next election the people of Vancouver sent a clear message to the government when Polly and the rest of the COPE candidates were elected unanimously.

[1425]

Vancouver presented Dr. Pauline Weinstein with the Freedom of the City in 1994, and she was the recipient of many other honours, among them the Helena Gutteridge award for women who contribute to civic reform and social justice in Vancouver, and the G.A. Fergusson Award from the BCTF for service to public education.

Polly Weinstein was our teacher, our mentor, our friend and our hero. We remember her with love, and we mourn her passing. I know that she would ask all of us to follow her, and she would be right to ask us to rededicate ourselves to her passions — to social justice, to equity and to peace.

SENIORS HEALTH SERVICES IN ATLIN

D. MacKay: It is obvious that health care is a very complex issue. Delivering excellence in health care takes innovative thinking. Sometimes the idea for excellence in health care can be found outside of the health care system. A great example of what I'm talking about can be found in the small community of Atlin, where they found a solution after a need was identified.

This community has a population of about 400 people. It has a rural outpost clinic staffed by nurses. There are no long-term care beds, and their seniors were previously sent to Terrace or Smithers as their health care needs exceeded what was available in Atlin. That, on a good driving day, is 14 hours one way.

A group of women, working together with the Northern Health Authority and myself, worked hard to reach an agreement with the Yukon Territory, and we now have a memorandum of understanding in place

which allows seniors from Atlin to be admitted to the Copper Ridge Estates in Whitehorse, which is only two and a half hours away. But there is more. The same group of ladies were fortunate to have a house donated by the Anglican Church in Atlin. The house required a lot of work, and the community members did the work to change the house so that it was friendly for seniors.

The home is called the Comfortable Pew. It provides twice-monthly foot clinics for seniors, it has bath facilities for seniors, and it has a palliative care bed. They even provide Meals on Wheels. The Comfortable Pew is staffed by volunteers who have been trained by the Northern Health Authority. The cost to the health care system: a mere \$1,000 a month to help pay for heat and light, and the donation of some medical equipment.

I have found the Minister of Health a great advocate for innovative ways to ensure our number-one health care system is the best it can be for all of us who live in this vast province. Working with the Minister of Health in the Northern Health Authority, we will continue to ensure that British Columbia continues to have the best health care system in all of Canada.

Oral Questions

EXPANSION OF REVIEW OF HEALTH AUTHORITIES

C. James: Just 24 hours ago the minister released a damning report about chaos and mismanagement in the Interior Health region. Later today senior officials who wouldn't engage with the minister's own deputy will be sitting down with the Minister of Health. We now know there are serious problems with seniors care in at least one health authority.

I ask the minister again: will the minister now widen a review of seniors care to include the other health authorities?

Hon. G. Abbott: I think, quite apart from what the Leader of the Opposition was saying, the report was anything other than a damning report. The report, I think, was a thorough assessment of a very unfortunate situation. It carefully analyzed what had occurred, why it had occurred, and it pointed to ways in which we might remediate and improve that difficult situation.

It was an excellent report. The officials from the Interior Health Authority that I will be meeting with later today all worked very hard with Deputy Minister Ballem in terms of preparing her report. We got excellent cooperation from the Interior Health Authority, including from the officials I'll be meeting with later.

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

C. James: These were the deputy's own words — that the deputy thought it was remarkable that senior officials would not engage through this process. I certainly would think the Health Minister would also find

it quite remarkable that senior officials would not engage. His deputy minister also stated within the report that there appears to be confusion in the application of the first-available-bed policy.

[1430]

The minister is refusing to review other health authorities. So my question to the minister is: what evidence does the minister have that the health authorities, other health authorities, are free of the problems that are plaguing the Interior Health Authority?

Hon. G. Abbott: To be clear, the deputy — and I was there — referenced one or two officials who she would have liked to have spoken to, but she wasn't able to. One should not make more of that than what the deputy actually said. Again, the officials that I am meeting with later today worked very hard to ensure that the deputy had all of the information and all of the cooperation that was necessary in putting together a very constructive report.

We've had a number of discussions in here about first-available-bed policy. I've said over and over again that our policy is to reunite them where couples have been separated by medical necessity. I'm glad to advise the House today.... In August 2001, just as we took office in this province, there were 615 married residential care clients in different facilities. Recently, August 2005, that number has been reduced from 615 to 73 married residential care clients in different facilities.

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

C. James: I must remind the Health Minister that his deputy found it important enough that the senior health officials had not engaged with her to actually mention it in her conference and in the report. So I would think that the Health Minister would also find it important to take a look at.

Let's take a look at the issue that's in front of us today. We need to take a look at the fact that if it wasn't for families, if it wasn't for the media and if it wasn't for the opposition, this government would continue to say that there were no problems in the Interior Health region.

We heard the minister state very clearly a couple of weeks ago that it was too early to make any kind of conclusions about challenges in that health region. Well, he now has conclusions — damning conclusions — about health care in the Interior Health region. Today the Health Minister has the opportunity to actually demand accountability from the other health regions. So I ask again: when can we expect the Health Minister to actually demand accountability from all five health regions?

Hon. G. Abbott: We have accountability from all five regional health authorities every day, and we have accountability from the Provincial Health Services Authority every day. Every day, each and every one of the people from the Minister of Health, through the deputy, through all of the ministry, through all of the health authorities, through the 120,000 people who get

up each and every day and work very, very hard to provide the best of care to British Columbians.... Each and every day, they feel accountable to the patients that they serve. That is the most important accountability that can exist.

The fact that the Conference Board of Canada said British Columbia had the best overall health care system in Canada is something that all 120,000 of those people can be enormously proud of and something that every member of this Legislature should be enormously proud of.

COMMUNICATIONS POLICY FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS

K. Conroy: I'm glad the minister raised the issues about the front-line workers, because we've heard concerns from people in the community about front-line health care providers being muzzled by health authority officials when they attempted to express their concerns regarding the patients in their care. Can the minister confirm that health care workers are free to raise their concerns and advocate for their patients without fear of retribution?

Hon. G. Abbott: Health care workers, we expect, will work constructively as important parts of the teams that work to serve the interests of patients across the province. Again, I know there are protocols and policies in place among the various health authorities — and among ministries, for that matter — around these important issues. I think what we need to create is an environment where people feel engaged, where they feel they are part of a team, where they can contribute to that team, where their experiences are welcome. That is the culture we are working hard to build in our ministry, and that's the culture we're working very hard to build in health authorities across this province.

[1435]

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

K. Conroy: That's wonderful to hear. I'm hoping the minister will be able to share that with the officials from the Interior Health Authority this afternoon, because I've heard from these people. They are coming to my office, they're calling me at home at night, and they're telling me they are being muzzled. In fact, on a recent tour of the Kootenay-Boundary Regional Hospital staff.... We were told by health care professionals that they were directed to not speak to any of us that were on the tour.

To the minister: what are he and the senior management at IHA afraid of us learning? But more so, will the Minister of Health stand up in this House today and confirm that health care workers in this province have a voice and are free to use it?

Hon. G. Abbott: Health care workers in this province absolutely do have a voice. We want to build a

health care system, and continue to build a health care system, where every one of the 120,000 people who are directly and indirectly providing care to British Columbians feel empowered, feel that they are part of a team and feel that they are contributing in important ways to ensure that we get the health care outcomes we deserve.

The situation which happened in Trail... Again, there's politics, and then there's common sense and good judgment. When we saw the unfortunate experience that occurred in Trail, I asked my deputy to go in to find out why it happened and to recommend to me ways in which we could ensure that it didn't happen again. Part of that is building a better culture in the Trail area among the health care providers, and I'm intent and will do that.

USER FEES FOR HEALTH SERVICES

D. Cubberley: You know, we're all proud, on this side, of the work that health care workers do in the health care system. But we also think the government should be a little less proud of a system that has the lowest patient satisfaction rate in the country.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

D. Cubberley: Last night BCTV shared an important letter with its viewers. It's from a doctor telling his patients that from now on, they're going to be paying an annual user fee for access to his services — telling them. Is the minister aware of how many doctors and how many clinics are now trying to charge patients a fee for better health care in British Columbia?

Hon. G. Abbott: If the members opposite want to know why there is a disconnection between the Conference Board of Canada's conclusion that British Columbia had the best overall health care system and the evident low patient satisfaction with their doctors and with the system, I think they need only look in the mirror to get the answer to that question.

Yesterday an important issue was raised in respect of a letter that was sent by a doctor, I believe, from North Vancouver to one of his patients. In response, upon my receipt of a copy of that letter, I contacted the College of Physicians and Surgeons. I am pleased to advise the member that just a short time ago, I was advised by the college that a number of the fees that the physician had included in that letter were included inappropriately, and were out of bounds with the Canada Health Act and the Medicare Protection Act. I have asked for the college to follow up in writing in respect of that, so all of us have a clear idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable under the acts.

[1440]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Saanich South has a supplemental.

D. Cubberley: It's interesting how the members opposite do not want to connect patient dissatisfaction to their own choices in health care and the chaos unleashed by the transformative change they've conducted in health care in their first term in office. I'm impressed that the minister took the step of asking the college what it thought about this set of user fees. It's another way of avoiding making the obvious determination that user fees are on the rise in British Columbia. The Copeman clinic was, in fact, the icebreaker. That's what we see. The minister's refusal to engage with it is enabling a culture of extra billing to grow up in the province.

Patients of Dr. Follows got a letter demanding an annual fee of \$140 per person and \$200 for a family. The patients can't believe that that happened in British Columbia. But I think we can understand how that happened in British Columbia and why it is happening. It is because the government is tolerating user fees and fees for access to better service at the Copeman clinic that clinics across British Columbia...

Mr. Speaker: Does the member have a question?

D. Cubberley: ...are emboldened to ask for additional fees.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members. Can the member pose his question.

D. Cubberley: Minister, are you prepared to send a clear message to all of the clinics that user fees for preferential access to medicine in British Columbia are not allowed and will not be tolerated?

Hon. G. Abbott: I hope that everyone's hypocrisy meters are fully charged, because they're going to need them here today. That's pretty obvious.

So one might ask: what would the Boardwalk Surgery Centre, Delbrook Surgery Centre, Broadmead Surgical Centre, False Creek Surgical Centre, Metro-town Surgery Centre, Parklane Surgery Centre, Seafield Surgery Centre, Okanagan Surgery Centre, Valley Surgery Centre and 22 other surgery centres have in common?

The answer, Mr. Speaker? They were all created during the tenure of this former NDP government.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members, the member for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant has the floor.

J. Kwan: The fact is that the minister doesn't know how many patients in B.C. are getting letters from their doctors asking for annual user fees. The minister said he was going to put the Copeman clinic on notice that it must comply by the end of February. It is now March 2. What action has the minister taken?

Hon. G. Abbott: I know that doctors in this province have to take a Hippocratic oath. I wonder whether members of the opposition have to take a hypocritical oath to function here.

I'd be pleased to read a whole bunch of the other surgical centres that were created during the NDP's period...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members from the government side, the minister is speaking.

Hon. G. Abbott: ...or I could merely observe that it was under the tenure of this former NDP government that WCB cases and ICBC cases were now referred to private surgical centres for prompt attention — unlike the rest of the proletariat, apparently, Mr. Speaker.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Member. Member.
The member for Surrey-Whalley will take the floor.

B. Ralston: I'll withdraw that remark, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Minister of Health continues.

Hon. G. Abbott: One might also note, as well, that the national leader of the NDP.... Apparently, when he found it necessary to require some surgical attention, he was happy enough to attend the Shouldice clinic, a private clinic, for that purpose. I am glad to answer the member's question, Mr. Speaker, but a touch less of the sanctimony around this would be appreciated.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant has a supplemental.

[1445]

J. Kwan: The minister can engage in his high-level rhetoric all he wants, but these are the words of the minister on February 17. The minister told the *Kelowna Daily Courier*: "Mr. Copeman has been advised that we want to see this resolved by the end of February. As the situation evolves, I hope that he comes into compliance. If he doesn't, we will be taking appropriate steps." So far the minister has indicated he has done nothing.

As reported by BCTV last night, Hollyburn medical centre is now charging patients an annual user fee for services that patients say should have been covered by their regular treatment.

Will the minister admit that the problem here is the government's lack of action in enacting Bill 92, the Medicare Protection Amendment Act? My question to the minister is: when will the minister do the right thing and enact Bill 92?

Hon. M. de Jong: Mr. Speaker, the member is a seasoned veteran of this chamber and knows that that question is out of order.

M. Farnworth: Hon. Speaker, ruling on whether it is out of order is up to you, and that's not traditionally done during question period. The member is also experienced and should know that as well.

Mr. Speaker: Next questioner.

LEGISLATION TO RESTRICT SALE OF CRYSTAL METH INGREDIENTS

R. Fleming: It's essential if we are to tackle the crystal meth problem in our communities that we disrupt the supply and manufacturing of this drug. This drug is not smuggled here from Colombia or Afghanistan. It is manufactured in small and dangerous clandestine labs right in our communities, where we live.

Can the Solicitor General tell this House why, as of April, British Columbia will be the only province in Canada without mandatory behind-the-counter legislation to restrict and monitor the supply and sale of the ingredients of crystal meth?

Hon. J. Les: First of all, let me say that I am very proud of the leadership role that British Columbia, under the leadership of our Premier, has taken in combatting crystal meth in our province.

Since last fall, when the Premier directly addressed this issue at the UBCM conference, we have been fighting crystal meth on a number of fronts. Indeed, I'm very much aware of the cold-remedy issue in pharmacies. Working together with the pharmacies of British Columbia, we have in place a Meth Watch strategy. But we're also aware that the meth labs in British Columbia are in fact fed by large quantities of precursor materials, and there is little, if any, evidence that the crystal meth that is being manufactured in British Columbia is actually coming from cold remedies that are sourced in pharmacies.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Victoria-Hillside has a supplemental.

R. Fleming: Less than a year ago the Premier and the former Solicitor General said that they were looking into this legislation; the Premier was quoted saying that he backed the idea. Ten months later we still don't have it, and as of April 1, B.C. again is going to be the only province in Canada without this legislation.

So my question again for the Solicitor General: are the other provinces — and many U.S. jurisdictions, I might add — wrong and B.C. is right?

Hon. J. Les: As I have already indicated, we have in place a Meth Watch program, working closely with the pharmacies of British Columbia.

We prefer to act on evidence. So far the evidence does not indicate that cold remedies in pharmacies are a problem in British Columbia. But we have also been very clear that if it becomes a problem, we will react to that very, very quickly.

CLASS SIZE AND COMPOSITION
IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

J. Horgan: Last fall we had an unprecedented disruption to our public school system. The government committed at that time to find solutions to the challenges of class size and class composition. The Premier promised that and the minister promised that — promised that to parents, to students, to teachers right across this province.

So my question: after admitting last month that there were over 9,000 classrooms with over 30 students and over 11,000 classrooms with four or more special needs students, what action — what concrete action, beyond that prescribed by the Ready report — has the minister taken to address this crucial, fundamental issue in our school system?

[1450]

Hon. S. Bond: Well, in fact, one of the good-news stories out of the very difficult situation that we faced in the fall is that for the first time in the province of British Columbia, we can actually have an informed debate about class size, because we have the largest collection of data that's ever taken place in this province.

We're doing exactly what we said we would do. We're bringing together the key partners, which include parents and trustees and administrators, to a table to discuss how best to meet the needs of students. There is more than one view about how we meet the needs of students in this province, and we're going to listen to all of the partners' voices.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca has a supplemental.

J. Horgan: I assume that the minister was referring to her round table, which she admitted just ten days ago was not a decision-making body. My question, again, is to the minister. Will she abandon her crusade to repurpose school boards? Will she abandon her deputy's crusade to focus budgeting on schools and concentrate all of her energy and her ministry's energy on the fundamental issue that we all acknowledged in this House last fall — class size and class composition? What is she going to do to fix it — now?

Hon. S. Bond: Well, we've expended more energy in the last four months on this issue than has been expended in over a decade in this province, so it's interesting to hear that question. Perhaps the education critic should have a chat with the Leader of the Opposition.

You see, what we're trying to figure out here is how to best meet the needs of students. Does it mean that if your child is number 31, they should perhaps be sent to another school? We don't think so. Let's listen to the Leader of the Opposition when she was a member of the school board, in fact: "Kids don't come in class-sized packages, and it's causing some real problems."

You might want to check with the Leader of the Opposition on the view.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO
CONCERNS OF B.C. FERRIES USERS

G. Coons: Hundreds of ferry users gathered outside the Legislature today to raise their concerns about B.C. Ferries. Fares have gone up 38 percent over the past three years, which has seriously, seriously impacted their ability to travel around British Columbia — something most British Columbians take for granted.

My question is to the Minister of Transportation. Will the minister please explain why he won't meet with them to hear their concerns?

Hon. K. Falcon: Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I noted that, actually, that protest was organized by a very good friend of the members opposite, Jim Abram, who I know is a prominent NDP supporter. I think that's great.

I think one of the concerns, as the member opposite mentioned, was that they're concerned about ferry fare increases. You know, with all the wild figures being thrown out, I thought we'd actually get the actual figures. So here we are.

In 2003 the frequent ferry passenger fare, which most of those folks would be, for the Quadra to Campbell River route was \$2.27. Today it is \$3.10. That's an 83-cent increase, including all the fuel surcharges and every other increase. You know, I'm not saying that 83 cents isn't a lot of money, but I think it's very appropriate that we now have a ferry corporation independent of political interference that makes decisions for the benefit of the 120 million passengers that use it every year.

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

G. Coons: I find it disappointing that the minister is so dismissive of constituents throughout British Columbia who have major concerns about ferry services in our marine highway. The minister continually states that the day-to-day operations of B.C. Ferries no longer fall under his jurisdiction.

[1455]

But section 5.02 of the coastal ferry services contract that this government signed with B.C. Ferries states that ten days after the commissioner's preliminary decision on a fare increase, the parties will meet to review this decision and discuss whether the province — which is the minister — is willing to increase the service fees in relation to the designated ferry route or route groups.

It is clear that this minister has the ultimate role and responsibility in determining fare increases. Why, then, won't he take the opportunity to meet with those who have come to be heard and take the necessary steps to address their concerns?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Minister of Transportation has the floor.

Hon. K. Falcon: Unfortunately, it appears that the members opposite haven't learned much from the fast ferries debacle of the 1990s, because three independent reports, including the Auditor General, all had one common recommendation to government. What was that recommendation? It was to get political interference out of the Ferry Corp., and that's exactly what we did in this government.

Let me just say this too. I find it interesting that Mr. Abram, a very strong NDP supporter, of course — and there's nothing wrong with that, Mr. Speaker.... I want to be clear.

[Applause.]

Thank you. But you know, Mr. Speaker, back in the glory days that they apparently harken back to, when government could interfere with B.C. Ferries.... I wonder if Mr. Abram and this group were part of a protest in 1993 when the NDP government increased the rates on the Quadra Island route — in one year, up 59 percent.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

QUADRA ISLAND FERRY PASSENGER SHELTER

C. Trevena: It seems that the Minister of Transport would only like to meet constituents who carry Liberal cards. Many....

Interjections.

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

C. Trevena: Most of the people outside protesting today were my constituents. One of the reasons they were protesting is that the Quadra Island ferry went in for its regular maintenance in the autumn and returned without its passenger shelter, which left disabled and seniors and others — such as parents with strollers — huddling on the car deck in heavy winds, in winter storms.

Now that we know that the Minister of Transportation has the ultimate authority for our ferries, will he commit to the people of Quadra Island to make sure that that passenger shelter is replaced without the cost being downloaded on users in yet another fare hike?

Hon. K. Falcon: Actually, I would hope the members opposite would have been impressed — I certainly

was — that the president of B.C. Ferries actually took the time to go to Quadra and meet with the residents to talk specifically about that issue, among others.

I think one of the interesting things about this whole ferry shelter discussion is that we have to keep this in mind. The reason the ferry shelter was removed was so that they could do a deck inspection, because they're going to be replacing that deck on that vessel, which is 41 years old. That's part of the most massive investment in retrofitting the ferries and building new ferries that we've seen in the history of the B.C. Ferry Corp.

[1500]

In conclusion, I note that the Ferry Corp. also made this commitment: when that deck is replaced, there will be a new shelter put in place, built in accordance with Transport Canada regulations — for the first time.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members.

[End of question period.]

C. Trevena: I ask leave to present a petition.

Leave granted.

Petitions

C. Trevena: I present a petition with some 600 signatures from my constituency. The petitioners have concerns about the direction of B.C. Ferries. They're concerned about fare increases — 17 percent over the last five months and 38 percent in three years. This is impacting the viability of ferry-dependent communities like Quadra Island, as it impacts not just individuals travelling to work, but all businesses. They are concerned about the proposal to replace paper commuter tickets with plastic cards, which is going to cause hardship.

Mr. Speaker: Just a friendly reminder to members: when you're presenting petitions — and this didn't just happen today; it happens on a regular basis — it's the one line that presents the petition. It's not meant to make statements about what's in the petition or what you're going to do about it.

Orders of the Day

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

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

Budget Debate (continued)

B. Ralston: I rise to respond to the budget presented by the Minister of Finance a few days ago. It's

interesting to note the approach the government takes to a surplus budget. It's somewhat like the government in Alberta, where a surplus of \$1.5 billion was projected and some of the supplementary estimates now expect a surplus of \$10 billion — completely due to the rising price of world oil prices.

This government is uncomfortable with a surplus and is a little bit lost as to how to deal with it. This government's posture when it assumed office was a much more comfortable one for the members opposite. They began an attack on government, cutting and slashing, with a view to subduing what they regarded as a problem budget and cutting government services.

Given a surplus and given that that era is over, this government is essentially bereft of ideas as to how to deal with a windfall surplus. There are, in the budget, efforts to fill a few political gaps. In anticipation of the report of Mr. Hughes in the Children and Families area, there's some money set aside — not quite the money that replaces the 23 percent cut in 2002 and the ongoing problems that resulted in the Ministry of Children and Families. There is a political response there to what is anticipated to be the report of Mr. Hughes.

One expects Mr. Hughes will have some recommendations. Despite all the other reports that have been filed in this matter, the government has not yet chosen to take action. But the anticipation in the budget is there, and one would expect that would cause the expenditure to flow after Mr. Hughes's report is tabled.

[1505]

Doubtlessly, people are looking for assurance. They're looking for assurance that after the radical and misguided experiments in the period 2001 to 2005 — and their effect upon Ministry of Children and Families and their effect upon seniors in particular — the government has learned something from that era: that those kind of experiments are over, that the kind of consequences we've seen in Port Alberni and Trail are to be left behind.

Although the government talked in the throne speech about health care and the professed desire to engage in some new solutions in health care, there's really precious little in the budget that enacts any new programs in health care. Now the Premier is engaged in, with his brother-in-law, a tour in Europe, and that tour really encompasses about six or seven days. In Lillehammer, Norway, which was the site of the 1994 Winter Olympics, about half the time appears, from the schedule, to deal with the forthcoming Olympics in 2010. There is, I think, a visit to the Lillehammer general hospital, and I'm not able to discern from the cryptic notes on the schedule what else might be involved in Norway.

The visit in Sweden was a single day. The visit in Paris involves meetings with the embassy. There's also a meeting concerning, again, the Winter Olympics, and there's a meeting with the French Minister of Health and some tours of some health care facilities in Paris. Then there's two days in London, again divided up

between what would appear to be some Olympic business and some health tours.

So one really would question whether it's wise or prudent to embark upon what is announced or heralded as a major change in health care policy based on fragmentary impressions gained in various hours in several European capitals. But that appears to be the agenda that's being advanced by the Premier.

In contrast to that, several years ago, and not that long ago, the Romanow report, commissioned by the federal government, was a very exhaustive and extensive study of health care across the country, supported by a number of expert reports and papers, extensive public hearings and extensive public consultation. Yet the Premier and his entourage appear to have rejected that as a basis for any decision-making in the area of health care. Indeed, perhaps they reject the basic premise of the Romanow commission.

In his message to Canadians Commissioner Romanow said: "I believe it is a far greater perversion of Canadian values to accept a system where money, rather than need, determines who gets access to care." That values argument is an important one, and it resonates with many Canadians and many British Columbians. But there is another argument about the health care system and its value to Canadians, which comes from a rather different source.

It's useful to look south of the border. I know that sometimes members opposite suggest that it's mere fearmongering to consider what goes on in our neighbour to the south, our biggest trading partner and perhaps the one with the greatest economic, cultural and social influence upon life in Canada. But I think that's a legitimate place to look on occasion as to what might happen and what kind of policy changes might take place that lead us closer to the American style of health care or further away from it. But there is some concern expressed from very unusual quarters about the effect that some of the directions that appear to be suggested by the government might have on the overall Canadian economy.

[1510]

Indeed, the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange — not necessarily, I wouldn't think, a New Democratic Party supporter, but maybe he is; I don't know what his political views are — made a speech on Wall Street at the prestigious Harvard Club, a Manhattan investment forum. He strongly urged — and I'm quoting from *The Lancet*, which is the leading medical journal in the English language world — U.S. investors to "pump their money into an economy where health care serves, rather than shackles manufacturers."

The logic behind that message is easy, says Nesbitt's speechwriter. "Americans are headed to spend almost \$2 trillion or 16 percent of their gross domestic product on health care this year," he says. "These costs are a huge burden on companies and on federal and state governments, on retirees and on the whole economy. It's just not clear what the advantages are in maintaining a system where about 20 percent of the costs represent profits for private managers."

Now this is not some wild-eyed socialist. This is someone speaking on behalf of the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange. The members opposite speak of their business savvy and their understanding of the commercial world. They don't understand what the implications of the policies that they're advocating have for the economy as a whole. Doubtlessly, they are lobbied by individual providers, particularly the Premier's brother-in-law and perhaps Mr. Day and others, who have a legitimate business interest in private health care. In other words, they stand to make a profit. Fair enough — if there's greater access or greater opportunity for them to serve patients that would ordinarily be served by the public health care system.

The implications for the overall economy seem to be lost on the members opposite, but they're not lost on the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange. What this Mr. Ablett — who is the speechwriter for Richard Nesbitt, the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange — says is: "Stock exchange officials strongly support public health care. The overarching reason for this is simple. It's in the exchange's best interest to have it clearly understood that there are advantages to investing in Canada, and public health is one of the strongest economic advantages we have over the U.S." You have it there.

The Speech from the Throne, the Lieutenant-Governor, has said that there's a wish to add sustainability as another principle to the Canada Health Act. Reflect then, upon the comments of the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange, who says: "It's just not clear what advantages there are in maintaining a system where 20 percent of the costs represent profits for private managers." That's not NDP party policy. That's not the demiurge from the previous decade. That's the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange.

The members opposite should be a little bit more cognizant, I would submit, of what the implications are of the kinds of reforms that they are proposing. When a public health system is clearly a business advantage to the economy of Canada.... It's clear that an American manufacturer such GM is simply, in its view, weighed down by the cost of private insurance. In the United States GM is required to pay about \$1,500 in insurance premiums to private health insurance companies for every vehicle they build. Canada's health care costs, largely in the form of corporate taxes, amount to about \$120 U.S. a unit. So there's the difference: U.S. private insurer costs for the manufacture of a vehicle is \$1,500 a unit; in Canada, \$120 U.S. a unit — obviously a tremendous business advantage.

Yet the members opposite, in their rush to respond to a few lobbyists, seem willing to throw away that economic advantage. Frankly, if one is not persuaded by the moral arguments, one ought perhaps to be willing to consider at least the economic arguments.

The cost differentials exist in other areas as well. The *New England Journal of Medicine*, perhaps the most prestigious journal in the English language on medicine, speaks of the administrative advantages of public health care.

[1515]

One of the ways, in a very extensive study, that this was dealt with is the number of administrators per 10,000 enrollees in a plan. In other words, it's a ratio: how many administrators does it take to deal with the health care requirements of 10,000 enrollees? The members opposite would have us believe that they are concerned about bureaucracy, about cutting costs, about efficiency — all those other business buzzwords — which I hope they mean sincerely, and I'm sure on some occasions and most occasions they do.

When you look at the structure of American private insurance plans, they're very top-heavy on administration, and that's in addition to the 20-percent profits that the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange referred to. So I'm looking at a paper published in 2003 in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on costs of health care administration. Some of the U.S. plans: Aetna, 20.8 number of employees per 10,000 enrollees; in CIGNA, 31.2; Humana, 22.5; PacifiCare, 24.2.

In Canadian plans, they compare Saskatchewan Health, 1.2 employees per 10,000 enrollees; and Ontario Health Insurance, 1.4. So up to 20 to 30 times fewer administrators are required to run the health care plans compared to U.S. private insurance carriers. That's a considerable business advantage, and that's one of the reasons why, as a percentage of GDP, health care costs are significantly lower in Canada and considerably more efficient in the administration of those plans.

Now, if a government is committed to public health care, those benefits will continue to accrue to Canadians, not only as individual health care users but also as members of society and as economic participants in the business of the country. Those are substantial business advantages that ought not to be lightly ignored or done away with.

When the Premier comes back with his proposals for health care reform, in my view, those proposals should be looked at through the lens of what is stated by the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange and by the *New England Journal of Medicine* as to the benefits of public administration — the efficiency, the practicality and the lower cost of public administration.

Now, it's significant that one is debating the budget and considering health care in the context of the budget in light of what has taken place in Alberta in the last few days. Despite being awash in a surplus of oil money, the Alberta government has launched a new health care initiative. One of the parts to that health care initiative is a proposal to permit physicians to practice in both the public and the soon-to-be — if the Premier has his way and prevails over Prime Minister Harper, I suppose — burgeoning private care sector in Alberta.

One of the things that has been analyzed in great detail in many countries is the effect of having a dual system upon wait-lists because obviously one of the major concerns that many people have, understandably, is the length of health care wait-lists for specific kinds of surgery. Here in British Columbia there's an experiment in Richmond, which has now been moved

to the UBC Hospital, that has some innovative proposals within the public health care system for reducing surgery times.

[1520]

Similarly, in Alberta there's been a proposal called the Alberta hip and knee replacement project. It's a similar example of innovation within the public system to reduce wait times and to use public resources and skilled public sector management to bring about better health care results.

Those examples show that it is possible to achieve innovation within the public sector. But there are other proposals, and there is a persistent view that one of the ways to cut wait times is to open up the private sector.

There has been a study by a leading health care expert at the University of Toronto, Colleen Flood. She holds the federal research chair in health law and policy. She compared the health systems in five western countries, including two that permit parallel private care. In New Zealand and England — and perhaps the Premier will discover this when he visits London in a few days — although specialists can practise in both sectors, public sector wait-lists there did not decline.

Her conclusion was that specialists "may even have an incentive to maintain long waiting lists in the public sector to generate demand for services on a private basis." What she is concerned with happening and what appears to have happened in New Zealand and in England is that when you permit physicians to work in both the public system and the private system, the migration from the public to the private system means that the available services in the public system diminish. The wait-lists increase.

Her view is that according to pretty standard economic theory, you incent physicians to work in the private system and create a demand for their services by making the public system more unacceptable. That appears to be, from what her conclusions are.... That is what her analysis of what has taken place in New Zealand and England demonstrates. Doubtlessly, the Premier and Dr. Vertesi will examine that in London, but I would hope that this kind of analytical passion, rather than political rhetoric, will be brought to bear on this problem and that the results in London and England and in New Zealand — an objective examination — will lead the Premier to reject that as a policy option for this province.

From the direction that the government is seeking to travel, it's clear that the government is not prepared to accept the Romanow principles and is looking for some, I would submit, drastic changes to health care in this province, not without considerable peril to British Columbians. Given what the effects have been upon various other sectors in the government's array of ministries — the Ministry of Children and Families and now, it appears, in seniors health care — one has to wonder what radical policy changes we can anticipate and what their effect on British Columbia will be. While one hopes for the best, I think it's legitimate to raise these questions at this stage in the budget debate

and look forward to what proposals are unveiled in the course of the next few days.

On this side of the House, if we look to the budget for any guidance in this area, it appears to be completely absent. Given the enormity of the changes that might be proposed, it appears to be a complete absence of any substantive effort or intellectual capacity in terms of dealing with these problems and engaging in a wide-ranging and full debate, as the Romanow commission did, rather than simply putting forward several quick fixes after a whirlwind tour of Europe.

Madam Speaker, those of us on this side of the House are disappointed in the budget and are concerned that notwithstanding the surplus that appears to be available, the government really has no serious solutions to this problem. That does not augur well for the future of British Columbians at this time.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks.

[1525]

Hon. R. Neufeld: It gives me pleasure to rise today to speak to Budget '06-07, the balanced budget — one with a surplus and one that I'm very proud to support.

Something that our government embarked on when we were first elected in 2001 to government was to get the fiscal house in order in this province. It was in such disarray that they called it an investment wasteland around North America. We knew that if we were going to be able to afford some of the services or all of the services that people demand and want, we were going to have to have a good economy to be able to do that.

It was a sharp departure from the attitude taken by the previous administration prior to our election, which was not to balance the budget, to spend as much money as you possibly could and actually to double the debt in ten short years. Their attempt at providing services to British Columbians was to go to the bank and constantly borrow money regardless of what was happening in the economy, which was going downhill badly.

I might add that when the NDP were elected in...

Interjections.

Hon. R. Neufeld: ...'91 — gee whiz, October 1991 — they inherited an economy that was number one across Canada. Within ten short years — in fact, within about eight or nine short years — we were a have-not province. We went from contributing to the wellness of all of this great country called Canada to actually receiving money back from it.

Interestingly, I know that some of the members opposite were here before, during that government period — I was here in opposition — and they were very proud of that, very proud that what they had to do was to go to the bank on a constant basis every month and every year, for sure, to borrow huge, huge amounts of money and add public debt to the province that, unfortunately, our children, people coming after us, will have to pay for.

Now, I can understand if they were borrowing most of that money for infrastructure, maybe building hospitals, schools, roads and those kinds of things, but unfortunately, very little of that debt went to those projects. Most of it went to the credit card. Most of it went to operations.

I see some members shaking their head no, and it doesn't surprise me. That member has been here for a quite a while, and he still doesn't understand the economics of actually trying to take in as much or a little bit more than what you actually spend. It doesn't work at home...

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, members.

Hon. R. Neufeld: ...and it certainly doesn't work in government.

We've worked hard to get there, and we're starting to see the benefits of that in British Columbia with expanded spending on all kinds of things that whether you're an NDP member of the House or a B.C. Liberal member of the House, we all want. We want to be able to continue that well into the future so that we can afford to have excellent services.

I know that my colleague, the Minister of State for Mining, is going to talk a bit about mining, so I'll just touch briefly on it. When we arrived in office, mining prospects in the province were pretty dismal. Over the ten years it took the NDP to actually chase almost all the mining companies out of British Columbia.... In fact, most of them went to South America and invested an awful lot of money — actually, money that was raised in British Columbia, by the way — in another country.

We've since been able to turn that around by doing a number of things with the mining industry, and it actually has created lots of jobs and huge amounts of investment. Those are good things. Those are family-supporting jobs. They are jobs that pay an average of about \$100,000 a year. People work in that industry now by the thousands compared to the 1990s.

[1530]

Part of what has been done with the budget we're looking at today was the hard work in the first four years to be able to get there. We know that investment in exploration was at an all-time low in the province, to \$29 million a year — absolutely disgraceful in British Columbia when you think of the mass mineral wealth we have in this province, and the ability and the people to actually produce that wealth.

Just recently the Minister of State for Mining — and I accompanied him — made a great announcement that in this last year, \$220 million was invested in exploration and mining. You know....

Hon. B. Bennett: A great announcement it was.

Hon. R. Neufeld: A great announcement it was, the minister says, and I agree.

Hon. Speaker, that brings us to a point where the industry tells us that that is almost enough reinvestment in exploration in the province on a yearly basis that new mines can be developed as the old ones close. That's where we want to get to. That's what we want to be able to do in British Columbia, and we've accomplished that.

I want to qualify this with some information. We have never been shy to say — and I know all the members on this side of the House and government have said — that the commodity prices have certainly helped. There was a time when commodity prices were high, when the NDP were in power in the 1990s, for both minerals and oil and gas, but there was not the investment. There was not the confidence. There were not the jobs created in any industry in British Columbia.

You need commodity prices, obviously, but you also need that the industry has confidence in the government to put in the right rules and the right regulations to respect the environment — and we have some of the toughest rules around for respecting the environment — and to encourage that investment so that we can create those jobs.

I think we have something like 15 new mines and projects in the environmental assessment process going through the Ministry of Environment at the present time. When we arrived in office there were none — zero, nada, nothing. In just about five years we now have over a dozen, and some of those projects are pretty huge. Some of those projects are well over a billion dollars in expenditures in capital to put those mines in place.

That's the confidence that has to be exuded to the industry to get them to invest the money here to create those jobs and the wealth for British Columbians. At the end of the day what the government gets out of that is taxes, whether it's personal taxes, corporate taxes, sales taxes — you name it — all the taxes that government applies to the industries to be able to provide the services that we hear everyone in this House talk about incessantly. We went through question period listening to it today.

I know all of us want the best health care. Interestingly enough, we have the number-one health care across Canada, I'm told. We want to be able to maintain that, to keep that, to be innovative, to think about it a little bit more other than just a small box here in British Columbia.

Our oil and gas industry, another great industry in British Columbia, has certainly flourished under this government. I know that when we arrived in office, there was approximately a billion dollars a year invested in the oil and gas industry. Today the industry is estimating it will invest about \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion next year in the oil and gas industry in British Columbia.

[1535]

Hon. Speaker, you only have to go to northeastern B.C. to see the value of that. You only have to look at the surpluses in the budget to see the value of that for

all British Columbians. The industry creates royalties, land lease sales that are in excess of \$2 billion this year — \$2 billion. That's an awful lot of money to fuel our schools, to run them and to pay the people who work in the hospitals and the health care system, in the post-secondary education system. All of those services that each and every one of us....

I want to just maybe say a bit. I want those good services as much as anyone. You would think, listening sometimes, that there are only a few people in this House that want that. Nothing could be further from the truth. You, hon. Speaker, me and members opposite want the best services we can have for our people that live in the province of British Columbia, but there are things you have to do and some choices you have to make.

The member that spoke just a little while ago, from Surrey-Whalley, was saying we were too obsessed with efficiency. Wow. I don't know what kind of goofy talk that is. Too obsessed with efficiency? Is there anything wrong with actually getting good service and very good service and extra service for the dollars? I don't think so.

I think that's what happened through the dismal '90s. There was no thought given to that, no thought given to efficiency. How can we spend our dollars better? What things should we look at? They lived in a small, little world, locked themselves in a border, didn't think outside of the box at all and even went as far as blockading Alaska ferries into the province of British Columbia. Hon. Speaker, you've got to think a little bit wider than that. You've got to think a little bit larger than that. You know that, and I know that.

We also have an electrical industry in the province that's doing quite well. When we came to office, lo and behold, there was no energy plan, no plan for the future — nothing that would lead government down some path. I think the decisions were made one day to do one thing and another day to do another. In cabinet I'm sure they made most of those decisions not on good information.

So we developed an energy plan that would move British Columbia forward in this century, starting to think about how we use those resources, starting to think about how we produce those resources, starting to think about how we can expand the development of those resources for the benefit of all British Columbians — whether it's electricity, whether it's oil and gas or whether it's mining or agriculture.

I mean, the minister responsible for agriculture is working on programs now to try and figure out how we can better expand our agricultural industry — whether it's the grain farmers, the ranchers where I live, the fruit farmers in the Okanagan or the farmers in the lower mainland. That's innovative. That's thinking. That's thinking outside of the box. Those are things we should have to do. But to be accused of some draconian move by this government because we happen to want to think out of the box to get some efficiency, to think about how we can spend taxpayers' hard-earned dollars better, and something is wrong with you....

I just find it unbelievable that people would actually think and look around each corner — from the opposition talking about there's something wrong here, there's something wrong there, and going on about the Premier being in Europe to visit other health care facilities.... I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think we should actually be looking around the world a little bit. I think we should be looking and seeing where they actually do things better, and I don't think we should be one darn bit shy of maybe adopting some of those things, whatever they happen to be at the end of the day. If we don't have an open mind to even first look outside of our borders at what other people do, we should give our heads a shake.

[1540]

I want to talk just briefly — time is marching on — about.... Actually, you would think that we weren't spending any money on children's services or health care or education. I just want to list a few of the dollars that are being spent by this government in this budget — '06-07 to '07-08. Ministry for Children and Families: \$72 million to add more social workers and other front-line staff to improve supports for grandparents and other relatives looking after children, and to increase the transportation allowance for foster parents by 50 percent — the first increase in more than ten years.

Children and Families again: \$100 million to enhance the child care protection system targeting early intervention services so the safety and well-being of children can be ensured in their families and communities — another \$100 million; \$34 million to increase funding for phase two of the child and youth mental health plan or to better serve the approximately 140,000 children and youth in B.C. with mental health disorders; \$36 million to Children and Families to reduce wait-lists for services to children and youth with special needs and their families; \$31 million in additional support to implement five regional aboriginal child and family development service authorities.

That's in Children and Families alone, but yet if you sat in this House and just listened to the opposition, you'd think that we were actually cutting it, that we weren't spending more. The list goes on. Public Safety and the Solicitor General: \$2 million for the crystal meth secretariat to integrate and coordinate efforts to combat the production and use of crystal meth.

Ministry of Education: \$112 million in additional funding for K-to-12 education. That's on top of \$150 million in last year's budget — per year, moving forward, the largest increase in British Columbia's history, the \$150 million a year. We have a declining enrolment, and yet we're spending more on children for education.

You know, you would think it was totally decimated if you listened to the members opposite. I have two school districts in my constituency. I went back to them, and I actually went back to 1991 to the records and brought it forward to now. It was interesting. The expenditure increase by the NDP through those ten years was minimal — absolutely minimal. Now, that might just be because that's where I'm from. They may have spent more in some selected school districts. I'm

sure they probably did, but they certainly didn't expend much more money in my constituency.

From when we took office in 2001 until last year, we expended more in four years in my two school districts in education than the NDP had in ten, and you would think when you listened to them that we've cut it dramatically. In fact, interestingly enough, the number of teachers in my school district as a ratio to students is about the same — 1991 to now.

Interjection.

Hon. R. Neufeld: I don't know.

When I talk to the teachers where I come from — not all of them, obviously — there are some that don't agree. But I'll tell you that there's a lot of them, and the school superintendents and the principals, and they will tell me: "Yeah, we'd like to have more money — no doubt about it." Everybody would like to have more money, but we're doing not bad. We've got schools. We have good schools. We have good facilities for those students, and we've actually picked up the amount of money that's being spent on education.

The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance: \$4 million to double the school startup supplement — the first increase since 1993 — to help the approximately 29,000 school-age children of families on income assistance cope with the costs of starting a new school year; Community Living B.C., a \$30 million grant for a family independence fund that will help families cover the costs of specialized equipment or home renovations that are needed to keep the children or adults with development disabilities in their own homes. What a novel idea. That's thinking out of the box. That's doing it a little bit differently. And you know what? There's nothing wrong with that, because I have parents that have those problems in their homes, and they love it. They think it's the best thing we did.

[1545]

Increased spending in health care. In my constituency, in my hospital areas, again, we've actually increased dramatically the amount of spending on health care. Is it enough? I'd say probably not. Would we like more? Sure we would. I'm no different than anybody else.

But at the end of the day, we have to balance the books. You have to actually make money to spend money. It's an interesting process. I know that's lost on a number of people on the other side of the House, but it's certainly not lost on the government of British Columbia.

Training and skills, post-secondary: \$400 million — 25,000 new spaces. In Fort St. John we're having a \$12 million facility built at Northern Lights College for a centre of excellence for oil and gas.

Thinking out of the box. I know it's a different way, and I know the members opposite may think this is crazy, but I actually went to the industry and got \$6 million of that \$12 million — asked them for it. I know that's thinking out of the box. I know that if it were the NDP that were in government, they'd probably just go out and write another cheque.

Hon. R. Thorpe: Or do nothing.

Hon. R. Neufeld: Or do nothing, which they actually....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, members.

Hon. R. Neufeld: To be perfectly honest, they did a lot of nothing in my constituency in the ten years. They didn't foster any growth in the oil and gas industry, they didn't foster any growth in the forest industry, and they certainly didn't foster any growth in the agricultural industry.

So \$309 million extra in homeowner grant improvements. What's the matter with \$309 million a year in homeowner grant improvements? It's a total of \$733 million in new expenditures — all well-placed, I think, in going to continue to increase the services that we now receive in the province.

You know, hon. Speaker, I have one more thing I want to talk about. I know my time is running out, but it wouldn't be me if I didn't talk a bit about it: roads in the northeast part of the province. I've been the MLA since 1991. I sat through ten years of doom and gloom with the NDP and watched the oil and gas industry fizzle out. I watched our farmers having lots of trouble. I watched our forest industry go downhill.

Worst of all, I saw our infrastructure actually get ruined. We had times when in the northeast part of the province that has.... Ten percent of all the roads in the province are in the northeast, and 90 percent of those are gravel. Those roads were totally destroyed, almost all of them, during the NDP period. I can remember asking different ministers, and there were lots of them under the NDP, about spending some money on our infrastructure in northeastern British Columbia, to little avail. Some years they might spend \$3 million and some years, \$10 million, but when you're talking about a road system that big, it was nothing.

In fact, I can remember the time when I got a call to get the kids to school. This was a government that says they care about students. Just about all of my kids are bused, and they are bused an awful long way, some of them. Farmers were having to pull the school buses with four-wheel-drive farm tractors down the main roads to get kids to school. That was under the NDP.

I can tell you, hon. Speaker, that that's changed dramatically. The Minister of Transportation has come forward with spending in northeastern British Columbia on our roads that I know the member for Peace River South and I are absolutely thrilled with. It's an average of over \$70 million a year. That's been going on for the last five years — the first real investment in our infrastructure in a long time.

[1550]

I'm proud of our government. I'm proud of our Minister of Finance, who has worked very hard to actually deliver again a balanced budget with a sizeable surplus, \$6 billion for new contracts with the public

sector, a billion-dollar bonus there for people to access. I think those are all innovative, new ways, different ways, of thinking out of the box. I don't think, hon. Speaker, you will ever see this government be shy of actually looking around — not reinventing the wheel, but actually studying other jurisdictions to find out what we can do better to serve the people of British Columbia better.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: The member for Nanaimo has the floor.

L. Krog: It's always an honour and a privilege to rise in this chamber, and I'm always delighted to have a history lesson from the Minister of Energy, responsible for gas in British Columbia.

Churchill said that there were three types of lies. There were lies, damned lies and statistics. So let's review just a couple of statistics before I get into the body of my remarks today.

The Minister of Energy, you will remember, was a member of the great Social Credit Party. When they left office in British Columbia, they left behind the biggest deficit to date in the history of the province. We had to contend with that, those of us who had the privilege of sitting on the government side in those days.

There's one other interesting statistic.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members, please come to order. Members, you must be in your seats if you wish to make comments.

L. Krog: One other interesting statistic, not to be outdone when the Liberal Party came to power in 2001. Were they satisfied with the record established by the former Social Credit Party? No, hon. Speaker. They wanted to do better, and they created then, in 2001 and 2002, the biggest deficit in the history of British Columbia.

They talk about hard work in the last four years — those four difficult years of hard work. You know, it must have been a pretty tough job playing Scrooge in those times. They cut the budget of the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance by 30 percent. That was real tough on the government. One-third of social assistance recipients are single parents, and 90 percent of them are women.

Well, what do we have? The hard work — yeah. "We cut it for the poorest and the weakest and the most defenceless amongst us." That was the hard work of four years.

We are number one. There's another statistic I'm sure the members opposite will be interested in. We now enjoy the pride of being number one in child poverty in Canada. The number of homeless in the Greater Vancouver regional district doubled — doubled. There's a statistic for you — doubled from 2002 to 2005.

But you know something? I am almost embarrassed to say with pride that this is true. We still have today — just as we did under the NDP from 1991 to 2001 — the highest percentage per capita of millionaires in Canada of all those provinces. The rich are doing very well in British Columbia. They are doing extremely well.

If those first four years of this Liberal government were so wonderful, if their budgetary skills were so good, I have to ask: why, in the wisdom of the people of British Columbia, did their percentage of the popular vote drop from 58 to about 46? That's fairly consistent with a most fascinating article in today's *Sun* by Craig McInnes, when he talks about a recent survey that was done of British Columbians: 55 percent of them don't think they are better off — a remarkable coincidence that this seems to equate to the number of British Columbians who didn't vote for this government in 2005.

J. Horgan: More than half.

[1555]

L. Krog: More than half of British Columbians, as my friend the member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca points out, don't think they are better off, and the truth is that they are not better off.

The prosperity.... I will give the government some credit for it. Government policy does have an impact on the economy. It does; that's true. The prosperity has not been shared. That's the problem. It hasn't been shared.

There's a fascinating article — it was actually published the day the budget speech was made — by Jean Swanson. Now, those of you in this chamber might recall the name Jean Swanson. She was a well-known advocate in the city of Vancouver, and still is, for those living in poverty. She continues now to be a volunteer at the Carnegie Centre.

I was around in 1975, the last year of the Barrett government, and this is a very interesting portion of her piece in the *Sun*: "In 1975 the minimum wage in British Columbia was 122 percent of the poverty line for a single person in the city." So if you earned the minimum wage in 1957, when Dave Barrett was Premier, you were above the poverty line by 22 percent. But: "Today the \$8-an-hour minimum wage is only 78 percent of the poverty line for a 37½-hour week."

D. Chudnovsky: Except that's not the minimum wage.

L. Krog: The member beside me says it's not the minimum wage. He's quite right. Please, hon. member, let me finish my quote: "To look at it another way, a single person would have to make \$12.51 an hour at a full-time job, a 37½-hour week, to have the same purchasing power as a minimum-wage worker had in 1975." Aha. Here's the best part: "A person who depends on today's \$6-an-hour training wage" — another great benefit of electing the Liberal government; I

added that — "will make only 58 percent of the today's poverty line with a full-time minimum-wage job."

Hon. K. Falcon: Students.

L. Krog: I hear on the other side: "Students." I think it's the Minister of Transportation mentioning students. I am so delighted that the member opposite has reminded me to not pass over the issue of tuition fees in the province. Tuition fees have doubled at British Columbia's universities and colleges since 2001. For the average student at UBC, the increase is \$10,000 more to complete a degree.

Now look, I value education. I have a couple of degrees myself. Many of the members in this chamber do. I obtained them at British Columbia universities. I'm very proud of them. I received the benefit of a full public education. But what this government has done is made it harder and harder for working-class and middle-class families to ensure that their children get the opportunity to go to post-secondary institutions in this province and to be able to participate fully in British Columbia's society. That's what they've done with their very deliberate policies.

I guess what troubles me most about the budget speech is the hypocrisy that is implicit in the document. I want to quote the wonderful words of the Minister of Finance when she says: "Like the budget update we presented in September, it's another step forward for our province and the people of British Columbia." You know what? A budget should be all about that. That's what it should be about.

She goes on a little further to talk about: "All across this province it's a stark contrast to the gloom of the '90s. People are excited." People are excited. What are they excited about? Are they excited about the fact that we can give \$309 million over the next four years to homeowners — who've already achieved a fair slice of the economic pie — when at the same time we can't find it within ourselves to provide housing for the poorest amongst us? When we can't give enough to community organizations like the Nanaimo Affordable Housing Society to build new units to actually look after the people who sleep in our streets? That's the hypocrisy involved — to talk about prosperity constantly when you're not prepared to share it.

[1600]

There are many in this province who were rewarded by this government with a huge tax break and who sit at the table at the banquet of life so full, so gorged. Is it too much to ask that this government take some of the wealth at that banquet table and spread it around, to maybe push some of those bloated figures away from it to allow some who have very little or nothing to share? That's all I'm asking.

I spoke to the throne speech. I didn't honestly think the budget was going to respond to anything I might have had to say at that time. I didn't think the budget was going to suddenly start to deal with the issues of poverty in British Columbia in a serious and meaning-

ful way. I don't flatter myself that my speech would result in that, but I thought that this government that claims to be so proud of its economic record, after having actually reduced assistance rates for people, might have found it in its heart to perhaps have provided even a small raise.

In 2001 the reduction, with the elimination of exemptions, meant that some single mothers saw their benefits decrease by \$380 a month. In addition, we brought in the famous three-week rule. Now, I've spoken about the three-week rule. I don't know where the members were raised, but I can tell you that in the community I represent, when people go to a social assistance office, they're desperate. They're absolutely desperate. It's not the place of first resort; it's the place of last resort. When you turn to those people and say that they have to wait three weeks in order to receive benefits, it is an act, as far as I'm concerned, of unmitigated cruelty and selfishness. It is absolutely inconsistent with democratic values, and it is absolutely inconsistent with a society that, by and large, enjoys great wealth.

In the throne speech the minister goes on to talk about how: "Budget 2006 focuses on children and the British Columbia we are building for tomorrow." It's good to build for tomorrow — very positive to think about the future. It goes on to say that: "Nowhere is that sense of boundless possibility more tangible than in our children and in our youth." Further on: "As government, we work hand in hand with families to make sure children get a good start in life." Was that what the cut to social assistance was about — helping children get a good start in life? Was that going to make the rocky road to success, to prosperity, to security easier?

The budget goes on to brag about the increase in the transportation allowance for foster parents. Now, you know, that's a good thing, because it's tough to find decent foster parents in the province. It's a tough job, and they deserve to be rewarded, and they deserve decent funds to provide good foster care. It's a very tough job. But just maybe it would be equally consistent with good, sound policy that if you think the people who are looking after the children of families that have already fallen apart or are in crisis.... Maybe you might want to help the children and the families before those families fall apart.

[1605]

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to actually increase assistance rates, to provide increases in shelter allowance, to build decent public housing. Maybe that would be a fairly appropriate investment. This is quoting from the budget again. We're talking about the \$421 million that the government is putting back, which is a complete admission of its abject failure in its previous budgets in the cuts it made to the services for children in this province. "The largest portion of this new funding, \$173 million, will be used to enhance services for children, including more social workers and other front-line staff to stay in closer contact with those families that are at risk."

Some wag once wisely said years ago that the solution to poverty is simple: it's money. If you've got money, you're not poor. It's a remarkably simple concept. Again, my question to the government is...? If you've got this surplus, and it's our money — and I speak for a constituency that is poor by the standards of most in this province — I just politely suggest, on behalf of the constituents who elected me to this wonderful chamber, that you might want to consider giving some of that money back to the people who need it the most.

The budget talks about \$4 million over three years to double the school startup allowance for some of B.C.'s neediest children. That's not even a rounding error in the Ministry of Health's budget. That figure falls off the table in a couple of hours in this province. But what is it? It's an acknowledgment that kids in really poor families need some assistance to get back into school.

The budget speech brags about how we have lowered income taxes by an average of 25 percent. Families earning less than \$30,000 a year saw their income taxes reduced by 28 percent. B.C. now has the lowest personal income tax rates in Canada for the bottom two tax rates, and most people earning up to \$16,000 a year pay no more provincial income tax at all. You know what? That's great. That's just great. Sixteen thousand....

Interjection.

L. Krog: Absolutely. Absolutely. The Minister of Education is clapping for my remarks, and I do appreciate that concern and that interest in my speech. I'm always flattered by a little bit of attention.

So I guess I have to say that if the government acknowledges that people who earn \$16,000 a year shouldn't pay any income tax, I guess the government is acknowledging that you need \$16,000 a year in order to live a decent life in British Columbia. That's the only way I can interpret it, and I don't hear any disagreement.

I guess I have to ask — and I'm going to come back to the same tiresome old point that I intend to make for the next three and a half years in this House — if you need \$16,000 a year to live a decent life in the province, how do you expect people to live on a little over \$6,000 a year, which is what social assistance provides in this province for a single employable person? That's the question I would love to have answered by a member opposite. I don't care if it comes in the form of a heckle or a clap or a memo or an e-mail. That's the question I have for this government.

We are enjoying a remarkable economy in terms of our commodity prices, in terms of our housing market. Indeed, I understand that, according to statistics, we've almost reached the same peak in housing starts that we did in the early '90s when the NDP were in power. That's a wonderful thing — seeing British Columbians housed. But we're not seeing enough of them housed, and we're not seeing the poorest amongst us housed. So I say plaintively to this government: as the revenues

appear to continue to increase from oil and gas and commodities in this province, find it in your heart sometime this year to shock me. Find it in your heart to actually put some real money into public housing.

I'm delighted you've given a break to homeowners. That's a great thing. But you know what? Maybe you could find a few hundred million to house the homeless who live on the streets of every community in this province. You've only provided now \$8 million over three years. There's \$5 million over two years, \$2 million in 2007-2008 and \$3 million in 2009-2008 for a multi-year homeless initiative that will develop transitional and supportive units.

[1610]

We have the homeless outreach teams now, a pilot project to have teams go out and find homeless people. Well, isn't that wonderful? We'll find them, and we'll identify them. Then we'll tell them: "We don't actually have any budget for housing for you, but we found you, and we'll try and keep some statistics." It isn't sufficient. It just isn't sufficient.

There's an increase in the budget in terms of health care spending, and we hear that we're going to have to embark on some changes in health care. We've got to do some privatization. We've got to look at some interesting alternatives, and that's a great thing. You know, it's always good to look at solutions. I admire people who are anxious to see change and progress in society.

I want to read something from an article that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on February 21, and I'll just read this quote. It simply says:

Our compassion for the suffering of our neighbours commits us to meeting their pain and ends in communion when every man and woman who suffers becomes a brother or sister. "The Acts of the Apostles" described the situation of the first Christian community in Jerusalem — how these people dealt with worldly goods, how they saw to it that everyone ate well and there were no needy persons among them.

Throughout the industrialized world there is a clear split between those who believe the way of the future should be based on greater emphasis on the individual and less concern about people and the social environment, and those who want more collective action to sustain the quality of the environment in which we live and work.

With the prospect of privatized health care, committed Christians must ask certain serious questions. How can we allow a situation where some people will gain a greater share of the pie while others will get less, where some patients will be unable to afford care or will have less than desirable service?

Now, are those words of the loonie left? Am I quoting J.S. Woodsworth or T.C. Douglas, or am I talking about some long-dead socialist ranting on behalf of the working classes? No, actually I'm quoting, hon. Speaker, from a lecturer in sacred scripture at the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto, Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Catholic television network in Canada.

You've kind of got to think that if both the left and a senior Catholic scholar in this country are suggesting that privatized health care is a bad idea, when you've

got unions telling you it's a bad idea, when you've got — as my learned friend the member for Surrey-Whalley quoted today — the president of the Toronto Stock Exchange telling you that privatized health care is a bad idea, why would you even want to consider it? Why would you take the Premier's brother-in-law on a trip abroad to look at systems when everyone of any intelligence is telling you that privatized health care is bad for the economy, it is inefficient and, in fact, it will make Canada a less desirable place to invest? Why would you want to do that?

Interjection.

Deputy Speaker: Member. Order please.

Interjection.

L. Krog: I like social democracy, hon. member.

I like social democracy, and if the member is happy with what's happening in Sweden, we could perhaps talk about the child poverty rate in Sweden. We could perhaps talk about the rather much expanded and far more improved and beneficial social programs they have in Sweden. We could talk about the prosperity of Sweden. We could also talk about the fact that the privatized health care....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order. Order, members.

L. Krog: We could also talk about the privatized health care, that small little portion in one little part of Sweden that really isn't doing that very well and that isn't going to form major government policy in Sweden. But you know something? Why should we worry about the truth and accuracy? It is so much better to simply talk about the dismal decade, to promote this wonderful image that everything was so wrong for a decade and that all of those programs that any government other than this government undertakes are somehow going to be disastrous.

[1615]

I didn't see anything in this budget that deals with the number of serious issues that face British Columbians or that face my constituents. There's a major mill that's going to close in my community this month. We have a significant skills shortage in this province. I've talked today about homelessness, and we certainly haven't seen the solution to seniors long-term care beds, as was promised by this government some time ago.

Deputy Speaker: Member.

I recognize the member for Vancouver-Burrard.

Point of Order

L. Mayencourt: Point of order. In the member's comments, I think he said: "Why should we concentrate on the truth, when we can refer to something

else?" I think his language was fairly close to unparliamentary language, so I'd ask that he withdraw that comment.

Deputy Speaker: Member, I didn't hear any direct allegation, but if the member for Nanaimo would rephrase his comments, I'd appreciate that.

L. Krog: If the member for Vancouver-Burrard has somehow read into my comments that I've accused him or any member of this House of being untruthful, I would certainly apologize. But the record, I must say, hon. Speaker, of this government, and the statistics I've quoted, I think do fairly speak for themselves in terms of what's happened in this province.

Debate Continued

L. Krog: I want to come back to my main point. What have you done for the average British Columbian?

Deputy Speaker: Members, please, through the Chair when you address.

L. Krog: Thank you.

What has this government done for the average British Columbian? Have we dealt with the crisis in the forest industry? Are we dealing with the crisis with the pine beetle in the interior? Are we dealing with homelessness? Are we dealing with the skills shortage? Are we dealing with all of those things that actually are genuinely important to people? No.

We're simply presenting a do-nothing budget that says: "We're just going to carry on. We're just going to carry on. We have no major platform. We have no new programs. We have nothing to address serious issues."

It's the same old tired government that, frankly, I don't believe has recovered from the results of the 2005 election. One gets the sense in this chamber that perhaps they've lost their oomph, that perhaps they're not sure where they're going anymore.

Interjection.

L. Krog: Ah, one member refers to their mojo. It's much too sophisticated a term for a country boy like me.

I would suggest that what the throne speech really says is: "We don't know where we're going. We're not sure what we're going to do. We just know that if we pretend to ignore the serious problems of British Columbians" — which I've outlined in my remarks today — "things will be okay. Maybe the Olympics will pull us out of this." There's nothing like a good game to distract people from real issues. I just don't see that happening.

I want to conclude, hon. Speaker, by emphasizing this to the government side. You've got problems in education. You've got composition and class size problems that aren't being addressed in this budget. You've

got serious issues in forestry. You've got serious issues in health, and most importantly to me, the poorest amongst us are not served by anything I read in that budget speech or heard from the lips of the Minister of Finance.

Until you face up to your responsibilities....

Deputy Speaker: Through the Chair, please, member. Comments through the Chair.

L. Krog: Until this government faces up to the privilege and honour and responsibilities it has to the people of British Columbia and to the poorest amongst us, then all I hear and see is hypocrisy and rhetoric. What I want to see are results.

I would love to finish, in 2009, looking across at the members opposite and being able to stand up and say: "You know what? You actually did something for those who really need it. It's not just for the friends on Howe Street. It's not just for the big mining companies. It's not just for the big forest companies. You actually did something for the people in this province who have been waiting desperately since this government was elected in 2001 — waiting desperately for something to actually benefit them."

[1620]

I conclude by reminding my friends on the government side that 55 percent of British Columbians don't think they're sharing this prosperity, and of that 55 percent, there's a percentage at the bottom who are indeed worse off with each passing day. I ask this government, and I ask the Minister of Finance, to consider those as we work through the estimates process in this House over the next few weeks.

Deputy Speaker: Again, I would ask members who wish to make comments to make sure that they are in their own seats.

Hon. S. Bond: It is a pleasure, as always, to rise in the House on behalf of the people of Prince George–Mount Robson and today to respond to the provincial budget.

I want to start, as I usually do, by saying thank you to the incredible people that are supportive of the work that I have to do each day. Certainly, without the kind of family that I have — that are absolutely incredible — the staff that I have and the colleagues that I have in this place, the work that we do would be much different. I know that the most important work that I do is to represent the people of Prince George–Mount Robson. They are an incredible constituency. They are resilient. They are creative, and they are excited about the future of British Columbia.

Before I go on to actually talk about the significant components of the budget that was presented, I have to make comment and react and bring some perspective to some of the comments that were made by the member who spoke previously. As we look to the future of British Columbia, we know that the most important thing that we need to do for the families of this prov-

ince is to continue to ensure that we have a robust and strong economy that allows us to provide for the future of our children and our grandchildren.

Let's just for a moment go back and talk about what the place was that we came from. Let's talk about why we are excited. It's so incredible and so disappointing to hear the day-after-day-after-day, doom-and-gloom, negative, critical perspective from the other side of the chamber. We know that British Columbia has seen an extraordinary turnaround in the past four years. We know we're going to build on that success, and in fact the people of British Columbia deserve leadership that's going to come from this side of the House.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

You know, it's really easy to start talking about commodity prices. Let's talk about the 1990s when the economy of North America was booming. Where did British Columbia end up? Let me tell you. We went from first to worst. Let me give you some of the statistics. The last in economic growth, dead last in Canada....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

Hon. S. Bond: The GDP per capita in British Columbia was \$1,781 above the national average. By 2000 the province had slipped — listen — to \$2,251 below the Canadian average. Let's look at British Columbia's business history in that period of time. We recorded the worst rise in business bankruptcies in Canada...

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

Hon. S. Bond: ...during 1994 to 1998, and British Columbia was last, dead last, in job creation in Canada from 1996 to 2000. How does that help families in the province? It doesn't. It's time the members opposite stood up and looked in the mirror and recognized this province is moving forward. Part of the challenge we're facing is restoring the damage that was done in the ten years they sat in this place.

[1625]

Let's just look at some of the selective kinds of information that have been shared. The member opposite brought up the school startup supplement and expressed his deep concerns about the fact that it hadn't been increased more significantly. Let's just check, because when you make those kinds of comments, you better look back and see what the record is of the government that was here in those days. Oh, we doubled the school startup supplement, the first increase since — wait for it — 1993. I wonder who should have had the opportunity to make those changes during that particular period of time.

Let's talk about the skills shortage. The interesting thing about a skills shortage is — guess what — for the first time in a long time in the province, we actually have jobs looking for people instead of people looking for jobs. When did that start?

Let's just look at some of the headlines. Maybe we can get a glimpse of why people are excited in this province. Let's just listen.

Interjections.

Hon. S. Bond: Listen. "B.C. led the nation in job growth in 2005. More full-time jobs created in 2005." Oh — "B.C. to remain the top performer."

Interjections.

Hon. S. Bond: Listen. "B.C. to remain the top performer." Not just for the short-term — B.C. is predicted to remain the top performer until 2010. Now that's progress.

You know, the other thing I find most uncomfortable is that somehow the members opposite think they have a monopoly on caring. That is unacceptable, and it is absolutely inappropriate. There are men and women serving on both sides of this House who have invested their lives, in fact, in making sure that we create a better British Columbia not for today, not only for today, but in fact for our children and our grandchildren.

While the members opposite smirk, I can assure you of this: I care about the constituents of Prince George–Mount Robson. I care enough that we're going to make the tough decisions that ensure that this economy will provide for the kind of programs that they deserve, that our grandchildren deserve, and we are not going to mortgage the future of this province on the backs of our children.

Let's talk about the budget that was tabled by our Finance Minister. Let's talk about it opening up opportunities. I live in northern British Columbia, and I can tell you something: there is excitement. So for the member opposite to suggest and ask the question of why are people excited.... Well, we're excited because for the first time we see the lowest unemployment rates ever in British Columbia. Imagine. In northern British Columbia we're talking about the Asia-Pacific. We're looking beyond the borders. Do you know what? The Asia-Pacific matters to Prince George, because it means that we are going to open up new opportunities for the transportation of goods and people. That means we can provide more jobs, well-paying jobs, for people to provide for their families. That's why we're excited in northern British Columbia.

One of the challenges we face with a booming economy is the shortage of skilled labour, but let's be clear. That's not a situation that emerged overnight. Let me tell you about the situation my constituents.... According to the members opposite, you know, the not-so-caring government.... Do you know that for a decade — a decade or more in this province — no one

trained more physicians, not one additional training seat? Do you know what that meant for the people where I live? It meant that they could not get a family physician. It meant that we were always struggling with the recruitment of physicians.

Not only that, we continue to face a challenge with nursing spots. We've aggressively added to the number of spaces. I can tell you this: because we had the aggressive plan that we did about training physicians and training nurses, for the first time in northern British Columbia, we have a complement of physicians, of specialists, of nurses to meet the needs of northern British Columbia. Tell me how that's not sharing the wealth and looking out for the rest of this province.

You know, to sit on the other side and mock the Olympics — "Well, let the Olympics solve it...."

J. Horgan: We started it.

Hon. S. Bond: Excuse me, I'm sorry. The members opposite suggest that they were the key proponents in the Olympics. In fact, just moments ago in this House, the comment was: "Let the Olympics take care of it." Well, I want to tell you something. I am proud to be part of a community and a region that has embraced the Olympics.

[1630]

In fact, at the recent presentations in Torino.... There was a day in Torino where Prince George and the northern part of British Columbia were on the stage of the entire world. We were able to take and share the products that are actually produced in northern British Columbia. The people that live there. We're able to attract training teams to come to Prince George. We are excited about the Olympics in northern B.C., because we know it's going to have everlasting benefit.

I can tell you what. I was in schools all Monday and all Tuesday, and guess what the kids in this province were talking about. You guessed it, Mr. Speaker — the Olympics, a sense of pride and accomplishment and encouragement to strive for excellence. You bet we're going to concentrate on the Olympics, and we are going to benefit for decades because of that.

We talk about a budget that provides for the future. One of the things that we've suffered and struggled with in the northern part of the province.... Many of my colleagues in the House today have experienced that, as they are northern representatives. We had challenges with infrastructure, but we want and we are building the infrastructure necessary so that all of the people in British Columbia can benefit from the economic growth that has been created.

Let me give you one concrete — so to speak — example. I want you to know that since 2001, in my constituency alone we have invested \$60 million in one of the most important forms of infrastructure, and that is highways. I can tell you that when you work with the Transportation Ministry, they would be pleased to tell you what a significant increase in attention that has been since the previous government was in place.

We're going to four-lane the Cariboo connector between Cache Creek and Prince George, and that has been a dream of the people of the north for a very long time. You can't imagine the excitement that's been created, to believe that as we move forward, we're going to have the highway that we've been looking for, for a very long time.

So \$113 million in this new budget will build on previous funding. For what, Mr. Speaker? To address the number-one concern of the regional advisory committees that provide information to our Minister of Transportation. They came and said: "We need money for roads to deal with pine beetle." We responded with \$113 million that will do over 400 kilometres of roads, to make sure that not only are our roads safe but that we can continue to transport goods in the way we have to. That's called leadership, and we're going to continue to demonstrate that as we move forward.

We continue to hear from the members opposite of the concern about health care and educational opportunities. I want to tell you that our students get the chance now to study and to train closer to home. We have phenomenal public education institutions in the north. We have the University of Northern British Columbia. We have the College of New Caledonia. We know that our students, if we can train them closer to home, are going to stay there.

We've added teacher-training programs. We've added physician-training programs. We are embarking upon the most aggressive addition of post-secondary education seats that has taken place in this province for decades: 25,000 seats. We know it's important. We are putting those seats in places all across this province to meet the needs of our students. It is aggressive, it is the right thing to do, and we're going to continue to make sure that we deliver on that.

As we talk about the Ministry of Education and the educational opportunities that actually face us, we have some challenges to address. There is no doubt about that. But the frustration is that there is an assumption on the other side of the floor that there is one answer to this problem. I can assure you that the whole issue is complex. You see, it's about finding ways to meet the needs of thousands of students in unique and special circumstances across this province. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question.

You know what's most disappointing? The obvious fear and fearmongering that go on when this side of the House stands up and says that we're going to ask the people of British Columbia. We're going to listen to more than one group of voices. Imagine: we're going to listen to parents. We're actually going to involve them in the process. And you know what? We're not simply going to listen to those loud voices that have one answer to this question. We're going to open the doors. We're going to talk about possibilities. We will make the decisions that are necessary to ensure that we have an education system that serves us not just today.

[1635]

The status quo isn't good enough, no matter how we want to frighten people. Change is necessary, as we

want to meet the needs of our students today in moving forward. I am looking forward to the ongoing dialogue that both the Premier and I will have as we visit districts right across British Columbia.

I can assure you of one thing. There's one group of people that we're going to listen to far more clearly than we are to many other voices. I'll tell you, we're going to put students at the centre of our agenda, and we're going to make the decisions necessary to put their interests first.

We can couch all kinds of things with comments and questions that are asked about who we're paying attention to. But in fact, it's not enough to listen to the loudest voices. We have to take the time to sort out a complex issue.

I am constantly asked the question by the Education critic: what are you doing about class size? What are you doing about composition? What I'm doing is this: I'm trying to find a way to ensure that families don't have to see their children separated and attending two different schools because we have an arbitrary number that says that's what has to happen. History shows us that's exactly what happened in the past. We're not prepared to settle for that.

Is it more complex than that to find a solution? Yes, it is. Is it going to take some time? Yes, it is. But we have data in front of us that now shows us that no two school districts are the same, no two classes are the same, no two students are the same and no two teachers are the same. We need a system that allows for flexibility and for input because, at the end of the day, what matters is the student in the classroom and the fact that they are in the kind of circumstances that are important for them and that parents have a meaningful discussion about what's important for their children.

I want to make it perfectly clear. We hear the talk of cuts to education, cuts to health care. Let's get the facts on the record. The government has announced the highest budget ever in British Columbia for public education. The Education budget has grown from \$4.59 billion in 2000-2001 to over \$5 billion in 2005-2006. In the budget that was announced by our Finance Minister, we're adding another \$112 million to that. When you add in the previously announced amounts: \$437 million of new funding to public education over three years.

There are challenging questions to be answered. We want to ask those questions. We want to have that discussion. But I can tell you this....

Let's look at the facts. If you were to take a graph and look at funding in public education, the funding line is going up. There's another line. It's called the student enrolment line. We all need to know which way that line is going. It is going downward, so what we're saying is: more money into the system with fewer students.

Let's talk about how dramatic that change has been. Over the last five years, we've lost in the system — remember, highest funding level ever — 35,000 students in this province in terms of enrolment numbers, and the projections forward are an increased decline. In

fact, we anticipate losing over 30,000 students in the next five years — that at a time when we have committed core funding, additional dollars every year, while the dollars rise and the number of students drop. Those are the facts.

This funding brings our budget to the highest level ever in the province of British Columbia, and that is something to be proud of.

When we look at what else we're going to do, I'm very pleased that later this year we will host the first-ever teachers congress in this province. We want to talk to classroom teachers. We want to have the opportunity to actually sit down with them, and we will continue, also, to work at the Learning Round Table. There are many opportunities for dialogue and discussion, and we certainly will continue to look at those.

One of the most exciting developments in education, as we look across North America, is the concept of distance education and how we look at helping improve student achievement. Education in the 21st century is moving B.C. beyond anywhere we might have thought about going. More than ever before, teachers are using technology to help their students and to help the student experience.

[1640]

The amazing thing as I travel from school to school and classroom to classroom.... The work that is done every day in British Columbia classrooms is absolutely phenomenal. We have a teaching staff that is not rivalled anywhere. What's most disappointing to me is the fact that the comments that continue to be captured in the media are negative. They're about conflict and about fearmongering by the members opposite, when we should stand up and talk about what a phenomenal public education system we have. We have great teachers. We have amazing support staff people. Most importantly, the people of British Columbia believe in public education. They want what's best for our students.

Let's look at the outcomes. Teachers in this province, support staff workers, the custodial teams — all of those people — the trustees, the people who administer in our schools.... Together this team has produced the kind of outcomes that are absolutely envied by people — not just across North America but across the world. If the situation continues.... We want to see that continue. We want to be on a path of continuous improvement.

You know what? We're at a record level of completion in this province — 79 percent of our students complete graduation. That's the highest it has ever been in British Columbia. But you know, that means that 21 percent of our students don't complete their education.

When we look at the aboriginal results, they're even more challenging. We've seen a 6-percent increase in aboriginal completion rates over the last five years because of the hard work, the partnership and the incredible investment of time and energy that people in the system have made. Teachers are absolutely critical to that. But 48 percent is simply not good enough. We

know that. Despite all the hard work, collaboration and effort, we know that there is much more to be done.

The work being done on aboriginal enhancement agreements around this province is fantastic. Every district will eventually have an aboriginal enhancement agreement in place. I was able to attend a planning session for an aboriginal education board just the other day in the Howe Sound school district. It was profoundly moving as people came together from various bands, from educational areas, from business areas to say: "How do we better serve the needs of the students who are of aboriginal descent in this school district?" That is how you make good decisions. It is not one voice. It's not the loudest voice. It's not the only voice. It's an opportunity to bring people together with a common purpose, and that's to improve the circumstances for students in British Columbia.

As we move forward, we look forward to new and exciting opportunities under the virtual school. We want to increase access and opportunity. Members like myself and my colleague from Prince George-Omineca know that there are students in our ridings that have challenges accessing the kinds of courses they want for graduation or for personal interest. The creation of the virtual school will allow us to open the world of opportunity, to expand the horizon of students all across this province. The Premier has made a commitment that we will deliver it quickly. We're working now, and certainly that will be another incredible initiative for students in this province.

We also believe that accountability is a critical component of the public education system, and we are expecting there to be a higher level of responsibility and accountability as we move forward. We know that we must work to ensure that school districts are working with us as they work on their accountability contracts and their achievement plans, as they work with us to see the increase in results that we expect for aboriginal students in this province.

We know that as a group our aboriginal students are doing better than ever at school, and growing numbers of aboriginal people who are succeeding in school are completing trades programs, becoming college and university graduates. We know they still face many challenges. More than half, as I have suggested, of our aboriginal students don't graduate. That should serve as a wake-up call to all of us.

[1645]

We have made a commitment. This government has said that it will be our goal to establish a new relationship with first nations people and eliminate the inequities facing aboriginal people within the next ten years. That's what leadership is about. That's what hearing those voices who haven't been heard for so long is all about. We know it will make a difference for all British Columbians.

The budget that was tabled builds on a foundation that the people of British Columbia responded to over the last four years. We know that there is still work to be done, but we also know this: British Columbia is a different place than it was five years ago. We are mak-

ing strides to lead this country, and that growth has continued. It will be expected to continue not just as we lead in British Columbia but, in fact, as we are a leader across this country over the next number of years.

I want to look at the results we're seeing today. It is hard not to be reactive to comments that we're not sharing or that it's not being felt in other parts of the province. Well, Mr. Speaker, I want you to know something. I live in the north and central part of this province, and I can tell you it is a different place than it was before. More people are working in our region of the world than ever before. Companies like Finning Canada recently made Prince George their regional service centre for mining operations. They are recognizing the growth and the potential of not just northern B.C. but also Prince George and the north.

Unemployment in the central interior is at the lowest level ever since records have been kept. Housing starts in my region continue to rise every year since 2001, jumping up 43 percent between 2004 and 2005 alone. These aren't just numbers. They don't mean anything unless they're about real people and real families. People and families in my constituency are benefiting. Mr. Speaker, we can tell you this: this is a budget that was based on what's important to children and to families.

Despite the concerns and the comments and the negativity that we continue to experience from the members opposite, it's an investment of 421 million new dollars based on supporting our children and our families. I can tell you this. We know that the future of British Columbia depends on strong, competent leaders who are willing to step up, to step out, to ask those questions, to ensure.... You know, Mr. Speaker, this isn't about commodity prices. This is about a plan — a strategic plan that says we're going to build on a foundation, that we're going to put tax policies in place that take care of people.

Our fall update on the budget. The Finance Minister focused that budget on the needs of seniors in this province. That's right, Mr. Speaker, it is important. This is about having a plan, having a strategy and having the courage to stick to it. British Columbians are experiencing the benefits. We know that the future ahead holds incredible optimism, incredible opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, I can tell you this: the members on the government side of the House are excited about the future of British Columbia. We are proud to stand up, and we are going to get enthusiastic and excited. We're not going to settle for the status quo. We are going to make sure that we move forward, that we're positive, that we're bold, that we're aggressive. And you know what, Mr. Speaker? British Columbia is going to get even better yet.

R. Fleming: It is a pleasure to rise this afternoon and respond to the budget speech on behalf of my constituents in Victoria-Hillside, the constituency I represent. Victoria-Hillside is a constituency composed of hard-working people that pay their taxes, have pride in their communities and look to government to help

make life better for themselves, their children, their communities and the places they live, and their quality of life.

[1650]

Unfortunately, in my constituency and in many across this province there simply wasn't enough in this budget for them, particularly on the heels of seven budgets that have inflicted a range of fee increases and reduced access and opportunity to all kinds of services: services for themselves, for their children trying to get post-secondary education, for their parents trying to access seniors care. That is the kind of thing that my constituents and people in British Columbia were looking for to be addressed in this budget, and it came up woefully short.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

My constituency is a diverse one. It begins in the north end of the downtown of this city of Victoria. It moves to its outer edge at Swan Lake in Saanich. It's a diverse community representing people from many backgrounds, many walks of life — an eclectic mix of neighbourhoods that people are very proud of. One of the things that my constituents are very interested in seeing supported by government is an understanding of the importance of public safety. There, too, I think residents of my constituency have found this budget lacking.

Let me talk first a little bit about health care and seniors, because I think that's something that certainly was a priority for many of my constituents. We have an aging demographic in British Columbia; that is not a surprise to any member of this House. In some communities the advancing age demographic is more significant than in others. My community happens to be one of those, a place where people do worry about the future of themselves and their parents, a place where waiting lists and closed beds have had an impact in people's family lives in the anxiety and worries they have about their loved ones. It is for that reason that long-term care beds and the supply of them are of particular importance to the constituents of Victoria-Hillside.

This is the seventh budget that this government has had. They're still talking about the same 5,000 long-term care beds that they were back then. The Minister of Health has admitted that they're about 4,400 short. They have extended out the estimates to complete that promise now till 2009, last time I checked. In my riding there are two prominent sites that have been zoned for three to four years now, been through the municipal councils — land acquired by local government in some cases. To be built on those: residential care institutions, assisted-living beds — a mix of both in some cases, depending on the site you are talking about.

The Mount View site is one that I speak of that has been sitting for three years now — inactive, ready to go, but one that the health authority has not been able to pursue because the funding isn't there. The same

situation is at hand in Selkirk. This government closed down beds at Gorge Road Hospital. Interestingly, I hear day after day about the concern of the building codes of the 1980s and some of the institutions, the residences that seniors were living in, in the 1990s and that's why they had to be closed: because it was better to have no beds than to have the beds we had at that time.

Well, the government closed down Gorge Road Hospital, and strangely enough, they reopened it very quietly about a year and a half ago. That's fine, because those spaces are needed. I think the situation is overstated by many members opposite in terms of the state of certain facilities. Gorge Road Hospital is not ideal, like many of those places weren't. But it is a place that can satisfy some of the demand we have in our community that has only increased because of that unfulfilled promise for 5,000 new beds.

Let me move on to make some comments about child poverty. You know, I think we were all surprised that in the throne speech two weeks ago it wasn't set as a goal by this government.

[1655]

The vision to reduce child poverty consistently, year over year, and move B.C. from being the worst province in this country to a considerably better position wasn't stated in the throne speech. Unfortunately, measures in this self-characterized children's budget aren't going to get us there either.

I think that that is the kind of boldness that British Columbians are looking for. They want to see a government that truly recognizes the needs of children, that expresses its displeasure with the current situation around child poverty and takes a very measured, strong and passionate approach to address that situation.

Child poverty has been around a long time. At one time we were fourth. We're now tenth — dead last — in terms of that. Our position has slipped considerably over the first term of this government. You'd think that in the second term that situation would regain some urgency from this government and that we would strive to make that situation much, much better than it is today.

Other issues around children that were in this budget deal with child care and child protection. I want to mention a few things about that. First of all, I think it's a matter of public record that between 2001 and 2003 the Campbell government did its best to dismantle the system of universal, publicly accessible, quality child care that we have in this province. They ended things like the out-of-school care program. Subsidies were cut for many low-income parents. Lowered income thresholds put less money in parents' pockets to afford the costs of child care. In fact, from 2001 to 2005, in terms of total numbers in the budget, the provincial child care program was cut to \$156 million from \$198 million.

The September update did transfer over some of the new funds that the federal government promised and in fact signed into a five-year agreement with all of

the provinces. We got some of that funding back up. But now we have a different situation as of January 23. We have had a change in government federally. In most cases when an agreement is signed, and one can expect benefits from it, and that's worked out between two parties — in this case it's two governments... When somebody threatens to cancel that agreement, you would hear more than the sound of silence that we heard in British Columbia about the termination of that agreement. In fact, the Premiers....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, member. I'd just remind all members that they have to make statements from their own chair.

R. Fleming: In fact, we saw in many other provinces — Conservative and Liberal provinces.... Ontario, the Maritimes, many of the prairie provinces were saying that they fully expected the government to honour that commitment, that they had planned their child care strategies provincially on that partnership, that they expected Ottawa to honour its word and honour the signed agreement that was achieved. It was a significant achievement.

In this province we could have added our weight to that effort. We could have pushed back Ottawa and the new Prime Minister and said that this was something that was important to the Premiers then, when we negotiated it; it's important now. Yes, the government's changed, but we expect you to keep that commitment. But, unfortunately, that didn't happen — in fact, quite the opposite.

We heard ministers in this government make excuses for why the federal government would want to get out of that agreement, try and say it wouldn't make much of a difference or: "Gee, maybe we could have it both ways." But never did we have them join with the Premiers of the rest of this country and seriously say to Ottawa: "Don't you dare touch that agreement. It matters to British Columbians. It matters to B.C. parents. It's part of our plan to address the situation of child poverty. It's part of our social development plan for this province." We didn't have that.

[1700]

I want to talk a little bit about housing and homelessness, because it's something that is a serious social issue for our province. In many urban centres in this province we've seen the numbers of homeless increase dramatically over the past several years. We've heard a lot of attention about that in the lower mainland — the figures of people sleeping in the rough in the streets. Those news stories come to the forefront of the public agenda every once in a while. Unfortunately, it's usually after a homeless person dies in the winter or some terrible accident happens, but the issue of homelessness is one that is not an issue just for people who work in that sector or for social workers. I think it is one that the B.C. public at large cares deeply about. I think they

are ashamed at what is happening on the streets of our cities.

I can tell you that in Victoria it is no different. In 1999 homelessness was being talked about very, very seriously in Victoria. At that time it was estimated that we had a problem. We had about 100 individuals who slept in alleys and dumpsters, under bridges, had no home, no roof over their head.

In January 2005 I participated with a number of other community members — politicians from both sides of the House and from varying political perspectives, mayors, councillors, religious leaders in our community — to do a comprehensive count and assessment of the homeless population in Victoria, with a sound methodology from the sociology and social work department at the University of Victoria. The disturbing result was that when the count was done, the population in this city had climbed to 700. In five to six years it had increased by a multiple of seven.

Homelessness is a serious issue in my community and many communities around B.C. Unfortunately, this budget ignored it completely. There is only something like \$8 million in this budget over three years to address housing issues targeted at the homeless population. That is not going to go far in a province of this size. We're about 11 percent of the province here on the south Island, and if we're going to get 11 percent of that \$8 million, I can suggest to you that in three years' time we are not going to have made progress on the problem of homelessness in this community. It's probably going to be the same in the rest of the province.

I think the evidence of the government's ignoring the homelessness problem and the growth of homelessness over these past several years is seen in the lack of starts on housing projects that address that population. I can tell you that since 2001 in Greater Victoria there has not been one single project that has broken ground and come to completion in this community that is today housing homeless people. There certainly were many being planned in 2001, but of course, some of them were stopped. There were 1,000 beds on offer in the planning stage, approved during the previous administration, that were cancelled upon the assumption of a new government in 2001.

So I would hope at this point in time that when the Minister of Finance and other members of this government have talked about the growth rate in the province, the improvements in the treasury and bottom line, they would admit that the dismantling of B.C. Housing's Homes B.C. program and other programs dealing with at-risk populations was a mistake, and that it is time to reinvest now. If the government is not going to make that investment now, at allegedly the most prosperous fiscal period in several decades, then when?

Homelessness doesn't just affect people in terms of their quality of life on the streets of where they live in their neighbourhoods. It affects our health care system. It affects our ability to provide services in other areas. It costs us money to ignore this problem. When we've had the homeless population double in this province in

the last four years, I would think this government would recognize that and put some attention in this budget to dealing with it, but that hasn't been the case.

[1705]

I want to talk about a public safety issue — it came up in question period today — a little bit more, and that is the subject of crystal meth. I know that all 79 members of this House have a crystal meth problem in their community, a presence of that drug. It is really pervasive across B.C., and it has travelled across this country. It has travelled up the I-5 corridor. It has travelled eastward in the United States. We're probably several years behind, when we look at Washington State and California and Oregon. I know, from my former colleague Councillor Dean Fortin, who visited King County two years ago to get a tour from law enforcement officials and paramedics, that the message he came back with was: "Don't let it happen where you live. See where we're at, and do your best to head it off before it gets there."

I will say this about the budget. I think the announcement of a crystal meth secretariat is a good idea. The idea to have a cross-ministry secretariat that creates a coordinated response is a good thing, because one of the dangers we have around providing treatment and detox beds — and the shortage that we have in getting the resources that we need to come on stream to address this crisis — is, quite frankly, the health authorities. The health authorities have so many competing priorities and cross-pressures within their finite resources and budget that they simply have not been able to get to this important piece that we need in our community.

In Victoria, in fact for the entire south Island, we have five youth detox beds today. For the adult population, we have no detox beds for crystal meth. There is simply no treatment or rehab facility that will deal with people who have the psychosis elements that can accompany this addictive drug, and they refuse to treat clients with that addiction. That's the situation today.

So while I applaud the creation of a secretariat, I must point out that I and other members on this side of the House are extremely disappointed that on the treatment pillar of an effective strategy to combat crystal meth in our communities, this government has fallen down. This, again, was a missed opportunity of this budget.

I also think that the enforcement pillar of the strategy could be stronger. You know, we have to wonder why B.C. has no legislation controlling the ingredients of crystal meth that are sold in drugstores in B.C. Every other province does. I understood the Solicitor General's answer this afternoon that we focused on large, wholesale sources of ingredients. That's been an inter-provincial concern that's been addressed by the federal government.

There are new requirements, and it's been successful. Law enforcement will tell you that they have stopped that flow and that when they find labs in our communities, they aren't the superlab types. But two weeks ago there was a crystal meth lab found in a place

only minutes from this House, in James Bay. What did they find there? They found over-the-counter tabs of the ingredients of crystal meth, the ephedrine, pseudoephedrine that were used to make that product.

We've only discovered 33 labs in B.C. in two years. Law enforcement officials will tell you that there are countless others out there, to be certain. It's a matter of them getting the leads and the resources to discover and interrupt them. But the fact is that every other province but British Columbia has legislation to monitor and restrict the ingredients of crystal meth. I think that's an enforcement tool that law enforcement officials and communities should have at their disposal. I hope that the Solicitor General, as he says he is open-minded, will seek to introduce legislation based on those other jurisdictions.

[1710]

I think the other part of the crystal meth strategy that maybe bears some comment is the education part. There's \$2 million. This has been reannounced several times. I notice that it was included in this budget. That same \$2 million, presumably — I know it is, in fact, what we're talking about — is divided up by the approximately 200 municipalities that we have in this province.

I think that's fine as a start, but there's absolutely no flexibility in that program. It's a maximum \$10,000 grant to produce educational information as part of the preventative approach to the strategy. It doesn't matter whether you're Vancouver or whether you're Ashcroft. It's \$10,000 — period. I think that's lacking, and I think they could do much better on the education front in this province.

I've just talked about some things that we need to deal with in terms of enforcement and treatment around people who are already addicted to the drug. The real battle, the real part of this battle, is preventing kids from getting there in the first place.

Another comment that affects me and my constituents very significantly is public transit. Other provinces, other jurisdictions are investing in their local public transit systems. We have the Crown corporation of B.C. Transit responsible for Greater Victoria and approximately 50 other communities in B.C. Those communities and mine have been extremely concerned that for the past five years there has been a funding freeze in place. Mayors and councillors, riders and users of the service in community after community in B.C. have communicated with this government to lift that freeze. In this budget — and, in fact, in the three-year budget — the freeze is in place for three more years. That will be an eight-year freeze.

In my community there are fewer buses on the road today than there were in 1996, if members want to talk about the 1990s. It's a result of flattened funding.

Interjection.

R. Fleming: You know, mayors and councillors are actually asking the province to let them have more local gas taxes, as the member just reminded me. Thank you, by the way.

The government certainly helped themselves in 2002 to a 3½-cent-per-litre gas tax increase — no consultation whatsoever. It was put in immediately, and not a dime of that 3½ cents goes from general revenue back into public transit — not a dime.

When local governments ask, in a desperate state for funding to keep the buses they have in their yards on the road today, the minister ignores them for three years. They won't even grant the right to tax themselves, but they'll help themselves to three and a half times that — only in 2002. This provincial government is clearly in favour of raising gas taxes, because they put a 3½-cent increase on every British Columbian in this province.

Interjections.

R. Fleming: I presume that was an agonized cabinet decision that a member across the way must have voted in favour of. Surely, the cabinet minister must have voted in favour of it, because his government did it without consultation with British Columbians or communities in B.C.

Let's talk about the skills shortage in the remaining minutes, because that bears some discussion. Other members have touched on it. I want to a little bit as well. It's particularly timely for me in the community of Victoria-Hillside, because only in the last month Victoria has had two approved zones — in some cases excavated condominium or mixed commercial-residential projects — not proceed, the main reason being that the supply of skilled labour can't be secured.

Now let's look at the record of this government on trying to meet the needs of the industry and the consumers who are buying housing over the last few years. They took, in a very ideological fashion, the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Council, a system that was built up in the 1990s, revamped, modernized — we modernized our apprenticeship system and spent several years doing so — a system that was studied by Alberta and copied.... Several recommendations were taken back from our system.

[1715]

That was dismantled beginning in 2001. Funding was cut by \$10 million a year to industry training. They couldn't blow up that area of responsibility in government entirely, so they created this thing called the Industry Training Authority. They went from 100 employees down to five. I think there are two apprenticeship counsellors today in British Columbia.

Can you imagine keeping track of those students, making sure that their employers send them back to school so they actually complete? Well, it's not happening, and that's why the completion rates for trades in this province have fallen by half under the term of this government. We now graduate approximately 1,500 tradespeople a year; we used to graduate 2,500 to 3,000. We graduate half the number of apprentices each year that Alberta does. A province with 75 percent of our population graduates twice as many apprentices as we do.

The record of this government has been a failure, and this budget is not going to make up for those cuts that were made between 2001 and 2005. It's not going to increase the spaces. That's sad, because that's not going to do us any good in terms of the demand for residential and commercial construction that we have. It's going to cost this government even more when it comes to the venues that they're trying to build and the transportation infrastructure programs that have been announced. They're driving up the cost of their own projects by failing on the skills training apprenticeship file in this province.

There are some other things in post-secondary education, I think, that I want to talk about, too — a government that doubled tuition fees in three short years, that cut student grants. It now costs \$10,000 more per year for a student per degree. Nothing's been done to help students afford the cost of post-secondary education. That's going to impact the so-called 25,000 new seats in terms of recruiting, but there have been some even more petty, mean-spirited cuts than that.

When you look at adult basic education.... As a hand-up to people that are trying to get back into the workforce to build a better life for themselves, we used to allow adults who didn't have their grade 12 to come back to a community college and do that for free — to get that K-to-12 education that is an entitlement of all of us. They were able to complete that later in life, get back into the workforce and get a better job because they had completed that certification. They now have to pay thousands of dollars a year, and those tuition fees are in place.

English-as-a-second-language funding. There have been cuts to ESL training at B.C. colleges every year since 2001. None of that was replaced in this budget, and I think that's a shame.

I guess my final comments will just be on the missed opportunity on a bigger picture. A chance to show vision. A chance to show that this province is going to take the benefits of growth — international trade benefits, commodity prices, an improved treasury and fiscal outlook — and spread those benefits to all British Columbians. A chance to build a socially inclusive society. That kind of big picture has been missing from this budget and, indeed, from every budget that this government has introduced.

There are other things too. We are one jurisdiction on the edge of this continent, on the Pacific coast, that looks out at the world. We have a responsibility. We have agreements that we've signed with the world, like the Kyoto accord. This government has still not announced in any serious way a Kyoto climate change plan for B.C. I've talked about public transit earlier. That would have been a good place to start. There is still no plan to reduce emissions in B.C. and make this a compliant, leading-edge jurisdiction, and I think that's a shame. That's the kind of vision that British Columbians are looking for.

J. Yap: It's an honour and a privilege to rise and speak in support of this budget. Before I get into the

main presentation, I just wanted to point out a couple of points raised by the previous speaker, the member for Victoria-Hillside, who spoke about apprenticeships being below what they were previously. The reason that we have fewer apprentices is very simple: our economy is booming, and as soon as they can be hired, they're hired — before they complete their apprenticeships.

[1720]

That's the power of a strong economy that has given us the highest employment growth in the country, and that's something we can all be proud of.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

The other point I would like to address, mentioned by the good member for Victoria-Hillside.... He implied that our government does not care about folks who need help with housing, and he went on to talk about nothing in this budget for housing. We have heard a number of times the Minister of Housing talk about a groundbreaking strategy for housing that'll be coming imminently within the next couple of months. That's on the way.

I want to thank my constituents, the good people of Richmond-Steveston, for the opportunity to be here to represent them and to be able to be in this House and participate in the work and debates of this assembly. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and recognize a few people from my community in Richmond, people who serve in public office.

Last November there was, as we all know, a civic election, and I want to congratulate those in my community who were elected or re-elected. Specifically, my congratulations go to His Worship Mayor Malcolm Brodie on his re-election. I want to congratulate Cynthia Chen on her first-time election to Richmond city council. I also want to say a word of thanks to long-time councillor Kiichi Kumagai for his service to Richmond. Congratulations are also due to new school trustees Donna Sargent, Grace Tsang and Bobby Singh, who I'm sure will bring as much excitement to school board proceedings as he does to the football field. I also want to acknowledge the re-election of the two MPs who represent Richmond — Raymond Chan and John Cummins.

I came to this House, thanks to the people of Richmond-Steveston, to participate in great debates. Listening patiently, as I have, for the last several days to the debates, it's clear to me that at times members can get carried away with their rhetoric. It's clear to me, listening to the members on the opposition benches, that the three words that come to mind that stand for NDP are negative, defeatist, pessimist. That's all we hear from our colleagues on the opposition benches. Negative, negative, negative.

Balanced Budget 2006 is a balanced approach to meet the needs of all British Columbians. This budget forecasts a surplus of \$1.5 billion, and we should all be proud and celebrate this fact — \$1.5 billion. That is the surplus that this budget forecasts for our province. I

want to acknowledge that this didn't come easily. It was mentioned by previous speakers that this was not hard work. In fact, it was the hard work of British Columbians and the sound fiscal management and policies of our government that has brought us to the stage where our credit rating has been upgraded to one of the best in Canada, second only to Alberta as a province. Our debt-to-GDP ratio is on a declining trend.

[1725]

This budget covers many priorities that are important to all British Columbians, but it has a theme. This theme is to focus on children and youth. In total, \$421 million is being earmarked for this important area: \$72 million for social workers; a transportation allowance for foster parents; \$100 million to enhance child protection for those who are most vulnerable and for early intervention; \$34 million for phase two of the child and youth mental health plan to better help 140,000 children and youth in B.C. with mental health disorders; \$36 million to reduce wait-lists for services to children and youth with special needs and their families; \$2 million for combating further the production and use of crystal meth — on that point, I do appreciate the comments of the previous speaker, the good member for Victoria-Hillside, who was fairly complimentary for a member of the opposition on our crystal meth strategy — and \$4 million to double the school startup supplement, the first increase since 1993, to help approximately 29,000 school-aged children and families on income assistance cope with the costs of starting a new school year.

This budget also importantly focuses on skills training: \$400 million earmarked for this important area, \$90 million for increased training through a new tax credit program to be put together with input from industry. I have the privilege of being a member of the Finance and Government Services Committee, and when we were doing a prebudget consultation tour through the province, we heard this over and over again from people coming to present to us, that we needed this program, and here our government has brought it in.

There's \$39 million, a significant investment in the Industry Training Authority, to increase the number of apprenticeship training positions through public and private institutions. There's \$50 million for a natural resources and applied science endowment — a serious investment to support economic development and diversification through research in the sciences and engineering — and \$5 million for more ESL training to allow new immigrants to access the workplace more quickly. Also, \$145 million in new operating funds for post-secondary institutions so that we can achieve our goal of 25,000 new positions by 2010 in our post-secondary institutions.

This budget also introduces tax relief. All members, all British Columbians, appreciate when tax relief is provided, although you wouldn't know that hearing members of the opposition benches talk about this. There's \$733 million in tax relief announced in this budget, two-thirds to benefit individuals and about a third to benefit businesses. Of this, \$309 million is to

reduce property taxes through increases in the homeowner's grant. Also, the budget includes PST exemptions for machinery and equipment, another recommendation that came through during the prebudget consultation with the Finance and Government Services Committee. The budget also increases the PST surtax threshold on passenger vehicles to \$55,000 from \$49,000. This way, folks who need transportation in parts of the country where a truck is needed will not be penalized by this surtax.

We continue to have the lowest personal income taxes for people with lower incomes. For example, a senior couple with an income of \$34,000 now pays \$1,000 less in provincial income tax than in 2001. Another example: a family of four earning \$30,000 now pays \$1,350 less in provincial income tax than in 2001. Today most people earning \$16,000 pay no provincial income tax. This budget continues to encourage investment in British Columbia. This budget invests in infrastructure: the Gateway project for transportation needed to move goods and people, hospitals, schools, universities. For Richmond this infrastructure investment includes the Canada line, the rapid transit line, and the Olympic oval development.

[1730]

This budget also focuses on seniors. It was a theme in the budget update last September, but this budget continues to focus on health care and seniors. Members of the opposition like to remind us of the commitment to meet 5,000 new beds, and we will meet that commitment by 2008.

A couple of examples in my community: Rosewood Manor, 30 beds, under construction; the SUCCESS Austin Harris facility, 50 beds, about to break ground. I will continue to work with the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to ensure that in Richmond-Steveston we get our share of the long-term care and assisted-living beds committed to by our government.

This budget addresses, as I said, many priorities. Of course, the largest priority, the largest area of our responsibility, is health care. Many speakers before me have made comments and talked about health care on both sides of the House. It's obviously a crucial issue.

As mentioned in the throne speech, we surely need to focus on protecting our public health care system and the five principles that underpin it and add to it a sixth principle, of sustainability. That is the logical way we can ensure that we and our next generation will have a public health care system that will meet the needs of all British Columbians and all Canadians.

Public education, another priority addressed in this budget — \$112 million in additional funding in this budget on top of the increases previously announced. It's a substantial commitment to public K-to-12 education. Over a billion dollars in seismic upgrading continues to be planned for our school system.

We know that we have a great public sector with people who care a lot, who work hard on behalf of all British Columbians. In the coming months we have public sector employees seeking new contracts. Our government has made substantive commitments — \$6

billion — to ensure that we provide compensation that is fair and reasonable to our public sector employees.

B.C. is back. Through the real leadership and stewardship of the B.C. Liberal government, there is great optimism and confidence that we all feel, except perhaps members of the opposition benches. We have the 2010 Olympics and Paralympics that are just around the corner. Our economy continues to grow. Job growth for everyone who wants a job. People are moving back to B.C.

In summary, this is a great budget which will help move British Columbia forward. I'm moved to recall the saying when I was going to high school. It was the motto of the school I attended. I will paraphrase it: "For British Columbia, the best is yet to come."

Noting the time and the rules, I will end my comments here and yield the floor to the Minister of Finance to conclude the debate.

Mr. Speaker: The Minister of Finance closes debate.
[1735]

Hon. C. Taylor: I want to thank the member for Richmond-Steveston for doing such a wonderful wrap-up of the budget for me. I appreciate that, because Budget 2006 is really about our children. It's about addressing the shortage we have of skilled labour, and it's also about giving families who own houses a little bit of money back in their pocket. It's a balanced budget. It's a budget we're proud of. It's prudent. We believe that we've taken into account all of the risks that are out there as we go forward.

I move, seconded by the hon. Premier of British Columbia, that the Speaker do now leave the chair for the House to go into Committee of Supply.

[1740]

Motion approved on the following division:

YEAS — 40

Falcon	Reid	Coell
Ilich	Chong	Christensen
Richmond	Bell	Bennett
van Dongen	Roddick	Hayer

Lee	Jarvis	Whittred
Horning	Cantelon	Thorpe
Oppal	de Jong	Taylor
Bond	Hansen	Abbott
Penner	Neufeld	Coleman
Hogg	Hawkins	Krueger
Lekstrom	Mayencourt	Polak
Hawes	Yap	Bloy
MacKay	Black	McIntyre
	Rustad	

NAYS — 23

S. Simpson	Evans	Fleming
Farnworth	James	Kwan
Brar	Cubberley	Hammell
Coons	Thorne	Gentner
Fraser	Horgan	Dix
Karagianis	Ralston	Krog
Austin	Chudnovsky	Wyse
Sather		Conroy

Hon. M. de Jong: Before moving adjournment of the House, a reminder to all members that commencing Monday of next week the House will be sitting in the evenings. In addition, on Tuesday — members can get the details from myself or the Opposition House Leader — the chamber will be visited by Her Excellency the Governor General. The proceedings will be arranged, obviously, to accommodate that.

I think that's all I have for members. With that, I wish all members a safe and happy weekend and move adjournment of the House.

Hon. M. de Jong moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: This House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. Monday morning.

The House adjourned at 5:45 p.m.

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