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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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

SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2006

The House met at 2:05 p.m.

Prayers.

Introductions by Members

C. James: I have two guests to introduce to the House today. The first is a longtime family friend and one of those individuals in our province who has served her community well into her fifth term as a school trustee in Nanaimo-Ladysmith. Please welcome TerryLynn Saunders.

With TerryLynn is an international student at Malaspina University College from Shanghai, China, who is TerryLynn's homestay daughter. I would like the House to please welcome Joyce Gu.

Hon. J. van Dongen: Today it's my pleasure to introduce a special visitor in the members' gallery. We have with us Uberto Vanni d'Archirafi, the newly appointed consul general for Italy in Vancouver. This is his first official visit to Victoria, and he is accompanied by Mrs. Yolanda McKimmie, a longtime local resident assisting him here in Victoria today. I ask the House to please join me in making him very welcome.

N. Simons: I'd just like to make welcome two constituents from beautiful Gibsons in the House — Anthony and Mary Cooke. Would the House please make them welcome.

B. Lekstrom: It's my honour today to rise and introduce two special guests to the House. Joining us from my riding of Peace River South and my hometown of Dawson Creek is our newly elected mayor, His Worship Mayor Calvin Kruk. Along with Calvin is our deputy chief administrative officer Mr. John Malcolm. Will the House please make them welcome.

C. Puchmayr: It's a great pleasure today to introduce two of my mentors and two longtime residents of New Westminster. One was elected to here in 1991 and again in 1993. She was Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism and Human Rights. She was also Education Minister and Deputy Premier. Please welcome Anita Hagen and John Hagen.

R. Hawes: I have two sets of guests to introduce today. The first ones would be Anne Shannon and Linda Pipe of the B.C. Nurses Union. They were here this morning to meet with our caucus and give us a very enlightening look at life in B.C. as a nurse. Also in the gallery today are Nancy Simms and Marilyn van Dongen from the Catholic Women's League, who are also here to meet with our caucus and enlighten us.

In case members are wondering if there's a relationship between Marilyn van Dongen and an unnamed member of this House, it's a sister-in-law here to also

look over his affairs and to make sure he's behaving himself. Could we make both welcome.

Hon. T. Christensen: It's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce a number of community leaders from the Kamloops region. We have with us — and I hope the House will join me in welcoming — Chief Shane Gottfriedson and councillors George Casimir, Harry Paul Jr. and Evelyn Camille from the Kamloops Indian band, as well as band employees Gary Gottfriedson and Jenn Manuel. Would the House please join me in welcoming them here today.

[1410]

Hon. S. Bond: Today I am asking you, Mr. Speaker, and other members of the House to send a message to someone who can't actually be here in person. This past summer I was very privileged to be present at a celebration of the Skills Canada B.C. competition. We honoured the winners there, and I was so pleased to meet a young man named Chris Turner. Chris won the gold medal for CAD drafting. A very successful student, he did extremely well in his graduating class, getting the highest marks as well. Two days before Christmas, Chris was hit by a car. That resulted in a very serious medical journey for both him and his family.

I just want to read something that was shared with me about the health care system here in Victoria: "Care has been awesome at Victoria General. They are a very caring, professional bunch, especially in ICU and the head trauma unit. We can be very proud of Victoria General. Our medical system has worked for Chris, and I thank all levels of government for that."

I want you to know that today Chris has gone home. He is speaking. He has made a remarkable recovery with the care and support of not only the medical team but his parents, Jackie and Steven, and his sister. I want you to know that that family put Christmas on hold, so today I know they're going to be opening gifts and celebrating Christmas with the real gift, their son. I know you would want to, as would other members of this House, wish Chris and his family continued great recovery but, most of all, a very merry Christmas.

Hon. P. Bell: It is my pleasure today to make a number of introductions to the House. Certainly, the first one is no stranger to the political world here in British Columbia. In fact, my first recollection of this particular individual was at a UBCM conference a number of years ago, I think at Whistler. We were at a large banquet, and the question was yelled out by the comedian that was working the room: "Who is the most important person in this room?" Unabashedly, Steve Wallace stood up and said: "I am." So ladies and gentlemen, I would ask the House to make welcome a past UBCM president and certainly no stranger to the political world: Steve Wallace.

I have to say there was a second voice in the room, and we would certainly want to welcome, as well, Steve's wife Joan, who was not encouraging Steve to

get up and say that. So I'd ask the House to please make welcome Joan Wallace and also Bob Primeau from Victoria.

Hon. G. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, in the gallery behind you today, as has been the case for several days now, are ten attractive and intelligent young people. I put those adjectives on so they're not confused with the press gallery.

Seated in the gallery are the ten members of the 30th legislative internship program, and I would like the House to make them welcome. This particular class of interns is the 30th class of legislative interns. I know that because I was a graduate of the first legislative internship program some 30 years ago. I hasten to add that it is not as bad as you think, because back in those days we were drawn from the most promising grade four students around the province. So I'm not as old as one would think.

The Minister of Environment, who is also a former legislative intern, wanted to join me in this introduction. We wanted to raise it today, because on the weekend there will be probably 200 or more of the now 300 current and former legislative interns gathering in Victoria from around the province, and probably from around the world, to celebrate a 30-year reunion of what has been — I'm sure in everyone's view — a very, very successful legislative internship program.

So welcome the current interns, and let's welcome back all of the former interns as well.

[1415]

M. Farnworth: It's my pleasure to introduce a constituent of mine to this House, Peggy Eburne. Not only is she a constituent, but she is also the BCNU regional co-chair for the Simon Fraser region. I would ask the House to please make her welcome.

R. Lee: In the House today we have from my riding the family of Mr. William Lloyd Fedewa. He passed away just last week, February 16. I would like the House to make the family welcome here.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce 28 public servants seated in the gallery, who are participating in a full-day parliamentary procedure workshop offered by the Legislative Assembly. This workshop provides a firsthand opportunity for the public service to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between the work of their ministries and how that work affects this Legislature. Would the House please make them welcome.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

MEDICARE PROTECTION AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

D. Cubberley presented a bill intitled Medicare Protection Amendment Act, 2006.

D. Cubberley: I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

D. Cubberley: The province plays a pivotal role in ensuring that health care remains universal, accessible, portable, comprehensive and publicly administered, consistent with the Canada Health Act. In December 2003 Bill 92, the Medicare Protection Amendment Act, 2003, received royal assent. In the words of the former Health Minister, Bill 92 amends the Medicare Protection Act to better protect access for British Columbians to publicly funded health care. The minister also said: "These amendments will bring greater clarity to both patients and private clinic operators about billing practices for medically necessary health care services."

Bill 92 provided government with the tools necessary to protect British Columbians from any extra charges or fees in relation to medically necessary services. These tools are just as necessary today as they were in 2003. This bill, the Medicare Protection Amendment Act, 2006, if enacted, will bring Bill 92 into force because despite receiving the full endorsement of this House, the Premier of the day refused to bring the act into force. I ask all members to review and support this bill.

I move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill M201, Medicare Protection Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

L. Mayencourt: I rise today to speak about emergency preparedness in British Columbia. Events like the tsunami in Asia, Hurricane Katrina and the devastating mudslide last week in the Philippines take a toll on human life. It is important for us to be prepared for similar emergency situations.

B.C. has adopted a coordinated system known as the B.C. emergency response management system, and its focus is to save lives, protect property and preserve the province's infrastructure. This emergency program works closely with the non-profit association Emergency Preparedness for Industry and Commerce Council and with the Vancouver Board of Trade to educate businesses in downtown Vancouver. In the event of a disaster, the city of Vancouver has a plan in place. Twenty-three community centres will be used to provide emergency shelter, clothing, food and basic medical care to citizens. The city also has a new \$48 million saltwater fire protection system that will ensure that

they have adequate water for firefighting in the high-density downtown peninsula.

Emergency preparedness is a critical component of public safety, and it's especially important in Vancouver-Burrard. Through my continued advocacy work with St. Paul's Hospital I have developed a keen awareness of the need for state-of-the-art emergency services in the downtown core. With a diverse population and sometimes challenging geographic configuration, which includes a network of bridges, the scope of the service requirement is great.

[1420]

For this reason, I have been working to facilitate meetings with our provincial and neighbourhood emergency personnel to have a proactive network in place. This topic is not often at the top of people's minds, but it is vitally important that our communities are ready for any kind of emergency and that they have the resources they need to overcome any challenge.

FOREST PROFESSIONALS

B. Simpson: This week the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals is hosting its ExpoFor and 58th annual general meeting here in Victoria. The theme for this year's ExpoFor is global challenges, strategic solutions. The association is responsible for registering and regulating British Columbia's professional foresters and forest technologists.

In B.C. the practice of professional forestry has been regulated since 1947, when foresters first agreed to help protect the public's interest in the province's forests in return for the exclusive rights to practise forestry. The mandate for these professionals comes from the Foresters Act, which charges the professional forester with the duty to serve and protect the public interest in the practice of forestry.

In the interest of public safety and forest stewardship, the association recently issued a discussion paper entitled *Forest Fires in British Columbia: How Policies and Practices Lead to Increased Risk*, in which they challenged our current forest practices and pointed out that "from a fire risk standpoint, we are leaving our forests and our communities open to the potential for more severe fire damage than has ever been experienced before."

In keeping with its mandate to serve and protect the public interest, the association also wrote a strongly worded letter to the Premier in December 2004, expressing its concerns about the depth of the cuts the government made to the Forest Service and in particular about the limited resources being focused on research, inventory and forest health.

In that letter, the association made the following remark. "Forestry is a very long-term discipline involving social, economic and environmental elements and requiring science of the highest order, making it clear that forest resource management is no place for minimalist, short-term thinking."

I believe we should all congratulate the association on their efforts to encourage good forest practice and stewardship in this province, and I look forward to participating in their ExpoFor this week.

BIOENERGY

J. Rustad: In my riding of Prince George-Omineca, we're faced with an unprecedented natural disaster: a mountain pine beetle infestation that covers an area almost the size of Germany. This outbreak has created an urgent need to find new users for the enormous amount of wood fibre now available in the central interior, and that has meant increasing interest in the idea of bioenergy, producing energy by processing renewable resources like the beetle wood.

Wood waste left over when trees are milled into lumber can become an environmentally friendly energy source that can potentially replace fossil fuels. With four wood pellet plants and plans for a fifth, the Cariboo and central interior regions are leaders in this emerging field. In fact, the executive director of the Pellet Association of Canada referred to the north-central part of our province as the Saudi Arabia of the bioenergy industry.

That incredible potential is why this summer, Prince George will be hosting the 2006 BioEnergy Conference and Exhibition. This two-day event will draw bioenergy experts from across the world to northern B.C. We will see firsthand the opportunities to invest in B.C.'s bioenergy sector and help to further diversify our northern economy. I'm proud to say that with my fellow MLAs from Prince George-Mount Robson and Prince George North, we've worked closely with the organizers to help make this important conference a reality.

Our government is supporting the growth of this new industry as well. The Ministries of Environment, Forests, Agriculture, and Energy and Mines have contributed \$11,000, and B.C. Hydro is also contributing an additional \$5,000 to this important conference. In addition, the Ministers of Forests and of Agriculture will be participating. That's because they recognize and our government recognizes the enormous potential of bioenergy in northern B.C.

[1425]

B.C. WINTER GAMES

N. Simons: It gives me great pleasure to rise in the House today to recognize athletes, volunteers and organizers of B.C.'s very own Winter Games. The Summer and Winter Games, which have been held every two years since 1978, are the province's largest multi-sport events. Tomorrow the Minister of Tourism, Sport and the Arts will open the games of Greater Trail, which will feature the performances of athletes and teams from every region of this province, making it into more than a great sporting event. It'll be a celebration of the efforts, dedication and commitment that our young people have put into their sport.

Joining the athletes, of course, will be hundreds of coaches, technical officials and upwards of 2,500 volunteers — all of whom share an interest in promoting the values we all respect, including hard work, dedication and healthy competition.

For some athletes, participation in these games will serve as a crucial step in their training and development. Many of them will go on to compete at the Canada Games, and I'll predict that we'll see some of them in international competition in the not too distant future.

The B.C. Games Society is responsible for the Northern B.C. Games, the Disability Games, the B.C. Seniors Games and, of course, the Summer Games, which will be held in Kamloops in 2006. That would be this year, yes. They should be congratulated for the exemplary work that they've done to foster and encourage community leadership through sport.

I'd like to make particular mention of the host volunteer-run organizing committee, which oversees the thousands of volunteers who in turn are responsible for everything from arranging accommodation to ushering events to coordinating medal ceremonies. They all serve as an example of what we as individuals can do to strengthen our communities and to enhance our quality of life.

To all the athletes, volunteers, organizers and their families, I ask the House to join me in saying: "Have fun, do your best, and thank you."

B.C. FILM INDUSTRY

D. MacKay: I would like to say how pleased I am that our government has decided to extend the enhanced tax credits for film and video productions. The basic Film Incentive B.C. tax credit rate will remain at 30 percent for productions that begin prior to April 2008, and the basic production services tax credit will remain at 18 percent for productions that begin prior to June 2008.

You may be wondering why the MLA for Bulkley Valley-Stikine is so pleased at the continuation of the tax credit, which will keep B.C.'s film industry going strong. There is a misconception out there that the big blockbuster-type movies are only interested in filming in Victoria and Vancouver. Well, I'm here to tell you that it's not true.

Those of you who have had time to sit down and watch television over the last few weeks would have noticed commercials for a film called *Eight Below*, starring Paul Walker. It is number one on this week's box office chart and grossed nearly \$25 million in its first week. This movie was shot largely on Hudson Bay Mountain just outside of Smithers, and it had an enormous economic impact on the town. The film brought 150 crew members to Smithers and resulted in about 40 production hires and 30 security and other jobs. It is estimated that the movie injected as much as \$3 million into the local economy — a significant boost to a community of 5,500 people.

So I would like to say I strongly support the decision to maintain the enhanced tax credit because this is not something just for the major cities. It's also for Hollywood North — Smithers, B.C.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

C. Trevena: The last few weeks have given us all pause for thought as we look around the world and see

anger and hatred inflamed. People have died, riots have broken out, diplomatic missions have been emptied, flags burned, and protesters have marched through cities in Europe and the Middle East because of cartoons — cartoons which offended large sections of the population and which were published, as we know, in the European press.

I'm not going to defend or promote those cartoons. It's redundant to say that something which incites such anger is provocative. But I will always defend the right to free expression. Next week is Freedom to Read Week. It's a week where across the country, Canadians reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom — a right guaranteed under the Charter. Books will be read and issues discussed at events around the country because when it comes to freedom of expression, we can never afford to be complacent.

Our debate sometimes brings us close to banning books. We're afraid to offend. We want to be inclusive. But if we live in a society where books are banned, are we far from a society in which books are burned? Are we far from a society where there are riots, where people are killed because people do not have freedom of expression?

[1430]

We cannot be smug. Here in B.C. we have our own ongoing debate, public arguments and court battles over Little Sister's, the gay and lesbian bookstore in Vancouver, and their right to import books and magazines.

We live in a world today where governments often try to govern through paranoia, by creating a sense of fear. That fear, that paranoia, leads to censorship and to self-censorship. Democracy should be treasured. Our democracy depends on free speech, on a free press, on the freedom to read and, with it, the freedom to challenge the accepted order.

Oral Questions

TREATMENT OF SENIORS IN HEALTH CARE FACILITIES

C. James: We've heard a lot of rhetoric from the Minister of Health over the last couple days, but very few answers. Mr. Speaker, I can tell you the people of British Columbia are looking for answers. Certainly the families of Al and Fannie Albo are looking for answers.

My question is to the minister. Can he explain to the family of Al and Fannie Albo how it is possible that this government allowed Fannie, Mr. Albo's wife of 70 years, to be taken away from her community with ten minutes' notice, against his wishes, against her doctor's wishes and against the family's consent?

Hon. G. Abbott: I thank the member for her question.

I want to begin by expressing my condolences to the Albo family for the terrible situation that they have been through. I'm very sorry that the Albo family, at a time when they were obviously experiencing grief, had to deal with this quite extraordinary and, I think, most unfortunate situation as well.

I am very, very concerned about the situation that occurred in Trail. I can tell the member that the Interior Health Authority is undertaking a review of this situation to see why this unfortunate decision was taken. I can also tell the Leader of the Opposition that because of my concern around this — and frankly, I view what happened in Trail in the recent days as probably the most serious concern I have seen in my nine-month tenure as Health Minister — I have also asked my deputy minister, Penny Ballem, to review the situation as well.

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

C. James: While I appreciate the Minister of Health taking a look at this issue now, sadly, this issue should have been looked at over the last four years. We've heard over and over again from this minister and from this government that everything is fine in health care. Well, I'd suggest to the minister that perhaps he should look at his own health authority documents.

In a document that we have, dated January 3 of this year — from a senior official — the first line says: "Our hospitals are too full. We need to do something about it." This is a document from the Interior Health Authority raising the flag on January 3.

If the minister believes everything is fine, can he please explain why his own internal report for Interior Health pointed out the problems?

Hon. G. Abbott: I have never at any moment said everything is fine in the health system. The member may wish to take my words, at points, out of context. That's unfortunate, but it's something that is not unusual. While we have a very good health care system in British Columbia — one that we can be proud of and one that the Conference Board of Canada sees as the best overall health care system in the nation — I have said in this House and outside this House on many occasions that it is a health care system that needs improvement. We as a government are going to demand continuous improvement.

[1435]

What we need to do is learn from unfortunate events as occurred with Mrs. Albo. I've asked my deputy to go to Trail. She is there today. She is looking at the situation to understand what happened, why it happened and what steps we can take so that this unfortunate, unacceptable kind of situation never happens again in this province.

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

C. James: Well, in fact, we have heard this Health Minister call the opposition fearmongers for raising questions and concerns about health care. We've been told that we are scaring people in British Columbia when we raise concerns. This story proves that this

government has not been paying attention to health care over the last four years.

I'd like to quote again from the health authority document. The chair of the health authority's medical advisory panel says in this document that the number of seniors in acute care beds in interior hospitals has increased 54 percent in just two years. So how can the minister stand here with a straight face and tell us that his government has paid attention to health care issues in our province?

Hon. G. Abbott: I think the comments in respect of fearmongering were entirely appropriate in respect of the issues raised by the member for New Westminster and the member for Columbia River-Revelstoke yesterday. In both cases, as they know, the health authorities worked very closely with them to explain and to understand why that occurred.

We should remember that in this province we have gone from a health care budget, when we took office in 2001, of \$8.3 billion a year to a budget of \$11.9 billion per year under the leadership of this government. We have made enormous strides in terms of the health care system in British Columbia. We have improved. Whether it's residential care or assisted living or surgical wait times, we've made great improvement. The fact of the matter is that it's not good enough. This government demands continuous improvement in the health care system, and that's what we will continue to drive for.

K. Conroy: Let's be clear. This government started its first term separating seniors in the Interior Health Authority. Seniors in this province were promised by this government that it would never happen again. It's hard to imagine a more uncaring government that allows seniors to be separated after a lifetime together.

My question is to the Minister of Health. Can he tell us how many other seniors in health care have been moved away from their home communities?

Hon. G. Abbott: The Leader of the Opposition earlier referenced rhetoric. Here, I think, is a very good example of what is most unfortunate and destructive rhetoric.

There has never been and there will never be a policy by any government in this province to separate seniors. It was never the policy with that government. It's never been a policy of our government. Every effort is made to keep couples together. Our residential care facilities, our assisted-living facilities and in some cases even our hospitals are designed to keep couples together. Sometimes they are separated by medical necessity. When my father had a series of strokes at 80 years of age, my mother was not able to live with him in the hospital, nor would she have expected to.

Sometimes medical necessity keeps couples apart. It has never been the policy of this government or, to my knowledge, any other government to separate couples.

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

CARE BEDS FOR SENIORS
IN KOOTENAY AREA

[1440]

K. Conroy: There is a policy. The minister is misinformed. The policy is called "first available bed." That's the policy in the Kootenays that's not working.

This opposition understands that in the Kootenays alone, there have been at least four cases where seniors have been separated. Seniors have been moved hundreds of kilometres away from their home communities — over mountain passes to facilities away from their friends, their families — and have passed away within hours and days of having been moved.

It's clear that the tragic circumstances surrounding the Albo case is not an isolated incident. It's a systemic pattern. According to the IHA internal document, at the Kootenay-Boundary Regional Hospital alone — the very same hospital where Mrs. Albo was taken from — there is a 126-percent increase in the number of seniors in acute care beds.

There's a reason for that. The reason for that dramatic increase is because this government broke its promise. That is not rhetoric, Mr. Speaker. That is reality, and that is what is happening to seniors in this province. It's time that seniors were taken care of. It's time that seniors had facilities for them. There are facilities that have been closed that...

Mr. Speaker: Can the member get to her question.

K. Conroy: I'm getting to it, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

There are facilities in this province and in my community that were closed because, as the minister says, they were old and dilapidated. On behalf of the seniors in my community, will the minister admit his formula is not working — the formula of long-term care is not working, the Kootenays does not have too many beds — and will he commit to reopening Kiro Manor?

Hon. G. Abbott: The member says a number of things, and a number of them are incorrect. First of all, I want to make it very clear that the first-available-bed policy has nothing to do with separating couples — never has and never will have anything to do with separating couples.

In the unfortunate case of the Albos in Trail in recent days, I think there was a misuse of that policy. There was, I think, a very, very unfortunate error of judgment made. We need to understand why that error of judgment was made. We need to understand how we can ensure that similar kinds of errors are not made in the future.

We have — I think it's its greatest strength, but at times I suppose it's its greatest weakness — a health care system in British Columbia that involves 120,000 caring people who want to do the best for the people

they serve in the health care system. But as human beings, occasionally they make mistakes, and we try to understand. We try to learn from that. We try to improve the system for everyone.

J. Kwan: As is always the case, when there's a crisis in our community, the government blames the staff. Let us be very clear. According to the government's own internal report from the Interior Health Authority, it states there is ample evidence that we're overcrowded, that the current ALC day's rate is 22 percent higher than the benchmark established in the performance agreement of 60 days per 1,000. In the Kootenay-Boundary region, that community lost 27.6 percent of residential and assisted-living beds. They lost 29.5 percent of acute care beds, and now there is a 126-percent increase in the number of seniors in acute care beds in the Kootenays.

The report states very clearly that they have a crisis. But the report further goes on to say that there are no plans to build acute care beds in the Kootenays until the year 2014. To date, there are five families grieving the loss of their loved ones because of this government's mismanagement of the health care system.

Will the Deputy Premier back up the commitment that this government made to seniors six months ago and immediately open new residential care beds now, and will she commit to building the needed acute care beds now and not wait eight more years?

[1445]

Hon. G. Abbott: I appreciate the member raising the experience of the 1990s and the transition that was made into the 21st century. To put this matter in context, I want to quote from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. I know this is an organization that is generally more noted for being hopelessly and reflexively sycophantic in relation to the New Democratic Party, but in this case they note in a report of November 2000.... This is a direct quote from the CCPA: "Between 1993 and 1999 there was an 18-percent drop in capacity in residential care beds in B.C.... Thousands of new residential care beds are needed, and existing facilities over 30 years old require upgrades or replacements."

That is the challenge that faced our government in 2001. We have since 2001 either remediated or built some 4,900 new units, new homes, for the frail elderly in British Columbia.

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

J. Kwan: Maybe the minister might want to spend some time reading the Interior Health Authority's internal report, rather than some other report from another agency. The government's own report states very clearly....

Interjections.

J. Kwan: This might be funny for the members opposite, and it might be something that the minister can make light of. It's about people's lives, and it is a matter of life and death. Let us be clear about that.

I want to quote from the report that the minister should be reading. It states: "There are no plans to build new beds in our health authority until 2014, and we need to expect utilization targets to become increasingly tight from the Ministry of Health. Many of our seniors are not in a position to pay for private health care if the public system is not in a position to help them."

Yesterday the minister praised the Interior Health Authority. Does the minister agree with the Interior Health Authority's statement, or does he think the answer lies in Europe?

Hon. G. Abbott: I'm not going to comment with respect to a report which I have no idea whether it's dated, whether it's accurate or inaccurate. I'm glad to have a look at the report and report back to the House as to whether the suggestions contained in it are accurate. What I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, is that this government has made a greater investment in assisted living and residential care — bigger than any government ever in the history of British Columbia.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Minister of Health continues.

Hon. G. Abbott: We have invested literally hundreds of millions of dollars — I suspect close to a billion dollars now — in supportive seniors housing with home care provided, in assisted living, in residential care — probably close to a billion dollars.

I will close on this. In 2006 we will be adding an additional 2,800 net new units for the frail elderly in the province.

REVIEW OF SENIORS CARE IN HEALTH FACILITIES

M. Farnworth: The Minister of Health indicated that he sent his Deputy Minister Penny Ballem to review the situation as it relates to the Albo family. Given the fact that we've raised in this House that there are at least four other cases that have occurred, will he commit to expanding her mandate to review the situation covering those four families?

Hon. G. Abbott: I'm very happy if the hon. member, who I know is a former Minister of Health in this province.... If the official opposition would care to provide me with whatever detail they have in respect of those case files, I'd be glad to look at them. I don't know whether the content of those case files would mean that I should ask my deputy to do that. I don't know, but I'm very pleased to receive the material from the official opposition, and if it's appropriate, I certainly would ask her to look at it.

PARTICIPATION OF LES VERTESI IN HEALTH CARE RESEARCH TOUR

D. Cubberley: I wonder if the Minister of Health would confirm that the Premier's entourage for his upcoming health tour includes the Premier's brother-in-law. And can he inform the House why Dr. Les Vertesi is the sole external expert who'll be travelling with the Premier?

[1450]

Hon. G. Abbott: Dr. Vertesi is a very well-known and very, very widely respected physician in this province. He has been an emergency room physician, I think, for something like 30 years. He is remarkably experienced, has had a range of health leadership positions in this province and is the province's representative on the Canada health council. Mr. Vertesi has a number of publications which may be of interest to the members. He has done a tremendous amount in the field of health care policy, and I think he is an entirely appropriate member of the delegation that will be looking at four jurisdictions in Europe.

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

D. Cubberley: You know, it's often said that less is more. But in this case, there is more about "Les" than the minister acknowledged. Dr. Vertesi has written books. He also advocates a parallel private health care system. He believes the rich should be allowed to pay to jump the queue. "Those people who are willing to pay are taken out of the queue" — those are his words. Dr. Vertesi says: "The most threatening provision in the Canada Health Act is the one that prescribes financial penalties to provinces that allow extra billing. A mechanism for payment that's agreeable to both parties — i.e., user fees — should be allowed."

The minister says, "No user fees," but the only expert adviser the Premier takes on his tour is an overt advocate of two-tier medicine. Perhaps the minister, who's a man of nuanced opinion, could explain to us: what's up with that?

Hon. G. Abbott: I'm sure that being a member of the official opposition and a member of the New Democratic Party, the member opposite would have a terrible, frightening attitude towards any idea that was different than his own and that might want to be tested against what's going on in the world.

I don't understand, frankly, what the members opposite are so scared of. Were they offended that we didn't include Cuba on the health care tour? Is that what this is all about?

For some reason, the members opposite are completely allergic to the notion that maybe we should go out and look at what other people do elsewhere in the world. I think it's a great idea. I think Dr. Vertesi is a great addition to that group. I understand from my learned colleagues here that the member opposite is

grossly distorting Dr. Vertesi's view, but I think he'll do a great job.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. The member for Victoria-Hillside has the floor.

EMERGENCY CRISIS GRANTS FOR INCOME ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS

R. Fleming: Freedom to Read Week is next week, I think we heard earlier.

Can the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance please tell this House under what circumstances a school-age child in a family on assistance and facing hardship would be denied by his ministry an emergency crisis supplement for a new pair of shoes?

Hon. C. Richmond: I am unaware of the instance that the member talks about. If he would be so kind as to provide me with this case, then I would be happy to look into it.

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

R. Fleming: My question was about the policy of the ministry, but I am happy to ask a question about an incident in my constituency where a young girl whose mother applied over a month ago for this grant from the ministry was denied shoes. They were denied this grant even though they met all the criteria and were supported by their doctor, and even though this young girl has a history of risk for bronchial infection, which is aggravated by sitting in her classroom each day in wet, ripped shoes.

[1455]

Surely warm, serviceable, dry, practical shoes are considered a basic need in a province such as ours. Can the minister describe why his ministry is denying poor parents and their children emergency grants and flouting its own eligibility criteria?

Hon. C. Richmond: The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance provides crisis grants every day to people that are in a genuine crisis. If this meets that criteria, and it sounds like it does, then I would be happy to look into it. So I ask the member to provide me with the details, and I will sincerely look into it.

C. Trevena: I'm very pleased that the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance will look into this case, because it's not an isolated incident. I have another case where somebody was applying for a winter coat and wet-weather boots, and I could pull together a catalogue of incidents across this province where peo-

ple have routinely been denied crisis grants. So I would like to ask the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance why his staff are being given direction to deny these basic needs for grants for things such as shoes.

Hon. C. Richmond: Again, I wonder where this member gets some of her information — that I would be directing people to refuse crisis grants. Quite often when we look into crisis grants, there is a genuine need for them. When there is, we give out crisis grants. Also, quite often when we look into individual cases, there is not a need for a crisis grant. The staff make that determination, along with their supervisor, and if it's a genuine crisis, a crisis grant is given. If it's not, it isn't. If you have indeed, hon. member, a catalogue of such instances, please bring them to my office, and we will look into it.

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

C. Trevena: I do. There is a policy for granting crisis grants, and crisis grants have been cut in the last four years. In 2002 the amount of money that could be given for a crisis grant was cut. What we are seeing is that people are being routinely denied these grants and that people are making subjective decisions on whether grants should be approved or not. People are being denied money for items that are necessities of life, which have become a crisis. So I do ask the minister again why his staff are being given direction to make sure that they do not provide crisis grants at times when crisis grants are needed.

Hon. C. Richmond: The staff have not been given any such direction. We never, ever turn away anyone who is in genuine need. If someone is in need of a crisis grant, they get a crisis grant. If they're not, they don't. I should add that one of the reasons that the amount of money for crisis grants has gone down is because the number of people on income assistance has been dramatically reduced over the last four years.

GOVERNMENT ACTION ON WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

C. Puchmayr: On Monday another Canadian teenage worker was murdered while working alone in Manitoba. On January 25, a 17-year-old teenage worker was killed while working alone in Montreal. Of course, in Maple Ridge recently a young gas station attendant was killed trying to stop a theft of gas. There is also an alarming increase in violent thefts and armed robberies from gas stations and convenience stores.

My question is to the Minister of Labour. What has the minister done to ensure that workers in British Columbia are protected from these increasing incidents of workplace violence?

Hon. M. de Jong: Thanks to the member for the question. Of course, it's something we're examining on

an ongoing basis. Everyone extends, obviously, their heartfelt condolences to those people and their families that are impacted in these circumstances.

[1500]

There is a regime in place that imposes obligations on employers to ensure that risk is identified and, where that risk is identified, that a proper plan is in place to minimize that risk — whether it's an employee who is working alone or in other circumstances where risk might accrue.

We are happy to examine and are in the process of examining that to look at ways it might be improved to ensure that all of the protection that can be made available to workers is there. As I have said — to this member, I think, and to others who have expressed legitimate interest in this issue — we're happy to work with them and entertain their suggestions to ensure that we have a regime that works for all British Columbians.

Mr. Speaker: Member for New Westminster has a supplemental.

C. Puchmayr: At one time those notifications and warnings to workers were posted and were mandatory; they are no longer.

My supplementary. I will ask the minister to commit to convene a meeting with all stakeholders — including labour, law enforcement and WorkSafe B.C. — so that we can develop the standards required to stop this senseless violence in our workplace.

Hon. M. de Jong: It's because I know the member does have a legitimate concern and a legitimate interest that I understand his question is presented with the best of intentions. We do that now. There is a regime in place that does impose mandatory requirements upon employers. We are meeting on a regular basis with interested parties — whether they are from labour; from, obviously, WorkSafe B.C.; from employers groups — to determine whether there are ways we can improve those circumstances and ensure that proper protections are there.

Workers work in a variety of environments, and we have to make sure we find a balance. The way to do that is not to be reactionary to what is admittedly a tragic accident but to involve people, as the member has suggested, to ensure we refine and make sure that balance is there so that workers can be satisfied they are working in a safe environment.

[End of question period.]

Reports from Committees

Hon. M. de Jong: I have the honour to present the first report of the Special Committee of Selection for the second session of the 38th parliament. I have that report with me. I move that the report be taken as read and received.

Motion approved.

Hon. M. de Jong: I ask leave of the House to suspend the rules to permit the moving of a motion to adopt the report.

Leave granted.

Hon. M. de Jong: I move that the report be adopted.

For the information of members, the report is the result of the meeting which took place with the Committee of Selection earlier today and which assigns members their various duties on the various committees that I spoke of in the House earlier this week.

Motion approved.

Orders of the Day

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

Budget Debate

(continued)

J. Kwan: I rise to continue my remarks on the budget. Yesterday the Minister of Finance stood in this House and presented her budget to the people of British Columbia, the second effort for this Finance Minister and the seventh for this government. It is a budget built on high commodity prices and the fortunes of a volatile and unpredictable international market.

[1505]

As the minister spoke about the financial forecast, about the facts and figures that would put her government's choices in the best possible light, British Columbians were waiting for something more. They were looking for an acknowledgment that the government understands their needs. They were looking for a budget that spoke to them, that showed that the government was listening.

It was British Columbians that bore the brunt of this government's drastic cuts and increases in user fees and taxes. It was B.C. families that paid the highest price for the Liberal agenda for the last five years. They were looking for relief from the growing fees and costs that have eroded their income day by day and year by year. They were also looking for proof that this government has a plan for the future of this province.

This budget serves as a litmus test for this government's attention to the needs of British Columbians and their families. Will the government take action to correct the mistakes it has made? Will it take advantage of current opportunities to prepare for the future? Do they have a long-term strategy to bring economic benefits to all British Columbians? Unfortunately, I must say that this budget was a disappointment and a missed opportunity on all those counts.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

The Finance Minister likes to talk about how British Columbia is moving forward. Despite the govern-

ment's latest catchphrase, many ordinary British Columbians are falling behind. For five years British Columbians have been nickel-and-dimed by this government. They're paying more than ever for MSP premiums. We're now paying for eye exams, massage therapy, physiotherapy and chiropractic care — all of which are meaningful in preventative health care. Sometimes fruits and vegetables are just not enough to maintain good health and to recover from illness or injury. This government has taken these care options away from many people.

Pharmacare coverage has been cut, meaning many low-income seniors have to stretch their dollars even further just to cover basic needs. British Columbians are paying higher auto insurance premiums, and ICBC just increased their rates again. Hydro costs are on the rise. Gas prices are up. We are paying for access to our public parks and campsites. Parking fees for outdoor recreation sites are commonplace. Tuition fees have more than doubled. Debt is growing. The list goes on and on and on.

The Finance Minister brought in a massive corporate tax cut in September and now some new selective sector relief for industries, but there is nothing to make life more affordable for the average family. Over the years this government has shifted the tax burden onto the middle income and families through user fees. Here's the bottom line: British Columbians are paying more, and the fact is that they're getting less.

With a record surplus, 2006 presented this government with an opportunity to provide relief to ordinary British Columbians — relief from the growing tide of rising costs and user fees hoisted up by this government and this Premier. While the budget does contain some targeted tax incentives, the average family will not benefit.

For example, the government's new homeowner grant. The homeowner grant program will provide some relief for some families, yes, with an extra \$100 a month — sorry, extra \$100 a year. If it was a month, that would be something different. I'm sure for some, yes, that would be welcome news, but we know this government will find other ways to get that money back. What about the thousands of people right here in the capital city who are struggling with rent on a monthly basis?

British Columbians bore the brunt of this government's cuts over the last five years, and in this budget, they were looking for something practical. They were looking for some relief, and this government did not deliver.

[1510]

The Minister of Finance said this budget was about children. Clearly, it's more than that. There were steps taken to restore services for children, but there were also steps taken to repair political damage. Why did it take so long for the government to act? Why did they sit in denial for so long while children and families in our community suffered? Why didn't they make this money available in September instead of the hundreds of millions that flow to corporate tax cuts? The answer is: the pressure became too much to bear for this gov-

ernment because the opposition was doing its job and holding the government to account. It is a shame that it took so long for the government to acknowledge their negligence.

However, regardless of the intent, this is a welcome change for a ministry that has suffered at the hands of this government. Finally, the government has recognized the shortsightedness of its budget cuts. Finally, the government acknowledged that you cannot cut 23 percent from child protection — 11 percent of the entire ministry's budget — while simultaneously undergoing a massive reorganization scheme.

The experts warned the government that it could not be done, but they chose not to listen, and we have seen the tragic consequences of those choices and the damage that it has done. It should not have taken this long for this government to realize the error of its ways. For too long this government denied responsibility, and it is unfortunate that the government only acted because of political pressure from the opposition.

That being said, this government still has a long way to go to make up for the drastic cuts it has made to services for our most vulnerable. The funding announcement in this budget brings us back to — yes — 2002 funding levels, back to the place where this government had much to talk about, had much fanfare about the new era. Funding for these critical services is now brought back to when this government first took office. This is a small step forward. Something must be done, and more must be done, and I expect the government to follow through with the recommendations flowing from the ongoing child protection reviews.

Yesterday the Finance Minister stood in this House and delivered another disappointment and missed opportunity. She failed to lay out a strategic vision for the future of this province. With this budget she had an opportunity to plan for the future, but instead of bringing forward a long-term plan for B.C., she made a flurry of seemingly ad hoc spending announcements. There was no mention of the heartlands or how our communities in transition will be supported down the road.

When this government took power, they brought in reckless tax cuts that did not pay for themselves and that actually resulted in a record deficit in this province. To balance the books, they cut the heart out of our social programs and slashed services for ordinary British Columbians — child protection, trades training, education and women's centres, to name just a few. They made cuts across the board to make up for their reckless agenda, cuts that B.C. families have not forgotten because they are still feeling them today.

Now we're experiencing an economic boom, driven by high commodity prices and resource revenue. We are getting record prices for our goods on the international market. The result is a substantial surplus. What we should be doing with these funds is fuelling a long-term vision for our economy and our citizens while the cash infusion lasts. That's what the government should be thinking about. That's what a government with vision would be doing.

On the international markets what goes up will likely come down. This government has taken British Columbians on a wild roller-coaster ride with many, many painful lows, and what is the end result? A fragmented, short-sighted and uncoordinated approach to building our economy. Where is the plan in support of communities on the verge of losing their mills? Where is the plan for interior communities after the beetle wood is gone? Where is the long-term plan for managing climate change? None — that is, in this budget.

[1515]

Let's talk for a moment about trades training, an example of this government's ad hoc, short-term approach. In the throne speech the government talked about trades training as being one of its key priorities. British Columbia needs skilled workers, it said. Trades training must be expanded. We need new initiatives in trades training. This is from a government that in the last two years gutted the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission and eliminated the training assistance benefit. This from the government that cut the budget for industrial training to the bone.

The changes were supposed to reduce costs and increase efficiency. Instead, they created chaos. These cutbacks happened when the rest of Canada was bracing for a major skills shortage. In 2001 economists were predicting a shortage across all industries, in both rural and urban areas, due to a hot housing market, retiring workers and technological change. But the government didn't listen, and there was no vision.

What were the results? Completion rates are down by 40 percent. We're falling behind provinces like Alberta, which is issuing more than double the number of certificates as B.C. Wait-lists for these programs are growing, and the effects are being felt throughout our economy. Construction sites across this province are running behind schedule and over budget. Businesses can't fill key positions they need to get the job done. The fact is that this government's shortsighted approach has exacerbated the skills shortage we're experiencing in this province, a skills shortage that's fuelling the spiralling cost of construction and puts us back years — because of this government's lack of action.

The budget puts some money back into trades training, but it does not yet make up for the level of funding cuts that this government made over the last four years, and putting money into a flawed system, frankly, would not help. Now, I know that the government will say: "Well, in British Columbia the completion rates for the skills training program went down because of the hot economy." Well, funny how that is, because in Alberta they don't have that problem, and in fact they have double the completion rate of B.C. What is wrong with this picture, Madam Speaker?

The answer lies in the fact that this government did not plan ahead. The answer lies in the fact that this government took the wrong approach and mismanaged the issue around the skills shortage, and we're now set back years behind because of this government's actions.

I also want to spend some time discussing what was not in this budget. The Finance Minister calls this a children's budget. But there are a number of important pieces that were simply not there. There was virtually no mention of child care. In fact, child care is an issue on which this government and this Premier have been disturbingly silent. The agreement reached last year with the federal government is worth \$600 million to B.C. families — \$600 million for quality, affordable child care for children under six.

The Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, has said that he wants to cancel this program, and Premiers and governments across the country are fighting back, whether they are NDP governments in the Prairies, whether they are Conservative governments in the Maritimes or whether they are Liberal governments in central Canada. They are fighting back, and they are fighting to get that money in child care for their families in their respective provinces. But not here in British Columbia — not one peep from our Premier. The fact is, this government is prepared to let it slip through our fingers. If this government really did care, they would fight for that funding.

It isn't cheap for families to afford child care, make no mistake about that. For one child under the age of three, the cost — I know this firsthand — is \$1,200 a month. That's a lot of money. But we also know that investing in our children's years — the early years particularly, these early development years — is perhaps the most important money investment that any parent could make. I am so lucky that I could afford to do that for my child. I know of so many families — particularly those in my own community, Vancouver–Mount Pleasant, where we are one of the poorest communities in all of Canada — and many parents who could not afford to do that.

[1520]

You know what? Every child deserves the very best. Every child deserves the opportunity to maximize their potential, and investing in them in these early years, in good quality child care, is the way to go. It's not just me saying it. It's the books and books and reports and research that has been done.

Dr. Clyde Hertzman, who I know is a respected individual in our community and on the international stage around early child development issues, recommends investments in child care. He says that will make a difference. So why won't this government act? What are they waiting for? Are they waiting for the children to turn old and grey? Are they waiting for the children to lose those opportunities to develop? Are they waiting for the children to fall through the gaps somehow?

You know what, Madam Speaker? Pay now, or pay later. This investment is for the future of B.C., for all of us — not just for the individual children and families, but for every one of us for the future in the province.

I would also say that missing from the children's budget was any attempt to address the growing issue of child poverty in this province. B.C. has the worst child poverty rate in Canada. That happened under this Liberal government's watch. With 23.9 percent of

children living below the poverty line, measures to combat these spiralling numbers were noticeably absent. Not one mention from the Minister of Finance, who says that this budget is about children. How could that be? How could it be that the Minister of Finance didn't notice that?

Also noticeably absent was any plan to deal with the growing number of homeless in our province, which includes a growing number of children, women and seniors. The government's new landlord subsidy program will not help families living in poverty to find safe, affordable housing. Let us be clear. Again, stacks and stacks of reports have shown, and research has shown, that investing in stabilizing people's living environments will pay dividends in costs that will come back to our system — whether it be through our health care system, through our criminal justice system or in a number of ways.

Affordable housing is a stabilizing force in communities, and they make a difference. This government, under their watch.... The homelessness rate has more than doubled — and let me be clear — not just in my community in Vancouver–Mount Pleasant, not just in Vancouver, but right across the province.

The Minister of Finance says she cares about children. Well, how about making sure that their families have safe, secure, affordable housing? Rent supplements have a role to play, let us be clear. But it is not the solution to a housing program. It does not replace affordable housing. British Columbia, for so long, was one of two provinces that had an affordable housing program, as in Quebec. I cheered our governments, no matter what government, that continued in believing that stabilized housing makes a difference in people's lives. As a result of this budget and this government's action, we are now one amongst many provinces — all except for Quebec — that will no longer have new affordable housing built in the province. I am a bit embarrassed about that, but more than that, I fear for our communities. I fear for our families.

[1525]

Clearly, there are gaps in what this government is calling its children's budget — a budget that many feel is less about children and more about political damage control. I'll say this, Madam Speaker. If this government were serious about bringing in a children's budget, the first line item would have been to reinstate an independent children's commissioner for British Columbia. We did not see that.

Another item that was noticeably absent in this budget: the Finance Minister made no mention of the aftermath of the beetle epidemic. One cannot deny that the pine beetle will have a dramatic impact on the face of our province. By the time it has run its course, it is estimated 80 percent of our pine stands will disappear. That is why it is essential that we deal with the issue of forest health in this province and that we develop a long-term plan to assist communities in transition.

But this government did not come forward with a vision for the future, and there was no mention of how they intend to deal with the challenges in the coming

years. Last year the Liberal minister David Emerson denied funding to B.C. for economic diversification because the province had not put together an adequate plan. There is a new Conservative government, but the plan is still missing — and somehow David Emerson is still there. The lack of vision will be felt in communities across this province.

I think the most surprising omission in this year's budget is the area of health care. This government set a number of expectations with last year's throne speech, and British Columbians were looking to the government to provide leadership. But there were no answers or direction in this budget. There was also no movement in this government's five-year-old promise to build the 5,000 additional long-term care beds. This budget does not provide our seniors with any assurance that those beds will ever be built; 600 is all that this government has added, and after the rhetoric in the throne speech, this government failed to provide anything in the budget to back it up.

As we saw today in question period, there is a crisis going on in the Interior Health Authority. By their own admission, an internal report from the health authority states that they have overcrowding problems. I quote directly from this report — right on page 2 after the title: "Our hospitals are too full, and we need to do something about it." That's how it begins. Then in the report they further go on to talk about the challenges that they face and the problems that they're experiencing.

I don't think it was an accident that in the Kootenay–Boundary area they lost 27.6 percent of residential and assisted-living beds and 29.5 percent of acute care beds and that in the entire Interior Health Authority area they lost 15 percent of residential and assisted-living beds and they lost 24.2 percent of acute care beds.

That's what's happened under this government's watch. Yes, the Minister of Health says: "Oh, but we had to close those beds down. They were deplorable. They were awful." Well, you know what? Let me say this and say this very clearly. A prudent government — a responsible government, a government that manages well — would have made sure that there were replacements in place...

An Hon. Member: And your government?

Deputy Speaker: Order.

J. Kwan: ...before they closed those beds. The other thing.... Let me say this. Kiro Manor, an 86-bed facility in Trail, and Mater Mis, a 41-bed facility in Rossland, were shut down in 2001. When the government shut those beds down — shut those facilities down — the communities were in an uproar. In fact, a member of the Albo family wrote and begged the government to keep those facilities open because she knew that people in her community needed it. She knew that seniors needed it, and she knew that her parents needed it.

[1530]

The government did not even stop to take a moment to consider the needs of the communities, and

instead just shut those beds down. We now have a situation where there is a 125-percent increase for acute care beds in the Interior Health Authority. Why is that? Oh, is it because the residential care beds were not available for these seniors to go into? Could that be part of the answer? Maybe the Minister of Health can figure that out without going to Europe. The health authority says: "There are no plans to build new beds in the health authority until 2014, and we expect utilization targets to become increasingly tight from the Ministry of Health."

It is time for this government to wake up. It is time for this government to be accountable to the people in the Interior Health Authority. It is time for this government to respond to the crisis that they have created in health care for seniors and families. It is time for this government to fully fund and open those facilities of acute care beds and residential care beds that this government closed in 2003.

I just want to quote one other item from this report, which was touched on today in question period. I know that the government thinks that the answer lies somewhere else. They think that Europe will provide them all the answers to the problems in our health care system. But let me say this. Let me quote the Interior Health Authority in their own report: "Many of our citizens are not in the position to pay for private health care if the public system is not in a position to help them."

The minister, when I asked him the question on whether or not he agreed with the Interior Health Authority on this statement, did not answer the question. He made light of it. He pontificated. He went everywhere else except for providing an answer that people in the Interior Health Authority expect to receive.

I venture to say that the answer that the community is looking for is not in Europe. The answer is here at home. The answer that people are waiting for is for the government to make good on their commitment to build the 5,000 long-term care beds that they said they would and to reopen the existing facilities that provide a service in those communities and to those families.

The government said in the September budget that it was a seniors budget. The Minister of Finance says it's a seniors budget because seniors are their number-one priority. Well, now we're seeing what's happening with seniors. We're seeing how this government is treating seniors. Families grieving the loss of loved ones with no action from the government and no commitment from the government that they will actually ensure those beds and facilities are in place....

This Minister of Finance said yesterday that this is a children's budget. Now, I've got to say, I have very little faith, very little faith indeed, that this government will deliver on what they say they will. The most scary thing about all of that is that I know if the government does not do its job and manage its responsibility well — that's been put to them, entrusted to them by British Columbians — that people in our communities will suffer, that chaos in ministries like the Ministry of Children and Family Development will hurt families. It will hurt children.

When the government wakes up to political pressure, then it's too late for many of the families who've already lost the fight and the battle. That's what I'm afraid of.

[1535]

How could this government, given their record to date, ask British Columbians to trust them when they have put out two budgets with this new Minister of Finance who says, "I care about seniors," and this is how they are treating them? They say: "Trust us with children." Given the record of the past four years, I don't know how it is that we could trust them.

The reach of a successful government budget should exceed its grasp, to be something more than the invisible hand described by economist Adam Smith. Such a plan more resembles, in my view, an invisible handshake than an invisible hand. That's the social contract with individual taxpayers. It should be evaluated in real-world terms: impact on the lives of everyday people.

Under this government's leadership the Liberals have forsaken the social contract. We have seen transformative changes where the Liberals have not honoured their handshake with women, the poor, the homeless, aboriginal peoples, workers and children. Our socioeconomic report card has been abysmal, and the province has been condemned by the United Nations not once, not twice, not three times but four.

In 2002 the B.C. Liberal referendum on treaty rights brought them to the attention of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This government forged ahead to have minority rights voted on by the majority, and the UN condemned this government on that action. In March 2003 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women reprimanded the B.C. government for not meeting its obligations under human rights laws. In the same month the UN chastised the B.C. Liberals for their treatment of unions and how they treated labour.

Moreover, the U.S. group the Human Rights Watch criticized the treatment of people with addictions in the downtown east side of Vancouver. That's the record of this government: judgments passed by international bodies on how this government dealt with the citizens of British Columbia and how they breached the social contract that was signed with British Columbians.

We need to examine evidence and not just rhetoric when we examine our economic position in B.C. Let us be clear. Homelessness has more than doubled under the Liberal watch. Vancouver has become one of the most unaffordable cities to live in, in Canada, and we have, as I mentioned, the highest rate of child poverty, and we have chaos in the Ministry of Children and Family Development with respect to child protection.

Classrooms are overcrowded. I looked at this budget to see what the government learned around education issues. That became a major, major issue in the last session. The government, the Premier, set up a round table. I thought that — I don't know why I thought that — in this budget the Minister of Finance would have made sure that there was a plan and a strategy to address class size and class composition.

The Liberals, I know.... You will hear that they will say: "But there was an increase in the education budget." I just read in the newspapers today that the Minister of Finance says there's ample money for our education system. Well, let us be clear. All the lift will do is allow for the system to stay at status quo with increasing costs. That's all that it will do.

It will not improve class size. It would not improve class composition, and it would not provide the kind of support that is necessary to support our children in their learning environment and our educators in their teaching environment. That's what this government is doing.

[1540]

So the government says the answer, of course, to our health care system is that we should redefine the Canada Health Act. We should add another category to it called sustainability. What this government is doing is formally institutionalizing a two-tier health care system. That's what this government is doing, all under the guise of sustainability. And you know, as sure as the sun sets and rises, economies will boom, and they will bust one day, and government budgets need to account for both parts of this inevitable cycle. Budgets based on boom alone will eventually shake the foundations of family life: a home, a secure job, a regular income, the ability to provide for the family.

Under the Liberals, British Columbians are getting budgets that achieve time-limited economic stability, if that. But they do not make, this government, any long-term social and fiscal investments. The Liberals are stripping the social and capital assets of British Columbia.

The public-private partnerships. While fine in theory, we've seen what's happening with — I'll just name one example — B.C. Rail. We see derailments, we see problems in the community, and this government plowed ahead and sold our asset — an asset that belonged to every British Columbian for perpetuity. But you know what? This government plows ahead with public-private partnerships. And you know what? The people who have to pay the price at the end of the day are British Columbians.

Let us be clear. The Liberal government's balance sheet will look good this year, but when our children are grown, health care and education will be privatized, and the children's children will pay the tolls on everything from eye examination to roadways. What we need to do is to invest in ways that raise the living standard of the vast majority of taxpayers and to eliminate the threat of extreme poverty as part of this plan.

That's what an NDP government will do. Let us be clear about that. We would invest in people in the spring of life — our most important resource: children — not because of political pressure but because it's the right thing to do. We will invest in those in the autumn of life, the seniors who have built this province through their taxes, through their hard work and their maintenance of strong Canadian values — seniors who have earned their right to proper support in their golden years. That's what they expect, and that's what they deserve.

The NDP understands the importance of including people in the shadows of life. Pay now, or pay later. Social housing is a stabilizing force in our communities, women's centres are safe havens, and legal aid means access to justice. As a society, we are only as strong as our weakest link.

The seventh budget of the B.C. Liberals is no exception, with its impacts that will be everlasting. The Liberals talk about the economy as if it were some faceless entity. The economy is comprised of everyday people — you and me — and you know what? We deserve better from this government.

In closing, I must again express my disappointment with this year's budget. British Columbians — I think many of them — are disappointed as well. They were expecting more from this budget. They were looking for something more practical, something long-lasting. They were looking for relief, and they were looking for a vision. They were looking for this government to address the challenges facing ordinary working families in B.C.

This budget failed them on all those counts. With this budget, the Finance Minister missed a key opportunity to create a vision for British Columbia where everyone — everyone — shares in the province's prosperity, and it is ordinary British Columbians who will pay the price.

[1545]

Hon. J. Les: I appreciate the opportunity to reply in response to the budget that was presented by the Finance Minister yesterday. I couldn't help but listen with some interest to the remarks of the member for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant this afternoon. I cast my mind back in time — I think it was 1998 — to when she, in fact, was the Minister of Municipal Affairs. I was a member of the executive of the Union of B.C. Municipalities.

We were, frankly, being ripped off by the then provincial NDP government. The last of our unconditional grants were disappearing. Hundreds of millions of dollars were being ripped away from communities right across this province. Today I hear that same member saying she feels for the communities in British Columbia. What rank hypocrisy.

As a matter of fact, at the time we were so concerned that — along with John Ranta, the president of UBCM at the time and the mayor of Cache Creek; the mayor of Fort St. John, Steve Thorlakson; and me — we went to visit with the then Minister of Municipal Affairs, the member for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant. We also went to visit with the Premier. I think it was the shortest meeting that I ever had in the city of Victoria.

An Hon. Member: Who was the Premier?

Hon. J. Les: My colleague asks: who was the Premier? The Premier was Glen Clark.

It was very clear that there was absolutely no sympathy to be had. As a matter of fact, that was the same Glen Clark who — along with Tom Gunton, the then

Deputy Minister of Finance — in 1992, I guess, gave us all a foreshadowing of what was to come. He announced at the hotel, Delta Town and Country Inn, where he called us all together: "I want you all to know that there is tax room available at the local municipal level in British Columbia."

Boy, did we live that nightmare for the next ten years. They plucked us until we were completely done. There was not a dollar of provincial support that went to communities in British Columbia. That was the sorry mess that we inherited in 2001.

To listen to the member opposite describe what she envisions for British Columbia today, you would have thought that in 2001 we would have inherited some kind of utopia. But no, in 2001 we inherited a provincial economy that was dead last in Canada, absolutely dead last.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, members.

Hon. J. Les: Madam Speaker, I was born and raised in British Columbia. I had always been extremely proud, as a British Columbian, to know that we were the leading province in Canada. Regardless of what category of achievement you wanted to look at and examine, British Columbia usually came out on top.

What a terrible disappointment, as a native British Columbian, to know that in 2001 we had arrived at that place where we were dead last in pretty much every category you could measure. As a matter of fact, we had become what was known as a have-not province. We were receiving transfer payments from the other provinces in Canada. Workers in British Columbia were having to leave the province to find jobs. That was a complete reversal, the likes of which we had never seen in this province. We were exporting workers. Thankfully, that has reversed.

Today, when we look back at what has transpired in the last five years, I can truly say what a difference, thankfully, five years has made. In 2001, when we became government in the province, what did we see as the legacy of ten years of socialist NDP government in British Columbia? Well, there's really only one signature achievement that I can think of that was left by that government, and that was three useless boats tied up at the waterfront in North Vancouver. That was the signature achievement of that government: another half a billion dollars blown away — nothing to show for it.

On the fifth of June, 2001, when this government came to office, we had a very serious challenge that we needed to undertake. Frankly, when I look back, the next day, the sixth of June, 2001, was indeed a very important day in the history of the province. It was on that day that we instituted the largest tax cut ever in the history of British Columbia.

[1550]

That was the day when we gave the province and the people of this province the opportunity to become

competitive again. That was the day when we signalled clearly to the world that we were open to investment again. That was the day that we decided to leave as much money as possible in the pockets of British Columbians.

Over the next several years, predictably, we listened to the litany from members opposite who said: "Tax cuts don't work." Well, I think it's now clear that the tax cuts that were instituted then clearly have done what we set out to do with them. We have watched as the economy of British Columbia has moved forward in a way that, frankly, some days even surprises me. It is clear that when you give people the opportunity, the incentives, and get government out of the way, people will invest. They will find ways to innovate, and they will find ways to grow their own personal employment prospects in a way that governments often cannot imagine.

Today our provincial economy in British Columbia has gone from what was a last-place economy in 2001 to a first-place economy today in 2006. I think that is a remarkable achievement, and it is a remarkable credit to all of the residents of British Columbia. We have an economy today that has the lowest unemployment rate in a generation in British Columbia — the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years.

You know, Madam Speaker, members opposite love to talk about various programs to help people who are in need. Yes, they are very, very important, but there is one thing that is fundamentally important to people as they live their lives in British Columbia or anywhere else, and that is a good, well-paying job. Today we have those in abundance. We are the province in Canada that is creating more jobs than anywhere else.

What a profound thing when the Finance Minister yesterday said that in the next 12 years we are going to generate, it is projected, another one million jobs in British Columbia. That's very significant. It's even more significant when you recognize that that's a job for every graduate coming out of our school system in British Columbia over that 12-year period of time, with 350,000 jobs left over.

Just think about the impact of that. That means we are going to have to bring in 350,000 people to take over the leftover jobs. Those 350,000 people are going to move into British Columbia over that 12-year period of time. They are going to bring others with them, obviously. The only conclusion I can come to is that if that projection is anywhere near correct, we today truly are standing on the threshold of a golden decade here in British Columbia.

It was with tremendous excitement that I listened yesterday to the Finance Minister lay out the budget for the next fiscal year in British Columbia. Of course, as we have become accustomed to, we not only have a one-year plan, but we have a three-year fiscal plan. It's very important to be able to plan in a longer time frame so that you tend to minimize the surprises as we move forward.

As I've already said — as opposed to the litany that we've heard for so long that tax cuts don't pay — as a

matter of fact, the revenues of the province continue strong. In the '05-06 fiscal year, for example, revenues of the province are actually up almost 7 percent. I think it's clear evidence that the tax cuts have done exactly what we set them out to do.

As we look at the budget in more detail, we clearly know and understand that the Finance Minister — appropriately, I think — set out in this particular budget to ensure that we provided more services to children in particular and that we also paid particular attention to jobs and skills training. With the expanding economy that we have in British Columbia, obviously, there is a need for skills training.

[1555]

We are, frankly, going to have to do the very best we can to train people that are living here in British Columbia. We're also, of course, going to turn our attention to bringing in skilled tradespeople, moving forward.

I just wanted to cover for a few minutes some of the areas in which we are going to be investing more capital in the year ahead. I look at such areas, for example, as the \$72 million that we are going to be providing to add more social workers and other front-line staff across the province, to improve support for grandparents and other relatives who look after children and to increase transportation allowances for foster parents by 50 percent.

It's important to point this out: this is the first increase in ten years in British Columbia. Members opposite sometimes would love to leave the impression that right up until June 4, 2001, they were busy increasing allocations to all of these programs, but as we discover over and over again, many times it is the case that during the '90s not much, if anything, happened at all. I think that \$72 million increased investment is indeed very, very important.

It gives families and parents many more options across the province. When you're talking about child care, for example, it is not necessarily at all the case that there should be a one-size-fits-all option. I personally am a great proponent of opportunities and options. Give people some options. A government-dictated, one-size-fits-all solution is not necessarily what people are looking for at all.

We're also investing an additional \$100 million in this year's budget to enhance child protection in the province. It's particularly for early intervention services so that the well-being of children can be assured, not only in communities but also in their families.

Another \$34 million of increased funding is for phase two of the child and youth mental health plan. I think that's extremely important. Obviously, there are issues that need to be dealt with across the province, and I am proud that I am part of a government that actually pays attention to these areas. This is in marked contrast to the previous NDP government, which announced a mental health plan but had no intention of ever paying for it and, in fact, provided no funding for it whatsoever.

We are also providing an investment of an additional \$36 million to reduce wait-lists for services to

children and youth with special needs and their families. Again, as we know, it's a reality that many children — and this has always been the case — have special needs. It's especially important to pay attention to those special needs early in life so that as these children go on into schools that they don't start off way behind the eight ball but can take advantage of those educational opportunities along with all of the other children.

There's also, over three years, another \$112 million for K-to-12 education in British Columbia. I just wanted to point that out for a moment, because you will hear from members opposite that we're not doing much for K-to-12 education across British Columbia. I'm here to tell you that in fact every year we have been in government, there has been increased funding for education in British Columbia. That is in spite of a reduction of about 6,000 students every year in K-to-12 across the province.

What we find this year is that the funding per student in K-to-12 is some \$7,340 per year — the highest it's ever been. I think if you compare that figure historically over the last ten years or so, you will find that it is increasing quite remarkably, consistent with our mission to ensure that K-to-12 students in British Columbia get the very best education that they can possibly receive.

The Learning Round Table that has been instituted by the Premier, in conjunction with the Minister of Education, I think is a terrific opportunity for educators and everyone involved in the education system in British Columbia to sit down together, examine some of the concerns around the education system and work them out in a collaborative and cooperative way. Frankly, I'm hoping that that process will sort out some of the things that are challenges. There is no question that there are challenges in the education system. There always have been challenges. Hopefully, we can work them out in a collective and collaborative way.

[1600]

Skills and training I've already mentioned briefly, but it is important that we pay particular attention to this area. We know that with the one million additional jobs that are going to be made available as a result of the expansion in the economy, we are going to have to ensure that we have the trained people who can take up those jobs. The expanded uptake in trades training that the Minister of Finance talked about yesterday is remarkable, and the increased investment that is going into trades training is a very enlightened and responsible response by our government to ensure that those opportunities are there for our young people.

There is \$17 million for computer training and the creation of computer access centres in first nations communities — again, a terrific example of how our government is making opportunities available to all communities across British Columbia and ensuring that no community is being left behind. It is particularly in first nations communities that more must be done to ensure that all British Columbians get to participate in the expansion of the economy.

I have travelled across British Columbia many times over the years, and in the last couple of years

particularly, it is clear that there are economic opportunities available everywhere. Our challenge is to ensure that the residents of those communities, particularly in the interior and in the north, have the educational tools they will require to build up that skill and knowledge base. Today, happily, with Internet capability across the province, we can make those opportunities available to children in every part of the province.

It's also important to recognize that we're putting another \$145 million into post-secondary education. I bring that up because that is particularly relevant to my riding and to the Fraser Valley. The University College of the Fraser Valley is going through an expansion phase where over the next several years, by the year 2010, they will in fact be adding 1,700 spaces to that institution. Those 1,700 spaces are part of the 25,000 additional post-secondary education spaces that are being added to the post-secondary system by our government — again, a huge step forward for the province.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

Think about it: 25,000 post-secondary education spaces being made available by 2010. That's like adding another UBC to the post-secondary landscape in British Columbia. That is huge, and I think it needs to be recognized. As I said, 1,700 of those spaces are coming to the University College of the Fraser Valley. That is happily coincidental with the fact that the Chilliwack campus of the University College of the Fraser Valley will be moving to property that the university college is acquiring, as we speak, at the former Canadian Forces Base Chilliwack. The 85 acres in what is already a campus-like setting offers amazing new opportunities for that institution in its development not only at the Chilliwack campus but at the other major campus, which is in Abbotsford.

I'm looking forward to working with my colleague the Minister of Advanced Education to make sure that the University College of the Fraser Valley not only does that expansion well but also moves forward to a different type of recognition. We have met with community leaders over the last several weeks, and they are clearly desirous of the university college becoming known as a university as opposed to a university college. We're going to be working with them to ensure not only that we achieve that but that we achieve it in a way that is a real credit to the Fraser Valley and to the overall structure of the post-secondary education system across British Columbia.

There are other investments that are being made in post-secondary education in British Columbia. I'll just mention a few of them because I think they are extremely important. There is an additional \$45 million going to Genome B.C., and there is \$70 million going to the Michael Smith Foundation, \$4 million in research funding for a cancer chair at the Canadian Cancer Society and \$15 million for the Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation.

[1605]

I point those out because it is important to recognize that students and researchers and academics in

British Columbia have done amazing work in those areas, particularly in cancer research and training.

It is, frankly, the case that if you're going to develop cancer as an individual, there are few, if any, places on earth where you could better be than right here in British Columbia. The work that is being done not only in our university institutions but also in our cancer clinics in British Columbia is second to none. It's never pleasant for anyone, obviously, to be faced with that challenge in their lives, but it is at least some small comfort to know that here in British Columbia you will receive the very best in treatment. Our government is here to ensure that those institutions which are doing this great work have the resources available to continue that great work, so that we can continue to be leading-edge, so that we can continue to lead the world right here in British Columbia.

Another important aspect in terms of yesterday's budget was the increase in the homeowner's grant. It has been at its current levels since 1993, and it is being increased by \$100, which is, first of all, an important recognition of the importance of home-ownership. This is an important contribution to the affordability of home-ownership.

I want to express a note of caution here. As I've already pointed out this afternoon, I used to live a different political life as a mayor here in British Columbia in the community of Chilliwack. I hope that later on this spring we don't hear of any municipal councils across British Columbia taking advantage of this increase in the homeowner grant. It is important, I think, that it be stated that the intention is that this benefit should flow through to homeowners. It is not there to be provided as room for municipal councils to add an additional property tax increase this year and to use the \$100 homeowner grant increase as a way to shelter that. I would ask British Columbians across this province to be particularly mindful of that this year, because the intention is that that \$100 should end up in the pockets of British Columbians and not in the coffers of city hall.

It's also important to know that British Columbians — when it comes to income taxes, for example, and taxes of all types — are better off in British Columbia than they would be in every other province in Canada. It is the case that on the first \$85,000 of income British Columbians pay fewer taxes than similar residents in other provinces of Canada.

We have seen significant tax reductions for individuals and families over the last five years in British Columbia. A senior couple with an income of \$30,000, for example, today pays \$1,000 less in provincial taxes than they did in 2001. A family of four earning \$30,000 now pays \$1,350 less in provincial tax than they did in 2001. We have paid particular attention to ensure that British Columbians with the fewest resources actually got the most benefit in terms of the economic measures that we have undertaken in British Columbia over the last four years.

When I look at the budget that was tabled yesterday, I see a budget that enables British Columbians to move forward with confidence, knowing that in the

future an economy is being built in British Columbia that is sound, that is based on solid and well-thought-out economic principles. It is an economy that can give confidence to people. It is an economy that is investing in the right places — in the appropriate social services, in education and in many of those other areas that are important to British Columbians.

[1610]

I think that British Columbians, from top to bottom and across this province, will recognize this budget as they have recognized the six budgets prior to this one as an important component of building the future of British Columbia, ensuring our future as we move forward. When we look to the future and all of the possibilities that we have in this province with our magnificent natural resources — which, frankly, are being exploited again today — it's great to see the massive increase in mining and mineral exploration that we have seen in the last four years.

When we look at the opportunities that are presented to us by the fact that we were awarded the 2010 Olympics, when we look at the opportunities that are being presented to us simply by virtue of being located on the west coast of Canada, on the west coast of North America, and with the economies of India and China — to mention just two — emerging as they are, we are potentially the gateway to all of that economic activity that will flow from there as well. We have important decisions to make with respect to that. I know my colleague the Minister of Transportation is very much alive to that and is bringing forward a well-considered program of infrastructure expansion so that we will be able to take advantage of all of those opportunities.

We know that our federal government — its work has been ongoing for some time — is in the process of negotiating status with China, whereby people from China will be able to travel freely to our country. We have to know in British Columbia that that will mean there will be a huge increase of tourists coming from China to visit our country, particularly so because there is almost going to be a bond created between our two countries.

We know that in 2010 we are hosting the Olympics. But we also know that in 2008, only two years before that, China — or Beijing, more particularly — will be hosting the Summer Olympics. So we will be part of one Olympic family. I don't think that's a bad alignment of opportunity, and I think it is going to tend to cement ties and relationships between our two countries that are going to be extremely economically beneficial.

I think that if we continue to invest as we have in our young people, in our education systems as we continue to create the best health care system in Canada — which, thankfully, we have achieved today.... And that's not us saying so; that is the Conference Board of Canada saying so. We actually have the best health care system in Canada today right here in British Columbia. I think that if we continue to invest in those areas, we truly will build an economy that is sustainable or, as I sometimes put it, an economy that has legs.

It is not only important to create an economy for today; it is important to create an economy that will endure. As an individual member of this House, I always see it as my duty and my responsibility to be part of a government that leaves a long and lasting legacy, a long-lasting and enduring economy upon which people can be confident and where people can continue to invest and create opportunities for generations to come.

With that, Madam Speaker, I want to thank members of the House for putting up with my words this afternoon.

Deputy Speaker: The member for Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain.

[Applause.]

M. Farnworth: I thank the member for Kamloops-North Thompson...

K. Krueger: Always a fan.

M. Farnworth: Always a fan.

...because I have got to say that I don't know where to begin, whether to laugh or cry at some of the remarks I have heard from the other side.

The first thing I can think of is that.... I mean, I have heard of Kool-Aid drinkers, but my advice to some of the members on the other side, who are clearly into Kool-Aid drinking, is: at least add water to the crystals before you get up and speak. We have heard some of the most outrageous, outlandish, unbelievable Kool-Aid-drinking statements I have heard in a long time.

Okay. Yeah, the economy's going good. No one disputes that. But to listen to some of the members on the other side of the House, it's because on June 5 they were sworn into office, and suddenly the economy just took off because of their efforts and their activities.

[1615]

They like to talk about long-term economic performance and economic managers, yet there seems to be no recognition that what's really pushing the economy forward here in British Columbia, in every other province in this country and in most of the rest of the industrialized world has been low interest rates and the huge demand for natural resources.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: The member says we're number one.

Perhaps I'd remind him of the Conference Board of Canada, which he liked to quote a few moments ago, which says that in the coming year Newfoundland and Labrador will be number one. I wonder if he can explain why it is that we have slipped to number two or three with Alberta?

The fact of the matter is that it's commodity prices and low interest rates that by and large have driven the

economy over the last few years. When copper is at 85 cents a pound, it stays in the ground. When copper's at over two bucks a pound, people go and dig it up. They go looking for it. When oil is at 11 bucks a barrel, people don't look for it. When it's at 60 bucks a barrel or \$70 a barrel, people go out and look for it, and government revenues increase.

That happens not just here in British Columbia but in every other resource province in this country. It comes from the demand from consumers and customers — in this case China, which has embarked on a dramatic effort to bring its economy forward and where there's a huge demand for resources.

That's what's driving the economy: low interest rates. When interest rates are at 4.5 percent or 5 percent, people go out and buy houses. That's a fact of life. When interest rates are at 8 percent or 12 percent, house sales tumble. In fact, there is a direct relationship between housing starts and housing sales and interest rates. It's that simple. It has nothing to do with government policy in terms of whether or not people are going out buying houses. So let's deal with that one right away.

The other comment that struck me — and I've got to come back to the Conference Board comments that were made by my friend across the way — was that the Conference Board of Canada rates British Columbia's health care system as the best in the country. I'd just like to remind him, in case he doesn't know, that it was that way through the '90s as well — the best health care system in the country and the best place in terms of Canada, if you had cancer, to get treatment. That's not something that's changed because of the actions of this government.

What we need to look at is: where do we go from here? This is a government right now that is celebrating large revenue surpluses due to resource extraction and an increase in global commodities. But the question is what...?

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Excuse me. Members, let's listen to each other.

M. Farnworth: I know the enthusiasm, and I know some of the members opposite are waiting to hear my next few comments, but before I give them that pleasure, I would like to yield the floor to the member for Burquitlam, who I believe has a request of you, hon. Speaker.

[1620]

H. Bloy: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

H. Bloy: It's a great pleasure for me to introduce three people. They're from the Japanese community in

Vancouver, and they represent the language school. For the Japanese in Vancouver, it is their 100th anniversary this year. They were here meeting with some of the ministers and were looking to see how we can assist them.

In the gallery we have Mari Honma, Motohisa Niiro and Richard Yagi. I would ask the House to please join me in making them welcome today.

Debate Continued

M. Farnworth: I am picking up where I left off.

I know that some of the comments I'm making... Some of the members like to shout across the aisle. I don't mind that because I guess it means that I'm touching a nerve, that they're listening, and that's always a good thing.

What I want to talk about — the point I was trying to make — is that right now we are in the midst of a revenue boom from resource extraction, and there are some fundamental, long-term questions that the government has to address that are not yet addressed.

What happens to our economy? What is our long-term plan when resource commodity prices decline or are static and the resources and those surpluses aren't there? What's their long-term strategy in terms of dealing with pine beetle when that wood has been logged out and those communities don't have that wood to harvest? What's their long-term strategy after 2010 on the Olympics, on which they have put so much and pinned so much hope in terms of stimulating and providing economic development to British Columbia? What's their plan after that? We haven't seen that, so in the days and weeks ahead, in terms of the estimates process, we are going to be asking those questions.

What is their long-term economic plan? What's their long-term vision to steer British Columbia's economy through the fact that resource prices don't always stay high and the demand is not always there? And if interest rates rise and housing construction starts go down, what then? Where do we go from here? I think that's something this government has to tell, to let the people of British Columbia know what their thinking is, as opposed to standing up and patting themselves on the back and saying: "My, aren't we wonderful because of the boom in global commodity prices and low interest rates?"

This brings me to the budget and to some of the comments that have been made around the budget. Much has been made by this government that this is a budget for children, that the last budget was a budget for seniors. Well, I only hope that the coming year, in terms of children and families, is a lot better than it was for seniors in British Columbia through the last years from a so-called seniors budget, because what we're seeing in terms of seniors and health care is not what seniors expected. It's not what they expect. There's not much in this budget for seniors.

Children and Families does see a dramatic increase. It still doesn't make up for all of the cuts that were taking place over the last four years by this government.

In fact, the only reason the increase is here to the extent that it is, is because of the work of this opposition in pressing the issue around Children and Families and what was happening in that ministry day after day after day in last fall's session and the public demanding answers to questions which the government was not forthcoming with. Instead, we have to wait for inquiry after inquiry after inquiry to try and start to reconstruct and to correct those mistakes that were made because of budgetary cuts by this government that impacted directly on children and families in British Columbia.

[1625]

It was the work of the opposition that led to the increase in that budget. It is important that that money be restored, and I am happy to see it in the budget. It's just unfortunate that it took the circumstances it did to get it back. We will be watching very closely over the coming months to ensure that what money is there will, in fact, see the implementation of recommendations that are forthcoming in the reviews, which will, I'm sure, be discussed later this session.

Much is made by the government benches around education — that somehow everything is wonderful, that everything is fine, that we keep putting more money in and that we spent more than we spent last year, so of course education is properly funded.

Well, if you talk to school districts, you'll find that yes, they've added more money, but more often than not it was not to fund salary increases. It wasn't to fund the dramatic costs that have occurred to school districts due to such things as rising natural gas prices and health care premiums — all those sorts of things that force them to make choices and that resulted in difficult situations for many school districts in their ability to provide class sizes for students that are where they should be. There are some 9,000 classrooms in British Columbia right now that are above the recommended class sizes. We need to see that changed. That needs to be changed, and hopefully, over the next several months we'll be able to prod the government into doing that.

The government also likes to forget that when they say, "Oh, well, we added more money this year," we say: "Yeah, you did add more money than last year. But guess what. There's a thing called inflation." If all you did was give the same money as you gave last year, you're in fact giving a cut.

I don't know why they keep patting themselves on the back and saying, "Well, we added more money than last year," as though it's some sort of panacea. When looking at the budget, the question is and you have to look at: what are the inflationary pressures are on that budget? What does it cost to deliver the services at either the same level as last year or, as we hope to see, with constant improvements? That's what we'll be looking for in this budget — to see that that takes place. We'll be exploring that further in the estimates.

In every area of this budget one thing becomes apparent. This is a government that really doesn't have much of a vision. What it is about is damage control.

K. Krueger: It isn't so.

M. Farnworth: The member says it isn't so. The member for Kamloops-North Thompson says it isn't so.

Well, the only real significant increase in this budget is in Children and Families. That's because of the abysmal situation we found ourselves in last fall under questioning from the opposition. The only increase, hon. member....

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: The hon. member says: "Do we want more tax cuts?"

I'll tell you what we want. We want to ensure that the children and families of this province receive the services that are required on an annual basis — properly delivered — and not have to be subject to cuts that have resulted in some of the tragic situations that we saw over the last two years in this province.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: The Minister of Transportation says: "Oh, we've got that."

Gee, guess what. It took an awful lot of pain to get to that situation, and I don't think that's acceptable, and neither does the public of British Columbia.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: I will address some of the Health Minister's comments. I do note that he's not sitting in his appropriate seat, horror of horrors that that is.

The point is: this is a damage control budget. The money for Children and Families is to deal with the damage that was done by this government in that ministry. In terms of the ministry of skills and training, the increase there, again, is to deal with the damage done by this ministry to what was once recognized as the best apprenticeship training system in this country. Now Alberta trains far more apprentices than we do in this province. Our system here has declined, and they're attempting to put in money to try and fix that, but unfortunately, they don't have a plan to do it.

[1630]

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: I'll address that question in a few minutes, hon. member. We're still working our way through the other areas of damage control in this budget.

Some of the members talk about the \$350 million increase to health care. I will be very interested to see if, later in the year, the Minister of Health comes back to this House and says one of two things: "The \$350 million is not enough, and we need more money." I fully expect that the Minister of Health will be going back to Treasury Board at some point — perhaps even during this session — to say that the budget for health is running over and that he's going to need more money. We know that not just in this province but in

every province the pressures on the health care system are tremendous and that costs on issues such as Pharmacare continue to rise. So I look forward to the estimates debate, where we can explore further in greater detail where that \$350 million is going and how realistic it is that the health budget will require only \$350 million more.

I see the minister smiling and nodding his head, because I think he, too, recognizes, even though he may not want to publicly admit it at this particular point in time....

Hon. G. Abbott: Don't take my smile as approval of....

M. Farnworth: I don't take it as approval of my speech, but I do take it as approval of....

In this particular case, I think he knows exactly what I'm referring to, and that is that I think the \$355 million will prove to be wanting and that we will need to see an increase in that health budget. I fully expect that that will take place. As I said, I look forward to the debate in estimates where we can explore that issue further.

You know, \$350 million may sound like a lot, but when you look at the record of this government over the last several years around long-term care beds — 5,000 new care beds, and we still are nowhere near that yet — there are a lot of challenges for this government. They made a lot of commitments, and unfortunately, they have not kept those commitments in terms of those issues such as long-term care beds. We will explore that issue further in Health estimates as well. I think it is something that people have indicated that they want addressed, and the government has to start doing it. We don't see that in this budget.

K. Krueger: Can't wait.

M. Farnworth: The hon. member for Kamloops-North Thompson says, "Can't wait," and I can assure you that the critics on this side of the House can't wait, either. We look forward to asking the questions of the ministers.

It's a damage-control budget. I know that my friend across the way, the previous speaker, made some comments about the increase to the homeowner's grant — \$100. The member from Kamloops indicated that he hoped it wouldn't be taken up by tax increases from local government. Well, I hope so too. Given some of the challenges that local governments face, I wouldn't be too surprised. But even if they don't take up that \$100 rebate that has been given to homeowners in British Columbia, for many of them, the activities or the actions of this government have already erased that \$100 increase in the homeowner grant.

An Hon. Member: You don't actually believe that.

M. Farnworth: The Minister of Revenue says that we don't actually believe that. Well, I will just point out

to him an instance of where that is actually the case. That is, for example, on ICBC premiums. If you have a typical car insured for around \$1,500 a year, a 6½-percent increase in ICBC premiums on \$1,500 is coming pretty close to a hundred bucks. So there, it's gone right now.

If you're a two-car family, you're already going to be 6½ percent in the hole, thanks to this government. So they've given with one hand, and they're taking with the other hand. That's very typical of this government. They have rewarded their friends over the past four years but again take it back for those who can least afford it.

[1635]

The member talked about taxes, about how seniors are better off. Well, many seniors don't call it Pharmacare anymore. They call it pharmacuts because the changes that were done by this government in Pharmacare resulted in significantly increased Pharmacare bills for many seniors in this province, and they're not better off under this government.

Hon. G. Abbott: Wrong.

M. Farnworth: The member goes: "Wrong." Well, there are many, many seniors who would be willing and more than happy to disagree with you, hon. member, and over the next few months I'm quite sure that some of those people.... You know, we can bring their cases to the House, and the minister can respond directly to them.

Hon. Speaker, as I said, this budget is a damage-control budget. It is a budget that lacks vision. It's a budget that didn't even meet its own expectations. Even some of the government's biggest supporters.... Phil Hochstein. I mean, this government has given him so much stroke and so much influence that he's sometimes referred to as — well, it depends on the size of the cabinet now — the 25th or 26th cabinet minister, you know. What he wants he usually gets. He said....

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: No, he was the 19th cabinet minister. We had a much smaller, lean cabinet. Hochstein's the 26th or 27th cabinet minister.

But no. This is someone who has got everything he wants over the last four years, and even he was disappointed with this budget. He said it doesn't.... He wanted more tax cuts. No tax cuts. He was disappointed in it.

It's a dull, boring budget. It lacks vision. It's a damage-control budget, as many people are saying. What I want to see, what we want to see, hon. Speaker, is a recognition, a little less backslapping on how great things are and a bit of a reality check that there are areas in this province that have been hurting.

Children and families, for example. Some of the money has come back. Seniors. A huge amount of work needs to be done, and the money is not there in this budget to do that. Health care — an increase? Sure, but

nowhere near enough to meet the needs of the health care system.

I relate it directly back to my own constituency, and I look at what's taking place there. Again, I can't help but comment on some of the remarks that some of the members made — you know, the member for Chilliwack-Sumas going on about the 1990s.

Hon. J. Les: Waxing eloquently.

M. Farnworth: Okay. "Waxing eloquently," he says. That's true. Waxing eloquently about the 1990s. Well, you know, in 1991 my riding of Port Coquitlam had a population of 52,000 people. In 1996 it was 85,000 people — a huge increase, a massive amount of investment, a massive amount of growth. At the same time, we built huge numbers of schools to deal with the huge increase in population.

Today, again, people are asking and expect to see school construction, yet what we see in this budget is that the money being spent is not taking into account the increases in terms of costs that have taken place in construction. As a result, programs that the government trumpets, such as earthquake upgrades in schools.... The \$1½ billion will actually do fewer schools than when it was originally announced. They don't want to tell people that. They don't want to let people know that.

They don't want to tell the people in my constituency that instead of us being able to do six schools, we may now only be able to upgrade four schools — and that's wrong. That has not been reflected in this budget. So I intend to continue to press to ensure we adequately fund that program, to ensure that we can stick to the time line that's been set out — if not speed it up — to upgrade and earthquake-proof the schools in our districts right across the province.

[1640]

I think that's crucial because for my constituents in Port Coquitlam that is a high priority, especially for schools such as Pitt River Middle School, Minnehada and a number of other schools. So we have to make sure that they're upgraded. Unfortunately, I don't believe this budget does that.

We need to see a recognition that the government's costs for many projects are escalating rapidly out of control. For a government that likes to pride itself on, you know, good forecasting and good financial management, it is somewhat of a puzzle as to why they haven't anticipated....

K. Krueger: A booming economy, brother, and we do this well.

M. Farnworth: I know we have a booming economy. I guess we also have a booming member over there too. But I would like to point out to that member that forecasting should be reasonably exact. There should be some parameters, and with 25- to 30-percent increases, you have to start to ask yourself: what are the assumptions that are being made by the government in terms of its capital projects? How did they ar-

rive at the figures in the first place? You have to ask: what were the assumptions they were using in the first place? It's pretty clear that they were the wrong ones.

What's happening now is that many of the capital projects that we view as essential are being pushed further and further down the time line. The Gateway program, for example, is one of those. The Minister of Transportation likes to talk about how we're doing this great thing, and it's going to cost \$3 billion. That's all it is going to cost.

K. Krueger: How far did you get on that?

M. Farnworth: The member for Kamloops-North Thompson asks me: "How far did we get along on that?" I assume, and I know, he means transportation improvements. Well, I would just like to take this opportunity to remind him that from the period 1991 to 2001, when I was the MLA from Port Coquitlam, we managed to do a number of transportation improvement projects, and I'll just list them for him.

We implemented the commuter rail system, which is a huge success, basically on time and on budget. We widened the Mary Hill bypass. We built a brand-new, four-lane bridge over the Coquitlam River, which had been empty for some 25 years. We widened the Johnson-Mariner overpass, which allowed the development of the Westwood plateau area. Significant transportation improvements. It was quite an exciting decade, actually. So I just find it interesting that the hon. members don't want to recognize or acknowledge the fact that these types of improvements took place. I'm more than happy to remind the hon. member of things that have taken place.

Coming back to today's transportation plan, I want to ensure that the Pitt River Bridge is going to be built, and I'm concerned.

An Hon. Member: It will be.

M. Farnworth: The hon. member says it will. Well, I hope it is, and I intend to press on behalf of my constituents to ensure that it is built. With the dramatically escalating costs we're seeing, there are serious questions being asked by many people — not just constituents but engineers, architects and planners right across British Columbia — about how realistic the plan is and what the impacts of increased costs are going to be. We need to ensure they're addressed.

In closing....

Hon. R. Thorpe: Oh, no.

M. Farnworth: I know my hon. friend across the way wishes me to go on, and I would love to go on, but I recognize that other people, too, would like a chance to speak and that there is a limited time. This budget doesn't cut it for the people of British Columbia. It fails to deliver in so many key areas. It fails in health care. It fails for seniors. It fails for students. It fails for home-

owners. So with that, I take my seat, and I look forward to the estimates debate to explore things further.

Hon. R. Neufeld: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

[1645]

Introductions by Members

Hon. R. Neufeld: Earlier today there were eight students attending the buildings from the Council of Forest Industries education program from northern B.C. They're spending a week talking to students across the lower mainland in schools. Two of those students came from my region of the province. Hillary Sheppard is a grade 12 student from Fort Nelson. Nikole Jensen is a grade 12 student from Fort St. John. They have now left the premises, but they were here earlier with their other peers.

Debate Continued

K. Krueger: Madam Speaker, it's a pleasure to stand up and speak about balanced Budget 2006 — another triumph of the B.C. Liberal government and one of which we are extremely proud. I don't know if everybody saw the front page of the *Vancouver Sun* today, but there were three very large numbers across the top of it. One was \$420 million for children's services. Another was \$400 million for skills training. The third was \$6 billion for uplifts to the wage and benefits packages of civil servants.

It was interesting — the way they were juxtaposed. I hope that no member of the public in any way takes umbrage at the relations of those numbers, because the fact is that our civil service dug deep with us — with the B.C. government from 2001 to 2005 — to achieve our goal of wiping out the \$3.8 billion annual deficit that we were left with, beginning to position this province to attack a provincial debt that had more than doubled under the regime of the NDP government of the 1990s.

People accepted wage freezes. NDP MLAs didn't actually accept a reduction in salaries, but all of the B.C. Liberal MLAs did. We gave up about \$10,000 each in income to be an example of why we all had to bite that kind of a bullet. There were a lot of civil servants who.... It was hard for them, but they did dig deep, and we succeeded. We wiped out that deficit just as we anticipated. As the member for Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain said.... On our very first day in office, the very first cabinet meeting, we did the dramatic personal income tax cut that we had promised. We reduced the taxes of people up to \$60,000 income in this province to the lowest in the whole country. Now it's \$84,000.

Interjection.

K. Krueger: The member opposite, who has quite a bit to learn — Mr. Cowichan-Ladysmith — would do

well to actually pay some attention to history, because they who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. He is not likely to ever be in government. He has rapidly emerged with more of a caveman mentality than some of his intelligent peers around him. He is constantly saying things, heckling our Minister of Education, heckling people without listening. He hasn't learned much so far, but we're looking for some improvement.

Deputy Speaker: Member, member. Through the Chair.

K. Krueger: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Six billion dollars to our civil service — I know that they're happy about that. My caucus met with the B.C. Nurses Union today. They're actively in negotiations. Good for them. I wish them well. Because everybody dug in, in order to put the books in line and make this province work again. We believed that we could take British Columbia back to the top of the economic order in Canada, where it's been most of my life, where I and a lot of British Columbians assume it naturally would be.

It was shocking to all of us to see the economy reduced to rubble the way it was in the 1990s. It was pathetic. I still have people from Alberta, when I meet them, saying to me: "How in the world could British Columbia ever have become a have-not province? How is it possible that Ottawa had to send transfer payments to British Columbia?" It is shocking, and it's a shameful time in our history.

[1650]

I was reading an interesting commentary by the CCPA. Interestingly enough, it is an organization that, of course, the NDP injected hundreds of thousands of taxpayers' dollars into in the 1990s. Normally, I think the NDP eagerly quote what the CCPA has to say. This is a report that they wrote, a quarterly review of social and economic trends. It says:

In real per capita terms, wages and salaries in B.C. declined by 7.3 percent from 1990 to 1998. However, those closest to the bottom of the income ladder felt the most pain due to more "flexible" labour markets matched by cuts in income supports by government.

As a result, there was an increase in poverty in B.C., by any measure. The depth of poverty was also higher and more visible on the street — in the rise of homelessness, panhandling and food banks. Life for the poor is more difficult and precarious than it has been in several decades.

The CCPA published that in the winter of 2000. Who was the government they referred to from 1990 to 1998? Well, it was the NDP, who like to hold themselves forth as the champions of the homeless, the champions of the poor, the people who believed they could make food banks redundant. But their history, their record in office, was exactly the opposite.

We've heard a lot of sneering over the last week by the NDP, by the opposition, at the word "transformation." They don't like that word. Well, we've been government less than five years, a shorter time than the NDP's first term in office in the '90s. They always went

to the max. The max they could go was five years. They probably expected to lose the election after their disastrous performance in the front half of the '90s, so they went five full years. We split the non-NDP vote, and they got to have another crack at it. They did even worse in the next five years.

But we haven't even been government as long as they were in that first term. Everyone knows the kind of destruction we were handed: the many, many deficits — and not just the financial deficit but the deficit in roadbuilding, the deficit in people. We had an out-migration of population. The province was hurt, and deficits were created right across the board. We still see and recognize deficits that are still there from the '90s.

But we turned it around. It's been a very dramatic transformation. We only have options to do the kinds of things we do in this budget because of the success in turning the economy around. The fact that we have a vision and a plan and that they're practical and they work is something to celebrate, not something to deride, as we hear the members from the opposite side doing.

I'm very grateful for the marvellous place where we are privileged to live and the democratic process whereby British Columbians make their way in it. I'm thankful for my colleagues, including some — many, actually — of the opposition members. There are some very gracious people over there, some very smart people, and I've been very impressed with some of them.

Interjection.

K. Krueger: One member enthusiastically agrees over there. But there are others who I think are exhibiting the fact they have a lot to learn. I'm grateful for the contributions I see MLAs on both sides of the House making, and trying to make, to British Columbia through their hard work. I appreciate all the positive things I can learn from each one.

The member from whom I've learned the most and for whose leadership and tremendous hard work I'm profoundly grateful is the Premier. We haven't always agreed on everything over the past ten years of working together, but I'm in awe of his abilities and his results. He is a big-picture thinker and planner, a man of vision and purpose and magnificent dreams, a man capable of building and inspiring teams to make that vision and those dreams a reality. He is a man of pure motivations, acting out of love for people and for this great province.

He could have been a fabulously wealthy man by now, well respected and admired by the great entrepreneurs of our day, as he is and always has been. He's a man who works, as one of my colleagues once put it, like a machine. He works tirelessly and gets by on less sleep than most people could imagine. In spite of that drive and that performance, he thinks at such a high level and with such a clarity of vision that any billionaire would leap at the opportunity to have him in leadership on their team.

He is a leader who has delivered success for British Columbians with results that few would ever have

thought possible and at a pace that is amazing to the intelligent observer, yet he is criticized and lampooned by the NDP and its shareholders day after wearying day, 365 days of the year. His well-being and safety are under constant threat to the extent that the RCMP maintain the necessity of keeping him under constant guard when he is in public.

[1655]

When Glen Clark and the NDP were turning British Columbia into a have-not province during the wealthiest decade of North America's history, driving thousands of British Columbians out of this province and putting 400,000 people on welfare at one point, so far as I know, there was never a death threat or a need for the NDP Premiers to have police guards. Yet this good man — the Premier who has delivered on his dream of a new era of hope, prosperity and opportunity for British Columbia; of a shining today and brighter tomorrow for all British Columbians and, yes, including the heartlands where I've always lived; a man who dares to set great goals, boldly predicts a golden decade for B.C. and demonstrably delivers on all of it — is ceaselessly ridiculed and harassed by the Jim Sinclairs and the NDP hopeless socialists of our day.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

I was at a meeting at Royal Roads University recently. I met the president of RRU for the first time. He was talking about unique initiatives of that university. The one I'd gone to see about was a unit they have to develop the prospects of non-timber forest products in British Columbia — a huge opportunity.

I chair the government's Caucus Committee on Natural Resources and the Economy, and I'm interested in anything that will help with the economy and help produce the kind of revenues that pay for the kind of benefits that this budget provides and for more in the future. I'm interested in that sort of emerging opportunity, and Royal Roads University is exploring it for British Columbia very expertly, very aggressively, very well.

When the president of RRU talked to the group I was with, he said that this Premier is unique in Canada. He stands alone in Canada as a forward thinker, a person who, far more than all other Premiers, is pursuing the Asia-Pacific opportunity for Canada and for British Columbia. I thought of many other examples of how this Premier has demonstrated that he's always thinking about the opportunities for B.C. — whether it's Legacies Now or the Spirit of B.C. or his drive to make sure that here in B.C. people from rural areas won't have to migrate into big urban areas that are already overcrowded, as they're doing all over the world, because he wants to have opportunities for every British Columbian right where they live.

An example of that is the broadband initiative. Nearly 200 communities around British Columbia are being connected to high-speed Internet because of that initiative.

Why is it that this good man with those great results is spoken of the way he is spoken of by the NDP? Why do they say the things they say about his government and our accomplishments, his accomplishments? Well, because they want to win elections. I submit that they've chosen a path of fearmongering, dishonesty, false messaging, and it isn't right.

I was listening to the member for Nanaimo make his reply to the throne speech last week, and I was....

Deputy Speaker: Member, could you please direct all your comments to the Chair.

K. Krueger: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome to the chair. I hadn't noticed the change.

I was listening to the member for Nanaimo make his reply to the throne speech last week and was momentarily shocked when he referred to B.C. Liberal policy — or at least how he sees it — as Christian psychobabble. What an offensive thing to say.

Most intelligent, educated elected people these days stay away from slurs on other people's faiths. Anyone in public life or tuned into current events should be particularly sensitive about such behaviour in recent weeks, as the world has been horrified by murders, arson and looting brought on by gratuitous insults to a great religion.

Earlier today we heard the member for North Island say something curious. I've looked at the *Hansard*, and it seems to me that she was saying it was unfortunate that those offences were created, and yet free speech is the big consideration. It isn't. When people are not telling the truth, when people are lampooning someone else's faith, that's not the kind of free speech that I think most of us would want to defend. There is no justification for those crimes that are happening around the world, but there's no justification for those insults either.

The member for Nanaimo did come back into the chamber sometime later.

Deputy Speaker: Member.

B. Simpson: Just a point of clarification. It might be my own ignorance, but I do believe that the member has already apologized to this House for those remarks, and I don't feel it's appropriate for another member to continue to berate that member for remarks that have already been apologized for.

[1700]

Deputy Speaker: The apology did end the matter, and I will request the member for Kamloops-North Thompson to stay on the budget speech.

K. Krueger: I was about to say that the member did come back into the chamber and apologize to members who might have been offended — not to Christianity, not to Christians around the world, many of whom have died for their faith.

In any event, we know that he is an intelligent, educated and elected member.

D. Routley: I rise to ask for clarification. Is the term "caveman mentality" a part of parliamentary discourse?

Deputy Speaker: Are you asking for the member to withdraw the comments?

D. Routley: Yes, hon. Speaker, I am.

K. Krueger: Withdraw.

The member for Nanaimo is in fact intelligent, educated and elected. In the May 2005 election, much to my dismay, he defeated my friend Mike Hunter, who'd worked in harness with us throughout the years 2001 to 2005 when the groundwork was laid to be able to pay for the kind of programs that this budget pays for.

We think a lot of Mike Hunter in the B.C. Liberal caucus because we know him well, and we saw how hard he worked and what he delivered for the people of Nanaimo. The convention centre is one example, but there was much, much more.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

Mike Hunter came to work every day, earnestly representing the people of Nanaimo and working every angle to solve their problems, to build their community and to represent them well, just as every member of the B.C. Liberal caucus does for its constituency. I don't ever remember having heard him speak unkindly about anyone, but the people of Nanaimo sent us the present member in his place. Well, that's the way it turned out, and that's what we live with.

Why do NDP members say the kinds of things they say about members on our side of the House, and why do people attack the Premier the way they do? Why don't they present policies? Why don't they say what they would do differently, if they got to be government, than they did in the '90s, which reduced this great province to the terrible state that it was reduced to? Why don't they tell us what they think should be in the budget that isn't there or how they could possibly increase the revenues to do some of the amazing things that this government is able to do?

There's a billion dollars on the table for the civil service to share if they are able to conclude collective agreements before March 31. It's not a gimmick. Our Auditor General has said that we have the most open and accountable practices in budgeting and in handling the province's money of any province in this country. The fact is that if the billion dollars isn't allotted, then it will go against the province's debt, and it simply won't be there anymore. Although we hope we'll have another great revenue year this year, there are many variables.

The member for Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain earlier talked about the fact that we are in really good times when it comes to commodities. In fact, every \$1 change in the natural gas price moves our provincial revenues up or down \$300 million over a year, so there's no guarantee that that price won't change — perhaps go down \$4 — and that we wouldn't have the

\$1 billion next year that we have right now. The money is there.

I got the clear indication from the Nurses Union today that they fully understand that opportunity, and they are zealous about pursuing that opportunity, and we wish them well. We want them to be amongst the very best-paid nurses in Canada. We want all of our civil servants to be amongst the best-paid civil servants in Canada. This is a huge opportunity with \$1 billion to allot before the end of March and a further \$4.7 billion over the next four years and a \$300 million incentive for those who negotiate long-term collective agreements.

What an opportunity. It's only possible because of the sound fiscal management that this province has seen in its government over the last four years — almost five. It wasn't there before. It's great to have it back.

[1705]

My father was very active in politics, and he was a dyed-in-the-wool Social Crediter. I really respected his politics, why he believed the things that he did. As I get older, I realize more and more that the best measure of a man or a woman is his or her results, that talk is very, very cheap but results are tangible. Who could deny W.A.C. Bennett's results and the legacy he left for all British Columbians?

When I was 17 years old, Dave Barrett was elected Premier. I acquired a bumper sticker that said, "Grin and Barrett," which I thought was clever, and my dad told me to take it off, so I did. I respected my father very much, and it was also his car. My dad expected me to respect Premier Barrett, and 33 years later I look at the ALR, and I look at ICBC, and I admire those results. I don't think we could have a better insurance company looking after our liability coverage and many other things it does in British Columbia than ICBC.

ICBC and the ALR are the measure of a man. They're the results of Dave Barrett and his government from 1972 to 1975, and I respect him for them. Yet two weeks ago he was in my constituency talking about how he had turned down the Olympics in his day and opted to spend more money on social programs. Although he was only in power for three years, he left behind some pretty significant new debts too. Even ICBC at the time, I believe, was \$200 million in deficit, although it had only been about a year that it had been alive, I think, when he lost office.

So even after three decades, including the NDP's dismal results in the '90s, the boom year for our whole continent's economy, and the collapse of socialist regimes on the scrap heaps of economies around the world, socialists haven't learned that you must have a sound economy in order to provide for people's needs through successful social programs.

The member for Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain, who is House Leader for the opposition, said that the success of the economy is only commodity prices and low interest rates. We had low interest rates all through the '90s as well, as I recall it. The whole country has the same low interest rates, and the whole country has the same commodity prices, although we are blessed with

more than a lot of them, but I'm sure the members opposite all know it's actually a whole lot more than that. It is good fiscal management. It's having a good plan and sticking to it.

The truth is that the NDP are very careless about what they say. They don't seem to care if they're hurtful, irresponsible, destructive. Statistics Canada released a study — I believe it was this month or late last month — which concluded that nearly two-thirds of Canadians aged 12 and over have a strong sense of belonging to their local community. The report examined the link between this sense of belonging and an individual's self-perceived physical and mental health. They noted that in B.C. the Thompson-Cariboo health service delivery area, which is the area that I live in and represent, reported the second-highest rate in the province at 76.2 percent.

The study said that Canadians as a whole have a strong sense of belonging to the community in which they live. Those who do have, also have more positive feelings about the state of their physical and mental health. It said that significant associations between community belonging and self-perceived general health emerged in all the provinces except P.E.I. and Quebec, but the associations were particularly strong in British Columbia and Ontario. Isn't that interesting?

It went on to say that in B.C., 64 percent of residents with a strong sense of belonging reported excellent or very good general health, compared with only 51 percent among those with a weak sense. So the study seems to demonstrate that those who have a weak sense of belonging to a community also tend to have poor expectations with regard to their general health.

The study concluded that these findings are particularly relevant in view of evidence that self-perceived general health is predictive of chronic disease incidence, use of medical services, recovery from illness, functional decline, and mortality.

[1710]

All through the last five years — certainly leading up to the election and still, since the election — we continually hear members of the opposition say what terrible shape our health care system is in, and we've known it isn't true. The people who rate the health system the highest are generally those who have used it the most recently in British Columbia. We have attracted hundreds of new doctors to this province, over 60 in Kamloops and the area right around it alone. We've opened up thousands of new spaces for nurses in our post-secondary institutions, and we're training them as fast as we can.

Today we discussed with Debra McPherson, the president of BCNU, and her executive who were with her the fact that our school of nursing at Thompson Rivers University says the bottleneck they have is that there aren't enough preceptors to help train the student nurses. They have to limit the number of spaces we can add because of that constraint, but we're adding them as fast as we can. We've opened two more medical schools, we've beefed up the UBC medical school, we're opening another medical school in Kelowna, and

the public who know about the things we're doing are feeling pretty good about them. But the public who believe the negative messaging from the other side, all indications are, are actually having their health affected by that negative messaging.

That's borne out by the recent results of the Conference Board of Canada, which said that in every measurement, right across the board, British Columbia had the best results. Better than Alberta's — and Alberta has no debt and a huge surplus. They compete with us like mad for professionals, for doctors and nurses. They can well afford to pay more than we can, but we're trying to stay up close to them.

The only measure that was negative in that report was public satisfaction, where we were eighth. What a curious thing: we're the best performers right across the board, but our report card is eighth. It struck me that it is the only measure that the NDP actually have a direct effect on. Our government is managing the system and managing it a whole lot better than it was managed in the past, but people hear those messages, and they frighten them.

We heard it today. We continually hear the NDP talk about things like seniors beds, long-term care beds, extended care, intermediate care, and how we should be building them faster. They never built one in the whole Thompson health region in the ten years of the 1990s — not one.

Seniors from the community of Clearwater, which I represented then and do now, were being housed in the Fraser Canyon, four hours away from their loved ones, cut off from their spouses, their networks, their families, their friends, and they went downhill really fast. They would go downhill so deep that they would have to go into acute care, when they had been expected to have long-term care. Then they would bring them back to Clearwater, where they lived, because they had acute care beds there. They would get better because they had their family and friends around. Once they were better, the NDP system would ship them back down to the Fraser Canyon, where they would go downhill again.

So who in the world are the NDP to reproach us after we built thousands and thousands of brand-new beds? I was in the facilities — Ponderosa Lodge, Overlander Extended Care Hospital — in Kamloops in those five years that I was in opposition to an NDP government. People and seniors, who deserve respect and who are frail, were crammed into small rooms like little, tiny hospital wards — four people, six people in a room sharing a bathroom. In facilities around the province the bathrooms weren't big enough to get wheelchairs into, but that was another of those deficits that the NDP left us. They didn't build a single bed in the whole Thompson health region, and now they reproach us.

One of the first things that happened in my constituency, one of the first things that I was personally able to deliver as an MLA in government, once we were elected to government in 1996, was a brand-new hospital in Clearwater that got under construction. It has over 20 extended care beds. It's the first time there's

been even one in the whole North Thompson Valley, and it's beautiful. It helps drive the economy at Clearwater, because professionals came to work and live there. That's the kind of thing we're able to deliver, as we are today with this balanced Budget 2006, because of our success in rebuilding the economy of this province.

[1715]

In opposition I would deal with families who had a senior in their home who definitely should have been in extended care, and the waits were often 18 months — 18 months. People in their '50s and '60s were trying to look after seniors with Alzheimer's and other very serious health complications. It was aging that second generation rapidly. We heard members opposite talk about the kinds of things that happen in a household that is dealing with that terrible affliction of Alzheimer's. It was happening to the whole household, but they couldn't get those people into a facility. There was just no room. For 18 months people had to wait under the NDP; 18 days under the B.C. Liberal government. What colossal gall for the NDP to reproach B.C. Liberals on the record of building extended care beds.

Mental health. The NDP promised over \$100 million in additional mental health care funding and never delivered anything. The member for Nelson-Creston said in the leadership contest about the progress of the NDP: "We promised things that we never intended to deliver." Clearly, he was right. They never budgeted that \$100 million. They never did any of those things.

We promised in the year 2000 and in the 2001 campaign that we would build a tertiary regional psychiatric facility in Kamloops. During the last big forum of that campaign I was sitting beside Cathy McGregor, who was running in a neighbouring constituency, and an NDP speaker got up to the microphone and said: "If you're elected government, will you resign if your government doesn't build that tertiary psychiatric health care facility?" I said: "How can you ask me that? We haven't even been elected government yet." Cathy began to heckle me: "Will you resign? Will you resign?" I turned to her and said: "Why haven't you resigned?" I can't even quote to you what she said. It wasn't parliamentary.

We opened that facility this month. Dr. Paul Dagg, a psychiatrist who came from Ottawa to manage the facility with his wife, who is also a psychiatrist, said at the opening that he had managed a large facility in Ottawa and dreamed of an opportunity like this.

I'm proud of the budget, and I thank you for the time to speak to it.

Deputy Speaker: Members, the Chair wishes to strongly remind all members to keep their comments focused on the budget debate and to avoid impugning members in this chamber. I wish to remind you all that personal attacks on any member are not tolerated in this chamber. It's not parliamentary.

B. Simpson: I had the pleasure yesterday — I think it was a pleasure — of going into the budget lockup for the first time. I had had it built up for me that it was

going to be an interesting experience, and the people that I was going in with were keyed up about it. My expectation was that I would spend a few hours trying to dissect what, our expectation was, would be a good-news budget with a strong vision for the province. Quite frankly, within half an hour I found it anticlimactic and quite mundane in many respects.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

We have a budget that makes the claim that we're building for tomorrow. What I question as I look at the budget, as I look at the components of it, as I look at the budget speech, is how we can frame this budget as a budget that's building for tomorrow when the vast majority of the money is targeted to address the problems that were created in the first term of the sitting government.

It's not a budget about tomorrow. It's a budget about redressing the past. It's a budget about redressing errors in judgment that were made by the sitting government. So I find it curious that the member for Kamloops-North Thompson wants to talk about having the freedom to speak about mistakes, having the freedom to say that that was an error. Yet the reality is that this budget is addressing errors without that honesty in the language surrounding those budget line items.

[1720]

We have before us in the House a report from the Ombudsman entitled *The Power of an Apology*. It's calling for us to look at apology legislation. I think that shouldn't necessarily just apply to gross decisions made that impact society. It should apply to the ability for a sitting government to say: "We didn't listen. We didn't listen at the time when people were saying: 'You are cutting too deeply.' We didn't listen when people said that we were cutting too deeply in the Ministry of Children and Family Development — that it was too deep, too dramatic, and there wasn't going to be a contingency plan to correct what would happen as a result of those cuts."

The money that the government is putting in the budget now is addressing that wrong, that error in judgment, that failure to listen to the people at the time who said: "Don't do that. It's too much. It's too deep. It's not directed, and it's not fair to our children."

I think this is a budget that is redressing errors of the past. Quite frankly, what I can't figure out in the budget, as I look at the speech and the components and as I look forward to the various estimates debates, is what this government's vision is for the future.

For the most part, this budget is a bunch of ad hoc programs and line item spending to address things that people have been calling for a while — for example, relaxing the use of coloured gas. I know people in my area are going to be very thankful for that. They are going to be thankful for the bump in the PST exemption for diesel vehicles. Those are minor adjustments for things that will make some sectors of our population happy, but in general, the whole flavour of the budget is a bunch of independent, higgledy-piggledy

little bits of spending that have no cohesive vision for where we are taking this province.

I'd like to spend a few moments talking about some of the things that I think are grossly missed in this budget and that do not address the realities we're confronted with.

First, I find it hard to believe that today we have a budget speech and a budget following on a throne speech that does not have two words in it: "climate change." We have a throne speech which says we have forces that are transforming the planet that demand us to rethink the assumptions of the last century and to change with the times to maintain and improve our quality of life. It goes on to say: "Too often short-term thinking and election cycles blind us to generational needs. Together, we must strive to change that."

Forces that are transforming the globe. If there's one force that will transform this globe — and is already transforming this globe — it is climate change. Yet it's not in the budget; it's not in the throne speech. There is one reference to global warming in this government's strategic plan within the context of Kyoto. I find that absolutely unconscionable.

For a budget that claims to be about children, for a throne speech that talks about generational needs, to not speak to the issue of climate change is not acceptable. We do not serve our children well by burying our heads in the sand, by following the line of the President of the United States, who wants to deny that this event is occurring.

In my neck of the woods, we haven't had a decent cross-country ski season for at least three or four years. We've built a brand-new facility in an area that normally would get lots of snow. We don't get the snow, and so we ski in marginal conditions now. This year we have the second year in which our logging contractors and our licensees are struggling to get wood out before what we used to call breakup. Everybody agrees now that breakup is probably a thing of the past. That's a significant shift that has already occurred.

We have situations in which we are seeing plants and animals in areas of the province that are well outside their normal range. Climate change is here, and it is a substantive change already. I believe that our children will judge us as being moral cowards for not addressing this issue. I believe they will stand in judgment of us in generations to come.

[1725]

Let's take a look at climate change across various areas in this province. First of all, forests. I attended a chief foresters conference in Prince George. The first day of the conference was about the impact of climate change on forest health. We had presentation after presentation. We had one unified voice coming out of that. It was that climate change is already impacting our land base, that climate change is already having a significant impact on our forest ecosystems and our aquatic ecosystems, and that we can't predict what the definitive changes are going to be on the land base. We can predict one thing, and that is that we need ecosystems that are resilient and adaptable in order to deal with whatever the climate change pressures will be.

Yet, coming out of this, the chief forester is struggling to figure out what the policy implications are for that on forest management. In a previous conference the statement was made that climate change should turn forest management in this province on its head. Yet again, climate change doesn't make its way into either the throne speech or the budget speech.

Invasive plants are spreading throughout this province. The economic impact of invasive plants alone on our agricultural community is amazing, and we'll be looking at those figures as we get into estimates debates. Again, it's an area that's not addressed. Compounded with climate change, we will be expanding the range of these invasive species, and we will be impacting more of our agricultural lands, which brings me to our agricultural strategy.

Where is it? Where is our agricultural strategy in light of climate change? What does it look like? What happens when certain areas of our province lose their productive capacity or are forced into significant irrigation that adds costs to an already marginal crop? What happens? What happens up in our area when the mountain pine beetle has run its course and areas of the province go through some kind of transformation driven by climate change? What does that look like?

We will have regional climate change impacts that are going to be significantly different from regions in the province. The reports I've read suggest that in the lower mainland we will be seeing more floods and more storms. In fact, one could take from this season that we've already had quite a few storms. We've already had quite a few power outages. We've already had floods. It's not something that's 50 years hence. It's something that's impacting us now.

In the Okanagan we are in a drought already. As a result of climate change, another bark beetle, the western bark beetle, has encroached up into the Okanagan and is in the process of wiping out ponderosa pine. Ponderosa pine is a shade tree. It shades all the water courses, and it shades all the valley bottoms where the rivers and the creeks flow. If we take ponderosa pine out of that mix, we will exacerbate the drought situation, and one of our growth belts for lots of our fruits and vegetables will not be able to sustain itself agriculturally and economically, because it will become too expensive to grow those crops.

In the Cariboo region, where I come from, one of the big impacts of climate change will be the potential for catastrophic fire events. We already have a history of fire, but if you add a drought to it and you add extra heat to it, and quite frankly, if you add the logging practices that we have in mountain pine beetle-impacted areas just now, we are going to see catastrophic fire events in that region.

I don't believe that we can afford to bury our heads in this. For a government that has the luxury of natural resource prices that are giving it additional revenue, the luxury of low interest rates driving the construction boom, the luxury of an economy that is giving it additional revenues, I believe it also has the luxury of trying to do some of the advanced work that needs to be done

to position this province for generations from now, who will thank us for starting the process of grappling with the implications of climate change.

[1730]

What could we do? First off, I think the province needs to be very serious about its energy strategy. I think that at present, that is on the back burner. At present, we're playing in the margins of a real energy strategy for this province. One example of this is that despite the fact that we have mountain pine beetles chewing up our forests, we don't have a definitive biomass strategy. The member for Prince George-Omineca mentioned that there will be a conference in our region shortly, but an \$11,000 contribution to a conference on biomass is small potatoes relative to what we need to do.

In my community we do have the possibility of putting in, for example, a 300-megawatt biomass generator. It would put 300 megawatts into the power grid, would employ people and would utilize wood for the next 35 years that we already know we will not be harvesting. We cannot get support for that program anywhere, because we don't have any place that that fits in, and we don't have a biomass strategy for the province.

Secondly, I believe that we need to start doing regional impact assessments. I think we need to start the planning now. I'm shocked that this budget didn't have the words "climate change" in it and at least put resources to regional impact analysis. Some of the work is being done in the Ministry of Forests. Some of the work is being done by the Canadian Forest Service and by the federal government. If the province took leadership on this and pulled those resources together, we could start to make headway on what will be the critical transformative change force on this planet.

Thirdly — and we'll be looking for these in the various estimates debates — we need ministerial strategies for the impacts of climate change. What is the impact of climate change on agriculture, on Crown lands? What is the government's liability for catastrophic fire events on Crown lands as a result of drought and climate change? What is the Crown's liability for floods? What is the Crown's responsibility for an agricultural strategy for the entire province that looks at how we migrate our crops in conjunction with the changes that climate change will put upon us?

In Transportation, we need to understand the implications of transportation with respect to climate change. In many logging areas now, we don't get winter road conditions anymore. In fact, the loggers and the logging contractors will joke that there's no such thing as spring and winter and fall logging anymore. It's kind of: "What are the conditions, and what kind of logging do I do to match the conditions?"

That has significant impact on our road infrastructure and on the long-term viability of those roads. I do appreciate the fact that that's tagged in this budget. I'm not clear at this juncture whether that's new money or simply money apportioned out of the Transportation budget, but we need a comprehensive strategy. We

need to know what the implications are for bridges. We need to know what the implications are in terms of rural infrastructure for sewers and septic systems.

I've already mentioned forestry. We also need one for Tourism. Much of our winter tourism is predicated on snow, and as we've seen over the last number of years, that's becoming more hit-or-miss, and the seasons for many of our ski hills are also changing. We need to understand the implications of that for tourism.

We need to understand the implications of warmer and drier summers in the Okanagan and the water demand in the Okanagan for the tourist influx into that area. It's already burdened by the people who live there. You add all of the tourists in there, and they have a tourist strategy to bring more people in. Then, for Community Services: what will the municipalities and the regional districts require to begin to plan for the implications of climate change, whether that's fire or drought or infrastructure impacts?

Again, I find it unconscionable that climate change isn't even mentioned in a throne speech about transformative change and in a budget that's supposed to be building for tomorrow. I believe that at some point, if this government does not treat this transformative force seriously, our children will judge us, and they will not judge us kindly.

The other question that arose out of examining this budget is that I have no sense of this government's vision for the economy. Again we have bits and pieces of money here and there. We have one-time funding into this, and we have some funding into that, but there's not a sense in here of where this government believes our economy is going.

[1735]

Some cases in point. As the Minister of Forests and Range knows, our entire forest economy and our entire forest sector are undergoing dramatic and truly transformative change. I know the minister doesn't like me to use the word "crisis," but in some areas it is. It's certainly, I think we can agree, going through transformative change.

So what is our vision for what that looks like? Where do we believe that's going to go? Where's the work in the budget around what we're going to do to reposition our forest sector for long-term viability? If you look at the recent report tabled in the small business profile for 2005, you can see that the secondary manufacturing in this province has been in gross decline for the last five years. In fact, in all regions of the province it's been in decline, but in a particularly hard-hit area, the Vancouver Island coast, we have seen a precipitous drop in secondary manufacturing.

Now, my assessment of what's happening in the province is that we are going to see a land base that will only sustain a smaller cut that will be scattered across the land base. In the Quesnel timber supply area, for example, the cut that remains will not be sufficient for one of our mega-mills, and it will be scattered all across the timber supply area. I believe the best way we'll be able to deal with that is through small-scale harvesting, small-scale manufacturing and a different driver for that, and that's maximized jobs out of the

minimum resource that's left behind. If that's the vision of the government, I'd like to see it. I'd like to see what the vision is for the coast. I'd like to see what the vision is for the interior of this province, post the mountain pine beetle and other forest pests that are out there.

Secondly, if we take a look at mining in the province, which this government takes a lot of credit for, the reality is that we're only in an exploration phase. The vast majority of the activity in the province is in the exploration for new mineral resources, not in the extraction. In fact, in the Prince George North region we will see mines close before new mines open.

Yet again, I see nothing in here to indicate that we have a strategic plan that says: where are those resources going to be, and what are the infrastructure demands that are going to be required to facilitate those mines opening as quickly as we can and in a sustainable fashion? Where are the roads? Where are the transmission lines? In fact, there are lobbies up north to get the government to pay attention to those. I don't see it anywhere here. I don't see that long-term strategic vision.

The reality is — all of the polarized politics of this province aside — that we have an economy that is not structurally sound and has not been for some time. As a primary resource extraction economy, we have not done the work — through the Social Credit government, the NDP government and now the Liberal government — to restructure our economy in a way that is sustainable long term.

I believe that in the forest sector, which is still 25 percent to 30 percent of our economy, we're going to see that hit first. If we do not have a strategic vision for mineral extraction in this province, we will not get it, because the infrastructure costs are too high; we will not get it, because we have not indeed got a new relationship with first nations; or we will not get it, because this government does it in such a lax fashion that we will not use best available technology for sustainable extraction of those resources.

So the primary sector, I believe, is threatened. That's the backbone of our economy, and this government has nothing substantive in here other than something in the graphic media to suggest what they think will happen to the economy.

I want to talk a little bit about one of the biggest impacts to our economy going forward that the government does recognize, and that's trades and technology training.

[1740]

The previous company that I worked for, around 2000 and 2001.... I did an assessment of our threats to that company. It was a forest products company. I looked at global fibre supply. I looked at investment capital. One of the areas I looked at was the area of trades and technology and the labour force adjustment. Quite frankly, that's the one that scared our senior management team the most. We saw that we were going to start having a skills shortage back in 2000 and 2001. In fact, the rest of Canada saw that as well, with the exception of one province, and that was this province.

This province in 2001 took us in the exact opposite way to where we should be going. They ended ITAC. In fact, they left a gap before they put the ITA in place because they didn't understand that the government plays a fundamental role in creating a trade and technological labour force. In 2001-2002 they closed regional offices all across the province that made the match between employers and apprentices and provided support for apprentices. They shut them down in Terrace, Kamloops, Dawson Creek, Courtenay, Nelson, Williams Lake, Nanaimo, Coquitlam, Cranbrook, Abbotsford, Victoria, Vancouver, Burnaby, Surrey, Kelowna and Prince George.

As someone in the industry, we felt the impact of that immediately because we no longer had the capacity to work with government in a partnership to link our apprentices with the training, and for other people who wanted to get into the apprenticeship program to be linked with employers that wanted them.

That's what this budget is addressing. It is addressing policy decisions made by this government in the area of industry training, and technology and trades training, that have created much of the backlog that we have now. The figures are there, and I'm not going to get into all of the figures, but I know from experience in working with an employer group that that's what happened. Again, I go back to what the member for Kamloops-North Thompson called for: a little bit of truth. The truth is that that area of the budget is addressing a shortfall because of this government's policy in the past.

The other area that I find quite disturbing is the fact that this budget does not address the rural disparity that we have in this province. Anyone who has travelled the coastal communities knows that the coast is in dramatic decline in the forest sector. We are seeing corporate concentration moving all of the licensees to become landholders and forest companies — not interested in manufacturing. In fact, mill after mill is closing. We know that the pulp sector on the coast is in its final years, and recent moves by some of the major licensees in the interior are suggesting that the interior may go down sooner rather than later.

Yet in this budget there's no recognition of that. There's no recognition of the fact that we are going to have — we have now and we're going to have many more in the future — communities who need assistance to go through that transition. We have communities that need help from a senior level of government. They don't have the resources themselves. They're going to lose significant tax base. They're going to lose significant high-paying jobs. In the Prince George area, in the future, that number could be as much as 2,700 high-paying jobs. A budget that does not even recognize that, a budget that does not even say, "Look, this is the reality, and we're going to address it by this," I think is a dishonest budget.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

It's dishonest in the language as well, speaking about a piece of paper, when it says that people are

excited, that they're making plans with confidence, that they see how far we've come and, just as importantly, that they see the possibilities for British Columbia. That's couched within the context of people all across this province. In the throne speech it's presented this way: "Optimism abounds. Every region of the province is moving forward again with pride and confidence." That's simply not the case.

In communities that have been devastated by forestry workers who have lost their lives because of the restructuring in the industry, in communities that have been devastated by mills that have closed and jobs that have been lost, in communities that are being impacted by the mountain pine beetle and don't know what their future looks like and don't have the assistance to map their way through the diversification that they need to do, optimism does not abound. Positivism does not abound. It can be there, and it must be there, but the reality is that this government did not recognize it in this budget.

[1745]

It is not doing a service to those communities by glossing over the realities that they're confronted with, and the fact that there is not a significant portion of this budget put to community transition services for those communities is not acceptable. It does a disservice to the people of British Columbia and a particular disservice to the people of rural British Columbia and resource-dependent communities.

I look forward to the estimates debates where we get an opportunity to look at the line items of this budget. I think we're going to see the same thing, though. I think we're going to see money moved around, money announced that's new that's not, and money that's one-time funding going to foundations so that the government divorces itself of the responsibility for the outcomes. But on the whole, the budget speech and the budget are very disappointing for British Columbians. It paints no path forward. On that matter of climate change, I believe, again, our children will judge us and find us wanting for not having the courage to address that transformative change now.

Mr. Speaker: Members, earlier today other members in the House have taken time to direct their speeches at other members. I want to remind members that when we're dealing with the budget or the throne debate, it's meant to deal with the budget or the throne debate. It's not meant to hurl accusations across the floor at other members. Just a friendly reminder to all members of the House.

D. Hayer: It feels so good to rise and speak to this budget, this balanced budget, and the second of the five budgets our government will deliver in our new, second mandate.

We face challenges that were left to us by the decade of decline under the NDP. I just want to say that I used to be on the Finance Committee, and I travelled the province for the last five years. Sometimes when I hear the members from the opposition tell about the

experiences that they're having, it's much different from what I saw in the last three years going to the small towns all over British Columbia.

They always told us before, under the NDP — the decade of decline — that people couldn't find jobs here. Their kids couldn't find jobs here. They were leaving from British Columbia to Alberta and to Ontario or to the United States to look for jobs. They couldn't sell their homes because people were leaving and the prices were going downward. When I travelled there just last year for this budget consultation, people were telling us what a great news story it is — all the prices up, people moving back again. We have more kids, so the schools are starting to expand rather than going down. It's much different than what I hear sometimes from the members across the aisle from here, and I just wanted to say that.

You know, as I was saying, we faced a lot of challenges when we were left by the decade of decline with the structural deficit under the NDP. When you look at the budgets, go back to the speeches of July '96 and you will find out what they were saying versus what the reality was. But we now have a vibrant economy in our government that allows us to present a budget that looks at the future, a bright and glorious future. With this budget we are setting the stage for our children's future — for a future, in the words of the Finance Minister, of virtually limitless possibilities.

To encourage that possibility becoming a reality, our government has clearly detailed in this budget speech just how we will achieve the goal of making today's British Columbia not only a better place to be but a province that will continue to lead this country throughout the century. This budget contains a huge investment into families, into children, into the infrastructure, into our seniors, into our health care, in expanded apprenticeship and skill development, and much more support for immigrants.

[1750]

There's also enormous investment, up to \$6 billion, in the public sector employment composition for those who we count on to keep this province moving forward — an investment in our future, and that is what this budget is all about.

As the Finance Minister said, people are excited about our future, and I am excited about what this government is doing in British Columbia — what it's doing for Surrey. This budget implements the key strategies to relieve the pressures that Surrey's fast-growing population is placing on Surrey Memorial Hospital. That's needed a lot of money invested for a long time, because only a very little money was invested in the previous government.

Through this budget we will see Surrey Memorial Hospital gain a new first-class emergency facility three times the size of the current one; an urgent-care facility; a 148,000-square-foot, new out-patient hospital; a new ambulatory care facility; and an addition to accommodate some 140 additional acute care beds that were needed in the '90s, but we never received them.

Surrey Memorial Hospital will also gain additional renal dialysis capacity and a new perinatal care facility. This is great news for my constituents in Surrey-Tynehead and good news, I'm sure, for all of the Surrey constituents and all my friends across the floor.

Another powerful addition for Surrey — which I'm also certain my friends across the aisle appreciate, especially the members from Surrey — is the \$319 million investment of provincial funding contained in the budget for the Gateway program, which will get all of our constituents to and from work much quicker and easier. This investment in our future will see the start of three key components of this project: the North and South Fraser perimeter roads, the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge, the interchanges on Highway 1 and the widening of Highway 1 to eight lanes from Vancouver to Langley.

How can anyone who lives south of the Fraser River not stand behind the budget that includes this — the resolution to the traffic bottleneck that keeps workers away from their families, their children, their friends and neighbours for far longer than they need to be, and pollutes the air by being stuck in traffic — and ends the \$1.5 billion loss in commercial revenue every year?

In fact, I look forward to Surrey members from across the floor singing the praises of this budget when it comes to what it contains for Surrey residents and the growing future it brings for all of them.

Another item in this budget I'm certain they will support is an increase of 22 percent in the homeowner's grant. A simple look at the real estate market in Surrey, which grows by 1,000 people every month, will tell you that housing prices have skyrocketed. This budget acknowledges those increased values. It is giving taxpayers a huge tax break by increasing the homeowner grant by 22 percent and by raising the threshold on the property value from \$685,000 to \$780,000 to reflect the huge increase in homeowner values that have occurred recently because of the strong economy and because there are so many jobs that we can't find enough people in here to fill those positions.

The value of homes, I might add, has increased because now people really want to move back to British Columbia because of strong job opportunities, the vibrant economy and the potential for a great and secure future in the leading province in this country.

While this budget speaks of the future, it does not overlook the people who struggle today, the people who struggle with shelter, with homelessness, with a disability, with disabled children or with mental health.... It has not overlooked our seniors who built our province and who set the stage for the economy and the lifestyles we enjoy today in British Columbia. It has not overlooked the need to battle crime and drug addictions. In fact, tackling all these things is just one of the steps in creating the golden future that this budget forecasts for British Columbia.

[1755]

I spoke earlier of the increased homeowner grant for seniors, veterans and disabled people — the grant

that will rise by a full \$100 to \$845 a year. This budget also contains a change to the seniors supplement, allowing seniors to be able to go out of the province up to six months and still receive their supplement. Plus, this budget contains a change to the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters, which eliminates the eligibility requirement of being a resident of Canada for ten years.

The budget also includes \$100 million in reporting operating expenses over the three years to support our government's commitment to add 5,000 new residential care assisted living-supportive housing beds by December of 2008, which were never improved under the last government. A lot of them got left in bad shape. You could not even get a wheelchair there. You could not have access to them. They were not — some of them — abiding by the new Building Codes, and we had to spend a lot of money to fix them.

The biggest support from this budget is for our children — our future leaders and our decision-makers. We have invested \$421 million to strengthen the future for children at risk and their families who need the support. There are thousands of children across the province who need the support services that this budget provides — services like counselling, mediation, parent support to help with addiction, and help for those with special needs to help in dealing with family conflict. This budget makes it clear that this government will be there for them with the help to make families strong and to help avoid crisis.

Because we want our protection system to work and because we want to ensure that every child has the opportunity to take advantage of the great future, we are

investing \$421 million, \$173 million of which will be used for hiring more social workers and front-line staff, more counselling, more treatment, more prevention of abuse and neglect, and significantly more support for those foster families who provide a safe and welcome haven for our children at risk.

The brightest light will shine on educating our children. More than \$950 million has been allocated to renovating, expanding and replacing kindergarten-to-grade-12 facilities as part of a \$1.5 billion program to upgrade schools at risk of earthquake damage. On top of that, the budget also includes \$112 million in additional funding for K-to-12. Combined with the previously announced increase, that amounts to \$437 million in new funding over the next three years. Furthermore, as the number of students entering the school system continues to decline, this results in more funding for each student. Per-pupil funding will reach a record of \$7,338 in 2008-2009. I have more to say about this later.

D. Hayer moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. G. Abbott moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

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

The House adjourned at 5:59 p.m.

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