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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
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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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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2006

The House met at 2:03 p.m.

Introductions by Members

Hon. L. Reid: I have the very great pleasure today to welcome to this chamber many representatives from the University of British Columbia AMS Society: Sophia Haque, incoming AMS VP for finance; Chris Little, AMS councillor; Jeff Friedrich, incoming AMS VP academic; Gina Eom, student senate caucus chair; Darren Peets, AMS councillor; Gavin Dew, current VP academic; Jess Pisarek, AMS external; Ryan Corbett, AMS councillor; Patricia Lau, AMS councillor; David Yuen, incoming AMS; Herman Tam, AMS external and a Richmond constituent — one of mine; Trevor Gilks, AMS executive coordinator of student services; Zoe Shipley, AMS councillor; Andy Nguyen, AMS external; Quinn Omori, student representative; Reka Pataky, AMS councillor; Omar Sirri, AMS councillor; Kevin Keystone; Laura Levine; Lis Parfitt; Jess Klug, current VP external; Ian Pattilo, incoming AMS VP; and David Wells, policy adviser.

I know many of you have had the opportunity to meet with these extraordinary young people. I want to say it has been a pleasure to have my office assist in their visit with us today, and certainly I suggest that this is an example of British Columbia's finest young people, who will indeed make an enormous contribution as they go forward in their careers. I would ask the House to please make them very welcome.

[1405]

H. Lali: With us here in the galleries are Bill Stowell, who is a friend and a log-trader. Joining him is Will Sloan. He's a forestry consultant. Both of these fellows are from my hometown of Merritt. They're in Victoria today attending the B.C. Professional Foresters AGM, and they've come here to see us cross swords during question period. Could the House please give my friends from Merritt a warm welcome.

Hon. S. Bond: I am absolutely delighted to have two very important people in my world in the House today. I think all of us who are here in this place know that when you get involved in politics, your family comes along with you whether they choose to or not. We certainly know that they give up a lot. I'm really happy today to have one of our twins, our son Christopher, here with us. He came to spend part of his reading break to actually get to visit with his mom. The good news is that he has had lots of time to read and not much time with his mom. But my son Chris is here.

With Chris is someone who is here to celebrate. She was a legislative intern — I should say, in a far, far more recent class than that of the Minister of Health or the Minister of Environment. She has gone on to become incredibly important to me. She is my constituency assistant. I am delighted to have two incredible people in the gallery, Chris Bond and Jackie Eden.

R. Fleming: I rise in the House today to introduce three guests who are with us in the gallery. Betty Bartlett is a retired teacher and is a resident of Manotick, Ontario. She now volunteers with the Ottawa-Manotick archives. Susan Mann is a historian and president emeritus of York University in Toronto. Both of them are friends of my third guest, a constituent of the member for Victoria-Beacon Hill. She is a former Speaker of this House, a former minister and a former mayor of Victoria: Gretchen Brewin. Will the House please make these three guests feel welcome.

Hon. R. Coleman: I rise in the House to introduce some guests today. David Hansen is the fiancé of my terrific assistant in my office, Lucy. By the way, David is a great Seahawks fan. We're both still in mourning over the Super Bowl. Having said that, accompanying David today are also Gordon and Shirley Hansen, who are soon to be Lucy's in-laws and therefore are David's parents; and then Kay Stewart, who's David's aunt, soon to be Lucy's aunt-in-law. Would the House please make them welcome.

L. Krog: I'm delighted today to ask the House to make welcome here a group of international students from Malaspina High School, accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Butler. Would the House please make them welcome.

Hon. S. Hagen: I'm pleased to introduce to the House today a very special young woman from the Comox Valley. Kelly Murdock, who lives in Courtenay, is returning from Queen's University where she's studying political science. It's a reading break for Kelly, so we welcome her to Victoria and also back home to Courtenay. Would you please join me in making her welcome.

C. Trevena: Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure to introduce a former constituent of yours who is now a constituent of mine: Mary Storry. Mary left Penticton, where she was a city councillor, to return to Campbell River. She has shown how wise she is in coming back to the north Island, and within months of her return, she was elected to Campbell River city council. I hope the House will make her and her daughter Kristen, who is studying forest ecology at UBC, most welcome.

J. Kwan: I'm very delighted, for I do not get very many guests visiting me in the Legislature. Today I have the pleasure of introducing five very special guests from my community. They include Muggs Siguerison, who is a resident of the Strathcona community and a strong, strong advocate for equality and social justice, a tireless volunteer in all sorts of sectors in our community. Along with her is Stephen Lytton, who is a member of the Lytton Nation. He is on the Carnegie board. He's also on the aboriginal homelessness steering committee and the B.C. Aboriginal Network on Disabilities Society board. He is also an actor.

[1410]

Along with Stephen and Muggs are Gena Thompson, who lives in the Lori Krill co-op on Georgia Street,

is also on the Carnegie board and is a learning centre volunteer and a student at Langara. Harold Asham is also visiting. He is a computer tutor volunteer at the Carnegie learning centre and writes for the newsletter in our community. Last but not least, I'd like to also introduce Luka Jolicoeur. She is with the DERA co-op and is also a very active community member from the downtown east side. I'd like to ask the House to please welcome all my special guests.

D. Thorne: It's my absolute pleasure today to introduce the House to my youngest son, Lee Edmondson, who is in the gallery for the very first time. He lives in Coquitlam in my riding — in my house, actually. That's my absolute pleasure as well.

Interjections.

D. Thorne: Now I've lost my train of thought — not really. In any case, it is a pleasure to have my son here. He's an absolute advocate for his mother, and he's here today in that role, I'm sure. With him is his friend James Morris, who is now a resident of Victoria, originally from Coquitlam, and his friend Shannon, who just moved here from Ontario and is loving British Columbia. I would ask the House to please make them very welcome.

M. Farnworth: I won't even try to follow that.

Anyway, it's my pleasure, following the government yesterday, to introduce the NDP interns for this session. They play a great role for both parties in this House, and it's an extremely useful experience for us and for them. It's my pleasure to introduce our NDP caucus interns who are in the gallery today.

First is Gwyneth Jones. She has a BA in sociology, honours, from Simon Fraser University. Karen Sawatzky has a BA in history, honours, from the University of Victoria. Adrian Etchell has a BA in political science and history, also from the University of Victoria. Emily Sinclair, a BA in political science from the University of Victoria — well represented. Finally, my favourite: Brock McLeod, who has a BA in liberal studies. I won't even ask what's entailed in getting a degree in liberal studies, hon. Speaker, but I would ask the House to make them all very welcome.

Hon. M. de Jong: It is, of course, a discipline attracting increasing numbers of followers across the province. In the roll of the dice that assigns interns to one caucus or another — I think the Health minister welcomed all of the members, but I wonder if I might follow on my friend the Opposition House Leader — the government's interns include Genevieve Murray, Justin Cheng, Zara Rahman, Corrie Delisle and Matt Watson. My own insecurity precludes me from listing their myriad academic credentials, but I know that all members will also want to make these great young people and interns welcome to the precincts.

Lastly, on behalf of the member for Abbotsford-Clayburn, I'm pleased to welcome back to the precincts

Ron Gladiuk, a friend, bon vivant and all-round good guy. It's great to have him back here in Victoria as well.
[1415]

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

FLAUNT YOUR FRENCHNESS CAMPAIGN

D. Thorne: Several members have commented on my unusual attire today. I'm advertising the campaign in Coquitlam-Maillardville of which I will be speaking. The Flaunt Your Frenchness campaign is a celebration of the rich francophone heritage and culture of Maillardville, the oldest and largest francophone community in British Columbia. The campaign is about celebrating whatever your Frenchness is — a passion for French food, French language, French film or getting back in touch with your French ancestry.

This year's campaign challenges everyone to find 50 different ways to celebrate Flaunt Your Frenchness Week, which runs February 25 to March 5. It is a prelude to Francophone Month in British Columbia, which is March. During the week, residents and visitors alike will be encouraged to participate in French activities throughout Coquitlam.

This cheeky campaign was trademarked by the city of Coquitlam and is part of its tourism project to both spread the word about the community and revitalize the Maillardville area. The campaign received two national marketing awards last year for promotional campaign and tourism marketing from the Economic Developers Association of Canada.

The 2010 Olympics have been the catalyst for this community to see itself differently. The Olympics share the same two official languages as Canada: English and French. When the world comes to British Columbia, they will expect an authentic francophone experience, and Coquitlam will deliver with panache. Maillardville was filmed and featured on the B.C. Stories link that is put on by the B.C. Olympic secretariat. It is aired at the log house, and media the world over will see Maillardville on clips given out at the Torino games and on trade missions.

Flaunt Your Frenchness Week kicks off this Saturday, with the music and heritage homes of Maillardville starting immediately after the launch. Seven heritage homes are opening themselves up to music and events for the francophone community. All these events, including films, music and festivals, will take place all week. Please join us and celebrate your Frenchness in Maillardville in the next week.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF AFRICAN CANADIANS

D. Hayer: It is an honour today to observe Black History Month in Canada. Over ten years ago in the Parliament of Canada — in support of a motion by the first woman of African Canadian heritage to be elected to our federal Parliament, the Hon. Jean Augustine — our federal government officially recognized February as Black History Month.

While Ms. Augustine may have led the way in the federal scene, more than two decades earlier right here in British Columbia, Rosemary Brown became the first woman in Canada of African heritage to be elected as an MLA. While these two women may have led the way in politics, African Canadians have been part of our country for more than 400 years. Over the centuries their contributions have been great, from making sacrifices as Canadian soldiers during the War of 1812 to playing huge roles in helping slaves escape to Canada during the American Civil War, to courageous fighting for Canada during the two world wars.

African Canadians are prominent in every walk of life in our society. Many new immigrants from that great continent have made Canada very proud, like Surrey's own Daniel Igali, who won an Olympic gold medal for this country, as did Donovan Bailey, who brought glory to this nation when he became the fastest man alive in the Olympic 100-metres.

It is with great pleasure and pride that as Parliamentary Secretary for Multiculturalism and Immigration, I ask all members of this House to salute the enormous contributions African Canadians have made to this country and to British Columbia.

ABORIGINAL ENHANCEMENT AGREEMENT IN MAPLE RIDGE-PITT MEADOWS

M. Sather: On January 25 my office had the honour of being asked to witness the signing of the second Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows aboriginal enhancement agreement. The five-year agreement was signed by school district 42 officials, Chief Peter James of the Katzie First Nation, Chief Marilyn Gabriel of the Kwantlen First Nation and a representative of off-reserve aboriginals and Métis.

[1420]

In school district 42 there are approximately 945 aboriginal students, 70 of whom are from the Katzie First Nation. The overall goal of the school district 42 aboriginal education department is to enhance the school experience and academic success of aboriginal students. There are 14 aboriginal support workers and three and a half teacher FTEs who maintain an academic focus with the students while promoting a cultural component. Over 100 cultural presentations and events are presented throughout the district each year.

In June 2000 the aboriginal education department negotiated the first five-year aboriginal education enhancement agreement with local aboriginal peoples and the Ministry of Education. Our school district's agreement was the first in the province to not tie funding to incentives to the success of aboriginal students. This led other school districts to stop this practice.

I would like to congratulate school district 42 on the success of its first enhancement agreement and wish them all the best for a successful second enhancement agreement. I would also like to take this opportunity to wish a very happy retirement to the vice-principal of aboriginal education in school district

42, Jim McCulloch. He has been instrumental in the success of aboriginal education in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows.

RICHMOND ADDICTION SERVICES

J. Yap: I rise today to commend the work of Richmond Addiction Services, as the organization recently celebrated its 30th anniversary.

Last year Richmond Addiction Services received funding from several sources, including \$1.1 million from Vancouver Coastal Health, \$100,000 from the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General and \$175,000 from the city of Richmond. Richmond Addiction Services offers free, confidential alcohol, drug and gambling out-patient counselling as well as prevention and education services to adults, youth, families and seniors.

The Richmond Addiction Services society continues to expand its programs, adapting to the changing needs of the community. The adult daytox program provides support to an average of 17 people per day, and in 2005 Vancouver Coastal chose Richmond Addiction Services to launch a pilot youth daytox program. Other recent expansions include hiring a Chinese outreach worker, an awareness campaign aimed at seniors, and an addictions counsellor who makes house and hospital calls to Richmond seniors.

Executive director Vincent Battistelli has raised the profile of the organization within Richmond and beyond. He understands that drug and alcohol addiction is a serious issue facing our community. Richmond Addiction Services brings together all members of the community to solve these problems. The services offered by this organization support our government's great goal to lead the way in North America in healthy living. The Richmond Addiction Services society should be commended for helping the citizens of Richmond to choose healthy lifestyles.

NAME CHANGE FOR GOLDEN TO HOCKEY, B.C.

N. Macdonald: Earlier the Premier highlighted Sara Renner, who won a silver medal in cross-country skiing. I would just like to add to that list from the Columbia Valley. Today Christine Keshen, a member of Canada's bronze medal-winning women's curling team, added to that total. I'd like you to join me in congratulating her.

[Applause.]

Thank you.

In the time that's available to me, I want to talk about Hockey, B.C., which is the official new name of my home community. Changing the name "Golden" to "Hockey" was an idea that was put forward by a teacher, Mr. Souhail Soujah. It's an idea he picked up off of television. CBC is running a contest that looks for Hockeyville, Canada. The idea of the contest is that you have to show your passion for hockey.

He took it to his leadership class, and the leadership class thought about what they could do to show

that the community was committed to hockey. The idea that one of them had, Biron Guthy-Kerr, was to change the name of Golden to Hockey. They took it to town council, and town council agreed to do it. They have put Hockey in front of the sign at the entrance to the town, instead of Golden. It has been picked up all over the place. It was in the *Toronto Star*. CBC TV is coming next week to do a story on it.

What's exciting about it is that from a student in the class having this idea to having it picked up all over the place.... And it's not just Canada. In Mexico two students from Golden Secondary School were moving, and they introduced themselves to some locals and said they were from Golden, and the locals answered: "Don't you mean Hockey?"

[1425]

The only bad part of it was that there was an e-mail from somebody in Belgium, and they e-mailed the mayor and suggested that it was a crazy idea to change the name of Golden. He had been there and thought it was great, and they were changing it to Hockey. So it's only for a week, but that's the story of Hockey, B.C.

SENIORS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

R. Cantelon: I'm speaking today about 21st-century seniors. As we look forward to the future, we know that seniors are the fastest-growing demographic in the province. We have all heard the statistics that today one in seven British Columbians is a senior. But in the not so distant future, that group will include one in every four people. I have to admit that like many of the colleagues in this assembly, I have a special interest in this fast-growing group.

But what I would like to talk about today is something I would call 21st-century seniors. This refers to the increasingly changing lives that our seniors live and how we can provide them — how we have a responsibility, indeed, to provide them — with the support they deserve. Our seniors today are more physically active and healthier than ever before and continue to make significant contributions to our community and our society for many years beyond their 65th birthday.

In 2007 my community, Nanaimo, will be hosting the B.C. Seniors Games. I invite all British Columbians, and particularly those in this House, to participate and excel in the games that will be held in Nanaimo. I promise you a welcome and a great reception.

It's important, though, that whenever our seniors decide they want to relax and enjoy the fruits of their lifelong efforts, we have a great system of support there for them. That is why our government has made it one of our five great goals to provide the best system of support in Canada for seniors.

In my constituency of Nanaimo-Parksville we've already seen a commitment to reaching that goal. Just a few weeks ago the Vancouver Island Health Authority announced that the region will be receiving 435 beds. I would ask the House to join me in showing our appreciation for the outstanding contribution seniors have

made and continue to make in each and every one of our constituencies.

Oral Questions

CARE BEDS FOR SENIORS IN KOOTENAY AREA

Mr. Speaker: I'd say the member for Hockey, but.... The member for Columbia River-Revelstoke.

N. Macdonald: Yesterday the Minister of Health claimed that the tragic case of the Albo family was a unique case. Yesterday my colleague told the minister that there were at least four other cases that she knew of. People in the Kootenays are telling me this is not unique. They are telling me that it is something that has happened in the past, that it is happening in the present and that they do not want to see it happen in the future. They are telling me it is directly connected to cuts to acute beds, cuts to residential care in the Kootenays.

The question for the minister is: will the minister today admit to the House that his government's cuts to residential and acute care beds in the Kootenays and the government's first-available-bed policy is moving seniors away from their communities?

Hon. G. Abbott: I appreciate the member asking the question. Yesterday two members of the opposition indicated that they had at least four cases that told a story in respect of this. In response to the Opposition House Leader, I invited the opposition to provide me with the case files on those four or more cases. To this moment — because I just checked with my office upstairs — we are in receipt of no case files from the opposition side.

I do not suppose this is any attempt to play politics with this issue. I expect that the opposition sincerely meant what they said, and I look forward to being in receipt of those case files. It is difficult for me to comment on case files which the.... Despite what I thought was an undertaking by the Opposition House Leader to bring them forward, I have not received them.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Columbia River-Revelstoke has a supplemental.

N. Macdonald: I do. The member for West Kootenay-Boundary is in her riding and will bring that information to you.

[1430]

The information that I can give you is a case from the past to point out to you that what has repeatedly happened.... This has happened in the past, and it is happening presently. What we need to do in this House is make sure that it does not happen in the future. The case that I'll give to you is one that took place last spring. There was a resident of Golden. The resident was a senior. The resident had lived in Golden her whole life. She was married for 50 years. Her husband

had participated in the building of the seniors home. The government made decisions to cut beds in that home. There was not space for her. Therefore, she was forced to leave the community. She died three weeks later in Salmon Arm, away from her husband, from her friends and from her community.

Mr. Speaker: Does the member have a question?

N. Macdonald: The question is this. There are examples that need studying. You have sent somebody to study what's gone on in Trail. What I'm asking the minister to do is to not stop just with Trail, but to move through the Kootenays and include Golden and all of the other communities that have similar stories. Look at what happened, and make sure that this does not happen again.

Hon. G. Abbott: If the member would like to provide me with the details around the unfortunate case he's describing, I'd be glad to look at it and see if there is something we can learn.

Remember, Mr. Speaker, that when we took office — and this is as true of the Kootenays as anywhere else in the province — the wait for residential care in this province was one year. Today the wait for residential care or assisted living is between 18 days in Vancouver Coastal and 88 days in the Interior Health Authority. That is the range across the province.

As we add new facilities — and there are certainly a number of them in the Kootenays, including Golden.... As those facilities come on line, we will be able to reduce the wait times even more. We've made a huge investment in this area. It may not be perfect, but it's a heck of a lot better than when we took office five years ago.

Mr. Speaker: Member has a further supplemental.

N. Macdonald: The experience in the Kootenays is different from what you are describing. We had, in each community, community-built facilities that met the needs the community had. The difficulty with what has gone on is the transition. Beds were closed before new facilities were ready. That makes no sense in any way, and the result has been tragedy.

There are lessons to be learned from what happened in the past week in Trail. What I want you to do is look carefully at what has gone on and look at the cuts that have been made to make sure that you learn from this. So I'm asking the minister to include communities other than just Trail in the studies that you're going to do.

Hon. G. Abbott: I don't for a moment question this member's sincerity. I have known this member for a long time, and I know he feels passionately about these issues. I do, though, have to remind the member that... I believe it's the Henry Durand Manor in Golden. It was typical of a number of the facilities across the province that we inherited, where narrow doorways

unsuitable for wheelchair access, narrow hallways, inappropriate dining and sanitary facilities.... As I noted yesterday in the House, a lot of these facilities were not meeting fire codes, not meeting building codes and not appropriate for the level of care that they were offering.

In the case of Henry Durand Manor, the province has invested about half a million dollars in there to improve all of those things — add wheelchair accessibility, add lifts and so on. We have qualitatively improved that. We have added assisted-living premises in Golden as well. We are working across the province to ensure that the frail elderly have the best possible experience, qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

[1435]

AVAILABILITY OF BEDS AT ROYAL INLAND HOSPITAL

H. Lali: This uncaring government's massive cuts to acute care beds and its complete failure to build 5,000 new long-term care beds are creating chaos at the Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops. Last November over 18 surgeries were cancelled at RIH due to the lack of beds. As we speak, six more surgeries will be cancelled in Kamloops due to the lack of beds. Presently there are 33 patients denied admittance to the Royal Inland Hospital due to the lack of beds.

The Minister of Health callously dismissed the bed shortage crisis last November, choosing instead to blame a car accident for the chaos at the Royal Inland. An IHA report says there is overcrowding in Kamloops. It says: "There is ample evidence that we are overcrowded.... Our hospitals are too full, and we need to do something about it.... While the pressures on Royal Inland Hospital... have been in the news of late, most of us have been aware of significant pressures for quite some time." This is the government's own report.

My question is to the Minister of Health. How long have you been aware of this situation, and what are you going to do about immediately restoring beds that your uncaring Premier cut in the first place?

Hon. G. Abbott: To be brutally frank about it, the only chaos that exists in the health care system exists in the minds of that member and other members across the way who I think, regrettably and unfortunately, distort the real state of our health care in this province, which is very, very good.

The Conference Board of Canada rightly pointed out that British Columbia has the best overall health care system in Canada. Have we ever said it's perfect? No, it is not. Each and every day we strive for continuous improvement in that health care system. But Royal Inland Hospital and the other hospitals across this province provide exceptional care, and they provide exceptional care because of the caring people that operate those facilities. We should never forget again.

This is an indication, and the members talk about this. The fact of the matter is that between the fiscal years '91-92 and '96-97 the number of acute care beds in

B.C. fell to 9,076 — a decline of over 22 percent. In the same period B.C.'s population grew by 14 percent.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

The member for Yale-Lillooet has a supplemental.

H. Lali: The minister has got to be hallucinating if he believes that the state of health care in this province is very, very good. The *Kamloops Daily News*...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

H. Lali: ...says:

"Patients who don't belong in Royal Inland Hospital but have nowhere to go are causing doctors to postpone surgeries because there are no beds available. At the same time, doctors are under pressure to discharge patients quickly and avoid admitting people, if possible," cardiologist Dr. David Kincade said. "There's this impetus to do everything we can not to admit patients in hospital," he said. Head of surgery at RIH Dr. David Stewart said: "What's happening at Royal Inland Hospital is a chronic problem in B.C."

The date on that article is July 9, 2004, and it is still happening today. For two years the Premier has known about it. This uncaring Liberal government has known about it, and they have chosen to do nothing. They are now forcing doctors to refuse to admit sick people to hospitals.

My question, again, is to the hon. minister. Will the minister take immediate action in Kamloops, restore cuts to acute care beds at Royal Inland and keep the Premier's repeatedly broken promise to seniors by building new long-term care beds so that sick people don't have to suffer the indignity of increasing wait-lists and cancelled surgeries?

Hon. G. Abbott: It's interesting. I was at Royal Inland Hospital just a week or two ago to celebrate the opening of the new 44-bed neuropsychiatric centre in Kamloops. Earlier I'd been there to celebrate the opening of other facilities that we have added in Kamloops.

[1440]

I know that I've seen in newspaper articles today more nonsense from some of the members opposite about hospital patients staying in hotel rooms and so on. Again, this is just a total distortion of reality. The people in question are staying in hotels because they don't require pre-operative care in the hospital. So they're waiting in the hospitals the night before they go into surgery.

All of this is totally appropriate. I hope the members opposite don't have to adjust their question period questions as a result of me saying this, but this is entirely appropriate. The attempt is always made now, in terms of the use of acute care beds, to have day surgeries or ambulatory surgeries whenever possible. We have come a long way in terms of surgical techniques

and technology and so on. Many things that required hospital stays before can now be done on a day surgery basis.

PARTICIPATION OF LES VERTESI IN HEALTH CARE RESEARCH TOUR

D. Cubberley: Speaking of distortions of reality, yesterday the Minister of Health described the Premier's brother-in-law as a respected adviser who has written a number of publications, which he encouraged members of the House to take an interest in. Yet when I quoted directly from one of those publications stating that the Canada Health Act prohibition on user fees should be done away with, the minister said that was gross distortion.

Moments later outside the House he admitted that he hasn't read the book. Given that today, presumably, he now knows Dr. Vertesi does indeed advocate a parallel private health system with user fees and queue-jumping, will the minister agree that it sends entirely the wrong message to British Columbians about the purpose of this tour?

Hon. G. Abbott: I thank the member opposite for reminding me of why my career as a literary critic was so short. It's probably very fortunate that that's the case.

The fact of the matter is that Dr. Vertesi is a very eminent medical practitioner in this province. I don't think even the members opposite — I hope not even they — are disputing this. Dr. Vertesi has had a 30-year career as an emergency room physician. He has more recently been the head of emergency medicine at Royal Columbian Hospital. He has been the head, in the last couple of years, of medical services there.

For those members who have had the unfortunate occasion to have to use the ambulance service in the province of British Columbia.... Advanced life support that's now a part of so many of our ambulances was something that Dr. Vertesi was very much pivotal in putting into place. He is, of course, our representative on the Canada Health Council. He has had a very eminent career, and I would have hoped that the members opposite would celebrate that rather than depreciating the contribution he has made.

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

D. Cubberley: The issue isn't the doctor's medical credentials, so we can set that red herring aside.

I'd remind the minister that the Premier promised British Columbians a real dialogue, not a hidden agenda, and that everything we do "will be within the Canada Health Act." The first thing we see is a private tour with a sole outside adviser who just happens to favour user fees and advocates two-tiered medicine, of which the minister appears to profess ignorance.

Dr. Vertesi's agenda is clear. He wants to "make sure the Premier is not inadvertently steered in the

wrong direction." He wants to "make sure the Premier learns the right things and not the wrong things inadvertently. He's well intentioned" — the Premier — "but there are lots of misunderstandings."

Will the minister acknowledge that this is terrible optics and that it smacks of a hidden agenda? Will he tell the Premier this hastily contrived tour with an advocate for allowing the rich to queue-jump should be either broadened or abandoned?

[1445]

Hon. G. Abbott: As we said in the throne speech, we are looking forward to engaging with British Columbians, other Canadian jurisdictions and internationally on how we can have a better health care system in British Columbia. Again, we've had lots of confirmation about British Columbia being the best overall health care system in Canada, but there's still lots of room for improvement. We plan to learn things internationally, nationally and certainly provincially from the discussion.

There is no intention by the Premier, by me or anyone else to limit the range of that discussion. I had, for example, just last week a very good discussion with the B.C. Health Coalition who, generally speaking, are persistent and often quite predictable critics of this government. Nevertheless, we are going to welcome a range of views, and I hope the member opposite wouldn't dismiss the views of Mr. Vertesi either.

We are going to welcome a range of views. To paraphrase Chairman Mao: let a thousand flowers blossom. Let a thousand ideas prevail.

CONDITION OF HOUSING IN DOWNTOWN EAST SIDE

J. Kwan: "You want to see the worst experiment of social housing in British Columbia, go to the downtown east side of Vancouver. It's a failed experiment because we forgot about the fact that people need to be integrated." Those were the words of the Minister of Housing.

Visiting us today are four individuals who are active volunteers in the community, who live in award-winning social housing projects in the downtown east side. Can the minister explain how individuals visiting us today are failed experiments in their community?

Hon. R. Coleman: There is a variety of very successful social housing projects in British Columbia, and there is a variety of projects that need to be enhanced for services for their clientele. There are also a number of people who are slipping through the cracks, who don't get the assistance they need when they have multiple barriers and addictions that they need to be helped with in various forms of housing.

I don't see any reason why we shouldn't look at a continuum of housing from homelessness through to social housing and other options to help everybody that could possibly be helped for the maximum ability we can do it.

J. Kwan: Interestingly, that's not what the minister said — not once, but twice. Let me quote: "Major cities

all across North America today are bulldozing their housing projects, and they're doing it so that they can redevelop their communities and integrate people into society." Words of the Minister of Housing once again.

The Premier himself negotiated an agreement with the former mayor of Vancouver, Larry Campbell, to fund 200 units of social housing in the Woodwards project in the downtown east side as part of the Olympic legacy. If the downtown east side was such a failure, then is the Premier wrong in signing that agreement?

Hon. R. Coleman: The member knows well what's happening at Woodwards. Woodwards is actually an integrated project. Yeah, there are 200 units of social housing that are going to be funded by the provincial government, but there is also market housing integrated into the same project.

D. Routley: The Tellier Tower. The Pendera. Four Sisters Housing Co-op. Bruce Eriksen Place. Lore Krill Co-op. If the downtown east side is such a failed social experiment, why do the minister's own officials repeatedly bring international guests to the downtown east side to tour these very same award-winning housing projects? Why do they tour what the minister has called a failed social housing experiment?

Hon. R. Coleman: You know, it's very interesting to listen to this. I had debates last fall with the member opposite during estimates debate also about housing, and there was this big concern that somebody might go out and do a program and expand something like SAFER to help seniors to stay in their rental apartments in British Columbia when we helped 7,700 more people. There was a big concern that we might be doing or even looking at rent supplements in housing in British Columbia, but when we became government there were already thousands of rent supplements put in place by the previous government.

[1450]

You actually talked about integration of housing in your own programs and debates when I was in opposition. Let's get real, hon. member. What we need to do is have a housing strategy that goes from the continuum of homelessness right through to home ownership, and that's what this government is intending to do. We're going to help as many people as possible with the maximum dollars that we can put into place.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Cowichan-Ladysmith has a supplemental.

GOVERNMENT PLAN FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

D. Routley: The big concern of this member and the big concern of the residents of social housing in B.C. is a minister who seems prepared to turn his back on all of that and apply simplistic, one-sided black-and-white solutions.

My question, though, is to the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance was an advocate of social

housing when she was a councillor in the city of Vancouver. Will the Minister of Finance step in and ensure that these award-winning projects are not abandoned and commit today the needed funding for a comprehensive social housing plan that includes new developments of social housing for the residents of British Columbia?

Hon. R. Coleman: The members opposite just don't get it. It's this simple. Yeah, there are some award-winning social housing projects in British Columbia. I was actually part of developing some of those, and they're great for their residents in B.C. But there's a gap that needs to be filled for people that have multiple barriers and mental illness. There are people in your community, hon. member, that can't have social housing today, because there is none available, yet they're paying over 50 percent of their income in rent. Would you deny them the opportunity to have a housing supplement so they would be financially stable in their community just because you have...?

You think I've got one-size-fits-all? Those are the people that have one-size-fits-all in housing, hon. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Just a reminder, members, to direct your comments through the Chair.

CANCELLATION OF LEAVING CERTIFICATES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

J. Horgan: Thank you for that reminder, Mr. Speaker.

We heard a great deal in the budget speech about the importance of children to our future here in British Columbia. Yet the Ministry of Education recently announced that they're going to turn their backs on special needs students in this province and stop acknowledging the good work they do.

Last week the ministry announced that they were going to do away with the leaving certificates that were traditionally given to those students, special needs students who have completed their individual education programs and graduated with their peers. My question is to the minister. Can she tell this House and parents across this province why it is that this government has decided to turn its back on special needs students? What research, what experts have advised her that this is a good idea?

Hon. S. Bond: Let's be perfectly clear. This is a government that has invested over \$600 million to try to meet the needs of special education students across this province. We intend to continue to do that. That indicates the importance that those students have for this government. In fact, two of the government MLAs have brought this issue to my attention. I've already agreed that it's an issue that's important, and we need to go back and look at the policy, because we care about every student in this province. It's something we're going to look at.

J. Horgan: I'm always pleased to hear the minister's answers, even if they don't have anything to do with the questions I've asked. But she did come to it at the end, and I want to ask her again. If the government thought this was such a good idea last week, can she tell this House and can she tell parents...?

In fact, she talks about parent involvement as well. The minister is very big on that. Fifteen hundred parents have signed a petition saying this is a bad idea; it's misguided. My question to her is this: why did you do it in the first place? Why didn't you stand up and say: "It was a bad idea, and let's do away with it"?

Hon. S. Bond: I'm delighted to continue to answer the questions from the member opposite as well. Even though he gets the answers the first time, he feels it necessary to ask them a second time. The fact of the matter is this. We said clearly...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

[1455]

Hon. S. Bond: ...that we're prepared to look at that decision. But let's look at the record of this government — over half a billion dollars to try to meet the needs of special needs students across this province. We also will soon release a report, the first that's been done in this province, called *How Are We Doing?* We actually want to look at how we are managing and working and trying to ensure that special needs students have the very best opportunities they can. We're committed to top-quality education for every student in this province.

COVERAGE FOR RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGERY

R. Austin: A constituent of mine, Mrs. Isobel Pantzelt, who is retired and living on a pension, was born with a cleft palate. She had all the usual reconstructive surgery as a child and then as a young adult. Now in her senior years, she has needed dental surgery in order to be able to eat and has had to take out a mortgage on her home to pay for this.

Her doctor and the dentist have both written on her behalf to get this procedure covered under the Medical Services Plan. Northern Health has refused to cover the surgery because dental is not covered even though it's obvious that this is medically required surgery.

My question to the Minister of Health is this: does the minister believe that surgery that a doctor considers essential should be covered under the Medical Services Plan?

Hon. G. Abbott: I'll be cautious in my answer, because I don't know the details of the case that the member raises. I am glad to receive from him the details of the case, and I'd be pleased to take it up. I do have to say, though, that the Medical Services Commission is an independent body, and it would be inappropriate for me or the member, for that matter, to at-

tempt to in any way fetter the jurisdiction and prudence of that body.

That having been said, I appreciate the member raising the issue. If he would provide me and my office with the details, I would be pleased to see what we can do.

BUDGET ALLOCATION FOR PREMIER'S OFFICE

M. Farnworth: Can the Minister of Finance tell this House what compelling argument was made by the Premier's office to give the largest increase, on a percentage basis, of any ministry to his ministry by this minister?

Hon. C. Taylor: In fact, there has been a lot of reorganization and restructuring going on, and one of the efforts that this government is really trying to work hard at is to get more cross-ministry initiatives. You see that in the new \$421 million that we have announced in services for children. That cuts across a number of ministries. Our Strong Start program for children also is doing exactly the same thing. In this case, we can look at children as a whole and try to make sure that there are points that we can intervene, help and assist, and we can do it.

Well, to back up those initiatives, you have to have in the deputy minister's office the ability to talk to the various ministries and get everybody moving in the same direction. The increases come from the deputy ministers' secretariat.

[End of question period.]

Petitions

J. Horgan: I have the privilege to present a petition. This petition was signed by over 1,500 British Columbians, and it calls upon the government to acknowledge that:

[While modified programs often have learning outcomes that differ from provincial graduation requirements, students with disabilities are entitled to have their work recognized and their accomplishments publicly acknowledged by the province of British Columbia in the same manner as their peers.]

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: Mr. Speaker, I call in this chamber Committee of Supply, for the information of members, to consider the supplementary estimates No. 1.

[1500]

Committee of Supply

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (continued)

The House in Committee of Supply; S. Hawkins in the chair.

The committee met at 3:02 p.m.

On Vote 48(S): contingencies — negotiating framework initiative (all ministries), \$1,000,000,000 (continued).

G. Robertson: I'd like to just clarify with the minister some math related to this million-dollar bonus for successfully negotiated contracts for the sectors that expire after March 31. Under what specific conditions are they eligible for a comparable share of this bonus?

Hon. C. Taylor: In exactly the same circumstances and in exactly the same amounts as all other public sector workers, if they can reach a negotiated settlement before their contract expires.

G. Robertson: So from that, is it safe to conclude that the minister will pay out that same \$3,300 per worker, plus or minus, on those settlements as well?

Hon. C. Taylor: As we have now said many times today and have said previously in public and private meetings, yes.

The Chair: Member, just to note, that question has been canvassed quite extensively this morning.

G. Robertson: Thank you, Chair. When there's \$1 billion on the table, it's important to make sure that stuff's covered. I....

The Chair: Member, repetition — tedious repetition — is not in this chamber.

G. Robertson: I understand.

The minister earlier today mentioned providing for the settlement within the forecast allowance. Is that the only provision in the new budget where the post-March 31 settlements are contained?

Hon. C. Taylor: As the member opposite knows, the forecast allowance is there for unexpected circumstances. This, we feel, fits into that category because it is always possible that the teachers will settle before March 31, and so we have greatly increased the forecast allowance for this coming year in part because there is the possibility of the settlements with the teachers. There's also the possibility that we will have difficulties with commodity prices, and there are always unknowns that happen, so we did significantly increase the forecast allowance.

G. Robertson: So I conclude from that that there's no other expense related to this settlement in other ministries' budgets? Any anticipated cost that's attributable to this is all in the forecast allowance?

Hon. C. Taylor: That's correct. If we are still concentrating on the bonus and the incentive for signing before the end of the contract, that's in the forecast allowance.

[1505]

G. Robertson: So a question for me — I'm relatively new here. In approving this \$1 billion, as the steps that we're taking right now.... We're actually talking about an additional chunk of money that will be potentially settled later. The approval related to that is not happening today. This is specifically around the \$1 billion that's in front of us. The approval that's related to the moneys that are in the forecast allowance — when does that approval happen?

Hon. C. Taylor: I don't want you to do any adding here. This is not additional money. If the teachers do not settle before March 31, their portion of the billion will go to paying down the debt in this year. We have put into the forecast allowance going forward a comparable amount, if the need is there, but in terms of when that gets approved, of course, it's part of the budget. It will be approved with the budget debate.

G. Robertson: Thank you for helping me with the math.

Questions, more specifically, on the post-secondary education sector. I'm curious who is really negotiating here. Is it currently the employers? Is it PSEC? Is it the ministry? Is it you, the Finance Minister, specifically?

Hon. C. Taylor: It is always the employers through the employers association.

G. Robertson: My understanding is that when there are challenges with the employer — and in this case there are a great number of employers involved — PSEC will play a role and will be present at the table as the negotiation proceeds. Are they currently at the table? Can you describe what their role will be in the weeks ahead?

Hon. C. Taylor: PSEC is not at the table. I want to remind the member opposite that this is about the \$1 billion incentive. This is not about the negotiations that will be going on.

G. Robertson: The negotiation that is taking place is what triggers the \$1 billion. That is what I have been hearing repeatedly, so it's hard to unbundle this conversation. There is a whole number of negotiations taking place with the employers. Can the minister give some information on how this is progressing at this time?

Hon. C. Taylor: Again, as we said many times this morning, there is a lot of activity. We are quite hopeful that these various sectors are making progress.

The Chair: Can we move on to something else, member? That area has been canvassed this morning as well.

G. Robertson: I'm specifically trying to get clarity around the negotiation that's dealing with post-secondary education, which is a very complex negotiation in that it directly results in whether or not the billion dollars will be allocated in the settlement.

I'm curious from the minister.... The mandate that the employers have to settle.... How broadly has this been shared? Have institutions been informed, the employers been informed, what their numbers are and what they can work with in this situation for the negotiation?

Hon. C. Taylor: The employers certainly are aware.

G. Robertson: The employers are aware. Is this information publicly available at this time?

Hon. C. Taylor: In fact, negotiations are negotiations, and they happen at the table. They don't happen in the press, and they don't happen in public.

G. Robertson: My understanding is that many of the challenges with the time line that are occurring right now are because the numbers are not on the table for some, if not all, of the sectors that are negotiating.

[1510]

Can the minister clarify the gap here between the employers having the numbers and those who are negotiating with the employers not having access to those, given that there's a very short period of time in which to conclude these negotiations?

Hon. C. Taylor: They all have their mandates, and certainly, negotiations are proceeding.

G. Robertson: In regards to this deadline, which is some short weeks away, the complexity of these negotiations has come up again and again with regards to the post-secondary sector. There are great concerns among faculty and staff that they will be able to achieve the goals, the targets that have been set, and be able to access the billion dollars, which, we assume in good faith, has been put on the table, but there appear to be a lot more barriers present and a lot more micromanagement of the negotiation than will allow these negotiations to conclude.

I'm curious if the minister has full confidence that the bargaining with all of the sectors who are now bargaining can be concluded prior to the deadlines imposed.

Hon. C. Taylor: What we are doing today is voting for supplementary estimates for this year. There are — more than decades — centuries of parliamentary tradition that say we focus on this year, and our year-end is March 31. That's what we're dealing with today on this.

G. Robertson: I understand exactly what our focus is today, the challenge being that in order for us to approve the billion dollars, we should have some confidence that there is in fact a negotiation in good faith taking place so that the sectors that are bargaining right now have access to that billion dollars. It's not a one-time bribe for good behaviour.

On this \$1 billion, can the ratifications of negotiations that take place after March 31...? Can they still appeal for this bonus, given special approval?

The Chair: Member, again, that question was repeatedly asked in committee stage earlier, and it is tediously repetitious to repeat the comments and questions that members have canvassed earlier.

G. Robertson: Thank you, Chair.

I understand that the post-secondary educators.... PSEC has to approve all of the contracts for the sector through this negotiating process. Are the guidelines for PSEC in this negotiation available? Can they be made available to us, or are they public documents?

Hon. C. Taylor: No, they're not a public document. But we're not talking about negotiations here today. We're just talking about \$1 billion that we are offering to put on the table as the signing bonus for every single public sector worker who manages to sign their contracts before their contracts expire.

G. Robertson: Again, I'm confused. On the one hand, I'm under the impression that this is an open and honest process, and that we are here in the House to debate the expense of \$1 billion of taxpayers' money. We need to have faith that the due diligence is being done. We need to understand that the bargaining is happening in good faith.

Given this government's record in bargaining and dealing with contracts, which, from my experience as a business person, has been deplorable, there is a lack of faith coming into this negotiation on the side of the public sector unions, given what they have been put through for these last number of years dealing with this government. At this point there are a lot of questions being asked as to whether these negotiations that are taking place currently are in good faith.

I'm curious, I'm asking, and I'll try this one more time. Are the guidelines that the employers and PSEC are working with available? Will you make them available to us so that we can understand whether there is a gap that can be filled here in the negotiation related to the \$1 billion?

[1515]

Hon. C. Taylor: No.

G. Robertson: There are considerable challenges. I want to talk about the complexities related to these post-secondary contracts, the negotiations that are taking place and specifically around the contract language issues. There are schools.... There are universities and colleges with extraordinary challenges related to their contract language that are having to work through this process for the first time. Again, we're talking about a short number of weeks in order to qualify for the billion dollars.

Can the minister explain the rationale in rushing through complex contract language? Is this a drive to get quick contracts done versus good contracts? Where is the comfort in this for institutions who are dealing with this process for the first time?

Hon. C. Taylor: The wage mandate — which is what you're focusing on even though that's not what we're here to vote on — of \$4.7 billion is not going to go away. It will be there. It will be on the table for unions that take longer to come to conclusions. It's not going to go away. It remains there.

What we're talking about today is an incentive of \$1 billion that we are willing to offer to public sector employees whose unions do manage to reach a contract negotiation before their other contract expires. It's as simple as that. We are not negotiating here, and if we know that there are complicated issues on the table, in fact, we've encouraged it. That's another reason why this negotiating framework is so positive. It not only has the wage-mandate dollars — extra dollars of up to \$300 million if the economy is doing well and they sign longer contracts — but extra dollars up front as a signing bonus if they, in fact, reach a negotiated settlement before their contract expires.

We said: "Come to the table and talk about your issues." We know that some have talked about pensions. Some have talked about training. Some have talked about technology. This is true negotiation that's happening, and it involves both sides. The employers and the unions are having a chance at the table to really discuss these issues. Unlike you, I have been getting very positive feedback from my constituents — people who are union workers in the various sectors — saying they're so pleased that for the first time they're seeing this kind of creativity and imagination in negotiating and the fact that they can bring some specific issues to the table, such as some sectors....

Some layers within the union, in fact, are at a position where they feel they are not being as well paid as other parts of that union sector. That's a difficult thing for a union executive to look at. We recognize that, but we do think that relevant labour markets should be guiding these negotiations.

G. Robertson: I won't argue on the creativity level. There's always a place for creativity in negotiation, and I think there's an interesting model put forward. My concern is that institutions that have not been down this road before — institutions that are working on very complex contract language — will not have access to the billion dollars that we're talking about today because they won't be able to get through the complex negotiation on their language. That is my concern right now. This creative approach ends up excluding institutions because of the circumstances which they come into this negotiation under. Is there an easy answer for those institutions that have difficult language to get through before the deadline?

Hon. C. Taylor: Every single sector has difficult issues to deal with, as do the employers, who are also trying to negotiate and work out a negotiated settlement. We recognize that. That's why we introduced this mandate back in November. We know that a lot of activity is taking place at the negotiating table, and I think we should all be happy about that.

G. Robertson: For these institutions, is it logical to assume that they are capable of getting full funding for subsequent wage settlements regardless of this deadline on March 31?

Hon. C. Taylor: The billion dollars is simply for signing bonuses for those unions who reach a negotiated contract before their contract expires. It has nothing to do with the wage mandate that they will be negotiating at the table.

[1520]

G. Robertson: A question, then, more broadly related to the post-secondary sector — specifically, the colleges within that sector where the employers are not at a common table. Their contract is not up, as the minister I'm sure well knows, till 2007. At this point their ability to negotiate before March 31 and to be included in the billion-dollar category is compromised by the fact that the employers are all separately at the table.

From legislation, I believe in 2003, this government accredited an employer association, but it's not mandatory. So the ability of the public sector unions who are negotiating at this time to reach a settlement before 2007, and in fact before March 31, is challenged by the fact that employers are all at separate tables and that this government has not been willing to make the common table mandatory to those employers, which in my mind sounds hopelessly inefficient.

Is there a mandate from this government to make that common table mandatory for these employers so that the negotiations can be more efficient and, hopefully, can be brought to conclusion before March 31?

The Chair: Member, I would ask members to keep their comments focused on the debate at hand and not estimates or issues that are perhaps two years from now. So keep your comments focused on this estimate.

G. Robertson: My question was specific to the negotiation that's taking place, as they are one of the sectors that are bargaining. My question is to the minister. Is there an effort to bring these employers together at their common table so that this negotiation can move forward more quickly?

Hon. C. Taylor: It's at their discretion.

G. Robertson: I will take that as a no.

I have one final question that is related to the bonus that is available after March 31 at the same rate as the settlements that take place before then. In the post-secondary sector there are a number of contracts that are up in 2007. However, there is an eagerness to negotiate these in the near term and to in fact qualify for 2007.

Given that there have been many challenges over the last number of years for these sectors which are negotiating to have faith in this government that there will still be money down the line — it's always down the line — the question is: what is the guarantee for

these sectors who are negotiating for their contracts who will not conclude those negotiations to qualify for the billion dollars that we're talking about today? Where is the guarantee that those moneys will be made available?

Hon. C. Taylor: We have said that we have made that guarantee to those who have contracts that come at a later date.

A. Dix: I want to thank members and the minister for their patience today. I think some of the challenges in this debate are about differing views of what the debate is about. The minister wants to narrowly focus the debate on the billion dollars, but the truth is that it is linked to the negotiations. I think we all acknowledge that, to the extent that where that billion dollars is spent — the minister said in her first statement here in the House, I think — will depend on the success of those very negotiations.

[1525]

If you took the position and employers took the position that they didn't want or weren't going to be in a position to succeed, then more of that money, presumably, would go to debt financing and more to paying down the debt, and less would go to these contract bonuses. So I think part of the challenge we have and part of reason that we want to have a debate about the substance of this is just that, and we're even going to have more of a debate in a moment.

I just want to say I appreciate the minister, and I also appreciate that the minister is reluctant to talk about the details of them because these are negotiations. I think that's a little bit of the difference. My colleague from Vancouver-Mount Pleasant is now going to carry on the debate with some specifics in pertinent issues around the supplementary estimates.

G. Robertson: Through the Chair to the minister, I would just like to thank her for putting up with the repetition. I'm sure it's been a little trying, but it's important that we do the right thing, do the due process and due diligence through this day of estimates.

J. Kwan: Let me also thank my colleagues for the questions to the minister.

Let me first of all start by saying that I do wish the minister and the government well in its negotiations. I think this next round of bargaining is very important. It's important for the government, for our workers and for all British Columbians. So I do wish them all the very best, and I do wish that they would be successful.

Now, of course — as we've seen in the last five years with respect to how this government deals with labour relations, and its track record — I am worried about it. I'm very worried about it, and let me just cite the following by way of a backgrounder. A press release from the National Union of Public and General Employees dated April 14, 2005, states that the International Labour Organization has condemned the B.C. Liberal government in regards to three anti-worker

laws passed in 2002: Bill 18, the Coastal Ferry Act, which allows for private contractors to override contracting-out provisions found in existing collective agreements; Bill 94, the Health Sector Partnerships Agreement Act, which wipes out any clauses that restrict or regulate the employers' ability to contract out; and Bill 55, the Railway and Ferries Bargaining Assistance Act, back-to-work legislation affecting ferry workers in the fall of 2003, after B.C. Ferries was privatized.

The Chair: Member, can you demonstrate how this is relevant to the supplement estimate at hand?

J. Kwan: Yes, thank you, hon. Chair. How this is relevant, of course, is that it ties into the entire issue that relates to trust in the negotiation process. It ties into this bill, in which I think the government is attempting to rebuild trust. So I'm trying to highlight, by way of visiting the background, the hurdles that are ahead of us around the utilization and the process related to this \$1 billion. So that's why I'm putting this on the record. We need to look at the whole picture. We didn't arrive at today in isolation. It didn't happen in a vacuum. It happened within the context of what's happened since 2001. So that's how it's relevant, Madam Chair.

According to the communiqué released by the ILO on February 6, 2004, the ILO noted that the passing of Bill 95 violated convention 87, the freedom and protection of the right to organize convention, which was established back in 1948. It also noted that the passing of Bill 94 violated convention 87.

In regards to Bill 18, it states:

Noting that the government did not hold full and frank consultations with representative organizations for the elaboration and adoption of the Health Sector Partnerships Agreement Act and of the Coastal Ferry Act, the committee once again requests it to hold such consultations in future where workers' rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining may be affected.

[1530]

The NUPGE states in 2003 that the ILO has found the government guilty of rights abuses for passing six other laws. They are the Health Care Services Continuation Act, Bill 2, which was passed in June 2001 and which is critical because there is a significant component of workers that relate to this bill before us and the dollars that the government has set aside, potentially, for the bonuses. The Health Care Services Collective Agreement Act, Bill 15, was passed in August 2001. The Skills Development and Labour Statutes Amendment Act, Bill 18, was passed in August 2001. The Education Services Collective Agreement Act, Bill 27, was passed in January 2002. The Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act, Bill 28, was passed in January 2002 and the Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act, Bill 29, in January 2002.

According to the NUPGE, the ILO ruled that these laws violated international standards by shredding signed collective agreements and curtailing bargaining

rights for more than 150,000 health, social services and education workers. To date, the province continues to thumb its nose at the UN agency and has failed to comply with any recommendations to bring these laws into compliance. So you understand why there's a high level of distrust on the government's handling of labour relations and labour negotiations.

This background is an important reminder, I hope, to the government in looking at the record, and for the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Finance in understanding the place that we have arrived at today and the history around that.

The Chair: Member, I've given fairly wide latitude, but as the member is well aware, because she has been in this chamber for many years, legislation is not discussed in estimates. So continue, but I would ask you to keep focused on the supplemental estimates at hand here.

J. Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate your guidance on that. It wasn't my intent to re-debate the legislation that I mentioned. In terms of the violation of international standards, in terms of labour approaches with this government.... I only raised them by name — I'm sorry, there are many acts that the government did bring into place that violated the standards — by way of a background and a backdrop.

Given that there is a billion dollars that is at stake here, and that's the bill that is before us, and it does relate to the history of labour relations in this province...

Interjection.

The Chair: Order.

J. Kwan: ...I think British Columbians deserve to know how exactly the government is managing the money in its negotiating process. Could the minister please tell this House how many people are negotiating on behalf of the government at this time?

The Chair: Member, that's been asked before, and that's not relevant in these estimates at hand.

J. Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the guidance. I did hear the question asked, but I didn't actually hear the answer. I'll tell you, again, to see if I can actually link the relevance here. It is a billion dollars of taxpayers' money. I think that taxpayers have the right to know how hard the government is working at engaging in those negotiations and how many people within the public service are involved in that process, so that we get a sense of confidence, perhaps, that the government is working on this. I'm not sure why the minister won't share that information with British Columbians.

Hon. C. Taylor: As the member opposite knows well, we are not at the negotiating table. I am not a negotiator. My responsibility was to assess the finan-

cial health of the province going forward and the amount the taxpayers could actually afford to put on the table to help with these public sector negotiations.

The overall negotiating framework will cost up to \$6 billion. We believe that's fair for the workers. We believe it's also fair to the taxpayers. Today we're looking at \$1 billion that we are offering, on top of wage negotiations, as almost a signing bonus if unions are successful in negotiating contracts before their contracts expire.

J. Kwan: Yes, I appreciate that the minister is not engaging in the negotiations. Ministers never do engage in the negotiations, and that's not my question to the minister. Surely this government and this minister, who is responsible for the finances of this province, would know and would care to know how many people are doing that work and how it is going.

[1535]

That's what I'm trying to get at, to get a sense that in fact the government is managing the process well. And is it? Does the Minister of Finance, who holds the purse strings, who has a high stake in this issue...? I think she wants to see successes. What assurance is she getting that we are getting successes?

Minimally, I would think that she would want to know how many people within government are engaging in the negotiations with the many sectors. I heard the minister say — and yes, she's right — that some 90 per cent of the agreements are up. That's a lot of negotiation that needs to take place, so why is the government being so secretive about it? Why won't the government give British Columbians and members of this House the answer? How many people are engaging in those negotiations? Who do they report to? Do they report to the Minister of Labour, do they report to the minister herself, or do they report to the Premier, for example?

The Chair: Member, just to note again that this question has been asked numerous times and the answer has been given numerous times that this is not about negotiations, not about the process.

J. Kwan: Well, maybe it's just me. A billion dollars is a lot of money. I anticipate that in my lifetime I probably won't see that amount of money, so for me it's a lot of money. It's a huge responsibility of government to manage taxpayers' money and to make sure that those dollars are spent wisely, to make sure that those dollars are spent in a way that is effective.

In this instance we're talking about negotiations, the process of negotiations, the people who will go out there to talk to the other parties to strike a deal. That ties into this \$1 billion. This \$1 billion that the minister talks about is related intrinsically to the work that is being done by the team of negotiators that are in government. So I think there is some relevance here related to this money. For us to know how many people are out there engaging in this work so that we get a sense of how the government in this process, in managing this \$1 billion price tag for negotiations....

I know, Madam Chair — and I take your advice — that this question's been asked. The problem is that the answer has not been received. I'm hoping that the minister will actually provide these answers to what I think are valid questions for the opposition to ask and for British Columbians to know.

Hon. C. Taylor: In terms of the billion dollars, the management is quite clear in this case. We have offered equally to all of the public sector workers what works out to be about \$3,300 if in fact their unions can negotiate a settlement at the bargaining table before their contracts expire. That money is a decision that we made as government to reach out to unions and, hopefully, help negotiations come to a conclusion in a way that has winners on all sides. As the member opposite knows, we are not negotiating. It is the employers who are at the table with the union leaders.

J. Kwan: Yes, and many of these employers work in a government agency or are accountable to a government agency with respect to the negotiations process.

But I fail to understand. I really do. It's not a trick question. All that I'm trying to get at is an understanding of how many people are engaging in this work and to give a sense to British Columbians of how the government is managing the process.

The minister has refused to answer the question. Let's be clear on the record about that. The question was asked many a time, and the minister refused to answer that question. Now, the minister says that it's not part of this debate in this bill. I don't agree with it, but I'll set that aside for a moment and just put a marker on this and save that for estimates debate, for another time, I'm sure. We'll be here until the end of May, so let's just earmark that question for a moment, then.

[1540]

The minister just said that there is approximately \$3,300 per worker if you divide up the billion dollars amongst all the different workers that exist in the various bargaining units. Is the minister saying, then, that how that \$1 billion bonus money would be divided would be on a per-worker basis?

Hon. C. Taylor: As we said earlier this morning, that will be decided at the negotiating table.

J. Kwan: Well, that's the statement the minister made. She said that if you divide up the billion dollars, it comes to about \$3,300 per worker. Is that the formula which the government's working with, or is that a figure that she just decided would be useful for the purposes of debate but not for the purposes of actual, factual information — that it would be useful to say: "Well, let's just break it up and divide it up, and that's what it looks like"? Whether or not it really looks like that remains another story.

Are there discrepancies, for example, in terms of different sectors that might receive different chunks of money? I ask that question because when the minister

made the announcement around this billion dollars, there were lots of questions that people wanted to know about. They weren't forthcoming. The answers weren't forthcoming at the press conference and certainly weren't forthcoming in the press release from the government. They certainly didn't add any information subsequent to the newspaper reporting on this issue. I'm just trying to get them some facts here in terms of how the government is dealing with this \$1 billion bonus money.

The minister cites in her comments that there are different envelopes for each set of negotiations. Let me just start with this, then. How many sets of envelopes are there within the bargaining units in the government? This billion dollars is to be divided up amongst how many envelopes?

Hon. C. Taylor: I think you're confusing two things. On the billion dollars it works out to approximately \$3,300 per employee. When you get over to the \$4.7 billion — which is the wage mandate, which is what they are at the table negotiating — in that case, there are different envelopes for whether it's nurses or HEU or BCGEU. We have tried to say that relevant labour market is very important, not only between these sectors but within these sectors. We have made our position quite clear on that, and I know that discussions are happening at the table.

We have even seen some discussions in the press from certain workers within unions who feel that within their union certain members should receive a larger wage increase than others. We have said that certainly, when we're talking about relevant labour market, that's important. But that is not the billion dollars we're talking about today. The billion dollars today treats all workers in the same way.

J. Kwan: First of all, I would appreciate it if the minister actually directed the comments through you, Madam Chair.

On the issue around the envelopes the minister says that the billion dollars is being directed to all of the workers in the same way. Then it goes back to the fundamental question, doesn't it? Is the minister's intent that the billion dollars will be divided up equally amongst all the workers if they are to be dealt with the same way? Is that what she meant?

Hon. C. Taylor: It's hard to imagine how you can see this as anything but great news for unions and their workers.

What we have said is that the amount of \$1 billion works out to approximately \$3,300 per employee. But we are also listening to the unions, and at the negotiating table there have been some that suggest they'd rather not have it as individual cheques but maybe would like to talk about things like pensions and other issues. So that is at the negotiating table.

[1545]

In terms of how the money is actually divided up, it is on the basis of \$3,300 per employee. Some unions

have also said to us that they would like the freedom at the negotiating table to talk about how they will decide to use that money. These are negotiations at the table. From our point of view, we're trying to be evenhanded and fair to everyone.

J. Kwan: The answer, then — if I could rephrase what I understood the minister's answer to be.... Is that yes, generally speaking? What we've got is \$3,300 per worker. The different negotiators at the table from the union side may decide that some of that money might go into a pension plan, for example, for the workers or that some other item might be more appropriate for them.

At the end of the day, though, the value of the dollars, whether it be in the pension plan approach or in any other components within sharing of the bonus money, comes to \$3,300 per person — per worker. That includes doctors, health professionals — the entire 90 percent of those who are engaging in negotiations at the moment.

Hon. C. Taylor: In the ways that the member opposite actually mentioned it, that's exactly what we're trying to do: a doctor, \$3,300; an electrician in the HEU, \$3,300 — whatever the position.

The unions have asked for some flexibility that they would like to use at the negotiating table. For instance, if they have someone who works one shift in the year, they don't believe, themselves, that they should be treated in exactly the same way as their full-time employees. All of this is happening at the negotiating table. That's why I'm always saying that it works out for most employees who are working full-time jobs at \$3,300 a year.

J. Kwan: Actually, that's useful information. That's helpful for me to better understand the process in which the government is embarking with this \$1 billion negotiating bonus money.

Let me ask you this question, because I think that this is very important as well. It is: is the March 31 deadline based on a signed contract? Does that mean to say, then, each of the unions that is engaging in negotiations and so on would actually have to have the entire negotiations completed and signed off by their membership by March 31 for them to access the bonus dollars? Or is it based on the agreements that have been agreed to at the table? In many instances a lot of people have to go back and go through another set of procedures to see whether or not the agreements are going to be ratified, and that, too, may take some time.

I'm just trying to get some clarity on the time line here. Is it the expectation of the government that the March 31 deadline is for signed agreements or is it agreements that have been arrived at, at the negotiating table?

Hon. C. Taylor: In order to meet our GAAP requirements, what the public service accounting and auditing board, which is a national body that tells us

how the accounting must be done.... We must achieve certainty in the contracts. We have been talking about ratification as being that certainty. It's interesting that the HEABC has come to us and asked if we would allow electronic voting, because they want to make sure that they could do it quickly if need be. What we're required to have is certainty.

J. Kwan: Then, I take it to mean that they have to be signed contracts, that they have to be ratified by the membership by March 31. Is that what the minister means by certainty?

Hon. C. Taylor: At this point, the negotiators are talking with union leaders, and they're certainly all working in the same direction. If you can get complete ratification done, then of course that really gives both sides certainty.

Also, if you can do it ahead of time and the contract, for instance, doesn't work, then you would be able to go back to the table and perhaps try to get it done in time. That's what we've been talking about. We're just saying certainty. I would think that this discussion is happening at each negotiating table, but I'm not there.

[1550]

J. Kwan: I'm sorry, but I don't actually understand what certainty means. What level of certainty is what I'm trying to get at. Are we talking about a signed, ratified contract, or are we talking about an agreement at the table for which it may take some time for the memberships to vote on the agreement? Is it enough certainty for the negotiators to arrive at an agreement at the table?

I'm just trying to get a sense of what certainty does mean. What does it mean for the Minister of Finance, who holds the purse strings? At what point would she say: "No, I'm sorry, that's just not certainty enough, and March 31 is the next 24 hours or next five hours" or "We are at March 31, so therefore I'm going to take that money away"? I'm just trying to get a sense of it, and I think that British Columbians, also, should be able to know what the minister means when she says certainty.

Hon. C. Taylor: We are required — and this is the wording — to have certainty. I know that the negotiators and the union leaders are talking about this right now. I am not in a position to pre-empt any of those discussions, but what we must be satisfied with at the end of the day is that there is certainty that it's going to happen. Otherwise, the billion dollars must go towards paying down the debt.

J. Kwan: Who gets to decide whether or not they are satisfied?

Hon. C. Taylor: The judgment certainly would have to be made at that time. The union leaders understand this situation. The employers understand this situation. These rules, which are set down nationally as

guiding principles, would have to be met. I know that these discussions are going on right now, as everyone's trying to make sure they will be able to reach certainty on these agreements. It would be quite improper for the Minister of Finance at this particular time to not allow those discussions to happen.

J. Kwan: No, I'm not suggesting that the minister should not allow for those discussions to happen. I certainly hope those discussions are happening as we speak. I hope the negotiators are out working really, really hard, and I expect that they are. That's not my intent at all with respect to my question.

The minister says that the "judgment...made at that time." That's a direct quote from the minister's comment. So my question is: by whom? Who makes those judgments? Is it them, the negotiators? Are the negotiators at the table making those judgments? Who makes the ultimate decision here? Is it the Minister of Finance? Is it the Minister of Labour? Is it the Premier? I honestly don't know. I honestly don't know who gets to decide the question of certainty, and maybe the minister can just tell us, and then we can get on with things.

Hon. C. Taylor: In order to achieve certainty, we are having discussions, as I've said several times, and we are looking for ways and ideas of how we can make sure that that satisfies all of our requirements. At the end of the day, it has to be signed off by the Auditor General.

J. Kwan: The minister says, "We're having discussions," discussions that have to satisfy everyone. Who is "we"?

Hon. C. Taylor: I assume you're referring to when I said "we" — it's Finance. Finance has the responsibility for this money. That's why we've come to the House today. That's why we're asking for permission to be able to spend this billion dollars so that if we were fortunate enough to have contracts concluded tomorrow or next week or the week after, we could immediately assign the money over to the unions.

[1555]

J. Kwan: Then, just to narrow this. I think I heard two people are responsible. One is the Auditor General. The minister says the Auditor General has to sign off on this, so I assume that he or she.... Although the Auditor General may change in the next while — who knows? Actually, no, it is going to change, but I don't know when that's going to come in. So the Auditor General has to sign off, and the other person that I.... When I asked who is the "we" that are having discussions that need to make sure that everybody is satisfied, the minister responded: "Finance." So does that mean to say, then, that it's the Minister of Finance and the Auditor General?

Hon. C. Taylor: It is in fact the employers and the union leaders who are discussing this. They will have

some suggestions, I assume. They will come to us at that point. We will look at it and see if we believe with all of our financial experts that it satisfies certainty, and at the end of the day it has to be signed off by the Auditor General. This is like all of the processes we do.

J. Kwan: I appreciate that it would be the people at the negotiating tables from both sides who would come forward with a package that says, "It looks like this," and so on and so forth. But the person who approves that, ultimately, who will then agree to say, "Okay, I am prepared to bring this forward to the Auditor General," would be the minister of Finance, then? The Auditor General may say, "It kind of missed the mark on certainty here," based on whatever. Or he can say, "Yeah. No. That meets my needs," and so on. Am I right, then, in this process? Because I think that's how it's going to unfold.

Ultimately, the minister makes a decision based on the information that's brought to her, and she can then say: "Yeah. I'm comfortable in bringing this forward to the Auditor General for signoff." Isn't that how it really would work? Ultimately, I'm not asking the minister to guarantee whether or not the Auditor General would sign off on it, but the minister will have the information before her, and the advice around her from her staff, that this tends to meet the understanding of certainty under GAAP.

Hon. C. Taylor: That's basically correct, except the step that always happens, in fact, is that there are conversations all the time as we're going through within our comptroller general department, within Finance and with the Auditor General as well. So it's not a completely isolated process. We're always trying to see how we can do this properly. We have been saying "ratification," and all I am saying to you is that I know there are discussions about exactly what that means and what the timing is, and so that's happening at the negotiating table.

J. Kwan: It sounds to me, actually, that there's some flexibility here around that, on the question around certainty. I heard this morning that the minister has said that she wanted to be very clear that there's no extension. March 31 is the deadline, and so on and so forth. Well, yes, March 31 is the deadline, but on the question of what exactly is certainty around that deadline.... There's flexibility within that. That's what I'm gathering.

So maybe I can ask the minister this. Who's giving the ministry advice at the moment around this notion of certainty? Is it the Auditor General's office? Is it the comptroller's office? Is it the Attorney General's office? Who's providing advice to the minister around this notion of certainty at the moment?

Hon. C. Taylor: At this point we have within our ministry decided that ratification is the definition of certainty. We have not yet had anyone come to us and offer other ways of ensuring certainty, so at this point

we have been saying "ratification." But I do know that conversations are going on. I'm trying to be very open about this. We would have to, at the end of the day, just ensure that it is something that we believe meets GAAP and that the Auditor General would sign off.

But the whole point here, the real point, is that at the negotiating table there are a lot of interesting issues being discussed. We're not here today to talk about the negotiating framework. We're not here to talk about the negotiations. What we are asking the House for today is a supplementary estimate of \$1 billion so that if in fact some contracts are completed before they expire, we will immediately be able to write those cheques.

[1600]

J. Kwan: With all due respect, I don't think anybody is trying to engage in negotiations here at all. I haven't heard any questions from anybody in this House that are driving the issue in that direction.

I think all that members in the House are trying to do is get clarity around this billion dollars, which is a lot of money. I heard today that there were some comments from the minister that somehow she thinks the opposition thinks that this money is bad news. Nobody has stated that either.

I want to be very clear on the record that all of us wish the government well and wish the minister well in her round of negotiations. All of us want labour peace in the province. All of us have seen how disruptive it can be and has been for people in B.C. when there isn't labour peace. All of us have learned and seen that when the government does not engage in good process on labour bargaining in dealing with the unions, it is actually not good. We've all seen how the government has breached the trust for so many hard workers in our province and, in the course of those five years of breaching that trust, how damaging that has been.

All I'm saying is that I wish the minister well. I hope the minister will embark on a road that will build that trust and that broken relationship that the Liberal government had created in the last five years, which has been condemned by the UN. All we're trying to do is get some understanding here around this billion dollars and how it works and, I think, some clarity, as well, for everybody who is involved. We keep hearing this March 31 deadline. We keep hearing this billion-dollar thing that's being thrown around, this bonus money.

But how does it all really work? At the end of the day, what does it really mean? At the end of it, I would love to know, but I'm not going to ask that question again around negotiators and so on. I'm going to save that for another day, because I know I'm not going to get the answer from the minister. I would really like to know the parameters that would follow when those cheques are signed off and to make sure that people actually have this information as they engage in this process. I think it's very important.

I think that what I've come to is this, though. The best I can get — and it doesn't matter how many times

you ask the question; it's not going to get clearer based on the minister's answer — is that she does have advisers, although she would not answer the question on who is advising her. I am interested in knowing, because the Premier just got a 15-percent lift in his budget. He's trying to work across government on all sorts of stuff, so I assume that with this matter, all sorts of people are working across government on this as well, because it's very important.

Who are all these people working across government on trying to bring settlement forward? Is it the Ministry of Labour? I would expect so. Is it the Ministry of Finance? I would expect so. Is it the Premier's office? Based on the 15-percent lift, I would expect so too. I guess I have to ask that question to the Premier when we get to the Premier's estimates.

The one piece, though, that is clear to me: despite whoever the advisers are, the Minister of Finance will receive recommendations or proposals to her which she will evaluate. Then she will determine whether or not it's good enough, based on advice that she gets, that it would be signed off by the Auditor General. Ultimately, the Auditor General, I think, really does have the final say to a certain degree. Perhaps my question, then, should be saved for the Auditor General to ask him: what exactly does certainty mean to you under GAAP in relation to this? I will do exactly that.

With that, I will simply close by saying that I do wish the government well, and I hope there will be labour peace achieved for all British Columbians.

Vote 48(S): contingencies — negotiating framework incentive (all ministries), \$1,000,000,000 — approved.

Hon. C. Taylor: Hon. Chair, I move that the committee rise and report the resolution.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 4:05 p.m.

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

The Committee of Supply reported resolution.

Mr. Speaker: When shall the report be considered?

Hon. C. Taylor: Forthwith. I move that the report of resolution from the Committee of Supply on February 23, 2006, be now received, taken as read and agreed to.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Taylor: I move that there be granted from and out of the consolidated revenue fund the sum of \$1 billion. This sum is in addition to that authorized to be paid under section 1 of the Supply Act, 2005-2006, and is granted to Her Majesty towards defraying the charges and expenses of the public service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

Motion approved.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

SUPPLY ACT, 2005-2006
(SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES No. 1)

Hon. C. Taylor presented a message from His Honour the Administrator: a bill intituled Supply Act, 2005-2006 (Supplementary Estimates No. 1).

Hon. C. Taylor: I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, the use of supplementary estimates is consistent with the spirit of the Budget Transparency and Accountability Act. This supply bill is introduced to provide supply for the operation of government programs for the 2005-2006 fiscal year as outlined in the Supplementary Estimates No. 1 tabled earlier. The bill will provide the additional funds required to defray the charges and expenses of the public service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

Mr. Speaker, in accordance with established practice, the government seeks to move this bill through all stages this day.

Mr. Speaker: In keeping with the practice of this House, the bill will be permitted to advance through all stages in one sitting.

Bill 5, Supply Act, 2005-2006 (Supplementary Estimates No. 1), introduced, read a first time and ordered to proceed to second reading forthwith.

Hon. M. de Jong: Hon. Speaker, I think practice and prudence would suggest that we distribute the bill and give members an opportunity to examine it.

[1610]

Second Reading of Bills

SUPPLY ACT, 2005-2006
(SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES No. 1)

Hon. C. Taylor: I move that Bill 5 now be read a second time.

[1615]

Motion approved unanimously on a division. [See *Votes and Proceedings*.]

Hon. C. Taylor: I move that the bill be now referred to a Committee of the Whole House for consideration forthwith.

Bill 5, Supply Act, 2005-2006 (Supplementary Estimates No.1), read a second time and ordered to proceed to a Committee of the Whole House for consideration forthwith.

Committee of the Whole House

SUPPLY ACT, 2005-2006
(SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES No. 1)

The House in Committee of the Whole on Bill 5; S. Hawkins in the chair.

The committee met at 4:20 p.m.

Sections 1 and 2 approved.

Schedule approved.

Preamble approved.

Title approved.

Hon. C. Taylor: I move that the committee rise and report the bill complete without amendment.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 4:21 p.m.

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

Report and Third Reading of Bills

SUPPLY ACT, 2005-2006
(SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES No. 1)

Bill 5, Supply Act, 2005-2006 (Supplementary Estimates No. 1), reported complete without amendment, read a third time and passed.

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

Budget Debate (continued)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Surrey-Tynehead continues the debate.

D. Hayer: I will continue with the response to the budget speech from yesterday. I left off on February 22, 2006, at 5:57 p.m.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

I was so impressed that when I was looking at the *Vancouver Sun* yesterday and information about our budget... It talked about \$421 million to help needy children and families. What a great news story. And

\$733 million relief for taxpayers and homeowners and \$6 billion for public sector contract settlements — it was a great news story. Many people I talked to were really happy with that.

As I said yesterday, through this budget we will see Surrey Memorial Hospital gain a new emergency urgent-care facility and a 148,000-square-foot out-patient hospital, along with 140 additional acute care beds as well as other renovations. Surrey Memorial Hospital will also get additional renal dialysis capacity and a new perinatal care facility. This is great news for my constituents in Surrey-Tynehead and good news for all Surrey constituents.

The budget also has funds for the Gateway program. We will see the expansion and improvements to our transportation system, which was built more than 40 years ago when the lower mainland had less than half the population it has today. Our Gateway program will include twinning of the Port Mann Bridge, the North and South Fraser perimeter road, adding more lanes to the Trans-Canada Highway, improving interchanges and overpasses on Highway 1, a new underpass at 156th Street under Highway 1, a new seven-lane Pitt River Bridge, as well as allowing for the reintroduction of bus transit service and the potential for a future light rail transit system to move people. Also a \$50 million investment in the cycling infrastructure, which will be the largest one in B.C.'s history, is part of the Gateway program.

[1625]

The Gateway program is about moving goods, moving people and moving services while protecting our environment efficiently, effectively and economically. Today's Port Mann Bridge, which was built more than 40 years ago in 1964, handles over 120,000 vehicles a day. That is more traffic than the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Today's Port Mann Bridge carries seven trucks every minute of the day. That is 417 trucks every hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Every minute they are slowed down, every hour they waste in traffic, costs our citizens through the increased price of goods they have to buy in stores. There is also the price of poor air quality and increased health care costs and the stress on our constituents and their families.

I was just talking about our budget on one of the radio stations today. They were so happy to see our announcement about the Surrey Memorial Hospital, about the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge. They were wondering how all the MLAs living in Surrey — if they're going to support the changes that this government is trying to make through this budget — and how the truck routes, how the taxi drivers, how the working people who go to work every day and pay taxes to this government to provide health care, education and social programs....

So this is a great news story; it's a great budget. I will continue on with this budget, because this budget really shines a fiscal light on educating our children who are our future. More than \$950 million has been allocated to renovating, expanding and placing kindergarten-to-grade-12 facilities as part of the \$1.5

billion program to upgrade our schools at risk of earthquake damage. On top of this, this budget includes another \$112 million in additional funding for kindergarten to grade 12. Combined with the previously announced funding, 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, that will result in even more funding for each student. Per-pupil funding will increase to a record level of \$7,338 in the year 2008-2009. These investments will indeed ensure that our children have the opportunity to take advantage of B.C.'s great future. But our education investments don't stop at grade 12. This budget allocates an additional \$400 million to increase training and skills development, to expand post-secondary education and to help people achieve their potential.

As part of the \$400 million, we are setting aside \$90 million for a tax-credit program that will encourage industry and business to expand trades training. As well, there is additional funding to encourage and increase apprenticeship training programs through both public and private institutions.

This vote is critical because our booming economy means that job growth in British Columbia is second-to-none in Canada. With close to 275,000 jobs created here since 2001, our unemployment rate is the lowest it's been in 30 years. That's a great news story. Our economic growth will be 3.3 percent this year and 3.1 percent for several more years. As the Finance Minister noted, over the next 12 years B.C. is expected to have one million job openings. That is one job for every person, every student graduating from high school during that time period, plus 350,000 more jobs opening. To fill all of these jobs, we will need to encourage and ensure that our own children are the best trained and best educated to take advantage of the opportunities we have created in this province in the last five years and the opportunities that we will continue to create in the future.

No matter how much we do, we still won't be able to fill all those jobs, so we must create opportunities for our aboriginal communities, for people with disabilities and for women who are facing challenges in returning to the workforce. We must also eliminate the barriers faced by many new immigrants who are seeking work in their chosen professions.

[1630]

As the parliamentary secretary for multiculturalism and immigration and as a representative of one of the most culturally diverse constituencies in this province, I am very encouraged to hear in this budget of the assistance provided to our new immigrants. This budget recognizes the value and the skills of new immigrants to the tune of some \$400 million. This confidence of government in our new immigrants is wonderful. This allocation will help them to increase training and skills development and will assist them in taking advantage of our boundless opportunities offered right here in British Columbia.

We heard in the budget speech that more than 30,000 immigrants come to this province every year.

Most have skills that are needed here, yet many are drastically underemployed, such as doctors working as cab drivers, engineers in coffee shops, nurses as nannies. The list is endless. The wasted skill and talent is a tragedy that will soon be addressed by our government. We are promising in this budget to work with the federal government and with the professional regulatory bodies to reduce the time it takes for a professional to gain accreditation.

Plus, under the government provincial nominee program, we are helping to fast-track the immigration process for people living abroad who have interests and ability in starting new business ventures right here in British Columbia. Since its inception the program has approved 195 entrepreneurs. They have committed investment in a total amount of \$220 million, which has generated more than 1,065 new jobs.

The provincial nominee program for strategic occupations, which helps British Columbia employers recruit foreign workers to meet the skills shortage, has nominated over 1,000 workers since its inception. It is expected that this year the program will exceed its target of 500 skilled nominees. We are working hard to make sure that we increase those numbers, so we are looking at a much higher target than that.

New Canadians are vital to maintaining and supporting our economic development in British Columbia. In fact, immigration is currently the key source of labour force growth in British Columbia. To help these new immigrants and these new contributors to our economy, in this budget we are investing \$5 million in English-as-a-second-language training, allowing new immigrants to integrate much more quickly into the community and into the workforce.

We are also reaching out to new Canadians through our Skills Connect program, helping them to move into jobs that match their qualifications, so they can utilize the skills and education they have received in foreign countries. This government has committed almost \$5 million a year over the next three years to assist this program in helping our new immigrants gain better jobs, more suited and situated for their skills. They are then better able to contribute to and take advantage of our booming and dynamic economy in British Columbia.

This government doesn't, however, just stop at helping people to get good jobs. We help tens of thousands of them who come here each year to settle into their new homes. However, what encouraged me the most is that this is just the beginning. As B.C. grows, opportunities are endless, and the future is bright and secure. We no longer have people leaving the province as we had in the 1990s. They are flocking back to British Columbia in droves.

In fact, since this government took office in 2001 and turned the British Columbia economy around from worst to best, 175,000 people have moved back to B.C. to take part in and share in our prosperity. We have put stability and security back into people's lives. We have taken our economy from last in Canada to first in Canada in a short five years.

We have taken the unsustainable health care system that was in shambles and was broken and made it the best system in Canada.

[1635]

We have slashed B.C.'s income tax rates. B.C. has the lowest income tax rate in Canada for anybody earning less than \$80,000 a year and the second-lowest in Canada for anybody making more than \$80,000. Those British Columbians who earn less than \$15,500 per year pay no provincial income tax in British Columbia. From what I know, we are the only province in Canada that is charging no provincial income tax to anybody earning \$15,500. That means one spouse can make \$15,500 and another one can make \$15,500 — almost \$31,000 — and pay no provincial income tax at all.

One of the first acts of this government after taking office in 2001 was to cut income tax by an average of 25 percent for everyone. Families earning less than \$30,000 a year saw a B.C. tax reduction of 28 percent.

One of the biggest things we did was to get the economy going. We created opportunities, and we set the stage for a prosperous future. We gave people courage and hope, and we returned British Columbia to its rightful place as the land of golden opportunity. This budget continues that promise of a better and more prosperous life for all British Columbians.

I am enthusiastically supporting this budget. I will be making copies of this budget's highlights and also our Finance Minister's speech available and will make them available to all my constituents. I encourage everyone in this House to do the same so that British Columbians will have the opportunity to see for themselves what it contains and to judge for themselves just how great this really is for them and for the future of everyone in British Columbia.

S. Fraser: I know we've been here a couple of weeks, but I haven't had a chance to welcome everyone back. Happy new year. I hope Christmas went well for everyone and you had a good season.

I guess I'm still relatively new as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, but I still feel excited by the tradition and ceremony of this place and by the history of this place. I understand that this Speech from the Throne and the budget are largely about ceremony and about tradition. That being said, I do not believe that these events should be used solely for the aggrandizement of the government benches. This throne speech and budget ring hollow and are woefully lacking in substance.

It concerns me when members opposite respond as though they believe their own rhetoric — as though Liberal policy has controlled commodity prices worldwide, has influenced interest rates across this country; as though Liberal policy has controlled the tides, the rise and the fall of the sun. When it comes to government rhetoric about deficits and debt, I will believe the Auditor General any day of the week.

In the interests of accuracy and honesty, allow me to provide some clarity for the government cheerlead-

ers across the way. This government rolled into office a few years ago just as world commodity prices were rising and interest rates were dropping. They inherited a windfall that the previous NDP government provided — a dream situation that no government, no matter how incompetent, should have been able to screw up.

Interjections.

S. Fraser: I love a reaction.

Under the previous NDP government's leadership, B.C. had the lowest unemployment rate in 20 years, the greatest job growth in Canada. The Minister of Finance speaks of the expected economy growth. In the year 2000 the economy grew 3.4 percent here. We had some of the lowest income tax rates for ordinary families in the country, the lowest small business income taxes in the country, the second-highest average wage in Canada, the highest minimum wage in Canada and back-to-back balanced budgets.

[1640]

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members. Member, please take your seat.

I have to remind everyone that the speaker has the floor, and he's the only one to address the assembly. Okay, please continue.

S. Fraser: This government inherited a dream situation, and then began the worst mismanagement in provincial history. They took a surplus budget, according to the Auditor General — you can laugh at it, I suppose — and turned it into a record deficit in a heartbeat. This government proceeded to increase the provincial debt by billions. Not for real assets — no, no. This government closed real assets like schools — I think it was 116 schools — like hospitals. They gutted ministries, removed valuable public services and sold off public legacies, and we remember those broken promises. No, they increased the provincial debt by billions to pay for corporate tax breaks at the expense of all British Columbians and future generations.

It is so easy to dismantle a ministry, to make it totally ineffective, and we're seeing the results of that this term. A shortsighted sweep of a pen will do that again in a heartbeat. It can take years or decades to rebuild those ministries so that they can actually be effective again.

Government members act as though they have been shrewd fiscal managers, and I know that's where we're getting the reaction from my comments. They act as though they have followed through with previous promises. I think it unwise for any of us to drink our own bathwater.

The throne speech speaks of our aging population and health care needs related to that reality, and rightly so. I represent Alberni-Qualicum. Alberni-Qualicum has some of the highest-percentage population of sen-

iors in this province, some of the highest-percentage population of seniors in Canada. All of the flowery words in the world won't change the reality for many seniors living in the real world in this province, not the fantasy of a golden decade. Governing is not ruling by slogan.

More than half of the new health care spending announced — the money announced in this budget — will go to inflation. There are no plans that I can see to build the promised 5,000 new long-term care beds. This government has created chaos for seniors and their families. They've off-loaded costs and fees, shutting down care facilities, in some cases leaving nowhere to go.

Now, I'd like to give some real-world examples of that from my constituency. I'll give credit where credit is due. When the throne speech was read, there was mention of acknowledging the problems of an aging population and the problems of dementia. They're real, and I appreciate that issue being mentioned. But remember the 5,000 new long-term care beds that this government's broken promises meant.

In my constituency on the west coast of Vancouver Island I've been approached by constituents who have loved ones that need long-term care. Severe dementia. There is a plan on the books to build facilities associated with the west coast, with the Tofino hospital, but that hasn't come to fruition, that hasn't been funded, despite quite a number of people that need those facilities close by. So the alternative is in Port Alberni. There are facilities there. It is a two-hour drive, and sometimes it is a daunting drive geographically, climatically. It can be difficult.

[1645]

But assuming that can be overcome, there are no spaces available in Port Alberni. There are none. There's a wait. There's at least a year-long wait for the next space. That's not all. If that were not the only problem, it requires sign-off from a local doctor.

Now the doctor in, say, Tofino, who would be the doctor associated with the patient that needs to be admitted, are not allowed to sign off. The local doctor must be from Port Alberni. There are no doctors in Port Alberni taking new patients. There is no one to sign off. So there are no spaces for these people, and these families are falling through the cracks. This was not addressed in this budget.

Vancouver Island Health. They've got their lists of beds through the budget process. For Alberni-Clayoquot — I have brought this issue forward to the minister, prebudget — there are no complex care beds. There is no relief here. It's not the golden decade for everyone, so we shouldn't just cheer ourselves. We should look for solutions. The budget is the place to provide those solutions, and it failed my constituents.

The throne speech also referenced — well, a number of references to — what I would call stealth privatization. It's not so stealthy anymore. It's reinforcing the policy of this government supporting two-tiered health care — first by mismanaging the system, leading to chronic problems like overcrowding; poor conditions

in the hospitals; lack of timely access to hall-room medicine, if you will; reduced sanitary conditions; poor food; long waiting lists; and facilities that simply aren't available to the people I have mentioned to this House.

The policies that have been implemented by this government have, essentially, created conditions that seem to call for a solution: private health care — then a trip to Europe to, I guess, confirm that self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another story, a local story, from my constituency. I had a senior come and visit me in Qualicum Beach. He had cataract surgery — he had to wait close to a year — in both eyes. His wife also required cataract surgery. She had a similar wait. They were willing to wait, understanding some of the challenges. They were solicited by a clinic, being funded by public dollars, where they could jump the queue — \$1,400 per eye per person. That isn't universal health care. That certainly isn't in accordance with the Canada Health Act. So when British Columbians hear this government talk about other models of delivery, they have a right to be fearful for their cherished public health care system, because it's not just the Copeman clinic. This is much more pervasive.

Many have already experienced what are often prohibitive user fees. This is, in essence, two-tier health care too — to have to pay for eye exams, physiotherapy, chiropractics, naturopath medicine, massage therapists or podiatry. This government's narrow philosophy has not saved anything, when people don't have enough money to go and get these services. It often leads to increased costs, both financial and personal, and a misery to individuals in some cases. It's costly to the province, and it's shameful.

In this golden decade, there are more and more people living in poverty. Now that's difficult to reconcile with a golden decade. It adds to the cost of our public system, and to individuals in our society as a whole. It's shortsighted at best to allow this to occur.

[1650]

Maybe that shortsightedness is one of the first negative results of the user fees for the eye doctor — shortsightedness. The throne speech states: "It will change employment programs to help people on income assistance overcome their challenges in finding employment." The opposition would expect no less, considering that two reviews of the government's employment programs have pointed to poor accounting practices, inefficiencies and wasted expense. The minister responsible has indicated that he would be reviewing income assistance rates in the budget. Now, there's no mention of any increase in support or shelter rates in the throne speech.

The throne speech further states: "Today's employable welfare recipients often face persistent and multiple barriers to employment that beg to be addressed." You won't get any question from me on that. That makes sense. But then it says: "Your government will act to help them."

Well, this is what I'm hearing. Let me elaborate on just what this statement means to this government, on

the ground, in reality, in this province. It means bonuses to staff for denying critical grants-in-need, crisis grants-in-need. It means encouraging those receiving assistance to receive that assistance electronically — not for their own security, as the minister had stated.

Those on assistance are often going through some pretty, pretty tough times. In some cases their meagre assistance will be garnished or taken away through direct deposits that this government is coercing through things like free socks and coffee mugs. I guess the socks will help them when they're homeless.

There is mention of a groundbreaking new housing strategy. This is a code word for dismantling B.C.'s social housing program. For the last four years the Liberals have been quietly shifting the mandate of B.C. Housing from providing assistance for low-income people to funding health care spaces. Now they are making this shift official. Instead of proposing innovative solutions to ease B.C.'s housing affordability crisis, the Liberals are abandoning this responsibility. Despite escalating housing costs, the Liberals are not building any new social housing for low-income families. The Liberals have allowed the waiting list for social housing to climb — more people on the streets. I visited the food banks. Mothers with children — the numbers have increased greatly.

The golden decade indeed. This is not a golden decade; this is disparity. The answer isn't: "Pull up your boot straps — or maybe your brand-new socks." The budget has only \$8 million over three years to address housing and the homeless. There is no reference to housing targeted for people with health issues and addictions.

The other housing is targeted to assisted living. More and more low-wage, working people have been forced onto the streets because they can't afford a place to live, and in many cases because there is simply no place to live. Rent subsidies are only targeting those, in this case, with addictions, seniors and the disabled. There's no denying the needs there for those groups, but there is no denying the thousands of homeless left out in the cold — literally out in the cold, left out by this government. The waiting list for social housing has jumped from 10,000 to 14,000 today. The waiting time is now three to five years.

[1655]

The throne speech notes that several steps have been taken to prevent violence against women, and more will be taken this year. The funding announced for women's safety last year only restored the cuts that were made by this government in 2002. The Liberals cut all core funding to B.C.'s women's centres in 2004 and cut the budget for legal aid by 40 percent in 2002. Neither of these cuts has been restored. Golden decade indeed.

I've been visiting friendship centres in some of the urban areas throughout our province. I'm learning about the critical number, the large and growing number, of homeless in the urban areas of our great province. There is no comfort whatsoever in the throne speech and nothing that I can see in the budget. A disproportionate number of urban homeless are aboriginal. I applaud the vital work of these organizations,

like friendship centres, in this province because their work is making up for government's lacking. They're lacking core funding. They're doing the government's work for them.

When there are huge surpluses, that's a disgrace. The much-referred-to new relationship is mentioned in the throne speech, but the lack of details and the lack of substance in this budget is very disconcerting, especially considering the hopes raised through the lauding of the new relationship. After this government's cuts to transition homes, to native courtworkers and to other related assistance programs, there is much need for reconciliation, something that will bring certainty and benefit to all British Columbians.

We've heard much previously about the new relationship, yet so far, as in this throne speech, that new relationship is just words. We've heard confusion. We've heard ministers making statements about the New Relationship fund, the \$100 million that seems to indicate they will be having say over that money. We've heard confusion in the line ministries about what the new relationship is, what it means, how it can be effected, where the capacity is to make it happen, and no leadership at all from this government in that regard. We've seen virtually no movement in meaningful consultation with first nations and contradictions in ministerial actions around the new relationship. We're continuing to see court challenges and inertia at the treaty table, as though the new relationship was a dream, as though it never existed. In many cases, there is no relationship on the ground — only the worst of the old relationship.

There is no mention in the throne speech, and no indication in the budget for that matter, of the raw logs leaving this province, leaving our country, leaving my constituency, and no mention of the job loss and hardship that causes. The budget is silent on the crisis in the coastal forest industry. It's silent on the interior forest industry crisis too. On the environment, there is virtually nothing.

Interjection.

S. Fraser: Thanks for the explanation.

The results-based management policies of this government, combined with the gutting of ministries, have taken us backwards, not forwards. In my constituency we see ministry policy putting the health of our communities, of our drinking water, of the long-term environmental integrity at risk. The budget fails to address any of these government-created shortfalls, and totally ignores more global issues like climate change.

Now, all we heard the first sitting was about the five great goals. The fourth one was to deal with the environment. It was used as a mantra. The government's actions through this throne speech's words and the reality of this budget are contradictions to the fourth great goal that this government was so proud to announce.

[1700]

In closing, Mr. Speaker, with regards to the throne speech and the budget...

[Applause.]

See? I knew I got the respect and the acknowledgment of all sides of the House. That's good.

Remember Marie Antoinette, I think it was, if I have my history correct. The throne speech and the budget? It's like: "Let them eat cake."

Hon. L. Reid: I'm pleased to rise today and respond directly to the constituents of Richmond East and to acknowledge that I serve at their pleasure. It is indeed a pleasure, hon. members, to respond to *Budget and Fiscal Plan '06-07* because this is a heartwarming, heartening budget for me in this province and certainly for the government of British Columbia.

This is about the future. This is a legacy that each and every single member of this government can be extraordinarily proud of. I take my hat off to the Minister of Finance and to the cabinet and to the caucus of this administration because this is about families in British Columbia, about the people who matter in British Columbia. It is about each and every citizen, as young as they may be, who indeed will be living in this province five years, ten years, 15 years from now and will expect this province to offer them opportunity and choice and flexibility in the choices they will make as young learners as they go forward.

The province, I think, certainly has opportunity. The Premier has certainly challenged me with the opportunity to create a cross-government, integrated strategy. I welcome that challenge, and each member of this caucus and this cabinet welcomes that challenge.

Each and every one of us has the opportunity today to put children and families at the centre of the work we do. We recognize that challenge, hon. Speaker, and frankly, we embrace that challenge. I share that with the members of this caucus, the members of this cabinet, but I share it, most importantly, with British Columbia families.

There isn't a family in British Columbia today who is not unbelievably concerned with what they would wish for their child. It doesn't matter if their child is a baby today, if their child is 15 years of age or if their child is leaving home for the first time. They have hopes and dreams and aspirations that they want to go forward in the best interests of their family.

There are many in this chamber who have grandchildren for the first time. Many of my colleagues have come to see me because they are first-time grandparents. We should be celebrating that in the province of British Columbia and understanding the joy that that brings to families.

The notion of family is different for each and every one of us. That diversity, that flexibility, that opportunity needs to be celebrated in more ways than we have in the past. But it's a responsibility I want to share with each and every single family. This is not about a one-size-fits-all proposition for how we go forward in the province.

I have two small children. I have a little girl who's six. Many of you will know that she grew up in this place. The best part of that, and many of you will recall

this, is that she believed in her early days that we lived in a very large house. My little boy is turning two. He will reap the benefit of this economy, of this province, because he will live his life in a province that has an incredibly strong foundation.

I live this portfolio personally, I live it professionally, and one day I will live it as a grandparent. I want us to understand that the foundations that we put in place today will matter for every single person as we go forward.

When Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor spoke in part of the throne speech, she wanted us to understand that we had a responsibility as legislators to capture the positive energy of transformative change — to capture that. That's just as important in the throne speech as it is in today's budget discussion. There is an opportunity to understand transformative change, to understand that the budget decisions that were taken have an impact on people's lives, and to have the opportunity to celebrate successes in people's lives in British Columbia today.

We need to be partners. We need to accept that we're partners in this exercise. We can be a whole array of other players, but partnership is what will give us success in British Columbia. That's the goal in every community in British Columbia. It's a goal that's related to health care — no question.

We've had many discussions in this chamber over the past 15 years, and I've had conversations with many of you because of the understanding of what is a social determinant of health. Those pieces are pretty much well-researched today. Education has a piece of it. Health has a piece of it. Justice has piece of it. What we do with it — how we understand that all those pieces integrate — is vitally important.

[1705]

It's also related to child care. There's no question about that, and I intend to ensure that we have the best possible and strongest start for young people in this province as we go forward on that file. Our vision for early learning and child care remains clear: access to quality early learning and child care in all British Columbia communities that meet the needs of all young children and their families. That is our vision. That is what we wish to ensure.

In order to achieve this vision, B.C. has identified the following objectives for early learning and child care: more children will enter school better prepared to succeed, more B.C. families will have access to quality child care, more families will have access to a range of early learning programs and services, more children with special needs will be supported in order to be included in quality community-based child care settings, more children will be cared for by qualified child care workers and regulated child care spaces, more B.C. families will have access to community hubs where a range of integrated services are located.

We are on the same page as those who would believe in co-location. This budget discussion needs to be about whether or not we understand what it is to be kinder to families in British Columbia. Can we indeed

offer a range of services from the same site, from the same address, rather than suggesting that it's appropriate that families seek service, access service, from three or four different places on their way to work in the morning?

Many of you may not have had this experience, but countless British Columbians do: where they have children that may be three and four different ages — a four-year-old, a two-year-old, a six-year-old — and they may go to three different child care centres on their way to work in the morning. That's not the way I would wish that British Columbia family to begin their day, so we do need to co-locate a variety of child care programs, family strengthening programs and family support programs at the same sites.

I have a fabulous opportunity to work with the Minister of Education in the province today so that we can co-locate services that matter to families and so that we can bring to life early learning and child care in co-located settings, in integrated settings and hubs in British Columbia. That will matter in the lives of children in British Columbia.

Early childhood development, many of you will know, has long been a passion of this administration, and we have done some wondrous things in terms of ensuring that children arrive healthier, happier, at full weight and full gestational age. They have a much better chance of succeeding in life — not just better prepared in kindergarten but succeeding in life — if they are indeed healthier at birth.

That piece of work, in terms of what I mentioned earlier around the social determinants of health, is a key piece of what we do as a government. Do we want a healthier populace overall? Do we truly understand what is meant by population health — or not? The research is clear. Dr. Perry Kendall, our public health officer has countless reports, unbelievably explicit advice about what needs to happen.

We take that advice as an administration, and I'm happy to suggest to this House that we have incorporated that advice into work we have done in early childhood development and aboriginal early childhood development. We are making headway across the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder front. We're making headway across the health and livelihood of communities in British Columbia because it's vitally important to do that.

We have in British Columbia the finest infant development program in the world, a program that looks at children from birth to three who may be developmentally at risk. You will know that that was identified in the budget speech as a priority of this government, to support young children when the interventions can be the most effective. The Finance Minister took to her feet and suggested that that was a priority of this government.

That is a priority of this government, hon. Speaker, and it will matter in the communities of every single member in this chamber. The babies of this province will be better served because this government took that initiative. Millions and millions of dollars will go to

serve children birth to three in the province through the network that exists today. Infant development in British Columbia, birth to three — from three years to six years of age, supported child development in British Columbia — is another entity that is going to fund the service delivery for children who are at risk or experience some type of developmental delay. It's vitally important that we build a continuum.

That is my challenge. My background is special education in British Columbia. We need to ensure that we do not continue to fragment service delivery.

The early learning and child care connection is important because it will not further the fragmentation of service. It will connect service for families. Each and every one of us in this chamber has an opportunity to reconnect service for families — and should. That will make every single dollar we spend in this budget a dollar better spent. We will get a better investment. We will get further reach for that dollar because it will be a dollar that has partnership attached to it and will not include the duplication that we currently see today.

[1710]

Many members here have spoken to me about the Success by 6 partnerships that are alive and well in our communities, which are planning tables where people in the community have come together to talk about what children in their communities need and what a children's agenda looks like in their community. It doesn't matter in which community in British Columbia — those planning tables are alive and well and doing some extraordinarily successful things.

Their work is guided by the work of Dr. Clyde Hertzman, University of British Columbia, the Human Early Learning Partnership. Each of us understands that we have a responsibility and an obligation to take the best research of the day. That was a passion of mine: that government should have the best-informed public policy. We would only be provided with that if we took what happened at universities and connected that better to the formulation of public policy within government. We have access today to that level of expertise.

I'm extraordinarily proud of the work of the Human Early Learning Partnership, and in fact, they are leading the world in terms of how they go forward and guide the creation of centres of excellence around British Columbia. He has been invited to speak in every corner of the globe. I am delighted that he has chosen to stay in British Columbia and offer that expertise to the province, because our children, families and communities will continue to benefit.

Since 2000 every school district has had the early development indicator work undertaken in their community. We are going to the second round today where we have now established the benchmark. We are now five years out, so we will know whether or not the investments and decisions we have taken — and the public policy we have derived from that information — have in fact given us the result we're looking for. That work is before us.

You will know that in 2003 the Premier was instrumental in the discussion and actual creation of the

fetal alcohol spectrum disorder provincial program that we took forward. We are going to be in the second round of that discussion and presentation of that material very, very soon — again, having had the opportunity to establish the benchmark, where we are going to be four or five years later.

It's an extraordinary opportunity for a province, and we are going to follow that up with the investments you see reflected in this year's budget. You saw a \$10-million investment going towards fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, probably the largest investment ever. Each and every one of you who have issues around those communities — and those citizens who have fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in their birth history — will now have the opportunity to see not just diagnosis, because we've had some fabulous diagnosis work happening in our province, but some treatment work come and follow that along. All of those things are useful and to the good.

For the leading-edge endowment fund in British Columbia and the aboriginal ECD research innovation shares, there's millions of dollars again, continuing to reflect this government's commitment to taking public policy and basing it upon the best possible research of the day — it's vitally important. These are questions that need factual, research-based, evidence-based answers. I'm delighted to say that this work is well underway in British Columbia.

Many of you have seen in the press recently, around the Roots of Empathy program.... You will know it is a program that has had an enormous impact on young learners in British Columbia in terms of reducing the incidences of bullying and aggression in classrooms. It has the opportunity to teach children about emotional literacy — a hugely valuable program. We are the pilot site in Canada for Seeds of Empathy, which is a program for three- and four-year-olds to teach them the same lessons — to teach it to them younger, for sure, but hopefully to have those opportunities to imprint those behaviours on them so that we don't see opportunities for aggression as those children age their way through preschool and into the school system. It's so vitally important that we continue to make those connections as we go forward.

You will know that we have a Strong Start committee in British Columbia. We want very much to have children get off to the strongest possible start. It is a coordinated, coherent opportunity for us at the cabinet table to ensure that we have the best possible decisions coming forward. We want very much to ensure that that level of dialogue — that level of conversation — continues, because it's important. This province is about families. Frankly, it's not about anything else. All of us chose this province, continue to live in this province and choose to raise our families here. We want countless British Columbia families to do the same, so we have to ensure that that figures prominently in the work that we do.

[1715]

Another area that I think we need to concentrate on.... This government has demonstrated in this

budget, in the ministry that is responsible for reconciliation, that we need to work on our aboriginal relations and, certainly, aboriginal early childhood development. It's vitally important.

We had a handful of aboriginal early childhood development programs five years ago. Today we have 43 of them. They are making a tremendous impact in terms of how we interface more effectively with aboriginal communities. The reality is that we have much to learn from aboriginal communities — much to learn. This is not about us imposing a particular parenting style or strategy on any British Columbia family. This is about us working in partnership, understanding that this is about respectful engagement so that we can go forward in much more positive ways and ensure that every single young citizen in this province has the best opportunity to succeed. It's vitally important, and it's vitally important to every single corner of this province.

We have provided training and development grants, and again you see that reflected in this year's budget, because it's important. We have a sense that this is about ongoing professional development. It's about continuous learning. Whether it's the throne speech or the budget, you've heard the Premier talk about wanting to be the most literate jurisdiction in North America. That work is underway.

Support for aboriginal infant development programs. We have the first aboriginal infant development adviser in the country. She's a resident in British Columbia. She's a member of the Cowichan First Nation. Her name is Diana Elliot. She's doing amazing work for us and doing work in your communities across British Columbia, hon. members.

Contributions towards research and innovation in aboriginal early childhood development in Malaspina University College and the Thompson Rivers University. Research at Malaspina University College is focusing on early childhood development training and child care, while Thompson Rivers is focusing on aboriginal maternal and child health — important pieces of work that we're not just doing on the lower mainland and southern Vancouver Island but taking to the communities in British Columbia.

Aboriginal initiatives are part of the Success by 6 program, which already involves 70 aboriginal representatives who are working closely with aboriginal groups and communities to make sure they are involved with Success by 6 initiatives — involvement of aboriginal communities and Children First initiatives across the province.

There are coalitions in 44 B.C. communities that aim to build partnerships across sectors and build capacity to provide services to children and families, following an approach that's culturally responsive to the needs of the communities they serve: research conducted by the Human Early Learning Partnership, better known as HELP, which is working with aboriginal communities to collect and map early childhood development and community asset information.

I wanted to just put on the record the paragraph in the budget, and I'm referencing page 17 of the budget

when I talk about the fetal alcohol work that's underway in communities — \$10 million to the Victoria Foundation to establish the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, FASD, action plan. The purpose of the fund is to promote prevention, public education and parent and caregiver education. As well, the fund will support three-year demonstration projects intended to focus on improving outcomes for children and youth with FASD through peer support, social and life skills development, transition supports and school-based and other initiatives.

All of you know the issues that these young people face in terms of impulse control, a lack of regimentation in their lives and, often, the ability to handle time and money. Those kinds of community supports — so that they can be in school, hopefully be employed, helpfully have a peer group that will stand with them, all of those things — are vitally important to young people. Anything we can do to ensure that they have a sense of belonging, a sense of comfort in their community — we absolutely should be doing those things.

Again, we've put some dollars in place in this budget to look at how we support the Seeds of Empathy program in aboriginal communities in British Columbia, to support aboriginal family resource programs and to support activities such as parent drop-ins, community kitchens, literacy and cultural integration. All these things are important for the simple reason that they build a sense of belonging and connection. There's participation of aboriginal communities in the Building Blocks program, which provides early childhood development services to children from birth to the age of six — and to their families.

You will note through my series of comments today that this is about children and their families. It's not children living in isolation. It's acknowledging that children live in families, that you cannot support one without supporting the other. These initiatives are making a difference to aboriginal communities, building capacities and supporting children in getting off to the best possible start in life.

Our government is also investing in aboriginal child care through initiatives such as the 56 first nations organizations operating 70 licensed facilities across the province. Certainly, you will know that we've concluded some major capital rounds in the last number of months. In November one of the rounds closed, and we're building a few hundred new child care spaces from that. We're just now adjudicating a process that closed on January 31, and you will see that reflected in a capital round that will hopefully result in a couple thousand new child care spaces across British Columbia.

[1720]

Those decisions will be taken, hopefully, in the next two or three weeks, because it's important that we begin the process of building child care spaces in British Columbia — and frankly, in every quarter of British Columbia. We will be guided in that work, again, by the Human Early Learning Partnership, by the vulnerable community work and by the places that we be-

lieve children will benefit the most from those opportunities.

Certainly, the dollars that have been but in place, I believe, will matter to the community. Many of you recently received some letters, as well, but we'll take a look at how we proceed on that front.

You heard me speak earlier about the necessity for training for professional development, for bursaries — all those things are vitally important.

Certainly, I wanted to spend a few more moments, if I might, on the child care question, because it's a huge question. There are opportunities before us to support new relationships with aboriginal communities and with all communities in British Columbia as we go forward. Our commitment to early learning and child care in aboriginal communities and all British Columbia communities is strong.

As hon. members know, last year we entered into an agreement-in-principle with the federal government to enhance early learning and child care in British Columbia. Before signing this agreement, we moved quickly to prepare for available first-year funding, putting in place new supports for both parents and providers. These supports included a 36-percent increase in operating funding for providers and significantly higher subsidies for families with children under six in regulated care.

For families this increase has raised the income threshold to \$38,000 from \$21,000 for full subsidy. These enhancements would make the subsidy available to approximately 6,500 additional children as reflected, while an additional 6,000 would see a raise in their existing subsidy.

We followed up the signing of the federal agreement with consultations here in British Columbia, carried out jointly with the Ministry of Education on how best to meet the needs of families and young children in the future. All of you members will know that the actual agreement was called the early learning and child care agreement.

At the time I said that B.C. is committed to creating a quality, stable, flexible and accessible child care system — one that works for today's families and tomorrow's. Achieving that means listening to communities about the unique needs of their parents and providers. Today I echo those same sentiments.

While the recent election of the new federal government has created ongoing dialogue, I've been encouraged by their decision to provide the first two years of funding. Our government's position is clear. We continue to be committed to the creation of child care that meets the needs of children and their families in all parts of this province.

We have worked incredibly hard for the past five years to create a strong foundation for early childhood development, early learning and child care in British Columbia through the initiatives in the aboriginal communities that I have described and through many other initiatives to meet the needs of all children across this province. We will continue to work with parents,

child care providers, communities and the new government to build on that foundation.

Meeting the needs of children with autism. I want to share with you a paragraph from an amazingly insightful book entitled *Autism: A New Understanding* by Gail Gillingham. I do want to put this on the record, because I would encourage every single person who has the opportunity to meet someone with autism or to work with someone with autism to take a moment and read this book, if they might.

Chapter one is entitled "What is Autism?"

The sun felt warm upon my back as Daniel and I strolled together across the lawn. Our chores were done, and now we had time to relax. He unexpectedly reached out and gently took my hand, guiding me in the direction of the house. Willingly, I went with him wondering at this new and unusual behaviour. As we passed through the door and headed into the back of the house, I realized that he was going toward the bathroom. He used the bathroom, and after he had finished, he turned and smiled at me. Again, he gently took my hand, and we quietly returned to the driveway. I sat down in a chair while he began playing with his trucks, using the low cement wall as a roadway.

To many, these simple actions would appear to be the regular interaction of an adult and a child, but for me, they were incredible, unbelievable gifts — for Daniel is autistic. At the age of ten he did not go to the bathroom on his own. He did not play with trucks like any other child. He did not approach others for help. However, on that particular day he did. I was stunned at the abrupt change that had occurred and wondered what had brought it on. Twelve years later I look back on that day with special reverence, for I had been allowed to spend a few moments of time with a stress-free autistic child. In those brief moments we had the opportunity to recognize who an autistic person is and what they are capable of.

That book is worthy of anyone's time who may have the opportunity to take a look at it.

Again, I'm pleased to lend my support to the budget document. It's vitally important that the aspirations of this government are reflected and come to fruition in that document, and I can assure this House that they will.

[1725]

The opportunities to build things that will last, that will matter in the lives of British Columbia families are before this House for their consideration today. The priorities are consistent with the work we've done over the past five years and are certainly consistent with the future of this province.

Whether we're talking about services for children, working closely with aboriginal communities or meeting the needs of a growing seniors population, our goal is the same, and our goal continues to be to support British Columbia families to make the most of their potential, to support them with their families to live in community. That's what we're doing to services for children, and that's what we're doing across government.

I believe in the work of this government. I feel privileged to be a part of it. I would draw the members' attention, as well, to the first-ever early childhood de-

velopment atlas — again, a creation, a compilation, of the work of the early childhood development-human early learning partnership consortium, which is a consortium of the four universities and, again, the work of Dr. Clyde Hertzman.

We, in fact, are leading the country in early childhood development, in early learning and in the collaboration between the Ministry of Education — early childhood development in the province — Health, Education and Children and Family Development — a cross-government integrated strategy, with the Premier's passion and vision. I share that. I know we will continue to go forward.

C. Puchmayr: It's an honour to rise here on the budget debate. Before I start, first of all, I'd like to comment on how well-behaved my side has been and how they've respected the words of wisdom from the other side. I hope that that will continue on and spread over, maybe across the great divide of two sword lengths.

Before I start, I want to send wishes to the member for Burnaby-Willington — I'm going to say John Nuraney, even though I'm not allowed; he is convalescing, and I hope you will allow me that opportunity — and Ralph Sultan, West Vancouver-Capilano, who is convalescing. I know they're watching this, and I wish them well. Also, one of my colleagues whose wife has just gone through some serious surgery and a serious malady — our prayers are with her. That's the member for Nanaimo's wife, Sharon Krog. Our thoughts and prayers are with you.

Noting the hour, I will try to get through this as quickly as possible, and I know we have an agreement on when we're going to complete. I find interesting the debate here with respect to the estimates. I know that with the budget speech... I know that during the estimates we spent a lot of time fleshing out some of the different issues. Again, with this budget I look forward to the estimates process to clarify some of the promises that are made in the budget.

We certainly have seen some concerns with the Education Ministry, and we have had some issues with the education process, and we look to overcome those in the weeks and months to come. I know that many of the unions are now in collective bargaining. Hopefully, there's some fruition from that and some peace from that.

This government has a long ways to go, I believe, and I hope that some of the initiatives that are laid out in this budget will address some of those needs and some of those concerns and try to rebuild some of the trust. I know that this side has been very effective in letting the government know the concerns that we have. I see little flickers of hope when I look at the budget, and I see that there is money going back into child care.

I think the cuts that were made were too severe. We had said all along that they were damaging. A 40-percent reduction in front-line workers in the ministries is absolutely unacceptable. We have seen so many

reductions, and we have seen the impacts of those reductions over and over again. I think the work of our side and the understanding from the opposite side that there needs to be some change maybe will bear some fruit. We'll see as we flesh out those estimates as well.

[1730]

The Premier embarks now on another new tour. Earlier when the throne speech came out some members suggested that we saw these hit men in the grassy knoll everywhere. Wow. They suddenly materialized in the name of Les Vertesi. He's the brother-in-law of the Premier, and he was going to be his sole adviser on this very, very important journey to Europe to look at the model health care systems that we can enjoy when he returns. It creates some extreme suspicion with people in British Columbia. People have e-mailed me or are contacting me and voicing some incredible concerns with this rapid junket to Europe with an adviser who is basically going there to keep him on the right track. Those are his quotes: "Keep him on the right track."

I know there are some very creative economies in other parts of the world, and we should look at those economies not just occasionally. We should always look at what other economies are doing, but to go and basically bring somebody along to steer you in the right way with respect to health care concerns me, especially when you don't factor in the entire intricacies of those economies and how health care plays a role in the weaving of the intricacies of those economies.

To merely go over — a few-hours stop in this city, a few hours in that city, a few hours in that city and then back again — with your expert adviser keeping you on the right track.... I am extremely concerned, and this side is extremely concerned. We look forward to the days of debate and the question period in the days to come as we flush out the motives from the alleged grassy knoll.

I remind my friends on the other side that we are already representing a direction towards a dismantling of a public health care system. That is extremely troubling to me, and it's extremely troubling to those who can't afford to become a member of a private clinic where you can spend money and line-jump, even though you're line-jumping for services that are being paid for by the medical system. The fact that your foot is in that door troubles me. I know my parents would probably find it very difficult to be club med members in the new medical club, and I certainly would have some concerns with even myself having a family membership in club med. That is a direction that I think, very strongly, we need not go.

You look at the American system of health care, how it provides health care, and it provides health care for profit. There have been many studies done, and at the very least, when you look at a situation.... For instance, a doctor in a regular health care environment is being restricted operating theatre times, has waiting lists. One doctor told me he's quit taking patients as waiting lists are seven years. Two years is not uncommon. They are not getting the facilities to perform the

surgeries that are required. So I'm troubled when I see this other Cadillac model setting up right next door that will allow doctors to join part of club med and get any operating times that they so desire.

The fruit of the public system will eventually die on the vine. That system is at risk of deteriorating, and experts are warning us of that. You can only look south of the border to see the incredible costs of providing health care in that type of a system. Then you look in the areas where they have a low socioeconomic condition, and you see the type of service that's provided there. It's very difficult for anyone that can look at those models to say: "Gee, I like that. I'd like that in my back yard. I think that's a great model." I mean, we have to be extremely careful.

[1735]

I understand that all the members on the other side aren't actively involved in the decisions with respect to the direction that the government is going. I certainly see the caucus solidarity when it comes to evaluating and voting and moving towards a direction, or even defending a direction that this province is going. I only wish that more of them could play a role in actually looking at the pros and cons of developing this type of a strategy and listening to the other countries that are saying: "Canada, you've got a great system. Don't mess with it. Don't destroy it."

In my community I had an e-mail from an elderly woman. This is an elderly woman whose husband is one of the victims of eviction, I guess you could say, of the Queen's Park Hospital. She writes in here that 150 full-time beds at Queen's Park have been closed. My information is that it was 87 beds that were closed — an entire floor of a care facility that's a longtime facility in New Westminster. These seniors are now being forced out, and it's having some catastrophic effects — some emotional effects, some psychological effects. She talks about her husband's depression, trying to understand what's going on. He's one of the few left on that ward.

I listened to some comments by Fraser Health about how some of them have moved into better places and closer to home. When I was a city councillor in New Westminster, I remember going to open a new renovation that they did in that facility. It wasn't that long ago. I believe it was probably in 1999 or the year 2000. It was a beautiful investment. There were happy patients. We had lunch with them. They had installed new curtains. They had a section where they could have singalongs. They had a little room outside where they could smoke.

I was quite dismayed when I found out that under the watch of this regime of Fraser Health, it had deteriorated. That saddens me, because I know that a lot of public money went into that facility and also money from members of the public, which I guess you could call private money — money that people donated to make a better quality of life.

When I listen to the virtues of all this money spent on health care, I wonder. I know that when St. Mary's Hospital closed, they had 25 palliative care beds in

there. I recall putting the question to Fraser Health, when I was a city councillor, as to what was going to happen to these people. They told us that they did an RFP, a request for proposals, and some private facilities picked them up. I thought: well, that's odd. First of all, these people were in the public system because they couldn't afford the private system. The government wants to get them out of the public system, so they put out an RFP. The RFP comes in, and then the government is paying the private provider to look after these people that were in a more effective, more economical public system.

When I look at these health care budgets, it's going to be very interesting in estimates to sort of peel that onion away and get down to see how much of this burgeoning of health care costs is really from taking public services that are not-for-profit and RFPing them out to companies whose business it is to make a profit.

There was a company in the United States. The name fails me, but it was on one of those investment shows that sometimes, at three in the morning, when you can't sleep and you're channel surfing and wondering what questions you're going to ask the Health Minister the next day.... There was a show on, and they were talking about these private care homes in the United States. They were boasting about how it was \$90,000 a year to stay there and how they basically rolled you into bed in the evening and rolled you out at night.

It was almost like they were making a mockery of the last days of our seniors — a disrespectful mockery. It saddens me to think that we're heading into that model up here in Canada.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

These companies were companies you could invest in. These business investment brokers were telling you that these were good investments. There are a lot of seniors, you know. It's a growing population. The greatest-growing sector is the senior sector. There are companies out there that see the trillions of dollars of wealth that hard-working people have earned, and they're going to make sure those don't go to the estates of their children. They're going to see if they can grab some of that in the last years of their twilight by putting them in expensive care.

[1740]

Hon. Chair, I see the changing of the guard. I'm assuming that you're going to reflect on the hour, so I will yield to the hour and move adjournment of the debate.

C. Puchmayr moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

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

The House adjourned at 5:41 p.m.

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